

Writing From Within: Women, Folklore, and the Fiction of Sudhindra Nath Ghose

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Abstract

A yellow-brown pamphlet brooding in one of the files kept at the British Library carries the names of the authors and the books published by Michael Joseph. It snobbishly displays the photographs of the writers along with their names. The centre of that yellowish page contains the name of Sudhindranath Ghose, but where is his image? Sudhin Ghose, a well-known author during his time, subsequently vanished from the literary scene. He was a successful author during the mid-twentieth century, but later was “silenced”. In this paper, I look at the reasons for the marginalization and subsequent silencing of a popular author. I particularly, argue that Ghose’s engagement with the women-centric folklore considered as “obscene” led to the marginalization of the author from the literary canon.

Keywords: women; Bengal; folklore; literary tradition

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In a Letter written to Ruth Pravar Jhabavala, a leading Indian author writing in English, Sudhindra Nath Ghose apprehends an inevitable ban on his written texts;

You are probably aware that the Delhi authorities have banned Aubrey Menen’s *Rama Retold*, and some of my friends feared that the same fate may overtake *The Flame of the Forest* on account of my criticism of the legendary Ek Nambur; moreover the Moscow Radio (for reasons best known to the Muscovites) commented on it both in English and in Bengali (Fortunately, few critics in India have read in between the lines of the book, and I believe it is likely that the censors will overlook its “moral” altogether. The Sunday Statesman’s reviewer has declared that the book’s story is complicated and it has no lesson to teach! So much the better) (London, British Library, MSS EUR 153/65)

While writing this letter to his fellow compatriot and a well-known Indian author writing in English, Ghose shows a sense of urgency. He sounds frightful and deluded. He contemplates an inevitable ban on his writing. What are the reasons for this urgency? Why a prolific writer well-known among his literary friends apprehends a ban on his texts?

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Text and Nation in Colonial and Post-Colonial India



**Figure 1.1 A grandmother telling tales to her little grand-daughter
Courtesy of the author.**

The Legacy of the Nation in South Asia is a gendered reality which can only be realised through folklore. The Idea of women in India is often of 'a caged parrot'; a metaphor brilliantly used to rebuke the whole idea of nation and nationalism as imagined by the nationalist's reformers of British India. But, this image can be logically dismantled only through introducing the world of folklore popular among women. Why are folk songs, tales, sayings, proverbs, riddle, and abuses so popular among women? While growing up in the North Indian district of Darbhanga, I frequently came across different forms of oral traditions. My father often recounts how he grew up on tales narrated by his grandmother. Growing up in a family of fifty-two, the dark winter nights or the warm summer afternoons provided the twenty children of the large household with an age-old form of entertainment. The sister of my father has a different story. A trained folk singer, she knows at least fifty songs to be sung on various occasions. For her, these songs do not just entertain but impart rich, philosophical knowledge, practical wisdom and moral training to the listener. Many of her songs are devotional, but some of them are tearfully hilarious and display an entirely different perspective on South Asian femininity. My most direct and notable encounter with oral performance, however, happened later. A singer used to frequent my household. He was an avid performer who used to mingle prose and poetry in his narrative, and, along with his musical instrument (harmonium), enchanted his audience. He was

a wanderer and had renounced the world after his son had abandoned him. His voice, therefore, held pain, and when he narrated the *viraha* episode from the Krishna *lila*, it resonated effectively with the audience.² In addition, the tales of *Hatim*, *Arabian Nights* and *Panchatantra* have shaped my childhood memories. What was interesting, though, was for me to realise how many of the South Asian novelists were similarly embedded in their native folk traditions. Even when writing in English, they fell back on their childhood memories to discover a new form of writing.

A.K. Ramanujan, in one of his essays, famously asks: 'Who needs folklore?' Responding to some sceptical voices that denigrated folklore as old wives' tales and peasant superstition, Ramanujan shows the presence of 'a large non-literate' group of men and women who compose various oral forms in South Asia (Ramanujan, 1999: 1553). The present article is built on this argument: it examines the folkloric world as well as its influence on the writings of some of the Indian writers writing in English in the mid-twentieth century. While some critics have paid attention to the use of myth in Indian writing in English, such scholarship relies heavily on the classical tradition derived from Sanskrit and Persian literature in South Asia. My exploration, by contrast, seeks to shift the paradigm from the recovery of the classical to that of the oral vernacular tradition as well as provide a structural investigation of the various folk forms.

