

# Viewing British Women In Bengali Fiction: Reading Lines Between Lines Of Nildarpan And Ichamoti

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**Abstract-** This article speaks of the perception of the rural masses of Bengal who mainly resided in the countryside of Bengal. Set in the backdrop of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the context of Indigo plantation both the text speaks how the native people (masses) viewed the British women especially and formed their own observations and perception which was full of contradiction, duality thereby hinting towards the multi layered and multidimensional as well as heterogeneous viewing of the Bengali natives to the Colonial Memsahib famously known as “Bibi”. The article focuses on two eminent writings of the Bengali fiction to portray the diversity and variedness of the views regarding British women which speaks of the constant evolution and position of British Women in the Bengali society who were exposed to the discussions and constant observation even from the lowest ranks of the Bengali society

**Index Terms-** British Women, Bengali, Fiction, Native, Literature, Perceptions.

## **I. Introduction:**

Vilified too often as ‘Spoilers of Raj’ the British Women have been accorded an unenviable reputation over the last century but recent researches speak otherwise. British Women out of all Colonial North European Women, British Women were equalled the British in exporting their metropolitan domestic life to the colonies which neither their French nor Dutch counterpart ever equalled. Hence British Women occupied a central position and played a significant role in the ambience of India which exposed them to multi layered judgements and perceptions which produced voluminous literary discourses both from Colonizer and Colonized perspective. But interestingly while the Colonial literary discourse speaks a lot about the Natives including Native Women the Colonized literary discourses till date speaks quite less about the British women who were as significant as their male counterpart – an aspect which this article tends to focus on.

## **II. Literature Review:**

Though Colonial India was a big subcontinent and the literary discourses by its inhabitants the “Natives” about their “Colonial Masters and Memsahibs” are varied and voluminous and this article speaks only about the perception of the ‘Bengali’ rustic masses who mainly resided in the rural and countryside of Bengal and since Bengal was the main epicentre of British rule in 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century India the perception of the Native masses of that very place regarding their Colonial Memsahib (quite often wife of the top British personnel) is very significant yet interesting to ponder upon. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal not only staged the capital of Colonial British administration but was also the hotbed of social cultural and political changes and faced constant socio political flux. Though there have been earlier works on the Colonized perspective regarding their Colonial masters through literary discourses by several historians most of them focuses on the non fiction mainly memoirs, travelogues and personal experiences mainly by the upper and middle class of the Bengali society who were known as the “Bengali Elites”.

Works of Simonti Sen, Shukla Chatterjee<sup>1</sup> focused on the Native Bengali Elite Women mostly known as ‘Bengali Bhadramahila’ of second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century renegotiated and consolidated their position in the colonized society as well as in the literary historiography of Colonial Bengal. Besides such works writings of Tapan Raychaudhuri, Inderpal Grewal, Antoinette Burton<sup>2</sup> deserves special mention.

Tapan Raychaudhuri in his work ‘*Europe Reconsidered : Perceptions of the West in the Nineteenth Century Bengal*’<sup>3</sup> speaks of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali elites notably Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda encounters with the Western world and their experiences, observations regarding the society, culture whereas both Inderpal Grewal and Antoinette

<sup>1</sup> Simonti Sen; *Travels to Europe Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives 1870-1910*; Orient Longman Private Limited; Hyderabad; 2005; Shukla Chatterjee; *Women and Literary Narratives in Colonial India: Her Myriad Gaze on the Other*; Routledge Studies in South Asian History, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered : Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Oxford University Press, 1988

<sup>3</sup> Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and Cultures of Travel*, Duke University Press, London, 1996; Antoinette Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire : Indians and Colonial Encounter in Late Victorian Britain*; University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997

Burton<sup>4</sup> focused on 19<sup>th</sup> century travel writing and Native women interactions with the West but the focus remains the same – the perception of the Native Elites (men and women) but the fact is that not only Native Elites but Native masses too interacted with the British Women and formed a perception as per their observations and understanding.

Though the British Women first came to India in 1617<sup>1</sup> the interaction with the natives started from the last decades of 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards and Bengal being the epicentre of the British rule in India saw the native women and men interaction with British Women quite early but the documentation of Native perception about their Colonial Master and Mistress saw a surge post 1857 which is considered as a watershed incident in the Colonial history of Britain in India. Nevertheless it is wrong to believe that there was no native observations, documentation prior to the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century it existed but with the growing consciousness and access to the Western print and education of the Bengali upper and middle caste section accelerated the documentation of the divergent as well as heterogenic perception regarding the British women.

In this article the Bengali fictional texts under analysis are of drama (play) and novel genre both of which are written by eminent Bengali authors and both the texts are set in the backdrop of second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal focusing on Indigo plantation (another significant). **Dinbandhu Mitra's NilDarpan and Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay Ichamoti<sup>5</sup> though written and published almost 100yrs apart (9years less than 100yrs) both event post Mutiny** and put forth the views of the masses of rural Bengal regarding the British women especially were written in the backdrop of the Indigo plantation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and both of them speaks vividly about the rural masses perception about British women.

