

MANIK BANDOPADHYAY'S "BOU": THE DUALITY OF LOVE AND DISAFFECTION

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"Love brings two souls close, but the distance between the self-aware souls coming closer than the self is greater" was deeply contemplated and used by Manik Bandopadhyay in the main character of the story 'Brihattamo O Mahattaro' from the first collection of stories 'Atasimami O AnnanyoGalpo'. Within the first few decades of the twentieth century, the turbulence that was shaking the traditional values, witnessing new socio-economic realities, the World War and post-World War changes in the global village-city were all occurring, and these series of upheavals or transformations were evident in various writings of the trio of Bandopadhyays — their relentless examples are scattered throughout. And within Manik, there exists a sharp observational power, akin to that of a scientist, to experience life. There exists an insatiable desire within him to express the complexity of life.

During the aftermath of the First World War, as cities were emerging at an unprecedented pace and whispers of rural decay or the advancing wave of industrialization echoed, global changes were stirring up a whirlwind of transformation. Not only were societal paradigms shifting, but within societies themselves, multifaceted and intricate changes were taking place. The gaps in life and civilization's ideological and intellectual landscapes became clearer by the day, giving rise to eruptions in everyday life experiences.

With life's complexities becoming increasingly evident, there arose a veritable deluge of emotions even in the realm of timeless love and affection. Manik Bandopadhyay, through his keen sociological lens, recognized and portrayed this heightened state of affairs.

As the Second World War unfolded, plunging the world into even deeper complexity, the fabric of socio-economic life became embroiled in increasingly conflicting and unnatural behaviors. It was during this tumultuous time that Bengali short stories began to vividly depict the variegated world of human emotions and societal complexities. Manik's fifth collection of short stories, 'Bou', was published during some period between 1940 and 1943 (though there are disagreements regarding its exact publication date, Saroj Dutta mentioned that the first publication was from Udayachal Publishing House). This collection, consisting of eight stories in its first edition and thirteen in the second, shed light on subjects that had never before been so boldly illuminated in Bengali short story literature.

When the imposed traditional values of society, customs, culture, and religious dogma were breaking down, yet the society was persistently pushing individuals into those very confines, when in the maze of family life or marital relationships, love was gradually slipping away like stolen treasures, and in the words of Buddhadeb Basu, who said, 'In the social chaos of mid-20th century Bengal... Manik Bandopadhyay has found the elements of lifelong art within the present and contemporary,' in profound readings, we attempt to explore the world of love and indifference through Manik's "Bou" stories.

In the story 'Dokanir Bou', we encounter the protagonist Shambhu. He belonged to a joint family of three brothers. However, they had already divided the paternal house into three portions. Each portion was marked separately with a sign. Shambhu, after marriage, opened a shop with his father-in-law's money. 'Dokanir Bou' Sarala desired to purchase happiness and freedom with her husband's money. She wanted to keep her husband bound in the chains of love. Thus, she left the joint family to establish her own household.

Now – "What happiness for Sarala, what freedom! To the neighbors on one side, she was just a useless person's wife, and now on the other side, they hear her gossiping and jeering, what pride, what glory" (Page: 3)!

However, amidst all this, the noise from the other side disturbs her. So – "From one end of the neighborhood to the other, Sarala has been cutting a few feet here and there, leveling it out inch by inch. Frowning, she spends hour after hour looking at these pieces. Within that cycle, after a while, the desire for Sarala grows" (Page: 5).

And when Sarala goes home to talk, she feels Shambhu is a "useless man." Doubting, she concludes – Shambhu is deceiving her. Consequently, even though she took three hundred rupees from her father-in-law, when Shambhu tries to open a joint shop with his brothers using that money, Sarala takes it back. She assures her husband that she will bring the money again from her father-in-law. She has to enact the drama of love again in the world of indifference.

"Sarala studied until the fourth class in school, then at home she learned reading and writing, singing, sewing, household chores, and the tricks of family life, she grew up cautious and vigilant amidst relatives and careless guardians, a naive one" (Page: 27).

