

Imaging the Folkloric Devi in Anti-Colonial Indian Fiction: A Case Study of Three Litterateurs

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ABSTRACT

There is a trend among the imperialist to use culture in order to legitimise their imperialistic design. The natives of the environs initially feel like pariahs in their own native land. Nationalism provides the chief motivating force for projecting 'cultural difference' and 'identity', against colonial authority. The colonised writers and other literary campaigners find folk culture a useful source to depend on for their resistance against the imperialistic culture. People accept women to be an embodiment of this nature and they worship nature in the form of a woman as a saviour to protect them from any danger. Raja Rao made it clear in the Foreword of his novel *Kanthapura* while referring to Sthalapurana and about the goddess Kenchamma in the novel as the saviour-deity and as the source of inspiration of the village. Manik Bondyopadhaya never made any announcement but he too gave an impression of destroyer and preserver to his women characters- features that are embodied in goddess Durga. My reading of Bisham Sahni gives me a similar impression.

KEYWORDS

Indian folk tradition; Folk culture; Women characters; Bisham Sahni.

A committed artist makes conscious effort to express his/her standpoint placing sufficient pressure deliberately so that the reader is compelled to re-examine social realities. Artists supporting the imperialist use culture to legitimise their imperialistic design. Their works highlight the power relation between the colonizer and the colonised. Colonialism does not usually aim at suffocating the native culture, because it seeks to perpetuate the agony of the colonised. Rather, it aims at deculturation through the process of a systematic elimination of the native culture by the natives. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people to distort, disfigure and destroy it. Through oppression, tortures,

raids, collective liquidations, fines etc. the colonist breaks the colonised society but does not destroy it completely. Through its economic, political, cultural and social exploitation, he makes it sick, calcified, and petrified. Being a social construct, consciousness of the colonised is thus altered and reshaped by the coloniser. Politically suspect, socially detested, physically marked, the people of the environs initially feel like pariahs in their own native land, but they lead a life that cannot be so easily definable. There is simultaneous acceptance in the familiar circle and questioning by the strangers for them.

Set in these circumstances, the idea of nationalism provides the chief motivating force for projecting 'cultural

difference' and 'identity' against colonial authority. Throughout the imperial world, during the decolonising period, protests, resistance and independence movements are fuelled by one or another form of nationalism, which are both condemned and much-admired. Third world nationalism intended to restore community, assert identity, initiate new cultural practices and work as a mobilised political force to instigate and advance the struggle against western domination everywhere in the non-European world. Colonialism physically disarms the colonised subject and it also tends to rob him of his pre-colonial cultural heritage. Fired with nationalism, the native subject is then galvanised to renew contact once more with pre-colonial springs of the life of his people. In the process of decolonisation, the vision of pre-colonial identity plays an important role. However, it is felt difficult to recover the pre-colonial past. Therefore, it is better to build a bridge between the past and the present through some medium which, for some or other reasons, remains unaffected by the colonial cultural onslaught. The colonised writers and other literary campaigners find folk culture a useful source to depend on for their resistance against the imperialistic culture – a folk culture that existed prior to the colonisation and is the only impervious ingredient in a society even after the colonisation. True, the colonisers impose their own superior culture but never feel any urge to destroy the folk culture that exists among the lower rung of the society with whom they do not have any regular interaction in a contact situation.

The Indian Folk tradition, as is elsewhere, has its roots in nature; it reveals close ties between man and nature. People accept women to be an embodiment of this nature and they worship nature in the form of a woman as a saviour to protect them from possible dangers. Sometimes the same woman

becomes a daughter of a farmer, a wife of a common man. Sometimes she comes to the same people as the benevolent mother. This tradition, unaffected by the superimposed culture of the colonialists is a preferred area for all the post-colonial writers- be it in India or elsewhere in the world.