In recent years, the study of folkloric elements in the literature of the Indian writers writing in English, particularly within the postcolonial discourse, has gained momentum. In a recent article, Vijay Mishra has drawn attention to the power of oral narratives – *testimonio* – in the formation of subaltern consciousness (Mishra, 2015: 558). While focusing on the indentured labourers who were carried from Kolkata to Mauritius, he describes the importance of 'memorial reconstruction' in understanding the plight of the labourers (Mishra, 2015: 533). In the same article, he examines Amitav Ghosh's employment of Bhojpuri folk songs and how they articulate the pain of the indentured woman. Construction of modernity through folklore is another area of interrogation in contemporary postcolonial studies. Laetitia Zecchini, for example, explores the confluence of translation and creative writing, folk music and poetry, *bhakti* and Euro-American modernism in the works of modern English poets in India, and shows how such negotiations expose 'the simultaneous confluence of local

² Viraha is a lament song. In devotional literature, it is sung to emotionally dramatise the separation of Radha and Krishna. The name of the singer is Suryanarayan Chaudhry. He lived in the Madhubani district of Bihar.

and global literatures, the porosity of languages and traditions' (Zechini, 2014:257). But the engagement of Indian novelists writing in English during the period between 1930 and 1960 with vernacular folklore remains unexplored, except for brief mention in discussions on Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan. In this context, an analysis of the deep influence of and inter-textual links between the early Indian fiction in English and vernacular folklore provides fresh insights into early twentieth-century Indian fiction in English. What are the various modes of engagement and how are they employed in the novel? Why does a folk song suddenly appear within the narrative? What are the proverbs doing in a novel? In the present article, I am particularly looking at the manner in which the idea of the folklore, woman and the nation has been envisaged in the novels of Sudhin Ghose.

An Author in Exile: Life and Work of Sudhin Ghose

Born in 1899 in Burdwan, Sudhin Ghose was brought up in the well-known Ghose family of Bengal (London, British Library, MSS EUR 153/62).³ Ghose spent his childhood in Burdwan in close association with his grandmother. In a letter written to Alis Jabana on June 9, 1952, Ghose describes his grandmother as a feisty and astute woman who knew eight different languages and often challenged the decisions of her husband (London, British Library, MSS EUR, 153/62).⁴ Mary Weiser, an Austrian lady who stayed with Ghose for the last twenty-five years of his life, records in her unpublished memoir the relationship between Ghose and his grandmother. She narrates that, although the family was orthodox and the young Ghose was not allowed to go to the theatre, concerts or dance programmes, the grandmother sometimes sneaked the children out to see

³ 'Papers of Sudhin Ghose', London, British Library, MSS EUR 153/62. In a letter to his French translator, Monsieur S. Jourat on January 17, 1955, Ghose writes: 'My father- Sir Bipin Behari Ghose- belonged to a patrician family of West Bengal; he was for many years a Judge in the High Court of Calcutta and the Dean of the Faculty of Law of the University of Calcutta; my mother Lady Mahila Ghose (Palit) was of Chandernagore, (until recently a French colony): her family- the Palits- was connected with Chandernagore for about three centuries'. The letter, thus confirms that Ghose belonged to the famous bhadrak community of the nineteenth-century Bengal, well-known for their cultural and political activism.

⁴ Sudhin Ghose, Letter to Alis Jabana, 9th June, 1952. London, British Library, MSS EUR, 153/62.

the circus (Weiser, London, British Library, MSS 153/137).⁵ As with Rao, it was his grandmother who introduced him to the world of oral narratives.

