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"Lakshmi Unbound"?: Observing women in a few poems by Sanjukta Dasgupta

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I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—too?
Then there's a pair of us!

------- Dickinson ("I'm Nobody! Who are you?")-
Poem No. 260

I

Indian writing in English has for quite some time been part of the curriculum for students of literature in the subcontinent. Post colonialist ideologies, post-partition conditions, postmodernist tendencies are not hard to seek in its enriched core. Literature in translation too plays a significant role in recommending to the global citizens the parameters of creativity prevalent in regional cultures, though names of artists are yet to be popularized. Novelists and writers of short fiction, however dominate the scenario. A lot is yet to be said of poets who, as per popular choice remain "less readable" and as a result their published works are much less in numerical value in comparison to the authors of fiction. The long and tedious journey of artistic composition across numerous terrains of history, phases of socio-economic, religious and political upheavals and the rise and fall of empires and ideologies, enables penetration into the minds of those whose works offer a prophetic vision of the consciousness, that treasured melting pot that seems to withstand the test of time that signifies "India" in all its multifaceted diversities.

Although it is easy to say that *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) was the first ever novel written in the English language by an Indian in colonial days, one is hardly ever asked to recall Bankim Chandra's female counterpart. Indeed, the list of women poets/authors writing in the English language during the days of the Raj is not an extensive one. Any mediocre student shall begin with Sarojini Naidu and end happily with Toru Dutt. Still less popular are the women poets writing in the regional languages. It is, however noteworthy that in the post-independence phase there occurred a gradual upsurge in women's writing in the Indian subcontinent and what is striking is that a couple of such writings were published in regional magazines, newspapers, etc on a regular basis. Many female authors adopted pen names but continued with their creative ventures. Bengal had already witnessed several changes and in comparison, with other parts of India, Bengal-based intellectuals supported women's education and liberated their daughters from the stigmas of customs with a greater enthusiasm. Hence expressions ear-marked "modern" are voiced in the writings by and for women and men accordingly risked it out against social norms to speak for women and their sufferings. What emerges is a special category of literature with feminist echoes, contextualised against the changing modalities of a new India, breaking through the dogmas of suppressive race and gender. And it would not be an exaggeration to state that from the days of Chandravati to the days of Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Bengal has pioneered many a unique feminist ethos and has always proved its readiness to blend the aesthetic with the political in the most troubled decades of history.

With the sisters at home, there ensues yet another new space for critical and literary scholarship abroad, what many conveniently label "foreign" in casual conversation. In this instance too Bengal seems to lead the struggle. Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri are ready reckoners for the Indian diaspora in the United States of America. Writing in English, they are comfortable to respond in a parallel manner to the characters living "there" and those who live "here". Memory, recollection, verbal correspondences, letters, abound in their narratives that relies a lot on the seeming contrasts of existence. They display their fondness for drawing the invisible gridlines demarcating "them" from "us" and often prefer to obliterate the boundaries between nations and nationalities that seem so rigid and literal, thereby sustaining the transnational spirits in their literary endeavours.

The Indian scenario in women's writing in English receives fame in the hands of those women who are frequently anthologized and whose names are recalled with ease. Kamala Das, Gauri Deshpande, Mamata Kalia, Eunice D'Souza, Meena Kandasamy, or the north-eastern poets such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, are widely read and better known than many others. These poets write in English and cater to a larger audience. Of the novelists, Geetha Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, or Anita Desai, are among a handful of litterateurs whose innovation in style and substance have made them best-selling authors beyond the south-asian limits in contemporary times.

