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Women in Bengali Detective Fiction

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Abstract:

The golden age of English detective fiction encouraged latter-day adaptations in Bengal. Bengali detective fiction not only became experimental but it also developed into a highly acclaimed genre with astonishing popularity. However, as against its English counterpart, women figure much less in every aspect; be it authorship or readership or even characters. This exclusion or limited presence is being analyzed in this paper.

Keywords: *Holmes, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, Nancy Drew, Byomkesh Bakshi, Satyajit Ray*

1. Introduction

31st January 1941 records one of the most heretical moments in the annals of crime-fiction. Rex Stout, invited as an honoured guest addressed a group of Holmesian devotees and scholars at a meeting of the New York chapter of the Baker street irregulars. His speech carried the title “Watson was a woman”, and Stout claimed that the good doctor was, on his /her own textual evidence, a member of what then was still being dismissively referred to as the ‘weaker sex’. The imagination of some may be ignited by what may be termed as a clever spoof of Sherlockian studies but to the faithful it was nothing short of an outrage to consider Watson’s strong sentiments translated as sentimentality, his manly self sufficiency read as domesticity and his loyal companionship interpreted as wifely fidelity. I bring this analogy since Bengali detective fiction has its genesis in the last decade of the 19th century with Priyanath Mukhopadhyaya’s “Darogar Daptar” which was first published in 1893, exactly two years after Conan Doyle started publishing the Sherlock Holmes stories in the Strand Magazine in 1891. Dr. Sukumar Sen in his “Crime Kahinir Kalakranti” discusses the indebtedness of Bengali crime fiction to its English counterpart. He contends that Bhuvan Chandra Mukhopadhyaya’s “Haridasher Guptakatha”, published from Battala from 1871-1873, is the earliest specimen of this genre.

Women figure in Bengali Detective Fiction in a curious way. We can broadly categorize their association under four broad heads. First, as author, secondly as the detective, thirdly as subsidiary characters in the fiction itself and finally as readers.

2. Method

The primary texts concerning the study of both British and Bengali detective fictions are numerous. However, the works of Richard Glyn Jones and Sukumar Sen are still the most authoritative launching pads for such an enquiry. A host of primary texts along with secondary texts have been consulted. The hypothesis has been developed using the methods of observation and comparison.

3. Discussion

Authorship in Bengali detective fiction has largely been a male territory. The ventures of women are few and far between. Historically, the credit goes to Saralabala Dasi (nee Sarkar) of Amrita Bazar Patrika. She bagged the prestigious Kuntaleen award twice. Probably “Ghari Churi” was her first initiative, penned in 1898 (though the date is historically debatable), and it earned her recognition. The narrator is a male and the tale is in first person narrative. Saralabala follows the deductive technique combining it well with analytical close door detection. The reader is evidently reminded of Hercule Poirot. Ashalata Sinha was a cotemporary of Niharranjan Gupta. She displays remarkable craftsmanship in her works of which ‘Adbhut Hatya’ is the finest specimen. She departs from the age of the fantastic solutions of fantastic crime (popularized by Panchkari Dey, Saratchandra Sarkar, Sasadhar Dey etc clubbed as “lomaharshak” or “hair raising tales”) and employs forensic expertise in the detection of crime. She also includes a psychic analysis of the criminal and informs the readers about the criminal as well as clues for detection. The interest lies in the detective picking up the clues correctly. However, it appears that this story was inspired by Craig Kennedy stories by Arthur B. Reeve, published in the Cosmopolitan Magazine between 1910 –1918. In both these stories interestingly (I am referring to Saralabala & Ashalata) the railway features prominently – a legacy of the British crime fiction. In the late 1930’s Deb Sahitya Kutir published “Kanchanjangha Series”. It combined adventure stories along with detective fiction. Among women, Sailabala Ghoshjaya and Prabhathi Devi Saraswati made their contribution of which not much is known. Unfortunately, later day writers deviated from serious detective fiction. Instead they tended to make it humorous and funny, targeting the teens as their readers. Nalini Das (a close relative of Satyajit Ray), Lila Majumdar (again a Roy relative) and Prativa Basu, with their immense creative potential started to cater the young readers. Das’s “RA KA JE TE NA PA” Majumdar’s “Ditiyo Tiktikir Antardhan” or Basu’s “Churir Tadanto” are instances. The

heroes in all these stories are interestingly young boys (and never girls) whose imaginative adventures lead them to the source of a crime as well as the solution. Much later Mira Balasubramaniyam tried her hand in such stories as “Golokbabur Guptadhan”; her product Pulla Reddy is modestly famous for his exploits.