It was also during this time that Ghose was introduced to the rich folk tradition of Bengal. He would have learnt about *Kathakata* (story-telling), *Jatra* (folk-theatrical form), and various folk tales popular in the inner household. He would have also been exposed to several popular rituals including *halakarshan* or the ploughing ceremony that was very popular in rural Bengal. It is observed even now every August in Shantiniketan, Bolepur. Ghose also would have heard about *Vaishnav* female singers (*kirtanis*). These singers often had a unique position in nineteenth-century Bengal (Banerjee, 1989:127-77). In their songs, they would draw upon ancient mythical as well as contemporary episodes and would often even teach the women of andramahals (inner household) *Kathakata* or recitation of mythological stories. Swarnakumari Devi, a prominent figure of Bengal women's reforms and elder sister of the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, remembered anecdotes she had heard from such a *Kathakata Vaishnav* singer: 'A vaishnav lady-pure after a bath, dressed in white, fair-skinned- would appear in to teach. She was no mean scholar. She was well-versed in Sanskrit and needless to say in Bengali also' (Swarnakumari Devi, 1899:1306). Such accounts suggest the popularity of the *Vaishnav* female singer in these elite households. The young Ghose might have known such performances during his childhood.

Ghose subsequently moved to Calcutta where he started studying science at Presidency College. He later sailed to Britain and then to France in 1920-21 for his higher education. Ghose spent his time in London, Paris, and Strasbourg as a Research Scholar, finishing his research on Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Later, he went on to become a journalist, widely travelling across the whole world, except South America (London, British Library, MSS EUR F 153/137).⁶ After several journalistic stints, Ghose joined the League of Nations secretariat in 1929. He worked in its information section for about a decade. During the period, he also did a lot of writing and translation. Ghose went back to India in 1940, but soon returned to London and was with the allied forces until 1945. Meanwhile, his connection with his homeland was limited to a handful of letters from his brothers and close

⁵Mary Weiser, *Sudhin Ghose: A Memoir* (unpublished). London, British Library, MSS EUR, 153/137.

⁶ London, British Library, MSS EUR F 153/137.
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friends.⁷ Ghose remained in London for the last twenty-five years of his life teaching the history of Arts and Philosophy. He died in 1965.

Ghose's varied literary output includes some journalistic writing, a study entitled *Post-War Europe: 1918-1937* (1939), and three volumes of folktales collected from the Indian subcontinent. His first novel, *And Gazelles Leaping*, appeared in 1949 in London. It was followed by *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951), *The Vermillion Boat* (1953), and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955). The novels are written in the style of a *bildungsroman*, tracing the journey of the narrator in a remote village as well as metropolitan Calcutta. Sudhin Ghose also had a rather bitter relationship with his publisher Michael Joseph.⁸

The novels, though, are distinct, and Ghose's novelistic career in Europe coincided with the rise of modernism. One of the strands within modernism was the radical reconceptualisation of European literature and art through engagement with more 'primitive' cultures and civilisations, with a distinct ethnological slant (Bell, 1999:20). Sexuality and black culture held a privileged place in modernist and avant-garde art, from Pablo Picasso to Gertrude Stein. Inspired by African art, Picasso in "Les Femmes d'Alger" famously experimented with Cubism, turning the shapes and faces of a group of posing prostitutes into fragmented figures (Rosenberg, 2004:220). In India, too, we see the influence of the avant-garde movement on the artists and writers of the period. The painters, such as Jamini Roy, Amrita Shergill, and Rabindranath Tagore, drew upon the so-called primitive images to construct their genealogy of modernity (Mitter, 2007:67). Sudhin Ghose, too, was influenced by the vernacular art forms and used them to construct his own genealogy of modernity. The rise of "print" in nineteenth-century Bengal perhaps led to his deep association with these popular art forms.

⁷His initial estrangement with the family began in 1920 when he decided to pursue literature instead of Science. His father, Bipin Behari Ghose wanted him to be a doctor and Ghose was sent to England to study Science. Ghose, however, decided to study English Literature. He subsequently, much to his father's distress, married a French woman, Yvonne Lolita.

⁸The relationship was so bitter that Ghose was unable to publish all his novels in India. It is beyond the scope of this essay to highlight rather vicious feud between Michael Joseph and Sudhin Ghose. For More see Sudhin Ghose papers housed at the British Library.