-- Like five other 'ordinary girls' from rural Bengal, at the age of nineteen, Amala also got married to Suryakanta ('Sahityik-er Bou'). And Amala was surprised, 'The girl whose name is known to everyone, the girl whose writing makes people laugh and cry'; to marry such an extraordinary person so ordinarily. Yet, after reading Suryakanta's books, she felt the extraordinary adventures of his characters and considered herself as a co-creator of those creations; just after marriage, the thirty-year-old Suryakanta is the one she considers as 'the wise elders of a big family'. Can ordinary people like this be loved! This 'person' who is utterly devoid of sophistication, loves and hates when hungry, sleeps when sleepy, gets angry when angry, laughs when happy, cries when in pain - the mysterious person of Amala's imagination" (Page: 30). The meeting with Suryakanta described by the storyteller:

"Suryakanta is nearly thirty years old. It is not exactly right to call him a perfect man, but there is an imprint of a slightly unintelligent personality on his face, there is a wonderful attraction. In his speech and behavior, he is very slow and calm -- somewhat like the great family elders of a big family" (Page: 29).

--So, in personal life, the very realistic writer's 'Bou' quite naturally became 'very angry at Suryakanta this time.' Amala feels upset because Suryakanta's writings created a world of unreal love, and in reality, she could not find that dimension in him. So, when both wanted to change themselves, when both wanted to color themselves in the colors of each other's imagined love - the world of indifferent love thickened. Consequently, Suryakanta wanted to escape from this intolerable world of acting, went to Patna, leaving behind what was only Amala's imagination and heartfelt sighs; now it was transformed into history. Therefore, at the end of the story, there remains the two banks of the river of life named love!

Failing to reconcile the world of imaginary love with reality, Amala's love went from being incomplete to shattered, and the longing for the idealized person led to the destruction of love in real life ('Bipotniker Bou'). As a result, when Pratima marries Ramesh, and her constant comparison with Ramesh's former wife ("A year ago, Maria, who is still present in this household as a tangible entity and in various consciousnesses, continues to exist," Page: 56) arises, then Pratima's mind interprets this love not as love, but as mockery! Consequently, Pratima's simple, natural rhythm of life is disrupted. Troubled by doubts about loving Mansi's son, she cannot love Ramesh completely either. Because,

"Pratima's silent jealousy against the heavenly wife disrupts the easy happiness of married life. It is no longer possible for Pratima to forget Ramesh's past mistakes, she still remembers him differently, she still interferes with his conversations, even though she is nowhere to be found" (Page: 60).

The image of the human statue made of blood and flesh is obscured by the shadow of Manasi's imaginative net, and no one keeps the whisperings of her heart. As a result –

"How sad it was for Pratima, how many imaginations there were, all are annihilated in one unbearable grief of self-absorption — not only in duty, not only in play, but also in the necessary purification of life" (Page: 61).

The interplay of love and indifference thus creates a new philosophy of life in the discussable story. But when those involved begin to deteriorate in the harsh grasp of time, the statue of Pratima's affection is released from everyone's grip. But Pratima? She now wants to keep herself alive for Mansi's sake.

There are so many imaginary shackles for the woman-statue, where she has to adhere to many chains to become a 'woman,' Sumati does not accept one rule - the subject matter of 'Teji Bou' is created by Manik. Just as Greek philosopher Demosthenes once said, 'Women's work is only to bear children and do household chores' – Sumati had to accept the shackles of those rules completely, even in a loveless marriage, she had to keep the flame of love burning — the old tale is a beautiful example. Political philosopher John Stuart Mill analyzed how a woman becomes suitable for a man in the turbulent environment of the inner sanctum, where a woman's personality, autonomy, and individuality are all suppressed — he analyzed and said: "No slave is a slave to the same length, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is." So, in the discussable story, when Sumati becomes Su-Mati, then the world of that love can no longer be found anywhere. It cannot be found in 'The Holy Family.'

