

## **Between two worlds: Cultural Conditioning and Struggle for Identity in the Works of Nineteenth Century Bengali Women**

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**Abstract:** Human thoughts are largely shaped by cultural influences, and cultural conventions and values embedded in language of the race or clan coordinate the multiple subsystems of a larger societal organization. The fact that language, thought and socio-cultural dimensions are inexplicably intertwined, in a way indicates a deterministic perspective. Benjamin Lee Whorf in 'A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities' observes, "The problem of thought and thinking in the native community is not purely and simply a psychological problem. It is quite largely cultural. It is moreover largely a matter of one especially cohesive aggregate of cultural phenomena that we call a language." The problematic of a profoundly linguistic base of culture emerges as Benjamin Whorf in 'The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behaviour to Language', jeopardizes the equal partnership of autocratic language and a dependent culture. If language itself hovers at the edge of continual flux and indeterminacy, the socio-cultural context of relevance and interpretative exercises in any given context, assume kaleidoscopic variety and generate intriguing questions. Interestingly enough GayatriChakrabortySpivak in her A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, refers to a cultural "foreclosure" signifying a colonial conditioning that recodes the colonized person's thought and literary endeavours, quite distinct from that of the original "native informant", rendering him/her "a blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western model discipline) could inscribe." The linguistic paradigms are intriguing. A concomitant overt

tension of the increasingly marginalized and self-consolidating new identity, thoroughly conditioned by the English linguistic bases of a new evolving culture and yet restricted by the native traditions and cultural norms, can be traced in the works of women of the nineteenth century. The woman exposed to Western cultural conditioning and yet restrained by the ingrained patriarchal traditional societal structures often traverse labyrinthine mazes in the quest of her true identity amidst the overlapping frontiers, through her poetic efforts in a language of the power-centre. How the "other", the colonized, educated, "emancipated" yet restrained women like Swarnakumaridevi, Sarala Devi, and others negotiate the overt cultural tensions through their linguistic literary endeavours, offers intriguing prospects of investigation.

**[Keywords:** *tension, conditioning, foreclosure, language, literature, identity*]

Human thoughts are largely shaped by cultural influences and the cultural values and norms embedded in the language of a race or clan coordinate with the multiple sub-systems and cross-currents of influences of a larger societal organization open to variegated external impacts. The fact that language, thought and socio-cultural dimension are inextricable intertwined, in a way, signifies a deterministic perspective. Benjamin Lee Whorf in 'A Linguistic Consideration of Thinking in Primitive Communities' observes,

The problem of thought and thinking in the native community is not purely and simply a psychological problem. It is quite largely cultural. It is moreover largely a matter of one especially cohesive aggregate of cultural phenomena that we call language (p.18)

If language itself hovers at the edge of continual flux and indeterminacy, the socio-cultural context of relevance and interpretative exercises in any given context, assume kaleidoscopic variety and generate intriguing questions. Culture remains at crossroads in the nineteenth century colonized Bengal and the linguistic base becomes highly volatile with the continual reframing of the knowledge base essentially representative of the power center. Knowledge, in tandem with the enlightened values of the Western colonizers perpetrated to the indigenous elite, assumes a paradoxical character. In an encounter with the indigenous domain of knowledge with the Western colonizers' ideas, the colonizers' ways of knowing and knowledge-domain assumes a hegemonic supremacy. The colonized indigenous identity interestingly assumes not only a strange 'hybridity' as prefaced by Homi Bhabha, but is found to reflect an

intriguing immunity or more likely a sanctioned ignorance of the traces of indigenous cultural representations. It is perhaps what Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak calls the phenomenon of 'foreclosure'. In *Critique of Post Colonial Reason*, Spivak asserts

The relationship between European discursive production and the axiomatics of imperialism...changes, although the latter continues to play the role of making itself appear as the only negotiable way. In the course of this unceasing operation, and in one way or another, an unacknowledgeable moment that I will call "the native informant" is crucially needed ...and it is foreclosed (p.7)