From Elite to Popular: Rise of “Print” in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

Bengal of the nineteenth century was the seat of growing political nationalism. The vernacular printing press and widespread printing industry gave a new impetus to the nationalist fervour. With the establishment of the first printing press in 1800, the large-scale production of journals, periodicals, and pamphlets began to appear in the vernacular – Bengali language. Most of these publications though, as Anindita Ghosh has shown in her influential work *Power in Print* (2006), were caught in the debate around – high and – low literature. (Ghosh, 2006: 145). A tendency to sanitize Bengali and make it capable of producing literature of 'high' literary worth gained momentum. The popular fiction produced out of – Battala book market and consumed by the woman and low-caste was declared obscene.

The contempt for the popular folk traditions such as *jatra*, *panchali*, *kathakata*, and so on was the by-product of colonial education. Embarrassed by the criticism of the British scholars and intellectuals, the *bhadralok* class of the nineteenth century began to look down upon these forms of entertainment. A *bhadralok* writing in 1855 complained against *jatra*, declaring that almost all the plots of *jatra* are taken from ‘_amours of Krishna and Radha.’ It further goes on to add that who that has any pretension to a polite taste will not be disgusted with the vulgar mode of dancing with which our play commences’ (Banerjee, 159). Well-known poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt even wrote a poem ‘Sharmistā’ in 1858 to condemn *jatra* plays. Commenting on the *bhadralok*’s disregard for the popular tradition, Rosinka Chaudhury argues that the nineteenth-century upper-middle class Bengali society was determined to construct a national literature for Bengal and poetry was to be written according to “pure

English literary convention” (Chaudhury, 2009:316-33). Such an attitude, argues Chaudhury, led to the marginalization of the native tradition and declared it both “immodest” (*brihasunya*) and “ugly” (*kadaraya*) (Chaudhury, 2009: 316-33).

Still, as Anindita Ghosh argues, huge amounts of popular material were printed during this period. Investigating the number of popular genres printed during the period, she explains that the individual presses produced around 8000 to 47000 copies (Ghosh, 2006:17). Works produced were mostly popular legends and romances, religious and mythological literature, almanacs, legends, and romances. Ghosh claims that “despite

bhadralok disapproval, these small presses did a brisk trade in light pamphlet literature, their publications enjoying a large and popular readership" (Ghosh, 2006:26). In a way, these printed genres were the – defining others of an emergent standardized modern Bengali language and literature. The interesting aspect of this debate between popular and vulgar was the fact that some of the educated elites, who publicly disapproved the content of these literatures, enjoyed relishing it at their home (Ghose, 2006:16). Such tendency gave rise to huge production as well as circulation of these printed genres.

Sudhindra Nath Ghose belonged to the educated *bhadralok* class of Bengal. He must have enjoyed reading these "popular" and "vulgar" materials at his home. From his writings, it is, however, clear that he was very well aware of the tendency of the new Bengali class to marginalize the native tradition. Though not a nativist like Raja Rao, Ghose through his fiction critiques *bhadralok* society for imposing Victorian morality and feudal patriarchy principles of sanity and the right code of conduct on the literature. He engages, as I will discuss further, with this folk material of Bengal, frowned upon by the colonial elite, to experiment with the genre of fiction as well as to represent a new version of Indian femininity.

The hitherto little-known archive of Sudhin Ghose in the British Library, comprising largely letters, provides fresh insights into his art. In his writing, he heavily draws upon these new literary trends, as evident in this letter sent to Madame Irène Jaccard in 1955:

I have started a new book. But the progress has been extremely slow. This sort of a snail's gait is due to my failure to discover an Indian myth to illustrate my theme. (In Gazelles there was Urvasi and The Thunder; in Cradle of the Clouds the story of Balaram; in The Vermillion Boat the legend of Chand Sagar and the Goddess Uma, etc., in The Flame of the Forest, I have Radha and Krishna). But now, I do not know what to utilise for my new book. Of course, I am definitely opposed to anything well known. I am an original and I must have an almost unknown or a complicated theme for my purpose (London, British Library, MSS EUR 153/46).⁹

Ghose in this letter explains his deep engagement with mythic tales. But what is interesting is the continuous adaptation and transformation of

⁹ Sudhin Ghose Letter to Madame Irène Jaccard dated 22nd October, 1955. London, British Library, MSS EUR F 153/46.

particular mythic episodes in the novels as well as his sustained use of obscure myths in his fiction. Ghose often relies on folk myth for both Radha-Krishna and the legend of Chandsagar forms the large repertoire of Bengal folklore. He produces a new form of modernism by invoking the rural myths of Bengal. While Raja Rao uses myths to establish a traditional image of woman (Tharu, 1989:263); Ghose's portrayal of women's sexuality in particular produces a counter to the image of women produced during the reform movement as well as the subsequent nationalist period. It is within these contexts that I will examine the texts of Sudhin Ghose particularly *Cradle of the Clouds* (1955).