On the other hand, the restrained emotion of maternal grief can evoke a strong resonance in a woman's subconscious mind, where the love-filled twelve years of marital life with the priestly master can feel nothing short of 'acting' even after the untimely death of both children. The decision to come to terms with this emotion may never be reflected again in the story of 'Pujari's Bou'. We understand from a conversation provided by Manik: 'The love between man and woman, their love is not something immortal, it's mortal love.' And we can comprehend that by making the dispassionate priest understand this, after the untimely deaths of two children, the arrival of a third child could have disrupted the archetype of motherhood and intensified the turmoil in her restless heart.

Gopal Haldar says, "Manik Bandopadhyay did not elevate a particular person to be the protagonist, but rather relied on experience -- accepted the intangible idea -- and tried to materialize it as a human character in the entire story."

In the crafted fragrance of short stories, in 'Rajar Bou', the prince of Avantipur Estate, Rajput Bhupati (although his annual income is only one and a half lakh rupees and the story's narrator does not forget to mention this, 'Bhupati Raja is only a pawn of power!') and the girl from the neighboring house, Rupasi or Ragi Yaminie, both love each other equally. The description of Yaminie's beauty in the text is as follows:

"Yaminie Rupasi. Rupasi is called the queen of the king. Like Parthiva Tilottama, a myriad of various beauties is accumulated within her. From her arched eyebrows to her rose-colored nails, there is a mixture of curious contours and blended hues" (Page: 96).

In the immortal realm of love – "The moonlight falls on Yaminie's face and behind Bhupati's face, a canvas of the sky. In the midst of restless exploration, their eyes were directed towards each other's faces. There seemed to be no end to their mutual recognition, someday they would understand this mystery" (Page: 100).

And sometimes "when Yaminie's sleep came, Bhupati would kiss the deep mystery of her half-closed eyes, Yaminie would hold one of his hands close to her chest" (Page: 100)! With wealth, family, son, and daughter, their days and nights were passing in extreme misery due to the fever of lovelessness.

However, that passionate love brought peace between them. We can learn from reading the story, the life they created together: "Layer by layer, her life was arranged, she had her kingdom, her king, her

lover, her son, more than a hundred hearts' love, past and future everything was there until tomorrow" (Page: 104).

But Yaminie's mind is not just peace! As a result, taking advantage of the opportunity of Yaminie's desire for motherhood, Bhupati ventured into the outside world, and Yaminie was left alone with her longing for children. When Yaminie understood the rules of nature, she realized that life with her husband had become as natural as breathing, and again she became eager for Bhupati's love — from that day on, Bhupati was mostly outside her grasp. At least mentally.

Bhupati's illness and changing circumstances provided Yaminī with an opportunity to be close to Bhupati again. Bhupati, affected by the lazy, solitary days, desired to have Yaminī close to him again. And – "At first, Bhupati thought, 'Yamini is still the same.' Trying to express affection with loving eyes, he learns that this mistake breaks her heart. Even though he still desires Yamini, it seems he cannot find that connection with her. Even within the embrace of her husband, Yamini seems distant, aloof, and it seems she remains disinterested and sleepy even today" (Page: 108).

Furthermore – "Yamini cannot accept Bhupati's awakened love. She spends her days lost in her own thoughts. When Bhupati, with eager eyes, tries to find the familiar secret in her distant gaze, Yamini dreams of another Bhupati, overwhelmed with eager, fervent love" (Page: 108).

Despite being close, both cannot fully grasp each other's feelings. Love goes unfulfilled. Hence, the storyteller's lament: "To endure the intense pain of romantic love, inner strength and resilience are needed" (Page: 101).