II

As I keep moving to and fro, I must remind myself that I need to deliberate on Bengali writers or poets who prefer to choose English as their medium of expression. Of some of the women poets who continue to inspire the younger generations of poets, Prof. Sanjukta Dasgupta, enjoys fame in the literary and academic hub today. She has published widely and along with writing fiction, has been adept at literary translations and literary criticisms. She lives and works in Kolkata though she is a visiting professor at institutions of repute in Europe, too. But what impresses me is her direct avowal to dismantle the cliches and portray the truths that often strike us but go repressed owing to circumstances. Her feminism does not prompt one to live with exalted biases, nor does it ask women to leave aside responsibilities and shirk domestic duties. In her is to be observed a keen mind that asks one to question,

teaches to perform with logic and reason through the intriguing patterns of womanhood and to accept responsibilities as they come and acknowledge in the midst of it all, the importance and the undeniable potential of the individual. She does not imagine a world without men as many others dream of, but on the contrary she contemplates a world where the lady has every right to share her views, form her opinions and express as she desires to without recoiling at the idea of being dismissed by the other.

The collection from which I have selected a handful of poems for close scrutiny is her latest book of poems bearing a rather interesting title: *Lakshmi Unbound* (2017). Although she has four other collections to her credit, this present one deploys a different technique to address women's issues more directly. Needless to say, the Promethean aspect works itself into the essence of the spirit that these poems explore. Lakshmi, the great Hindu goddess of fortune is archetypally held as resonating with the charm of soft, feminine tenderness. She is the soul of kindness and goodness, personifying richness, ripeness and an opulence that remain unmatched. Her luxuriating sophistication enthrals all who look on her. Her divine grace is cherished and worshipped with great care. Vishnu's consort and wife, Lakshmi is the great mother who according to myth rose from the churning of the great sea and held ambrosia in a golden vessel. It is believed that this very same fluid was the milk that flowed from her breasts and she, therefore could make all those who consumed it immortal. Her piety was the envy of gods and demons alike.

A common Bengali expression "Lakshmi meye" meaning "a girl as good as Lakshmi" or the popular Hindi expression "humare ghar ki Lakshmi" denoting the wife/ daughter-in-law who is as noble as Lakshmi, weaves the powerful influence of this divinity into quotidian life, heightening the claims of patriarchy for submissive, passive emotions at least where women are concerned. So, with this gendered discrimination governing the general social temperament, Lakshmi continues to represent sobriety and shyness, being classified the deity exuding femininity. Dasgupta's manipulative title carefully draws on the tales of coercion that compel submission from Lakshmi and the irony is double-layered. The poet, however, expects readers to imagine free, happy existence for all Lakshmis as she says, in the brief, compact preface to the collection, quoting from Virginia Woolf, no creativity may be possible if the angel in the house does not die.

III

I put forward a few important questions that the title recommends to readers like me:

a) to whom or what is Lakshmi bound?

b) what liberates Lakshmi and how?

c) how does Lakshmi cope with her new existence in her newly acquired liberation?

If the Shelleyan vision is important for interpreting the poems in the light of rebellion, amounting to extremism in some form or the other, then Dasgupta seeks to locate the women whose tales she has encrypted, as departing from tradition and writing their own histories. These shall not bear the seal and signature of men but shall be the histories of the sufferers who refuse to conceal the truth. The promethean fire that gave men the power to create, enriched the mortal world. These poems look forward to break the barriers of silence that continue to engulf women.

The poems that I have selected for closer analyses inspect the theme of suppression in distinct ways. The first three poems are inspired by Tagore, the next two poems are from contemporary social conditions in which women refuse to suffer victimisation and torture of their bodies. In each instance the typified ideology of Lakshmi as the worshipped perfection of womanhood is shattered and a new persona supposedly emerges like the phoenix that is born from its own ashes.