Spivak refers to Lacan and Freud explaining 'foreclosure' as an energetic act of defense in which the ego rejects an incompatible idea 'together with the affect' and behaves as if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all. The native intellect then appears to be self-consolidating, self-conscious and a convincing presence, and yet deep down remains somewhat a "blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the colonizing Western supremacy could inscribe". The suggestion of a cultural conditioning emerges as a disturbing reality. The colonizing West is unquestioningly accepted as the model but the native element is deemed essential too. It is needed to be foreclosed since without this express act of foreclosure, the might of the imposition naturally grows weak. The conditioned self remains what Gramsci called "a site of unlisted traces" while the surface, interestingly enough, appears as an overt colonial attempt at fabrication of new and glorified representations of the self, that in its hegemonic manifestations, provides blinding alibis for the domination, exploitation and epistemic violation that are necessary corollaries of the process of colonization. What then emerges as a representative voice of the women of nineteenth century Bengal, poses a serious challenge as the representative hand wielding the pen is more often than not from the 'educated' elite that has had its fair share of exposure to the literature and 'enlightening' culture of the colonizing West and a thorough conditioning in the allied linguistic subsystems. The quintessential tension inherent in any 'foreclosure', in the form of what Spivak calls "an inner-outer switch: an internal withdrawal of cathexis that becomes a disavowal of the real external world", renders the critical reassessment of their literary output a highly challenging interpretative enterprise. The encrypted patronymic collides with the exposure to and the conditioning in the Western models of enlightened emancipation. How far the texts then, replete with an overt rejection of the 'affect', serve as true representations or operate as a highly conditioned defense of the colonizer's 'civilizing

mission', baffles the questing intellect.

Knowledge or more precisely, the ways of knowing the world is somewhat inextricably intertwined with the concept of 'power'. Both for Foucault in Archeology of Knowledge and Edward Said in Orientalism, power is constituted in part through dominant ways of knowledge that in its turn gain influence through continual associations with nodes of power in a cultural network. The colonizer's ways of knowing gains hegemony and is unanimously accepted as legitimate. The nature of exposure of the nineteenth century Bengali women betrays various levels of complicities. If earlier she was allowed to take lessons from female Vaishnabees, a common praxis even in the culturally and educationally advanced Tagore family, such indigenous influences are gradually eradicated in favour of a more rigid Western model of education. BrajenBandopadhyay in SahityaSadhakCharitamala, no. 28, quotes fromSwarnakumari Debi's enlightening article on the education of the women in the 'Andarmahal' published in Pradeepin 1899, where Swarnakumari's observations regarding the nature of indigenous female education reveals that such education was increasingly relegated as lowly under the Western influences. She heard from her elders how a Vaishnabite lady, dressed in pristine white and strikingly well-versed in Sanskrit and Bengali, came to the Tagore household to teach the female members of the Andarmahal', though by Swarnakumari's time she has already been expunged and Swarnakumari"did not have the fortune to see the Vaishnabite lady". The Vaishnabite lady like her other counterparts, was an expertise in 'Kathakata' or traditional oral narratives that was an invaluable source of profound religious knowledge presented in a fascicle, rhythmic and simplistic narrative form, frequently fraught with overt topical references. However, the subaltern voice is gradually deemed uncouth and unfit for the cultured elite, conditioned by the Western enlightenment model and the indigenous voices are repressed and ousted in favour of the norms and ideas of refinement prescribed the Evangelist Missionaries and the English educated minds upholding the Victorian 'genteel' tradition as the idea to be followed. Popular 'Kirtan' or traditional 'Dhop' singers like Sahachari or JaganmohiniDasi of the 1840s gradually disappeared into oblivion with their reservoir of indigenous knowledge, wisdom, profound devotional treasure and intuitive insights into human life and the transcendental. One is reminded of GayatriChakrabortySpivak's discussion on 'epistemic violence' that refers to violence done to ways of knowing and understanding of the non-western indigenous people. With the sources of

traditional indigenous knowledge gradually relegated to oblivion and a systematic imposition of the colonizing domain of cognitive knowledge and ideals, in tandem with linguistic structures and new linguistic styles sanctioned by the hegemonic discourse of the ruler, the new band of "emancipated" women of nineteenth century Bengal exposed to such education, emerges as a strange group of immense potential, and yet ridden by deep disquiet and dilemmas. They may be read as suffering from a profound identity crisis, while their position as the representative of their race or sex remains grossly inadequate, due to the express act of 'foreclosure' discussed earlier.