Writing From Within

Cradle of the Clouds is set in a remote Santal village in the (now) Jharkhand state of India. The novel begins with the farewell ceremony of the narrator as he is leaving the village to pursue higher education in Calcutta. Every face relapses into a recollection, where the narrator nostalgically recounts their tales and his experiences in a flash-back mode. The scanty rainfall and a ritual performed to bring rain hold the plot together. The narrator, in a flash-back mode, recalls his participation in the ploughing ritual ceremony. Numerous tales, myths, legends, songs, and sayings are included in the novel to construct a village world. Commenting on the form of the novel, Shymala A. Narayan rightly argues that, just like the novels of Raja Rao, the novels of Ghose are constructed with a series of small tales connected to the main narrative as "a pearl on a string" (Narayan, 1973:11). Many of these tales are centered on woman. In South Asia, there are different rituals performed by women for various purposes. The mythical episodes are profoundly embedded in ritual performance, and the transmission of myth in a ritual is well-known to the folklorist working in the region. The ritual and mythic traditions are not the same as each other, yet now and again Peter J. Claus argues that 'both myth and ritual in a given setting tend to overlap into one another' (Claus, 1997:37). The vast majority of such performances have phalasaruti (statement of purpose) importance, and they are conducted to accomplish desired objectives, for example a child or rain. The ritual for rain is exceptionally prominent in Bengal and its adjoining areas. Sudhin Ghose draws on a popular rain ritual performance called *halakarshna* in Bengal to form the

climax of the novel (Mukherjee, 1971:146).¹⁰ However, there is a striking contrast between the myth that appears in the novel and the actual ritual performance.

The myth behind the ploughing ritual as it appears in the *Cradle of the Clouds* is as follows:

An unusually hot summer once reduced the river Jumna to a thin thread of water, and that was the time when the tyrant Kansa decided to throw a dam across the river and divert its course to ruin the inhabitants of Brinda-ban: he wanted to subdue them but they were unwilling to accept his sway.

The dearth of water constrained the people of Brinda-ban to send their cattles away. This news pleased Kansa. 'while the men are away with their cattle their women remained undefended,' Kansa said to himself. 'I will send my mercenaries now and in the dead of the night they will burn down the town and humiliate its proud matrons.'

The tyrants project was partially carried out. The women of Brinda-ban had just time to run out of their burning houses snatching their babies with them. 'What shall we do when the day dawns? They sobbed. Who will protect us? Who will clothe us? 'Will you help me to pull my plough? Asked a little boy (Balaram)? 'I want to plough the fields round about here. In the morning when Kansa sees the furrow he will think that our men have not only been back, but have already been at work and getting ready to wreak vengeance on him (Ghose, 1950:89).

The traditional story-teller, Punditji, portrays the legendary story of Balaram and Kansa to present the reason behind the ploughing ceremony in the village (Wilson, 1840:424).¹¹ To familiarise the young narrator with the myth behind the actual performance, the Punditji narrates this long story. The entire function forms the climax of the novel. What is interesting though is the telling of the tale. Punditji keeps on depicting the villainy of Kansa. He emphasises that the women ran naked out of their houses and were worried about their modesty. They are shown to be helpless and crying out for help. Punditji establishes the men as protectors. When the

¹⁰ Folklorists have recorded such rituals in adjoining Bihar. Jhijiya and Jat-Jatin are annual rituals and are tied to seasonal activities. While Jat-jattin is performed to please rain god Indra, Jhijiya is enacted to keep away witches. Both these performances are exclusively performed by women and are not meant for entertainment.

