

Revelation of Aestheticism through Meta-Narratives in some Bengali Bratakathas

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The term “meta-narrative” in this paper has been taken as “tales on tales”. In the field of critical theory and particularly in post-modernism, a meta-narrative is about narratives of historical meaning, experience or knowledge which offers a society legitimating through the anticipated completion of a master idea. But as this paper would take the word in a simplified sense, it is a kind of text which focuses on a particular group of texts including it and discusses about it. It largely influences the reader who reads it, the teller who tells it, as well as the audience who listens to it.

To enter into the very depth of the Bengali culture I have taken some Bengali Bratakathas or ritual tales as subject of enquiry in the context of chiefly the rural society. Mostly celebrated on those parts of the country the Bratakathas are seen as typical cases of Para-literature. Though Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Ashutosh Bhattacharyya, Sila Basak and many other creative writers and scholars have discussed quite a lot on such texts, this specific attempt of finding out the aesthetics of those Bratakathas and to locate the various maneuvers through which the joy of the beautiful things could be appreciated might be something novel.

The Bengali Bratakathas talk about ‘Bratas’ or rituals celebrated by both male and female, but especially females irrespective of categories like the rich and the poor, Brahmins and other castes, educated or otherwise. The bratas of all kinds are observed for the purpose of wish-fulfilments which can give the observants benefits according to their needs. These bratas are generally categorized into two major sections – shastriya and ashastriya. Shastriya ‘bratas’ are addressed to the major and well established gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and scriptures like Siva, Vishnu, Brahma, Durga and so on. Those bratas are performed by the rituals done by the Brahmin priests chanting Sanskrit mantras, and the ashastriya bratas are performed chiefly by the women addressing to some non-scriptural gods and goddesses like Itu, Mangalchandi, Shasthi etc. They are performed with some home rituals in order to satisfy the above mentioned gods and goddesses and are quite unlike the conventional pujas of the shastriya bratas. Many of the bratakathas of both these kinds are directly derived from the epics, the Puranas or many other shastras.

The tale of the “*Harish Mangalchandi Brata*” for instance, comes under the category of the ashastriya brata. It tells how a Brahmin’s wife used to perform this ritual in the month of

Baisakha so that she could spend a life of everlasting happiness. It is noteworthy that the bratakatha being a part of the ritual seems to guarantee happiness, obviously in purely material terms. But the tale also tells how hard the ritual is to perform. The Brahmin’s wife had the village milkmaid as her friend, and being influenced by the prosperity of the earlier, the latter too became much determined to perform the ritual. Soon after performing the ritual twice her life too became full of happiness and prosperity, but very soon she discovered that it is impossible to bear all those sudden changes and even she is not able to cry. Hence pure material happiness is not complete without having the capacity to endure its troubles; for trouble would always be there with materialism which is to be combated on the material plane itself, and a bratakatha is able to suggest ways for the combat. The Brahmin’s wife told her friend to go and uproot all the pumpkin saplings, and pluck all the pumpkins immediately so that the farmers, getting angry, bit her black and blue and she could cry. But the situation reversed as the plants became livelier by the blessing of the goddess Mangalchandi and the farmers happier. Then she went to the hillside where there was a dead elephant lying. She wanted to embrace the dead elephant’s neck so that the king’s men could think that she wants to steal the tusks, but the dead elephant got alive. Then finally she prepared some sweets to feed her daughters-in-law mixing a certain amount of strong poison with those. But here also she failed to do any harm as the poison-mixed sweets turned into nectar and became delicious and the daughters-in-law ate to their heart’s content singing all praise for her. Thereafter, with all attempts exhausted in failure, the milkmaid stopped performing the bratas on the advice of the Brahmin’s wife. Then only Mangalchandi got angry and it is by her rage the milkmaid lost all her family members along with her wealth. The message is very clear: the bratas are to be observed properly and with the caution that their cycle should be completed, which includes the completion of the bratakata. Immediately, the milkmaid started performing the bratas and gradually she got back all her lost family members.