German sociologist Lorenz Von Stein (1815 - 1890) once said, "A man desires a woman who not only he loves deeply, but whose touch caresses his forehead, bringing peace to his life, solving a thousand problems in the household; above all, whose feminine charm will keep his family life lively in sweet turmoil." And it was precisely this that Majlishi, Mishuk, compassionate, empathetic Jatin desired of his wife Satadalbahini ('The Generous Wife' from 'Udaracharitanamar Bou'). However, the disparity between the Jatins from the outer world and the Jatin's wife from within was so great that, despite Satadalbahini's hundred efforts, she was still 'defrauded by love' by Jatin. In response to that lovelessness, she, out of anger at her own inability to take revenge, encouraged her sister-in-law Krishna to seek refuge in the world of love, which, even after Jatin's marriage elsewhere, led Krishna to carry her love-filled dreams with her, futilely seeking revenge for her loveless life. Additionally, it seems to us that compared to the female characters of Manik like Mejulie, whose characters are portrayed in several novels ('Janani', 'Darpan', 'Amritasya Putra', 'Dhara Bandha Jiban' etc.), Satadalbahini's characters of the 'Udaracharitanamar Bou' were even more courageous, clearer in their own positions.

In everyday married life, what spouses want, nobody says openly; however, when it doesn't happen, the seemingly serene world of love becomes turbulent. When even trivial incidents create endless misunderstandings between two hearts, then bitterness arises in the quiet realm of love. Or, one starts to create stories like 'The Ideal Wife of the Omniscient' or 'The Wife of the Gambler' ('Juyarir Bou') just out of anger. When Bertrand Russell's famous saying ("Marriage is something more serious than the pleasure of two people in each other's company.....") doesn't reach them, and when Manik creates the world of love with the crop of 'Mental Experience' in his short stories, natural lovelessness also comes along. It comes, because love doesn't happen only with the body, nor does it happen only with the mind. Love will be mutual. Love thrives through the attraction, intimacy, and connection between men and women — against which is the death of love.

In the story 'The Wife of the Leper' ('Kusthorogir Bou'), we see that despite the curse (!) of fate or the sins committed by the former generation, even after Sukumar Jatin's contraction of leprosy, his wife Mahashweta does not leave him. Mahashweta has accepted all of Jatin's sufferings. But – "When

everything in this world is fragile, there is nothing to be surprised about in the fragility of humanity! The breaking of human nature with humans is commonplace" (Page: 77).

So when Jatin could finally understand, leprosy wasn't contagious, he began to doubt Mahashweta. Now, "The weariness on Mahashweta's face looks like the glow of beauty in her eyes, and the vacant gaze in her eyes, which now seems subdued by exhaustion, appears to her as contentment" (Page: 80).

Mahashweta also loses faith in Jatin. However, in the first four years of their marriage, they lived a loving life. But Jatin, afflicted by leprosy, not only became physically ill but also mentally. He becomes sick with love. Their unborn child faces punishment.

While Jatin, the sick, strives to recover, Kamakhyā comes to his mind, and Mahashweta heads to Kalighat. From there, she returns home to open a leprosy asylum. And what is it — "For so long she loved her healthy husband, despising the leprosy-afflicted people on the road. Today, she despises her husband and loves the leprosy-stricken people on the road" (Page: 85).

Thus, we see that Manik, in the narrative of life, has depicted both the distinct and indistinct forms of love. Manik believed, 'The life I have intimately known is the life depicted in literature' – if understood, the creator becomes capable of creating in a brand-new creation. Even in the impurity of daily life, the artist is capable of shedding light. This is evident from Tapodhir Bhattacharya's correct observation: "Throughout his life, Manik sought the experience of people. The diversity they create in life, with the limitation of natural and empirical existence, no other author has observed it with such skill."

Manik knew this correctly or made us know that his love/dislike, the duality of love/loathe, opens up the closed arteries of social/familial real-life struggles to us. Romance with love is not just naive romanticism, in the juxtaposition of contemporary times, he clearly shows people's inner turmoil in his household stories. Now, not only love remains in people's minds - hatred also resounds loudly. We accept it and maybe not.

Book:

'Bou' by Manik Bandopadhyay, M.C. Sarkar & Sons Pvt. Ltd., Kolkata - 73, Fifth Edition – 1406.