In her illuminating essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' GayatriChakrabortySpivak shows how to be accepted the non-Western "other" must adopt the hegemonic forms of western discourse and domains of knowledge. The folklore, the Vaishnabite narratives, the lore of female 'kabiya's', 'kathalkata' or oral narratives and 'dhopkirtans', 'khemta's and numerous other forms of indigenous popular culture that reflected the quintessential subaltern voices fraught with tales of love, pain, values, bold aspirations, blatant and sometimes almost rude critique of domination and repression and exploitation, are repressed and foreclosed in the new educated Bengali female's literary endeavours characterized with cadences of Western modality, a necessary outcome of the new female education in the Western model. What was previously accepted as a somewhat crude but an authentic depiction of contemporary life with its joys and pains, and source of profound spiritual knowledge, is discarded as redundant. The 'epistemic violence' leads to a foreclosure and the colonizer's ways of controlled thinking pervades the newly educated Bengali female who now combats her inner repressed sensibilities and is deliberately and consciously trained in a new evolving linguistic framework. As Spivak aptly observes, the subaltern must always be caught in translation, never truly expressing herself, but always already interpreted. Memoirs of SaratKumari Deb born in the same year as Rabindranath Tagore, presents glimpses of the life of a nineteenth century Bengali educated woman who attended dinner parties in British households with her father-in-law and interacted impeccably with the Western elite. Her reference to her six well educated, refined sisters-in-law in her autobiography Amar Songsar, apparently presents an exceptional picture and can scarcely be read as a representative voice of the century. SaratKumari Deb's memoir remains an example of controlled and refined literary style, sanctioned by the hegemonic praxis and strangely purged of her indigenous identity. Anuradha Roy's *Dukkhini Sati Charit: UnishShatakerBanglayMeyederUponyash*(2011) points out a

similar lack of evidence of the rise of the self-conscious and essentially emancipated female voice in the novels of the period though traces of tremendous intrinsic struggle in the description of their plight and the strangely intense moments of conflict. The presentations of such conflicts is however largely tempered by a genteel treatment and literary style - probably a result of the systematic cultural conditioning. What is interesting however, is occasional traces of an agonizing combat with the repressed or marginalized voices that pierce the genteel veneer. Kanak's conflicts in SwarnaKumari Debi's *Chhinnamukul*, Snehalata's dilemma in her *Snehalata* or Parijat's hesitation in *BijanBashiniby Satadalbasini* seem to be faint eruptions of a non-sanctioned otherness of voice dissenting against the carefully designed and superficially imposed Western cultural model of discourse.

Almost all these women authors including SwarnaKumari Debi and her daughter Sarala Debi Chaudhuri of the Tagore family, Prasannamayee Debi educated in the Western model at a zamindar family, Girindramohini Dasi exposed to the English education both in her parental home and later in the family of Akrur Datta, Mankumari Basu - the niece of the eminent poet Michael Madhusudan Datta or Kamini Roy who later became a teacher of the Bethune school, have a common trait of using soft and sentimentally charged verbal modules as opposed to the aggressive bold and sometimes crude portrayal of the contemporary and basic issues by the indigenous woman's traditional narratives. SwarnaKumari Debi's farces sometimes did incorporate the indigenous woman's dialect in the dialogues of her protagonists but such incorporations were meager and insignificant. The *Calcutta Review's* comment (18880) on Prasannamayee Debi's *Banalata* interestingly reveals an unconscious drifting away from the indigenous sensibility:

it [*Banalata*] consists of several short poems on a variety of subjects which bear the impress of a mind emancipated from the thralldom of... Juthi, Mallika, Malati (names of flowers common in Bengali households) of bygone ages and awakening to an appreciative perception of the universe.

The horizons have broadened indeed, but the literary style and even the subject with a few exceptions, betrayed the systematic marginalization of the authentic unadulterated indigenous voice and vision. The female protagonists are often dutiful, washed out virtuous role models whose superiority lay in larger than life sacrifices and sustained endurance. The model of the Victorian Western education disparaged