It is interesting to note that all of such ‘bratakathas’ are related with certain ‘brataphalas’ that are but the immediate reactions of the ritual on the lives of the human beings. Those ‘brataphalas’ being the primary aim, the ‘bratakathas’ on one hand tell how the effects have previously been achieved by fictitious characters, while on the other hand make the fiction real through inviting actual men and women to perform the rituals in order to get the desired effect. Obviously, many

religious taboos are created and ratified in the bratakatha narratives, and many new licenses are given. Told and retold since time immemorial, and then written and re-written for many times afterwards, such narratives are being framed and reframed in our culture according to the necessity of those in different systems. Though there are enough scope of looking at these texts from conventional pan-Indian aesthetic points of view, like the theories of *rasa*, *dhwani* etc. they seem to be far more *lokayata* texts as their message as literature is clearly *laukik*, or this-worldly.

In another *ashastriya brata* related with '*Jamaishasthi*' one would come across the younger daughter-in-law who used to steal food and always put blames on a black pussy-cat favourite of the goddess Shasthi. One day her mother-in-law told her to look after the food cooked for the *Jamaishasthi* ritual so that the cat may not steal it. But the daughter-in-law herself ate from the plates as much as she could and thus, the '*rakshak*' became the '*bhakhak*' or destroyer. Finally, she took some milk-porridge to put around the mouth of that cat in order to transfer her guilt. Coming back from bath the mother-in-law saw this unfortunate happening and the daughter-in-law gave the cat a beating and as an effect the cat went into the forest crying bitterly reporting everything to goddess Shasthi. If the uneven distribution of food-stuff is the focus of this tale, it is noteworthy that the cat has someone to report for justice while the daughter-in-law has none. But whatever she accomplishes behind the eye of the authority, namely her mother-in-law, is actually against the social norm and Shasthi as a goddess approves of this norm by taking away her sons immediately after their birth. Since child-mortality in our country was very high and till date an extra privilege is given to the birth of a male child in this patriarchal society, mothers loosing male child is considered as the most unfortunate; this mother, too, was thus left to the forest to weep and suffer. The present tale becomes a very significant meta-narrative in the sense that it presents Shasthi herself in front of the weeping mother asking what has happened to the latter. As she must have narrated her own story, the half of the bratakatha is narrated before the goddess once again. Only after this Shasthi asks her to drop a big pot of curd on a dead cat lying on the wayside and then again to take back all the curd into the pot by licking. This would certainly be a nauseating experience, but passing through this successfully she comes back to her house carrying all her children. At recent times, this brata is observed with the ritual tale hoping the women would only share the fortune of the daughter-in-law and not her agonies. Hence, the text here does not advocate before the reader or the audience complete identification with the characters, but emphasizes its importance through a partial non-identification.

The final example in this paper is from a *shastriya brata* known as the *Bhaimi Ekadasi brata*. In the month of Magha, on the eleventh day of the bright fortnight, Kunti was on a ritual-fast. The weather had been very cold on that day and yet she had to go for a bath. As she took a holy dip, her entire body started trembling in cold. In a wretched condition thereafter, the old woman slowly walked back home.

Bhima met his mother on the way and found her in a miserable state. He grew furious. And in no time, he heated a blade of iron to put it into the river uttering the holy name of Krishna. This way, he repelled the cold immediately and saved his old mother from the verge of collapse. But lo! Varuna, the mighty Lord of the Waters, was almost scorched by the heat the iron blade had produced. He ran fast to Krishna crying, "Please come to my rescue O Lord, or this heat will do away with me!" Krishna's heart melted at Varuna's prayers and he gave him an assurance, "I have a remedy for your problem. Let Bhima observe the ritual fast of *ekadasi* and your pain will be automatically relieved. Do not worry. For, I myself will ask him observe the fast, though I understand that it may not be a very easy task for him to do." But Krishna was crafty enough to convince Bhima do the fast. Thus Varuna's pain was also alleviated. And since then the eleventh day of the bright fortnight of Magha came to be known as *Bhaimi Ekadasi*. By observing this ritual, human beings are redeemed of their sins of theft, brahmin-killing, and wine-drinking. There is no barrier of class, caste, or gender in observing it.