¹¹ Balaram in Hindu mythology is the brother of Krishna. He is also associated with fertility myth.

actual performance begins, it is the women, however, who are central to the event. It is the task of the village and tribal women to protect their men and land from an inevitable drought (Lamb, 1997:55). Now the women take centre-stage. In the myth, they ask for help: 'Who will protect us? Who will clothe us?' In sharp contrast, in the ritual performance, they shed off their clothes to save their men.

The ceremony begins with nightfall; women raise the paean, 'Hail! Balaram! Hail!' The young girls beautify the narrator with sandal pastes, flowers, and offer him a little furrow. They then carry pitchers of water to wet the land. At midnight, the ritual starts. In the courtyard of the house of the narrator a number of earthenware lamps, all filled with Sandalwood oil, are lit. Soon after, a rumbling din fills the air as though the mountains and hills were collapsing. A cloud of dust rises and 'Anjalir Ma' orders everybody to lie down. Lightning flashes tear the earth, and the rain finally arrives with thunder, situating women as the protectors at the time of extreme distress. Ghose brilliantly adapts folklore to break away from convention as, in his account, the women —Hindu, Muslim and Christian— all gather together to play out the service (Nussbaum, 2012:147-59).¹² Sectarian divide is abandoned before his vision of communal harmony and sisterhood as the women develop and perform the whole ritual without any help from the men.¹³

In the entire ceremony, the narrator, with much hesitation, performs the role of young Balaram. While decorating her nephew for the ritual, the mashi-mama of the narrator continues murmuring 'whence first came the sense of shame and the feeling of guilt nobody knows'; she rehearses, 'these sentiments vary with men and women' (Ghose, 1950:242). Commenting on the social customs, she emphasises that the patriarchal tradition considers immodesty and infidelity as the wrongdoing of women. Before, performing the ritual, she narrates a story in the novel to counter this formulation. In the story, a naked woman appears before the god, *Yama*.¹⁴ The Chitragupta, the recorder of vice and virtues, opens his record to punish her. The

¹² Traditional Baul singers have inspired many Bengali authors including Rabindra Nath Tagore. Bauls are the wandering minstrels of rural Bengal. They reject orthodox tradition through their songs. Their songs are transmitted orally.

¹³ A humanist at core, Ghose adored Tagore. It is because of his closeness with Tagore and his humanism that he transcends the ideal of women's ritual and transforms it from being exclusive to inclusive.

¹⁴ According to the Hindu mythology the god is believed to keep the record of the people's karma (doing). It is believed that he punishes and rewards an individual on the basis of his or her action.

courtiers in the court of the lord *Yama* critique the woman for being naked. They consider the “naked woman” impure and virile. But later the goddess Chayya appears and argues for her freedom. She proclaims that she is not impure for she was in love. Discarding the set norms, the *Yama* releases the woman, saying that nobody can call her immodest:

All sins committed by word, thought, or deed, are noted down, according to Mashi-ma, in the great register, Agrasandhani, which is kept in the palace of the god Yama, Lord of the Nether-world and the Dispenser of Eternal justice. Chitra-Gupta the Recorder of the Yama's court writes down not only our major sins, but our minor failings as well...A woman's sense of shame and the restraining influence of the feeling of guilt are her twin protectors in this world...What would then happen to one who has loved profoundly and for the sake of her love has been constrained to abandon her twin protectors? When such a woman is before the judgement throne, Chitra-Gupta the Recorder opens the register ... Yama's principal custodians, Kala-Purush and Maha-Chandal, Death and Dissolution, peer over the shoulders of Chitra-Gupta. They are amazed : her record is black. 'She is naked and ashamed'.

[...] 'I know her'. Chhaya, will plead for her. 'I know her sorrows and trials. [...] 'Woman!' Yama, Lord of the Nether-world gives his verdict, 'Go in peace and be judged elsewhere. Let none molest her. Nor call her immodest.' Chitragupta writes across the page in letters of Vermillion: 'She was not immodest.' (Ghose, 1950:244-247)

Sarah Lamb argues that ‘it is through the oral narrative that Bengali women critique and scrutinize the social world they experience, giving voice to the experiences through the language of story’ (Lamb, 1997:55). She goes on to argue that the ‘oral’ voice of these women forms a kind of subaltern voice. Here, similarly, the voice of Mashi-ma – middle aged woman - functions as a subaltern voice. She is an illiterate but deeply progressive woman who understands the significance of women’s freedom and presents a counterweight to the established gender norms.¹⁵

Tanika Sarkar in her celebrated work *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2001) argues that though the social patriarchy was at its peak during the later decades of the nineteenth century, some women from the *bhadralok* household criticised past custom and celebrated modernity (Sarkar,

¹⁵ Sarah Lamb argues that the older women often complain about the behaviour of their son.