Postcolonial writers confront the colonial culture by recreating a glorious past of their own that existed before the colony was set up. That we had a civilization, culture and language as good as that of the colonizers, perhaps even better one is repeatedly emphasized in their writings. As a part of this glorification, they have preferred to present their women characters with a positive attitude to withstand the turmoil- be it in their home or in the society- equating them thereby, as it was, with Goddess Durga in her different forms, as the symbol of power to endure all miseries in life. Not only this, these women characters were assigned the duty to look after the well-being of the *aam-aadmi* (common people). Raja Rao made it clear in the Foreword of his famous novel *Kanthapura* when he made reference of *Sthalapurana* :

There is no village in India, however, mean, that has not a rich *sthalapurana*, or legendary history, of its own. (p.v)

and about the goddess Kenchamma in the novel as the saviour-deity of the village:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, the blood of life,
Harvest queen, rain crowned,
Kenchamma, Kenchamma
Goddess benign and bounteous (p.4)

Kenchamma stands both as the source of inspiration as well as a symbol of power that drives the evil force out of the village. Though Manik Bondyopadhaya never proclaimed anything like Raja Rao in the Foreword to any of his novels or

short stories, it becomes clear from most of his writings, especially when he portrays any woman character, that he too had the same objective –to give an impression of destroyer and preserver to his women characters, features that are embodied in goddess Durga. My reading of Bisham Sahni gives me a similar impression when he wanted to tell in his short story *Pali* that the enmity between the Hindu and the Muslim communities can be repaired through love, the tradition set by the woman character in his short story. The future generation represented through the boy would surely remember the love, affection and much-needed security provided by his Muslim foster mother at the time of his crisis. A reading of the story makes us feel the Hindu-Muslim riot resulted from misunderstanding intentionally superimposed on the two communities by the colonizers. Despite this, the mother-son relation remains unaffected, closely bonded.

As I have mentioned earlier, these writers recreate the tradition with a well-defined objective. In the process, they recreate an image of a woman who resembles the mythical figure of Devi Durga in her multiple roles. In the works of these littérateurs, women characters emerge as saviours of the new age yet to be affected by corruption. In another case, the same woman character, like Devi Durga has taken the responsibility to destroy the evil that is in us so that mankind is saved from further disasters. Through the women-construct, both Manik Bondyopadhaya and Sahni want to say that the communal riot that took place between the Hindus and the Muslims followed by the massive movement of the refugees from one country to another to save their own lives is an act of cowardice and misunderstanding and that the colonizers were successful in their mission. But this divide did not have any socio-cultural implication.

That too is what Bhisam Sahni in his short story *Pali* seeks to communicate. The motherly figure of Devi Durga takes the responsibility to protect and nurture a child whose parents lost him in the crowd which was in a hurry to cross the border terrified of being butchered mercilessly by the members of a rival religious community. Both the parents had to leave their child for the others in their community won't wait for them to find out their lost child. Broken heart, they left the place accompanying the other Hindus. But the child was not killed. A Muslim woman extended her motherly affection to the child, provided him with the much-needed shelter, love and care, as he was a representative of the generation to come. This mother-child relation, though they belong to rival religious community sends a message- the bitter communal feeling is not inherent but imposed upon by the divisive colonial force. The motherly image of Devi Durga seems active in the woman who showed courage and extended her hand in re-establishing the age-old communal ties that were destroyed by some goons under the influence of the colonial power. Zeenab, the Muslim woman saved the lost child, Pali, reared him for seven years but she gave away the child when she heard that his own mother, a Hindu, was seriously ill, owing to the loss of both her children. In spite of repeated requests from her neighbours not give in, she agrees to let the boy go to his own mother with a condition that he would be sent to them during the time of Id for a month to stay with them. This sacrifice is something superhuman because Zeenab too did not have any child of her own. She responded to the ardent request of Manohar Lal rising above the religious parochialism:

...Folding his hands, he said, "Bahen, I'm not begging you for my child. I'm begging you for my wife's life. She has lost both her children.

She is missing Pali very much. His absence is driving her insane. ...”

“Take away the child. I do not want an unfortunate woman’s curse to fall upon me. How could I know you had lost both your children?”