Bengali detective fiction suffers from one serious setback. There is virtually not a single instance of serious detective story where the woman plays the lead role. The early shapers of this genre carefully left out women in the margins. However, this was not the case in England from where the formative impulses came. In the latter half of the 19th century, we come across a sizeable number of women detectives who did not have to play second fiddle to the violin-playing eccentric of Baker street, but solved cases expertly and by their own right.

Though these early female characters represented in varying degrees the then (late 19th century) emerging modern woman, they were all alike in eschewing domesticity in favour of detection if only long enough to give them a recordable career. Independent and audacious, skilled at disguise (a prominent feature in spy stories of W.W I & II) and courageous in the face of dangers, they set the stage for such diverse types as Nancy Drew, Miss Marple and Modesty Blaise. In England by 1940's – the adventures of well over sixty women detectives had been chronicled, from Edwardian debutantes to ingenious flappers, from elderly busybodies to hard boiled molls. Of this entire group Mrs. Paschel is the senior most, appearing as early as 1861 in a “yellow back” edition written by an anonymous writer.

Andrew Forrester Jr.'s Female Detective, published as early as 1864, outlines the use fullness of women investigators. She (the detective) perceives that criminals can be of either sex and, therefore, “detectives should be of both.” Her pragmatism is further illustrated by her admission that “(my) trade is a despised one, (she is) not ashamed of it”. She reasons, “the woman has far greater opportunities than a man of intimate watching, and of keeping her eye upon matters near which a man could not conveniently play the eavesdropper”.

As an interesting anecdote it may be mentioned that the sense of reduction evident in the usage of the term “eavesdropper”, is also palpable in real life government establishment. In 1950 a Miss McDougall received an official position, the duties of which combined the offices of social work with those of wardress; eventually this position was designated “police matron”. Real life policewomen were expected to deal with prosaic and sordid cases of child prostitution, wife beating and the like rather than the more “colorful mail robberies” and jewel capers.

The early crop of English women sleuths was possessed of a collective sensibility that could indeed be described as lady-like. In fact, they were usually over endowed with feminine charms to compensate for their mannish profession. This elicited alternate response of scorn and admiration from colleagues, clients and criminals alike. The authors themselves seem never to be quite certain of their creation, intent as they are on playing up novelty of such a peculiar figure, often abandoning her in mid-career and finishing her off at the matrimonial altar in order to reassure the late Victorian and Edwardian public of her ultimate femaleness.

Any record of women and Bengali detective fiction will be incomplete without mentioning Swarnakumari Devi, the editor of **Bharati**, a magazine, who encouraged such efforts and published them way back in 1893-94. Picking up the threads of earlier paragraph, we may infer that the first female sleuth was conceptualized by Pravaboti Devi Saraswati. Deb Sahitya Kutir started publishing “**Krishna Series**” in the late 1930's. Krishna, the detective in question, is beautiful, intelligent, daring, lady like but often requiring the aid of a male with a conscience. The stories are much more adventurous and contain less scope for detection. It is at best a mystery romance; it is sufficient romance that she was a woman.

