



**Reinterpreting Gendered Narratives: Saradindu Bandyopadhyay - A Case Study.**

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**Abstract**

History through the prism of gender has recognised cultural ideas and institutions that have framed gender roles and expectations. The political and socio-cultural ambience of the late 19th and early 20th century had produced a rich cultural outcrop in Bengal, especially in Bengali literature. The social and political response of the Bengali *bhadralok* to the social questions regarding the position of women had shaped the lives of the newly educated Bengali Brahmo women as well as the curriculum developed for this expanding readership. These changes took place in the context of the nationalist leaders rallying against the mighty colonial state – leaders who were hailed as the brave sons of Mother India. This legacy of valour and martyrdom burdened Indian men with lofty aspirations and ambitious goals. These complexities were reflected in contemporary Bengali literature. This paper endeavours to examine the influence of the gender politics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries on Bengali popular literature, based on the case study of four of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's historical novels- *Tungabhadrar Teere*, *Tumi Sondhyar Megh*, *Gour Mallar* and *Kaler Mandira*.

**Keywords:** *gender; historical fiction; New Patriarchy; Saradindu Bandyopadhyay; women's question*



### Innate politics of literature

The "linguistic turn" inspired by literary theory in historiography highlights the significance of language in forming historical comprehension. Michel Foucault and other postmodern historians contend that language shapes our understanding of reality and emphasises the importance of literary devices in historical discourse. Literature and history have a vigorous and reciprocal relationship in which each informs and enriches the other. A study of historiography reveals that while historical events inspire literary works, literary works themselves function as priceless historical artefacts. An appreciation of this interdependence enables a better comprehension of the past and, indeed, of the human condition itself. Our research question demands an analysis of Indian historical literature in the colonial context. (Foucault, 1972)

In his celebrated work, published a quarter of a century ago, Benedict Anderson argued that nations are 'imagined communities' given concrete shape by institutions such as print capitalism. In Anderson's words, there is a 'paradox' between the 'objective modernity' of nations to the 'historian's eye' and their 'subjective antiquity' in the 'eyes of nationalists'. This tension – of creating the nation while positing its long, unbroken existence – that lies at the heart of nationalism, makes the study of both nations and nationalisms fascinating, yet difficult. This contradiction has also shaped the Indian historical political novel. (Dube, 2014)

The exposure to the European concept of history created a tension within the Indian psyche which manifested itself in Indian writings particularly in historical novels. What distinguished the literary-historical writings was the conscious attempt to reconstruct the past according to contemporary needs under the compulsions of colonial rule. Patriotism became the driving force to express political ideals and, to a great extent, shaped the thought process behind a particular piece of writing. Patriotic writings as spontaneous expressions of the people against foreign domination began to emerge in the nineteenth century much before organised political movements for independence. Historical fiction<sup>1</sup> was produced in several Indian languages during this period. (Das, 1995).

A project for national literature looked at literature as an expression of the national spirit. Historical fiction in Bengali literature was pioneered by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and was sustained by Saradindu Bandyopadhyay and Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay among others.<sup>2</sup> All the worldly interests that would have otherwise divided the Bengalis – Hindus from Muslims, lower castes from upper castes, and the elite from the masses – were supposed to be countered by this sense of national pride. Literature, in that sense, was seen as inherently political. (Chakrabarty, 2004).

### The women's question

In Bengal in the early to mid-1800s, the women's question was at the centre of some of the most contentious discussions about social reform. Some of the bitterly debated issues included Rammohun Roy's opposition to *satidaha* (widow immolation), Vidyasagar's attempts to outlaw *Kulin* polygamy and legalise widow remarriage, and the Brahmo Samaj's split twice in the 1870s on issues pertaining to marriage laws and the "age of consent." According to Partha Chatterjee, nationalism had fully achieved its desired objectives by resolving "the women's question" in the final decades of the nineteenth century. (Chatterjee, 2010).

The foundation of this resolve was the division of culture into two domains: the material and the spiritual. The strongest arguments made by Western civilisation were in the material realm. The material domain lies outside



us - a mere external, that influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual that lies within, which is our true self and essence. The external, material realm (*bahir*) is the domain of the male and is the scene of his actions, achievements and success. The home (*ghar*) represented by the woman reflects our inner spiritual self or true identity; it must remain distinct from and undisturbed by the profane actions of the material world. Thus, the division of the social realm into *ghar* and *bahir* corresponds to the delineation of social roles by gender. The hallmark of a woman's newly gained freedom was her achievement of a superior national culture through her efforts. This was the core ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women's question. (Chatterjee, 2010). As the need for educated wives grew, early proponents of female education saw prospects for social mobility of women as companions of men, members of civic society, and 'scientific' nurturers (Sarkar 2007). In this way, the "new" woman was subjected to a new patriarchy. By linking the mission of "female emancipation" with the historical objective of sovereign nationhood, nationalism's new patriarchy granted women the honour of a new social responsibility while also tying them to a new, but perfectly acceptable, subjection (Chatterjee, Menon, 2010).