... “I will part with the child on one condition. You must send him to us every year on the occasion of Id to stay with us for a month. Do you agree? Then give me your word.”
(p.69-70)

This sacrifice for the welfare of mankind equates, to my mind, Zeenab with Devi Durga.

In *Upaya* (Means), Manik shows a different facet of Devi Durga. He had the same belief like Bisham Sahni that the Hindu – Muslim divide and the riot thereafter are externally imposed upon the two communities and some goons of the communities were there to take this advantage – kill people brutally and loot their property. It mattered little if the affected people were Hindus or Muslims. So, Mallika, the Hindu refugee has been trapped by Pramatha, a Hindu gangster who, in the name of helping her wanted to exploit her sexually for a few days and then use her as a prostitute. That this could be designed by a Hindu when another hapless Hindu crossed the border to save her life, is something beyond imagination for these poor, ill-fated people. She is now a refugee. But a goon like Pramatha does not bother any human value and shows little sympathy for these unfortunate people. On the contrary, he carries on with his single agenda to exploit the refugees- be they Hindu or Muslim. So when he attempts to exploit Mallika in his residence, she takes the wine bottle and hits him hard on his head and then kills him. This is the other phase of Devi Durga – who does not hesitate to demolish the evil spirit for the welfare of all.

In *Shubala*, again another facet of Devi Durga has been portrayed by Manik. Shubala, the refugee has a hard time to

meet both the ends together. But she knows she has to feed her child and herself and look after the old ailing aunt at home. And to meet this minimum demand, she has to earn something. With this positive attitude, she goes to the town to find out sources of earning. She does not hesitate even to beg. The benevolent motherly figure of Shubala who does not care even to breastfeed her child in a crowded bus is synonymous with Devi Durga’s benignant figure.

Sarbajanin tells us about another woman character, Shuroma who fell in love with Samir, her neighbour and married him. Samir aspired to become rich overnight. The ambition was not to be fulfilled. So evil forces dominated over him and he gradually lost himself in the world of darkness. As a mark of protest, Shuroma dissociated herself from Samir. She remained firm in her decision not to meet Samir when he begged her permission to meet her at least for once before he left her forever. Thereafter, Samir managed to convey the information to his father-in law’s house that he was lying in his death-bed near Sealdah station. After repeated pursuance from her uncle, Parameswar, the friend, philosopher and guide of the family, Shuroma agreed to go to Sealdah station to find out the ailing Samir. He was taken home and every possible measure was taken for the revival of his health. At midnight, Samir got up to tell Shuroma that he learnt a lesson from the refugees how to face the challenges of life with persistent determination and promised her that he would be a new man henceforth. Some changes in his activities were observed to satisfy Shuroma soften her stand and be close to him as a wife. Here too, the evil and pessimism in Samir have been overpowered by Shuroma’s positive and resolute mind, which again reminds the reader of Devi Durga. In fact, the title *Sarbajanin* has a specific connotation for the Bengali readers.

Shuroma represents the Devi who purges out the evil in a human being and acts as a saviour for the mankind in general. Parameswar stands for Brahma, the God of Knowledge and good sense. In the novel, Parameswar takes the responsibility of himself to see that good sense prevails among his neighbours.

The Akhshaya- Sudhu relationship in the novel *Chinha* (print) shows how Akhshaya, a rogue and a drunkard, has to surrender himself to the mental strength of Sudha who purges the evil out from Akhshaya to give him a new lease of life. Sudha stands for heavenly honey through which a man is raised to the level of an immortal being. Then there is another relationship -- Hemanta-Sita. The novel tells us that the life of Hemanta has been moulded by two women characters- first by his mother and thereafter by Sita who motivates him to join the political movement that was going on in the country against the British imperialism. In both the cases, Manik preferred mythological names and associated their strength of character with that of his in his novel. The symbol of Devi Durga and her resolute role to kill the demonic forces in whatever form it is, is reverberated in the relationships mentioned. There is another woman character, Aamina, who is convinced that Independence is a priority for the Indians and any form of sacrifice, even if it be the death of her son, is acceptable to her. There is Ratna, the sister of Ganesh showing resoluteness of her character when the whole family was about to be trapped by a fraudster.