There is quite long gap before Pratul Gupta, Manoj Sen and Prodipto Roy come up with their brand of women detectives in the 1970's. Pratul Gupta gave shape to Sadu Thakuma and Prodipto Roy to Jagapishi. The close social relationship is an indicator to their commonness – an effort to make the reader feel at home. Both these characters are aged and remarkably are widows. Sadu thkuma is educated and refined and proficient in the usage of fire arms. In a story like Sadu Thakumar Pistol (which cannot be termed as a true detective story), the complication comes to an end through a coincidence. Sadu Thakuma is not the detective but rather a suspect since the patriarchy is opposed to a woman's proficiency in firearms. Even her entry into legitimate right of self defence has to be augured by a nephew who is a police inspector himself. The locale is Mathurapur and not Calcutta. A similar shift of locale is found in Prodipto Roy's Jagaddaler Jagapishi. The physical description of Pishi involves a deliberate reduction. Her linguistic codes distance her as uneducated, severely preoccupied with caste considerations. Her unassuming wisdom and logical analysis, employed in solving a petty theft, shocks the reader- a case of juxtaposition of opposites. She questions the reader's familiarity with the urban educated male sleuth. The plot is sympathetic where an unprofessional criminal is matched with a rustic detective. Both Sadu Thakuma and Jagapishi are free from any burden of family which makes them floaters or on the contrary enables them to assume a broader social identity. Opposed to all this is Damayanti, created by Manoj Sen. One of the best stories featuring her bears the title Prem. Damayanti is essentially a product of post 70 Bengal. She is a lecturer of history, centered in Calcutta, married to an Electrical Engineer and acutely aware of the changing role of women down the ages. She is conversant with psychology and Freud and takes libido in her stride. She follows a close door detection technique commanding all her knowledge and understanding of social patterns and how it shapes the identity and mind set of an individual. Her intellect is commensurate with her own social standing. Her husband plays second fiddle in the story, an inversion of Byomkesh-Satyabati, Kiriti- Krishna stereotype. In her case the criminal is educated and a professionally successful man. Are we to assume that the complication of the plot is dependent on the education attained by the female detective or does a learned criminal need a learned crime buster?

As characters within detective stories women principally feature as victims. They also appear either as causes of complication in love triangles or as fillers. Occasionally they figure as villains (as in Panchkari Dey's Papistha Jumelia, published in 1902, or Mayabini etc.) in mystery romances or as heroines such as Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay's Kunjabala, Kashmir Kusum published in the 19th century.

In the immensely popular Byomkesh and Kiriti stories, Satyabati and Krishna first appear as victims before they are married off. Both are educated but never actively participate in solving mysteries. Keen analytical reasoning is not their forte but they have a brisk common sense. They belie the possibility of the emergency of sleuthing couple, which became fashionable in England in 1940. Mention may be made of Pam and Jerry North, Nick and Nora Charles and partners in detection like Perry Mason and Della Street, Bertha Cool and Donald Lam etc.

Both Saradindu and Niharranjan seemed to follow the model of Lady Maigrey a quintessential domestic companion to her illustrious inspector husband. The reader may not have accepted the Bakshis or the Roys performing together which could have affected the market of such books. Both Byomkesh and Kiriti are essentially “Bengali Bhadrakalok” – adept in maintaining a safe distance between their professional and domestic life.

Interestingly woman appears neglected by Satyajit Roy in his Feluda series as well. They make occasional appearances as Topshe’s mother or a little girl in Chinnamastya Abhishap. Either Roy considered it improper to accommodate a woman with a substantive role in the plot (since it was meant for teenagers irrespective of gender) which would complicate the plot beyond the reach of his target audience or it could dent the popularity of his evergreen hero whose age has increased by only eight years during a publication tenure of 25 years. Both Feluda and Kiriti are handsome, athletic and six feet tall. Gupta and Roy could see in their creation potential lady-killers and restrained themselves. Even Jatayu is a confirmed bachelor and Topshe forever, is a prisoner of his teens. Bengali middle class readership was more at home with an icon who denied time and age. More often than not the detectives are bachelor since they were principally intended for younger readership. Here is a catalogue-

1. SARATCHANDRA SARKAR HARIHAR.
2. DINENDRA KUMAR ROY.....BITHALRAO KHARE.
3. MANORANJAN BHATTACHARYA.....HUKAKASHI.
4. SHIBRAM CHAKROBORTY..... KALKEKASHI.
5. ASHALATA SINHA..... BIMANBIHARI.
6. HEMENDRA KUMAR ROY..... JAYNTO- MANIK.
7. PREMENDRA MITRA PARASHAR BARMA.
8. BUDDHADEB BASU..... RANJIT SAMANTA.
9. NIRENDRANATH CHAKROBORTY..... GHANASHYAM.
10. SAYED MUSTAFA SIRAJ CORNEL NILADRI SARKAR.
11. KRISHANU BANNERJEE..... BASAB.
12. TARAPADA ROY GARJAN GOENDA. ETC.