2001:21). Citing the example of Rashedi she claims that such women were aware of their subordination (Sarkar, 2001:20). Mashima of the novel presents a similar protest against subjugation. In contrast to the Punditji, she is in favour of the modern education. Later on, she narrates the long story in the novel to invert the traditional image of the modest Bengali/Hindu woman. In the story, a woman experiences sexual desire for a man. As the expression 'naked and ashamed' proposes, she perhaps has broken the social code by enjoying a romance before getting married or by having an illicit relationship. The teller relevantly asks, what will happen to her? The subjects in the court of Yama think of her as liable: 'She is naked and ashamed'. Soon after, the teller presents goddess Chayya. She has seen the miseries of the woman and had seen her torments. She mediates and pronounces, 'I know this frail daughter of the earth, and I know her tears and her ecstasies'. She argues for her freedom, and the ruler of the netherworld declares that no one can call her immodest. Chitragupta, the recorder, writes over the page in letters of vermilion: 'She was not immodest. She was in love. Let none call her immodest' (Ghose, 1950:247). The story counters social norms, proclaiming that a passionate woman is "not immodest". Sudhin Ghose probably heard this story at home; subsequently, he employs this story to challenge the nationalist construction of modest woman. There is an added dimension: in the novel, Mashima tells this story to the narrator who is a small boy, to educate him in women's issues and get him used to female nudity: 'that you should not be severe on the women who will take part in the ceremony. Let your tongue never condemn them' (Ghose, 1950:248). Such a gesture - a middle-aged woman telling a small boy about female nudity - is quite extraordinary in South Asian fiction and completely transgresses social and gender norms, however, such transgression of the gender norms led to the eventual marginalisation of the author.

"Silencing" The Author

Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, an intellectual discourse began in colonial Bengal that depreciated the colloquial forms as "polluted" and something that was overtly sexual. The project to redefine and purify Bengali as a language led to the formation of an elite consciousness that discarded the popular culture and informal means of entertainment as something that harms social order. Anindita Ghosh in her celebrated work *Power in Print* argues that during this phase of

canonization of language as well as literature “sex, community, identity, and social status, in particular, were minutely mapped out by a series of socio-linguistics markers on imagined literary cartographies.” (Ghosh, 2006:4) These “socio-linguistic” markers isolated the cultural form popular among women, lowly classes and even poor Muslims. For example, a folk song (kheud) of the nineteenth century displays the liaison between Radha and Krishna in a merry-ribald manner:

Orey āmār kālo Bhramar

Madhu lutbi Jodi āye

Come hither, my black bee,

If you want to feast on my honey!(Banerjee, 1989:137)

Similarly, Tanika Sarkar notes that the proverbs in Bengal are a unique domain that reflects the hard contempt for patriarchal orders. Also, as Sumanta Banerjee has famously shown, the folk genres such as “panchali”, popular among woman, not only provided a space to woman but also played a significant role in diminishing the traditional fear of men wielded by men (Banerjee, 1989:137).

Such forms of popular culture were, therefore, put aside by the men of the *bhadralok* community. These men were embarrassed by the bawdiness of these peculiar forms and gradually began to look down upon them. A *bhadralok* writing in 1855 complained against *jatra*, declaring that almost all the plots of *jatra* are taken from ‘amours of Krishna and Radha.’ It further goes on to add that ‘who that has any pretension to a polite taste will not be disgusted with the vulgar mode of dancing with which our play commences’ (Banerjee, 1989:159). Well known poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt even wrote a poem ‘Sharmistā’ in 1858 to condemn *jatra* plays.