Manik has empowered his women characters with the strength of mind, their resoluteness not to compromise with the evil and encourage their fellow-mates, both men and women to fight against the foreign demons that were plundering our property and culture –so much so that our very existence is under a question mark now.

The same temperament has been found in the women characters of *Kanthapura* who form the Sevika Sangha or a women's group to fight the forces of oppression. Rangamma, a leading woman leader inspired by Gandhian philosophy takes the responsibility to motivate and form a women's group to fight against the oppressive British force:

Rangamma said, "In the city, there are groups and groups of young women, girls, married women, and widows, who have joined together and have become Volunteers... and they practise exercises like the Police... Do you know the story of Rani Lakshmibai, and do you know how she fought for India? (107)

But there were more hurdles for them to overcome in order to organise such a sangha: "And when our men heard of this, they said: was there nothing left for women but to vagabond about like soldiers?" (109)

The women- leaders asked their comrades to tackle their husbands in a way quite unlike the 'Red-man' oppressors: "And Rangamma says, if we are to help others, we must begin with our husbands." (110) The plan is to take care of the home so that the husbands are friendly and allow their wives to carry out the programmes of Sevika Sangha against the British. The way these women are tortured by the local policemen shows the intensity and effect of their struggle:

And we ran here and there to seek refuge, and in Satamma's house and Post-Office House and Nine pillared House, man after man had been taken away during the night, while we had slept the sleep of asses, and the women who had their husbands taken away were tied to the pillars and their mouths gagged, and those who said 'No, no', were asked not to leave their houses till mid-day, and that was why there were so few women at

the Promontory and no Rangamma either. (156)

At that time, they are not ordinary helpless women, but manifestations of Durga or Shakti, the destroyer of Demons. But these women volunteers need to be mentally prepared. So Rangamma says:

Now, imagine the policemen are beating you, and you shall not budge a finger's length,' and we close our eyes and we imagine Bade Khans after Bare Khans, short, bearded ... and we feel the lathis bang on us, and the bangles break and the hair tear and the lips split and we say "Nay, nat,' and we cannot bear it, ... but Ratna, who is by her, says, 'Be strong, sister. When your husband beats you-you do not hit back, do you? You only grumble and weep. The policeman's beatings are the like! (127)

Though it is not mentioned clearly in any part of the novel, the mood is set for the reader to feel that Great Britain, the island beyond the seas is obviously the kingdom of Ravana. The red colour of the British indicates their violence and the Skeffington Coffee Estate is a symbol of the European industrialisation on the Indian way of life. All the women, except for a given few, were conscious of reality and of their existence in a group with a common concern. The struggle of the women in the village Kanthapura continues even after they were uprooted from their lands and driven to alien

places. They used to sing bhajans and hold a reading of Vedantic texts thereby retaining their old tradition. This resoluteness shows they would never succumb to the oppressive rulers. The wish to fight, to reflect, to oppose and to revolt was still kindling within their hearts despite their complete uprooting from home.

The short stories and novels of three prominent writers from South, East and North India were taken with a view to observe how all the litterateurs from different corners of the country viewed women as the power- incarnate in their writings to fight the evil spirit in the Indian society. As it is felt, the mythical figure of Devi Durga has influenced in some way or other to draw their women-characters who played a decisive role in the days of turmoil – in the pre-independent period and also after when post-partition era saw a huge number of rootless men and women moving from one side of the border to the other to save their lives. By instilling in their women characters the positive attitude to face all odds – be it a freedom movement, or a challenge in the home front or an attack by the camouflaged enemy, these three writers have shown the strength of the women characters in India that is personified in Devi Durga. Though there is no direct reference of the mythical figure of Devi Durga in any of their works, the role of the women characters in the days of turmoil recalls to mind that Devi Durga is the incarnation of this vigour and talent to face all odds by the women characters.

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