This gender politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was reflected in Bengali literature produced during this period. This paper endeavours to analyse how gender is perceived by a well-known novelist like Saradindu Bandopadhyay in his historical novels. The analysis is based on a case study of four of Saradindu Bandopadhyay's historical novels- *Tungabhadrar Teere*, *Kaler Mandira*, *Gour Mollar*, and *Tumi Sondhar Megh*.

### Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's historical novels

Among the stalwarts of Indian literature, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay occupies an extremely prominent place and his oeuvre is as varied as it is impressive. Though Bengal produced many eminent novelists, none could match Bandyopadhyay's incredible capacity to bring to life the long-buried past. Though best known for creating the iconic character of the fictional detective Byomkesh Bakshi, he has also written numerous novels (both historical and contemporary), plays, short stories, and film scripts. His works continue to be in print and have been adapted for radio, film and television repeatedly.<sup>3</sup> Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's body of historical works is extensive, spanning a broad timeline, ranging from ancient times to the 17th century.<sup>4</sup>

Bandyopadhyay's historical novels remain in the sphere of contemporary literary discussion.<sup>5</sup> He wrote five historical novels, four of which have been discussed in this paper – *Kaler Mandira* (1951), *Gour Mollar* (1954) *Tumi Sondhar Megh* (1958) and *Tungabhadrar Teere* (1966) (Sen, 2021). *Kaler Mandira* portrays a fictional story in the post-Gupta age, while *Gour Mollar* unfolds in the anarchy of post-Shashanka Bengal in the 7th century. *Tungabhadrar Teere* is a well-known novel that narrates a story that transpired during the Vijayanagar period in the 14th century. *Tumi Sondhar Megh*, on the other hand, unfurls during the time of Atish Dipankar, that is, during the 10th to 11th century. He also wrote *Kumarshombher Kobi* which depicts the time of the great poet, Kalidasa, during the 4th to 5th century. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay was a multifaceted writer whose historical fiction remains a significant part of his literary legacy.

In his introduction to a compilation of Bandyopadhyay's historical novels, Sukumar Sen asserted that Bandyopadhyay was not a historian, he was a storyteller for passionate history aficionados. He argued that as the stories were primarily romances, they would retain their original plot and beauty even if the historical context was completely removed. Noted poet and essayist, Mohit Lal Majumdar agreed, commenting that romance was Bandyopadhyay's main inspiration and that like Keat's 'Nightingale' he wanted to escape into the spring of life and nature. However, Majumdar also described Bandyopadhyay's *Bagher Bachha*, a short



story about Shivaji's childhood, as a 'reconquest of antiquity'. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar too praised his works for their Indian ideological context. (Sen, 2021).

### Reflection of the 'new woman' in Saradindu's novels

The novel *Tungabhadra Teere* is set in the Vijayanagara kingdom (1336-1646) in Southern India. It weaves a tale of political intrigue and secrets within the framework of the historically significant marriage of the princess of Kalinga, in modern-day Odisha, to Deva Raya, the ruler of Vijayanagara. As an epic romance the novel may also be viewed as an expression of the feminine 'voice' and how female characters have been moulded according to the needs of the time. The two contrasting characters of Bidyunmala and Monikonkona (both Kalinga princesses) proceed on their maritime journey to the powerful South Indian kingdom of Vijayanagara where they are to wed Deva Raya – a royal marriage which is really a political alliance (Chowdhury, 2016).