Of the poems that emerge from Tagore's spirit, Chandalika and Chitrangada are two opposite souls living very disparate lives and possessing radically different perspectives about their own individual identities. While one is a lowly born girl and living on the outskirts of the town, slightly away from refined habitation of men and manners, the other is a princess who powerfully asserts in debate and claims to be acknowledged as equal and undeniable in courage and might. Chandalika's shame for being lowly born naturally demands certain social behavioural differences and she is expected to identify with those differences. The differences set her apart from the crowd. The depths of her psyche reveal a sense of guilt that becomes apparent in various forms of shame and disallows her acceptance by her social betters. Chandalika, who is categorised an untouchable, is a vivid representation of the scheme of discrimination that continues to damage the unity of a nation to this day. Such distinctions produce an unexplained sense of woe in the deprived beings for things that lie beyond control, but continue to perturb the mind and allow a sense of gloom to pervade their existence either in an individual or even a community. She too maybe branded "Lakshmi" since she, under several restraints accepts and abides by the norms that her community has dissipated so far among its members. She is uncomplaining and shows little desire to break the barriers of caste or creed. The Buddhist monk Ananda helps release her from her self-imposed bondage and prepares her to contemplate the greatness that life promises for each, irrespective of the general restrictions that conspire to imprison the mind. Tagore aligns the Buddhist dharma of equanimity to the story of the girl born in the lowest of the low stratum of society. The reformist in Tagore addresses the often-cited instances of untouchability through the blending of myth, folklore and religion. Of Ananda, one of the leading preachers of doctrine, it has been said that he initiated the idea of including women in the sect and appealed to the Buddha. After much persuasion, Buddha agreed and women came to participate actively in spreading the word of Ahimsa and Dhamma to all. I refer to Staal in this context:

> Tradition has it that Buddha allowed only men to become monks, but that his favourite pupil, Ananda, pleaded for the admission of women. The Buddha told him that, if he were to permit it, the Sangha would last five hundred years instead of a thousand. Even so, he consented and admitted women as nuns, provided they would be kept separate from the monks. His prediction turned out to have been wrong—Buddhism has lasted for two-and-a-half millennia, though women have again been excluded from ordination in Theravada countries. (252)

In Dasgupta's reading of the entire sequence of Chandalika, I observe a few innovations in the method and manner of expression. She is combining the Tagorean paradigms of humanity, equality and compassion with the modern dilemma of the Dalit and adding her understanding of Chandalika both as myth and woman in the Indian, Hinduised femininity:

> Dalit maiden branded and stigmatized Innocent yet condemned Condemned for being born in a home Not by her choice! (ll. 46-49)

It is important to note the repetitive "condemned" in the above lines. While the first points to a sense of anomaly, i.e. why should the innocent be condemned and brings the legal aspect to the fore, the second discusses the social stigmas and taboos that feature condemnation of those who are low. To "brand" and "stigmatize" may produce echoes from Cixous's analysis of stigma:

> The person who is properly or figuratively stigmatized has traits of the saint…and the outlaw, of the martyr and the condemned. The stigma conveys the strongest message, the most secret message, the one that is most difficult to obey: whether good or bad, the stigmatized person is single out for *exclusion* and *election*" (Cixous 12)

Dasgupta has taught feminist theories for decades at the university and recurrences of such notions conform to her observations in the academic as well as the creative spheres spanned across her career.

With "Chitrangada", a marked departure from the nature of femininity noted above impresses readers. Here is the tale of a Manipuri princess, ready to be betrothed to the gracious Pandava archer, Arjun. She is not just a delicate royal too engrossed in the ideas of love and perfection awaiting to be accepted on the terms of the man. Tagore captures a unique lady whose romance must not be dealt with on typical codes of womanly conduct. The north-eastern region of Manipur houses a long line of tribes and communities that have supported matriarchy since their early inception. Hence Chitrangada's claim to her share of equality places her in a rather old world where varna, i.e. caste ceased to exist as women were free to explore their fields of knowledge in their own terms. I would like to offer a translation of "Chitrangada" penned by Mallika Sengupta, a contemporary poet from Bengal, (who is no longer among us), and as I gather, had been a very close friend of Sanjukta Dasgupta. Sengupta, too, nursed in her ideology of femininity from real, practical incidents, had been a scholar and teacher of Sociology at an undergraduate college in Kolkata. What follows is an extract from her poem that suffices to dismantle the regular patriarchal notions of women and their sexualities:

You shall always be prepared with body and desire, bathed in sandalwood and perfumes--

> The flawless skin around your naval Devoid of hairy substance.
>
> Men shall make you as they please Is this your doom, your destiny? Or, has none ever contemplated your potential That you are naturally complete, whole, Independent, absolute and perfect. (126, *translations, my own*)

Chitrangada is revered as a powerful heroine in Tagore's canon and provides ample scope to question and reason the constraints of domestic bliss as a common lady seeks and finds in her multiple roles in the family. Sengupta's Chitrangada chooses to refer to the body and the spirit of the woman that a man rejoices in possessing and confining in the falsified image of a lover. Her perfection is a matter of natural contention and it need not be certified by a male partner. Does this attitude produce a sensation of female masculinity, an idea that opposes the prevalent binaries of sex and gender? A look at Dasgupta's Chitrangada may enable a parallel reading of the persona of this warrior-princess. The latter makes a significant conclusion in summing up through a translation of the original verse that produces the enigma of a woman who refutes the male order:

> "*I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet The object of common pity to be brushed aside Like a moth with indifference."* (ll. 37-39)

What precedes these lines are a couple of lines that examine the position of the sweet beloved in a rather different position as artist, author, or one who writes and therefore leaves a mark upon the world. Dasgupta imagines a princess of the bygone era disturbing archetypes for society—a surprise for men who may be doomed to accept her sovereign status perhaps because she is princess and hence occupies a position of pride in the social hierarchy:

> "The princess of Manipur Also the princess of the people Scripted a mantra for every woman Princess or pauper-" (ll.33-36)

She is envisaged as guru, as teacher and as a leader who may command other women to follow suit "Princess or pauper" as Dasgupta justifies. Her script is coded with variation for women to read and acknowledge her prime position. "Mantra" is akin to precious and specialised knowledge, a unique combination of mysticism with spirituality that is otherwise supposed to impart divine wisdom too.

The next poem focuses on a more contemporary theme of marriage and social acceptance of a woman who finds an unsatisfactory marital life unbearable to put up with and instead prefers to withdraw from its tedious ambience. This appears an outright challenge to patriarchy since the patriarch cannot be ignored. Taking its cue from "Streer Patra" (the wife's letter) Dasgupta voices Mrinal's determination to live a life beyond the confines of her marital home and forego marital bliss. The elitist Bengali genteel culture suffers multiple shocks to learn that the noble lady may have ever harboured such thoughts contrary to the ideologies on which such families bred their daughters. The quietude of Lakshmi is split apart and the centre truly fails to hold and sustain. Protests and remonstrations surface in her letter to her husband in which she states her reason and purpose with accuracy. Dasgupta carefully selects her words to highlight the general impact of a man receiving a letter from his wife:

> No one could believe
> That gentle Mrinal who obeyed
> All the rules of the sacred space
> Would write a letter to her husband (ll. 1-4)

Sarcasm and irony join hands to account for the sudden change in Mrinal's behaviour. Saddened at Bindu's plight, she

fails to show any further signs of compromise with her own marriage. Bindu's suicide leaves her full of remorse and she is unforgiving since the girl's marriage to an insane partner was arranged by her in-laws who sought to provide the hapless girl a sense of solidarity through marriage. Dasgupta touches on Ibsen and seeks to draw a parallel between Mrinal and Nora:

Mrinal, like her elder sister Nora
In a far away world
Shut herself out from the hypnotic
Humiliating, terrifying sacred space
Mrinal erased the lines of control (ll. 31-35)

She truly resigns from her role as wife and daughter-in-law ("resignation letter" l. 50) and unbinds herself from all responsibilities. The letter is a written document that accentuates her personality. She has dared to conceive the impossible and does not shy away from articulating her inmost desires. This document may be perceived as the letter that summons the partner and asks him to consent to divorce that may be appropriate for the present purpose.