### III: Native Viewing British Women in Dinbandhu Mitra's NilDarpan:

One of the most prominent Bengali fiction post Mutiny was **Dinbandhu Mitra Nildarpan published in 1859 (Bengali year Agrhayan ,1336)** though predominantly based on the oppression of the indigo planters and retaliation of the native peasantry the play also gives a detailed picture of the divergent yet varied observation of the Bengal rural masses regarding British Women who were generally the Wives of the British Indigo planters who were in colloquial term were known as 'Kutir Bibi'<sup>6</sup> From this play it is quite evident that the British women were a very significant topic of discussions among the rural masses especially in the discussions of the Native women who were quite critical about the ethical code and conduct of the British Women in the village...

**"...Aduri/Bibire Ami dekhichi ,Nojjao nei ,Sorom o Nei..Jyalar Hakim Marchetok Shaheb ,koto Nangapakri ,Teronal Firti thake – ...Ai Saheber songe Ghora chepe Byarati elo . Bou Mansi Ghora chape – keshar kakir ghore Bhandarir songe hese kotha koielo ,tai loke koto nojja dele"**<sup>7</sup>

These lines speaks that how Native rural women observed and formed the perception about the British Women. For them 'Kutir Bibi' was the better half or wife of the British Indigo Planter and for native women it seems to be unpardonable and ethically loose character of the Kutir Bibi who not only ride horses but that too with the other British Male Companions of the Indigo Planter – a scene beyond imagination of the Native women of the area. But in the same line we also find an amalgamation of both the curiosity and desipensness regarding the clothing of the 'kutir bibi'. For the Native Men the clothing and dresses of 'Kutir Bibi' is something which should be imitated and quite a luxurious expensive dress material whereas for the Native Women 'Khetramani' jute clothes are far better for her than the dress of the Kutir Bibi....

**"Lakhi Ma Amar Bichanar Eso ,Saheb tore ekta Bibir Poshak debe boleche"**<sup>8</sup>**and in turn Khetramani replies.. "Pora Kapal Bibi Poshaker Chot pore thaki Seo bhalo tobu jeno bibir poshak porti na hoi"**<sup>9</sup>

Though in this play we find that the approach of the natives especially the women folk of the rural countryside were critical in nature but for the native men especially those who worked under the Indigo planter the "Kutir Bibi" was strong ,superior and had so much power and hold that with her one decree was enough to issue a suit file on peasantry at the civil law court because of her presumed hold and acquaintance with the magistrate of the nearby district....

**"....Kutir Bibi ai Mokkoddoma Pakabar Jonni Machertok Sahebke Chithi Nyakeche bibir kotha naki hakim boddoshone"**<sup>10</sup>

But in the context it is worth mentioning that the stronghold and the commanding position of the Kutir Bibi was not always for the oppression and exploitation of the native villagers the power and position of the British Memsahib was also used for the benefit of the native subordinate officials mainly who worked under the Indigo planter...

**"...Ami jokhon Ardali chilam dekhichyachi, Wood saheber bibi khud doya,ekkhani chittite a garibke jailer jommadar koriya diyachen"**<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly throughout the play there were two simultaneously approach one focused on the suppression and oppression of the Indigo planters as well as the retaliation of the native peasantry another focused on native perception about the British Women or Kutir Bibi. Not only the code of conduct ,behaviour ,dressing sense of Kutir Bibi were judged by the social differences between the British Men and the British Women also came under the purview of the native villagers..

<sup>5</sup> Katie Hickman; She Merchants ,Buccaneers &Gentle Women : British Women In India, Virago Press,2019

<sup>6</sup> Bhibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay, Ichamoti; Mitraloy; Kolkata; 1950

<sup>7</sup> Dinbandhu Mitra, NilDarpan; Calcutta; 1859

<sup>8</sup> Dinbandhu Mitra,NilDarpan; Pratham Anko; Chaturtha Garvanko; Pg-17

<sup>9</sup> Ibid; Chathutho Anko,Trittiyo Garvanko; Pg-40

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> ] Dinbandhu Mitra,NilDarpan,Prathom Anko;Chaturtha Garvanko; Pg-17

**“... Shanibarer Sochiganjer kutite sahibder samphin parti ache .Bibider nach hobe Wood Saheber Bibi Amadigher Sahiber songe Noile nachte paren na”<sup>12</sup>**

The whole approach of the play regarding the perception regarding the British Women seems to be the amalgamation of both resentment and attraction for the Native rural masses. The natives though criticised the mode of conduct, ethics, norms and lifestyle of the British women but they did respected acknowledged and feared the superior commanding attitude of the British women. Interestingly the perception differs among the native Men and Women too. Native Women for instance maintained a critical approach towards the British Women in general throughout the play but the Native Men especially when it came to subordinate native officials they spoke of the kind and considerate nature of the British Women and also respected and feared the commanding position of the British women and saw it as a sign of power and superiority – an aspect which is more clearly clarified in our next text under analysis.