Bidyunmala is a woman, who in her subtle sense of self is ahead of her time. She is portrayed as being of 'pure' royal blood, born to an Aryan queen. At a time when polygamy was a widespread practice, particularly among royalty, she despises it and is disgusted by the idea of sharing her husband. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay recreates the medieval Indian period, but his own consciousness, trained in European rationalism, can't help but question practices like polygamy through a character like Bidyunmala, whose strong views mark her out as a woman far ahead of her time. This provides a sharp contrast with her stepsister, Monikonkona, the princess born of a non-Aryan woman, who, like most other women of her time, accepts the social reality of polygamy and is unperturbed by it. She is enamoured by the valour and greatness of Deva Raya and falls in love with him at first sight. Monikonkona finds her sister's disgust for monogamy to be silly since it is not only the norm but the destiny of royal princesses. Moreover, Bidyunmala, contrary to societal expectations, doesn't abide by her father's decision to marry her off to Deva Raya, and is surprisingly vocal about her own free will. Risking Deva Raya's wrath, she is direct in informing him of her decision to marry the man of her choice, Arjunbarma, a commoner. Throughout the novel, the characters of Bidyunmala and Monikonkona provide an intriguing contrast between the traditional and new ideals of womanhood as they played out in late 19th and early 20th century Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

There were two primary threads in the pre-independence women's movement, which started in the late 1800s and lasted until about 1947. One included women's participation in the national struggle, while the other included social reform groups headed by men to free women from the "shackles of tradition." (Ramaswamy, 2013). From social reforms on women's issues advocated by men of upper class and caste to women's participation in their autonomous organisations in the 20th century, the women's movement in India influenced the psyche of educated Indian men. This is reflected in the literature of the time. Bankim Chandra's *Devi Chaudhurani*, Tagore's *Chitrangada*, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Bamuner Meye* are some evergreen classics that can be cited as examples. This trend of giving women an individual identity beyond their narrow domestic orbit is also portrayed in some other novels of Bandyopadhyay (Jaiswal, 2018)

*Tumi Sondhyar Megh* offers further opportunity to explore Bandyopadhyay's depiction of women assuming the right to make autonomous decisions, especially in matters that concern their future. Joubonoshree, the female protagonist of the novel, stands out as an epitome of decisiveness, strength and integrity. She holds her ground against her father who has organised a *swayamvara*<sup>6</sup> for her, deliberately excluding the man of her choice, Bigrahapal, the prince of Magadha. However, she also refuses to elope with the latter when he urges her to leave secretly with him, as it would bring shame to her paternal and marital families. Joubonoshree thus



is portrayed as a strong, woman driven by independent, rational thought who is not afraid to challenge social norms but is also strongly attached to cultural values and principles. Bigrahapal had initially been attracted to her beauty, but when she takes a strong stand by refusing to elope, she earns his respect. Though the decision would involve a great deal of risk and danger, Bigrahapal comes to appreciate her value and recognise that only such a woman could be worthy of being queen of Magadha (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

*Kaler Mandira* is set in a period after the death of the Gupta emperor, Kumaragupta when his eldest son Skandagupta ascended the throne. The story depicts the defeat of the Pushyamitras by Skanda Gupta after a long and exhausting war, as well as his fight against the Hunas to save his homeland from invasion. In the novel, Ratta Jashodhara is a fascinating female character who visited Skandagupta's camp to enlist his support to rescue her father from enemies. She introduced herself as a Hun, born of a Hun father and an Aryan mother. She is unapologetic about her family identity and impressed Skandagupta with her fearless approach. The monarch acknowledges that no woman would ordinarily have had the courage to enter the military camp of such a large and powerful army, and it was very brave of Ratta to have entered it. He admires her strength of will and courage to have reached him after travelling through extremely difficult terrain. Ratta is shown as a woman who is catapulted out of her safe domestic space into the treacherous, overwhelmingly male world of politics and war. She remains undaunted and proves herself worthy of facing and overcoming the challenges she is faced with. Ratta, thus, may be seen as an embodiment of the ideal early 20th-century women reflected in the past (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

Early 20th-century Bengali literature, shaped by the rising tide of nationalism, attempted to construct a new ideal of womanhood (albeit restricted to the middle class). The female characters in the works of leading writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay show the contradictory aspects of nationalism through the definition of gender roles. The response of Bengali women to the dominant discourse in both politics and literature was not uniform as caste and class divisions generated different responses. Despite such divisions, the hesitant critiques by nineteenth-century women changed into a more assertive self-awareness and induced them to critically examine how the prevailing nationalist ideology imposes stereotypical roles. (Casci, 1999)

Both during the context in which Bandyopadhyay is writing and in the historical contexts in which he places his stories, women seem to dwell beyond their narrow domestic orbits. However, this autonomy is restricted in several ways. Nationalism seems to be a masculine project, where men enjoy privilege, power and responsibility. Simultaneously men also suffer the imposition of the burdens of valour and martyrdom. An ideal patriotic man was supposed to be fearless and adventurous, who was eager to die in the service of Mother India.