Tagore's women, like the Shakespearean heroines impress the mind in times of severity and change. The next two poems deal with very contemporary incidents and refer to the women who are victims of violence and social discrimination. Drawing from a piece of news published in one of the leading English dailies, the poet dramatizes the gruesome event of murder of a husband by his wife and her subsequent surrender and trial. Murder shall pronounce capital punishment on the offender as per law. But the chief accused has her right to defence and explains her years of woe at living with an abusive drunkard who refuses to alter himself. In trying to save her only son, she finds that she must kill her husband. her justification of her criminal act is protected by law, though it is not clarified how she may have been meted out justice at the end. "I Killed Him M'Lord" stiffens the ambience and instead of the Lakshmi, the image of kali, the great destroyer completes our understanding. I do not know whether the chief motive behind her violent criminal act had been vengeance or defence, but it is apparent that her regular victimisation occurred in physical torment and psychological torture. Unlike other domestic tales of violence where the husband finds supportive parents, the victim's mother-in-law had actually supported her following her witnessing several years of aggression. Is she a Medea of some sort who decides to perform acts of destruction and thereby prove her dynamism? Is she, in her manner of highlighting her past, not really compelling justice to pass judgements where mere circumstantial evidence is not enough?

The last and final poem that I examine in this paper bears direct instances of sexual violence, rape, forcible imprisonment and sexual slavery of girls in the most modern societies. While these instances sustain the interests of the media, there are several instances of cases not reported or the truth not being told. "Rape" represents the most mature vision of the poet. It deals with a nameless, suffering female who is a prototype of the victim that every patriarch may secretly cherish in possessing. The entire act of rape is told with a precision that a psychoanalyst would note with care:

He gnashed his teeth
Eyes gleaming like a hunter on a kill
He felt omnipotent
As she writhed and screamed
Hate in every curve of her ravished frame (ll. 9-13)

Whether this is to receive the brand of sadism or sado-masochism is not important to me. I try to grasp the intensity of the desire that turns human to animal and attracts him to his coveted object. The keen, sharp eyes with the readiness to ravage and ruin, give off the feeling of a man who cannot accept defeat. Recognising the weaknesses of his enemy, he appears to betray his confidence to remain immune to all legal measures. The poem does not produce any unique ideas with regard to the acts of rape or physical violence. But the conclusion to the poem recommends an optimum use of a woman's imagination to liberate herself. The dream of freedom reverses the scene of brutality and extends it to an extreme form of savagery where the woman is least likely to display mercy. Her faith in her own potential to oppose and overcome her seemingly strong, masculine enemy is roused:

But this time
A strange serene smile lit her face
At last she could dare to desire
His severed head at her feet (ll. 41-44)

A barbaric system of rejoicing at glory, when the chief would display with pleasure and pride the severed head of his enemy on a staff or simply allow it to lie at his feet and prove the ignominy of losers, it has always been related to the concept of spectacle. Revenge prompts the winning side to exhibit gruesome forms of animosity for the sufferers. To "dare to desire" repeats the same harsh consonants perhaps to indicate the notable change in the girl, hunted in body and mind by a powerful "other".

As it is observed, from the poems of the collection, the patriarchal perfection of Lakshmi is hard to come by. Repulsive, outrageous, apparently difficult to be suppressed, deprived of the least minimum traces of the spirit of the benign and merciful, women prove their readiness to combat and raze to the ground all the existing parameters of "compulsory heterosexuality" (to borrow from Adrienne Rich).

The other poems in the collection refer to themes that retain the charm of women's writing in an aura of modernism. Though the adverse conditions affecting womanhood may not be eradicated in a day, the poems aim to connect the various forms of suffering as these persist in the different layers of society. I conclude in the words of the poet who sends what I designate a clarion call to women: "Till we are able to make this distinction between women's bodies and women's identity, aware women know that the battle must go on." (Preface, *Lakshmi Unbound* page no. not mentioned)

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