It is obvious that in the context of the above brata and its tale, one aspect of the desire to get rid of heinous deeds of theft, killing, and intoxication is greatly overemphasized. But the other aspect of the tale is expressively the wish to maintain an ethical standard in human beings' relation with nature. It could be examined how human beings' relation with nature is represented by a group of Hindus with logic of responsibility towards environment. In the above tale, Bhima's sympathy towards the miserable state of his old mother along with his sense of duty to save her from cold, and the urgency to treat a proper lesson to one who has failed to behave properly with a woman is rooted in his identity as a *kshatriya*. But his ethical standpoint is not properly supplied with reason which could otherwise lead him to the understanding that nature, be it in the shape of Varuna as a person, has to work in its characteristic way, say making the winter cold and the summer hot. Bhima's sympathy towards Kunti could easily let him arrange some fire to recover the old woman instead of making the entire river-water boil so as to drive away cold. But out of rage he failed to reason properly and committed the most unethical thing of scorching the innocent Lord of Waters. As in the *Mahabharata*, here too Krishna stands for the *Rita* or *Dharma* which may otherwise be called the highest ethics. From his angle of perception, causing harm to nature by changing its normal course is as great a sin as theft, killing, or intoxication. Since Bhima tormented nature to a great degree, Krishna's prescription for him is to understand his fault and observe the brata. That intervention in nature's normal course, for one's cravings for personal pleasure or sense of duty even if it be too powerful is highly condemnable – this particular ethical principle is preached through this tale. Bhima's atrocity with Varuna in order to make the climate hot may perhaps be related with global climate change. As an aftermath of what has been done to nature since the early days

of industrial revolution till date, reports have been coming of the glaciers melting down every year at an unprecedented rate, cycle of major seasons in the sub-continent namely winter, summer, and rain shifting their usual span and running unstable, unexpected floods and droughts visiting together at various places, animal, plant, and insect species getting extinct every day. Tales of the above sort ask the readers never to stop appealing like Varuna against the wrong, and ask for, like Krishna, the necessity of being ethically or morally right in handling nature and natural resources for human-welfare.

In one context, Rabindranath Tagore expressed his opinion that these bratas and bratakathas are often seen with ignorance. These bratakathas are often categorised at the bottom of folk literature and not at the top. The very subject of bratakatha fails to step into the boundary of intellect though in the case of social identity the analysis of the bratakatha is of an immense importance specially to know about the womenfolk in the Bengali household bratakathas are the easiest medium. So Rabindranath says without any hesitation-"the tales which have been the part of the internal aspects of the society have also become the materials of science, history and philosophy". Secondly, "those who love their motherland intensely also want to be one with her and they can not be one with her without these folktales, bratakathas and fairytales." Others who have also left their footsteps in the field of bratakathas are Aghorenath Chattopadhyay with his *Meyeli Brata* published in 1896, Indumati Devi with her *Banganarir Bratakata*, Abanindranath Tagore with his famous *Banglar Brata* in 1944 and so on. So, we can see that these famous

literary persons also felt the immense gravity of these bratakathas and also talked on them in their literary works.

It can now be concluded that bratakatha as texts to be read as literature is capable of providing sufficient examples of such tales which could tell how those are to be told and appreciated. One does not need to go to any readymade approach of reading those tales, though there are many such approaches present everywhere and some of them are really insightful in providing some guideline how those tales could be seen as forms of art. Certainly, the circles in which the bratakathas have been popular included people with the faculty of analysis and appreciation and since their analysis and appreciation have been chiefly subject of personal communication among the members of those circles, they are not well-known among the official appreciators of literature aesthetically. It seems to be an important task to find out those desi ways of appreciation for a complete understanding of the native.

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