#### **IV. Native Viewing British Women in Bhibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay ‘s Ichamoti:**

Published nearly 100 years after **Dinbandhu Mitra Nil Darpan in 1950 Bhibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay Ichamoti** gives an more vivid picture regarding the British Women settled in the banks of Ichamoti . Set in the backdrop of Indigo Rebellion of 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century around the river Ichamoti this novel gives an detailed yet varied perception about the British women through the conversations and dialogues of Native people in the village.. Though the opening comment regarding the British Women speaks of a strong, commanding yet rude British Women Mrs Shipton ( wife of the Indigo planter of that area Mr Shipton) towards the native subordinate Dewan Rajaram when he was chosen as a prop for the portrait painting...

**‘...Mem bollen – soja hoiya danrao dewan.....Memsahab hath diye dekhiye bollen – Atkhani Lomba hoina .Buk thik koro’<sup>13</sup>**

The novel gives an detailed picture that how language played an important role in forming the perception of the natives regarding the British women and in general proved to be a barrier for the Natives to understand the British women and their dictates often causing miscommunication and misinterpretation of the commands given by the British Women ...

**“...Rajaram a adhbhut banglar arthogrohon korte na pere aaro pith tan kore book chitaye ultodike dhnu kore felbar chesta korlen dehta ke”<sup>14</sup>**

Though the novel from start present a very soft benevolent attitude of the native villagers from start but as the novel progresses we see a dual shade in the attitude of the natives regarding the British Women which is quite different from Dinbandhu Mitra ‘s Nildarpan though both were set in same backdrop of Indigo rebellion. The native subordinate officials though in prima facie put forth an soft benevolent and respectful attitude but in reality thoroughly criticized the attitude lifestyle of Mrs Shipton...

**“... Prasonno Chokkorti bolle- Hare Gaya, Saheb Memer Nacher modhe holo ki ?dekhechis kichu?”<sup>15</sup>**

- **Na Khuro Moshai .More sekhane thati dei na**
- **Shipton Saheber Mem naki Choto Saheber songe Nache**
- **Oder Pora Kopal ....Jhata Marun Dekhi Oder Mukhi Mui dekhe lajjai more jai Kuro Moshai”<sup>16</sup>**

Interestingly Amin Prasanno Chokkorti views regarding the British Women projects an lucid and disgraceful yet distasteful and inappropriate behaviour of the natives yet when it comes to take the advantages and benefits from Mrs Shipton the same Amin even compares her with the Goddess Jagatdhatri and Lakshmi ..

**‘...Purono kormocharider modhe Prosonno Chakroborti Amin Hathjor kore give dariye bolle-Ma, Jagodhatri Ma Amar .... Ma amar obostha ki kore gele ?Amar goti ki hobe ma ? kar kache dukkho janabo ,Jagodhatti Ma amar”<sup>17</sup>**

Ichamoti the novel serves an perfect example of multilayered and multi dimensional perception and views of native women regarding British Women. On the one hand the novel highlights criticism ,lustful and inappropriate comments and in another hand in total contrast highlights the admiration of the strength and also the care concern of the native subordinates especially Paik and Lethel who were concerned about the safety of the Mrs Shipton on the increasing Indigo rebellion in the surrounding areas and also suggested Mr Shipton to remove Mrs Shipton from the area and the Indigo Planter also paid attention to the advices of the native paik and lethels.

**“...Sahosh den to boli hujar – Memsahaber songe jeno Karim lathiyal ar paik jeno jai . sorojontro onek dur goriyeche..Tin deen pore boro saheber mem nilkuthir kach theke biday niye kultolar ghat e bojrai chaplo.Songe doshjon paiksoh karim lathiyal ,nije horkali sur prithok noukai bojrar pechone.”<sup>18</sup>**

Though the novel Ichamoti is based on Indigo plantation in and around the river Ichamoti the novel presents a layered and multi dimensional perception of the Natives regarding the British women. Though the core of the novel is built on the rural and rustic lives of the Native villagers and their daily chores in the context of 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with gradual eradication of Indigo

<sup>12</sup> Ibid; Chaturtha Anko; Trittiyo Garvanko; Pg-54

<sup>13</sup> Ibid; Pg-54

<sup>14</sup> Bhibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay; Ichamoti; Pg-9

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid;Pg-24

<sup>17</sup> Ibid; Pg-110

<sup>18</sup> Ibid;Pg-109

plantation and voices of the discomfort and dissent cropping slowly but steadily but this novel also presented an concoction of varied emotions of the Natives regarding the British women.

## V. CONCLUSION:

The texts Nil Darpan and Ichamoti both presents a detailed yet layered and multi dimensional perception of Bengali Native masses who resided in the rural areas of Bengal and in conclusion it can be said that though Native people (villagers) has limited interaction to British Women and limited exposure to their culture the perception which they formed by their own observation interaction which was appealing in the prima facia but behind the curtains they showed a duality and ambiguity which speaks about the multi dimensional yet layered and heterogeneous perception of the Native rural masses regarding the British Women.

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- [8] Ibid; Ditiyo Anko; Trittiyo Garvanko, Pg-40
- [9] Ibid
- [10] Dinobondhu Mitra; NilDarpan; Pratham Anko, Chaturtha Garvanko ; Pg- 17
- [11] Ibid; Chaturto Anko, Trittiya Garvanko, Pg-54
- [12] Ibid; Pg-54
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