any form of blatant assertiveness or the slightest departure from the straitjacket of imposed domestic virtuosity. ShriKaliash Chandra Bose writes in 'On the Education of Hindu Females' (1846) that it would indeed be foolish of our countrymen to think of debarring our women from the light of knowledge which has already struggled its way into the chambers of darkness and yet the ultimate end of such education would be to breed a new army of refined, reorganized, recast and regenerated "lady" with a pristine purity of the figures etched on the glass windows of a cathedral with absolutely no traces of the now marginalized indigenous Vidya of Vidyasundaranandpanchali who is strikingly assertive and bold or the adulterous Radha who dares to explore the truth of love and devotion with scant regard for social norms. Even contemporary magazines like the BamaBodhiniPatrika advocated an almost similar 'genteel' education. What is interesting to note is the sustained strong rejection of not only loud and assertive native linguistic profiles, but a continual monitoring of the subject of composition. Kmaini Kalanka, the autobiography of a prostitute written by Nabin Kali Debi in 1870 in an apparently refined modern Bengali dialect was vehemently repressed and Apurva Sati (1975) by Golap, one of the first ladies to be recruited for MichaleMadhusudan'sSharmisthamet equal disapproval. Even of the actresses mastered the refined language through the dialogues they memorized their authentic voices defied the imposed norms of the Western 'genteel' culture and hence were summarily marginalized. It seems that the educated women of the elite households had unknowingly internalized the male concepts of the 'emancipated' woman that was fully imposed by the hegemonic Western cultural superstructure. It was almost obligatory to be refined in both thought and speech, the nature of refinement being defined by the colonizing culture. How far what Spivak calls a foreclosure happened effectively and how far the dissident repressed voices collided continually with the impositions remains in itself a challenging prospect to be explored.

The situations seem to be what HomiBhabha calls 'hybridity' in his Location of Culture. The literary output of the nineteenth century colonized Bengal seems to be a volatile space of multiple cultural borders. The elements of dilemma, anxiety and dissidence project faint beginnings of a fascinating identity crisis and a concomitant, however subdued quest for the true identity. Rokeya's female protagonist in Padmarag refuses to marry her beloved as she learns that his father had rejected her earlier and her self esteem is hurt. KusumKumari's protagonist Premalata in Ashalata partially opposes the straitjacket of the institution of marriage that denies even a basic

respect to a woman as an individual with her own wishes or aspirations. As Bhabha aptly points out, the purity of the colonial ideas are resisted in the myriad forms and the nineteenth century literature presents a bewildering spectacle. The strange paradox of the presence of the "self in the other" in form of a hybridity that leads to an austere cultural conditioning immediately followed by tendencies of resistance, armed with the new power of knowledge, can indeed be read in the works of the women writers. As Bhabha argues, the hybrid offers a resistant politics that redraws boundaries and sometime goes to the extent of subverting them altogether. It is almost like what Bell hooks (1990) tells Spivak in her autobiographical tale, that the marginal space or position is a site of "radical possibility". The female colonized "other" relegated to the margins is systematically conditioned to approach the sanctioned center with all its prejudicial preferences and yet the remnants of the margins remain alive, pregnant with tremendous intensity and potency. Retelling the woman's tale from a culturally conditioned, foreclosed and 'refined perspective' would have ordinarily given only an incomplete or misleading picture but what renders the works of the nineteenth century Bengali woman intriguing is the faint gleam of this outer space, the occasional betrayal of dissidence and profound identity crisis that defies any attempt at generalization. The literary endeavours tend to emerge with a full subaltern heterogeneity that opens up fresh avenues of explorations in any critical attempt at reassessment. As Bell hooks says - "Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there". Sarala Debi Chaudhurani asserts in a public lecture in Medinipur Sangeet Sammelan, that the eternal message of emancipation of the spirit comes from Nataraj's dance steps that pervades the human blood and breadth. In the rhythmic progress of the universe lies the key to human emancipation and no one should even try to restrict or impede that progress towards liberation. She analyzes the English words 'disease' and 'at ease', referring to a spontaneous self-emancipation that defies any imposed or artificial control of any hegemonic human center. If her marginal position as a conditioned female demanded an artificial progress to the center sanctioned by the society, her overt recourse to the indigenous Pagan rhythms of the calamitous 'Tandava' of Nataraj subverts that with tremendous intensity. It is in voices like that of Sarala Debi Chaudhurani that the cultural struggle finds expression and the evolving "culture" as Spivak prefers to define in *A Critique of Post Colonial Reason*, tantamounts to "a complex strategic situation in a particular society"(p.353) in a given time. Whether the indigenous voices successfully penetrate



the surface colonial culture or remain submerged in dark oblivion, repressed and systematically foreclosed cannot be deduced with facility. The journey through the literary output of the nineteenth century Bengali women is both fascinating and baffling. The end defies clarity of vision and any certitude of definitiveness and to propose a definitive resolution is not the purpose of the present paper. In the very dilemma, the conflict and the ambiguity lies the seduction and the challenge.

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