### **The womb of sacrifice and the legacy of martyrdom**

In resorting to the figure of Mother India to supplement the mapped form of the nation, Sumathi Ramaswamy (2008) shows how barefoot cartography<sup>7</sup> reveals its preoccupation with male bodies, especially the "big men" of official Indian nationalism. Such men are, as is apparent from the titles of patriotic prints, the "Jewels of India," the "Architects of Indian Resurrection," the "Gems of the Nation." When women (infrequently) appear in the company of the map of India, they are either depicted as honorary males or are shadowy presences. In striking contrast to much popular art in India, where women are hyper-visible in incarnations ranging from the goddess to the vamp, it is men who are accorded prominence in patriotic pictures, thus reiterating the



dominant truth about nationalism as a masculinist project, fantasy, and hope. In such pictures, Bharat Mata appears as “the conduit through which collusions and collisions” between colonized and colonizing men are worked out, allowing in this process bonds of male homo-sociality to evolve between them (Krishnaswamy, 1998). Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s work, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), it is suggested that the nation is pre-eminently pictured as a male homosocial arena in which men jostle for power and privilege but also work out their mutual fascinations, anxieties, and hostilities through and around the exceptional figure of Bharat Mata. (Ramaswamy, 2008)

The mother, however, is not just a figure of enslavement. Feminine cults also represent power, an image of resurgent and fearful strength, irrevocably associated in the Bengali Hindu mind with the concept of Shakti on whose grace depends the success of the patriotic enterprise. There is a curious blending of both the principles of object victimhood and the possibility of triumphant strength in the polysemic iconography deployed around the matter. (Sarkar, 1987)

In barefoot cartography and the patriotic imagination that animates it, the ideal of masculinity is pictured as placing one’s life and limb at the service of the map and mother. Rejecting worldly pleasures and privileges, the ideal Indian man casts himself in this role. He is pictured as selflessly dedicated to Mother India and the territory she embodies, although there are diverse models of filial service on display. Self-effacing service to the nation and its territory might be the road to visibility in the world of patriotic pictures, yet barefoot cartographic practice also reveals its ambivalences and anxieties—as well as pride—about the ultimate patriotic endgame for men, the crowning glory of martyrdom. The martyred male body — “the body in bits and pieces” (Axel 2001), bloodied, decapitated, or hanged — is the honourable prize of the pictorial transaction between men and maps in the name of the mother. Thus, nationalist ideology — masculinist though it might be in conception and practice — brought with it its share of burdens and tragedies for men along with privilege, power, and visibility (Sarkar, 1987).

### The gendered history of martyrdom: a close reading

Bandyopadhyay’s novel *Gour Mollar* is based in the context of the anarchy that prevailed in Bengal after the death of Shashanka. The novel does not claim any historical authenticity but draws a vivid picture of Bengali life during this period. The story is initially set in Betoshgram, a village in Bengal. Rangana, the daughter born out of wedlock to Gopa and Kapil Dev, was socially ostracised. Kapil Dev was a general of Shashanka, who visited Betoshgram. Later, Rangana fell in love with Manab Deb, the son and successor of Shashanka, and gave birth to a son, Bajra Deb. Manab Deb desired to live a simple life in the village with his wife. He didn’t like the fiercely competitive urban life where people kill for power and wealth. He was a romantic man at heart but was burdened with the expectations from a *Kshatriya*, to protect his *rajya* (kingdom). His son, Bajra Deb born with the required characteristics of a ‘Kshatriya’, was physically strong, intelligent and sincere. Bajra Deb set out to look for his lost father, and despite knowing that defeat was inevitable, he fought with intense patriotic fervour to protect his *Pitri-Pitamohar Mati* (ancestral land). He managed to sit on the throne for a single night and finally succumbed to his inevitable destiny and returned home (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

In the novel ‘**Tungabhadrar Teere**’ Arjun Barma had left his homeland, which was occupied by the *Jaban* rulers. Maharaja Debray, the ruler of the Vijayanagar kingdom was the epitome of patriotic valour, around whom the brave men congregated, to protect their motherland. Though Arjun Barma was banished from Vijayanagar by the king, he endangered his life to protect Vijayanagar from the enemy kingdom of the



Bahmani Sultanate. Though he was not born in Vijayanagar, Arjun Barma was a patriot, loyal to the king, as Maharaja Debray was the indigenous hero protecting his motherland from the invaders (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