I believe Hercule Poirot was the role model of this breed.

Women are easier to use as victims. The trend starts with Priyanath Mukhopadhyaya and continued with Panchkari Dey (his creations Debendra Bijoy and Binoy Kumar are married) and reaches its climax with Niharranjan Gupta.

But before we consider women as victims it is essential to probe why are they are so? Colin Wilson has persuasively argued that a murder is a product of the social stresses of the time, so that in the primitive period when the primary concerns were the basic needs (shelter and food), murders were committed precisely for these things. As the society progressed, these basic necessities would be taken more for granted, people’s needs extended to matters like happy and stable relationships, “good marriages” and money. Thus we find murders committed in order to dispose of unwanted spouses or purely for financial again. This is where the age of murder really begins. We enter an era of domestic murder which had to be secretive because it took place in tightly knit communities, replacing highwaymen and ruffians whose crimes, (read murder) were brutal but not complicated. As we progress to the murders of our own time, murders are committed for more disturbing reason. The fulfillment of our basic needs has given rise to greater personal freedom, and this combination leaves many people with little idea of their own place in scheme of things. Perhaps because of the social pressures on us to acquire more and more goods and status – the carrots of a consumer society- a good many people (variously dissatisfied) feel a burning sentiment against the society and a sort of abstract desire for revenge upon it. In extreme cases this can only be expiated, it seems, in an orgy of killing, usually of victims weaker or in some sense “inferior” to the murderer (usually women and children) all to often with a sickening sexual element.

In Niharranjan Gupta’s novels deviated women lie at the center of complications. In such novels as Mrigtrishna, Manikundal, Mithun Lagna, Aloke Andhar, Nagar Nati or Blue Print we come across characters like Malabika, Nurunnesa, Mitrani, Malancha and Minakshi who are either the causes of murder or themselves murdered. We come across women culprits as well, like Kamala or Arati in Ripu Sanghar who are victims of their own illusion or of the society. The Bengali reader in the middle of the 20th century may not have accepted a hardened female criminal. The author instead attempts to tamper criminality with sympathy for the culprit. More often either wealth or sexual jealousy is behind the cause of the murder.

Finally, we come to the issue of readership. Following the dictates of art’s responsibility to the society, in 1893, Baninath Nandi, the publisher, of Darogar Daptar writes that it will enrich the language and popularise “good books”- the good is essentially tinged with morality. Writing on the eighth anniversary of Darogar Daptar, he observes that the book has been highly estimated by “Educated, uneducated, countrymen, foreigners, Bengali, Assamese, Oriyas, Hindustanis, Maharashtrians, Sikhs and Englishmen.” What is important to note that Englishmen appear as the climax of the series and women are excluded from the scope of readership.

Gajendrakumar Mitra in his preface to Kiriti Omnibus Volume II mentions that boys used to read and get excited over such stories as Raktamukhi Dragon or Dainir Banshi. In the early years of the 19th century mystery romances and detective stories were principally written for male consumption. This can also be held true for extremely popular stories like Jakher Dhan by Hemendra Kumar Roy. This trend was reverted by such talismanic figures as Saradindu Bandyopadhyay and Nihar Ranjan Gupta. There are evidences of women featuring as readers.

4. Conclusion

We may conclude with another anecdote. H. Bose, constituted the Kuntaleen Prize in 1896. The idea of Swadeshi was gaining momentum. Bose introduced Kuntaleen hair oil and Dilkhush perfume. He had a twin purpose; to advertise his products and to encourage young literary aspirants. Every year the prize stories were published as a book before the pujas. The makers of Jabakusum, Keshranjan and Kuntalbrishya hair oils imitated Kuntaleen to bring out books on detective fiction to be distributed with their products free of cost. Detective Fiction in Bengal has also served as an advertising medium in the early years of the 20th century.

I may conclude by proposing that Bengal detective fiction awaits an Agatha Christie and one Miss Marple even in the twenty-first century.

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