A general disregard for the popular culture continued in the twentieth century. Not only in Bengal, but in other regions of colonial India, too, the texts or traditions that overtly displayed female sexuality were considered obscene and ultimately got banned by the British authority. A notable case is of the banning of Nagaratnamma’s version of the famous Telugu poet Muddupalani’s *Radhika Santwanam* (1910 edition) (Tharu and Lalita K, 1993:199). Earlier, many versions of the work were produced in printed form, but Nagaratnamma being herself a courtesan and learned scholar found the earlier publications limited in their effort to bring out the beauty of Muddupalani’s poetry. Also, her edition drew

Muddupalani's famous lineage and restricted itself from sanitising her poetry. This enraged the reformist as they found the text obscene and finally led to its ban in 1911.

Sudhin Ghose, though, actively negotiates with the folklore popular among women or lower caste in Bengal. Writing in English, he brings in the various distinct features of this "other culture", and rather portrays female sexuality without any sanitisation. Such inclusion of the colloquial Bengali popular culture, I argue, like the banning of the Nagaratnamma's version of Muddupalani's text, led to the expulsion of the novelist from the cannon itself. At the time, when the national identities were being formed and the printed literature was participating actively in its formation, Ghose attempted at something that subdued the popular view. The writer was aware of this and in a letter written to a famous American agent Jacques Chambrun, he displays his disgust:

Dear Mr. Chambrun,

Thank you very much for your kind letter of December 5th, which has just reached after travelling round the globe—sent from one address to another.

Any author however distinguished would feel proud to receive a letter like the one you have written to me. And in my case it is more than that an unusual reward to be praised by a Literary Agent of your standing: for, between ourselves, I am scarcely known in America and I fear my (Bengali) way of story-telling has no great attraction for the numbers of the different "Book Clubs" of America. For no book of mine has as yet been recommended by any such body.

*"Generous minds," they say in Bengal, "are apt to be poor critics: they overlook the shortcomings of others". And I am wondering if your kindness has not yet led you astray to some extent. For though *The Flame of Forest* has been praised by *The (London) Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Manchester Gaurdian*, it has been condemned in strong terms by *The New Statesman & Nation*—the only English weekly which has a wide circulation among the intelligentsia of India. The book, according to this weekly, does not possess a single redeeming feature and consists primarily of Babu jokes.*

*The same *New Stateman & Nation* has highly commended the recent publications of two of my compatriots, e.g., Mr. Aubrey Menen and Mrs., Kamala Markanday. Both of these authors have been sponsored by the Book-of-the-month club (or Society, I am not quite sure) of America.*

Therefore it seems to me that from your point of view it would perhaps be desirable to contact these two writers. Mr. Aubrey Menen's present address is: Villino Santa Maria di Lone, Amalfi (Italy); Mrs. Kamala Markandaya was here a

few weeks ago, and I presume she may be reached readily if you write to her c/o PUTNAM & Co. LTD, 42 Great Russell Street, London, W.C.I. For all that I know Mrs. Markanday is going to be in England for some time.

*As for my own shorter works, these are at least in my judgement no much better than *The Flame of the Forest*: slow moving, meandering, concerned primarily with mental adventures. Can such things be of any interest to an American magazine? Would it not be abusing your kindness if I were to send any of these to you? Personally speaking, I have no great confidence in my shorter works though some of my acquaintance thinks highly of them. (London, British Library, MSS EUR 153/65)*

While commenting on Ghose as the Indian author writing in English, Leela Gandhi observes that Ghose has been “effectively forgotten” in India (Gandhi, 2009:168-192). The letter of Ghose to Chambrun seems to me as a prelude to this statement as the author for sees the destiny of his written work. He anxiously writes that though he has received enough praise for his works and his novels have been widely consumed by the British readers, he has not been received warmly in India. The magazines that are widely circulated among Indian readers have rejected him as an author, declaring that his work does not have a “single redeeming feature” and mainly comprises of “babu’s jokes”. Ghose knew that his style of narrating the story in the style of Bengali story-telling will attract less audience as these forms of narration by then were considered as rudimentary. With a sad and reluctant spirit, he refers names of Menen and Markanday to his American agent, but as we know Menen faced a similar reception in India and his novel *Rama Retold* (1954) was the first text to be banned in post-Independence India. It is therefore important to revisit the period and look at these novelists afresh. These authors, if explored well, will turn out be legitimate predecessors of the post-national cosmopolitan novels.

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