The novel '**Kaler Mandira**' begins with an old Hun soldier, named Mong, lamenting a courageous and victorious past, when they conquered kingdoms. Tilak Barma, the Aryan successor to the throne, returned to win back his power and glory. He eventually became the ruler and married a Hun princess, who had been assimilated into the refined Aryan social framework. In his intense love for his motherland, he later joined Skandagupta against the Huns invading India, despite having married a Hun princess. He is depicted as a brave nationalist, who vowed to live and die for his motherland. Rutta, the Hun princess is seen to have wholeheartedly supported his endeavour (Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

Each of these characters, Manab Deb, Bajra Deb, Maharaja Debray, Arjun Barma, and Tilak Barma seem to possess all the qualities expected of the 19th century nationalist leaders, fighting against the powerful, oppressive British Empire, despite all odds. Bidyunmala, Joubonoshree, Rangana and Rutta are the wives and mothers of these men. They were devoted wives, who would wait for their brave husbands for eternity, and bring up sincere and heroic sons, who would protect the glory and power of their paternal line.

### Conclusion:

Engels (1989) has shown how it was men who articulated the "female discourse" within the colonial conflict, where women's interests were secondary. Women's identification with the domestic sphere allowed both Bengali and British men to highlight the need to reform the condition of women when it served their larger political objectives, but to 'exile' women figuratively to their zenana when legislative reforms or feminist activity threatened to conflict with male political or patriarchal rights. The gender politics of the 19th century influenced Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's perception of the Indian past. His historical novels were very popular, and in that capacity had to some extent, shaped the Bengali readers' idea of history and gender identity in the past. The historical novels examined in this paper illustrate how the socio-cultural ambience in which the author wrote influenced his creation; they also reveal that the gender identities and roles depicted in them mirror the cultural norms and gender stereotypes of the author's context.

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<sup>1</sup> Hari Narayan Apte, '*Chandragupta Hindi*', Kamal Prabha Prakashan, Pune, 2012; Harish Chandra Datta, '*Aitihaasik Kahini Somogro*', Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2005; Kalki Krishnamurthy, '*Ponniyin Selvan*', Set of all five parts (Tamil), MBF Publisher, Chennai, 2022; K.M.Munshi, '*Gujarat no Nath*', Pravin Prakashan, Gujarat, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, a contemporary of Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, was an archaeologist by profession who wrote historical fiction as well as many academic works. He wrote several novels — '*Pakshantar*' (1924), '*Byatikram*' (1924) and '*Anukram*' (1931). Three more novels, namely, '*Dhruba*', '*Karuna*' (1917) and '*Shashanka*' (1914) are set in the different phases of the Gupta period. The setting of his '*Pashaner Katha*' (1914) is Kushana period, '*Dharmapala*' (1915) narrates the story of the Pala emperor Dharmapala. '*Mayukh*' (1916) describes the Portuguese atrocities in Bengal during the reign of Shahjahan, while '*Asim*' (1924) narrates the condition of Bengal during the reign of Farrukhsiyar. His last novel, '*Lutf-Ulla*', is set in Delhi at the time of the invasion by Nadir Shah. Another unfinished work, '*Hemkana*', was published in '*Prabasi* magazine) from 1911 to 1912. A number of his novels were translated into other Indian languages.

<sup>3</sup> Tapan Sinha, '*Jhinder Bondi*', released on 8th June 1961; Satyajit Ray, '*Chiriakhana*', released on 29th September 1967; Anjan Dutt, '*Byomkesh Bakshi*', released on 13th August 2010.

<sup>4</sup> His short story, '*Pragjyotish*' was based during the Aryan invasions, and another story '*Indratulak*' even before that. '*Adim*' was based in the historical period of ancient Egypt. Some unfolded in the 4th and 5th centuries ('*Amitabho*', '*Bishkanya*' and '*Setu*').



'Rokto Sondha' and 'Chua Chandan' were set in the 15th and 16th centuries. The periods of Islamic rule in India were reflected only in a few of his works, for example, 'Shonkho Konkon' and 'Reba Rodhoshi' (the reign of Alauddin Khilji). Two more were set in the time of Shivaji (*Bagher Bacha*), and Shah Shuja (*Tokt Mobarak*).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance <https://www.getbengal.com/details/saradindu-Bandyopadhyay-not-just-detective-byomkesh-but-a-master-writer-of-historical-novels>

<sup>6</sup> It is a form of marriage mentioned in Hindu mythology where a woman chooses a man as her husband from a group of suitors.

<sup>7</sup> Sumathi Ramaswamy uses this term to refer to the practice of colonial-era, Indian language magazines like *Hindi Punch* to use the female body to represent movements, values, nations depicting them on cartographed bodies, globes and maps.

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