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Article

## Women in Bengali Orature: Selected Genres

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	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Keywords:</b> Orature, Women, Voices, Gender, Preservation</p> 	<p>Unrecorded oral folk literature has various genres of which some are dominated by women, who have used these as <i>Voices</i> to express anguish, discomfort, protest or any kind of feelings. Through such utterances pictures of patriarchal society, position of women, rivalry in family, gender discrimination etc several issues can be seen reflected. Hence preservation of such Oratures are extremely important as integral part of Folk literature and gender studies. The article delves to discuss the same.</p>

1.

Folk culture & literature was not created overnight. It has a long tradition which was initiated many many moons even before alphabets were developed. Myths are the best examples, which are narratives of ancient people who used to explain all natural occurrences in the form of stories, which are now considered as science before emergence of real science. Ever since human civilisation started communication through signs and /or words, folk literature of some form was created. So in reality the horizon of Folk literature is widely expanded outside any recorded material, as traditionally most forms of unrecorded oral folk literature were created and spread in a much larger section of any race.

Let us first look into the features of Orature:

- Oral utterances with no written versions
- Prevalent mostly among rural less educated socially marginal people
- Ever flowing as orally these pass on from one generation to another
- Hence no specific author can be identified. Orature is always a group creation reflecting collective intellect.
- Dependent on the memory of the bard, hence always variable as a particular narrator may change or twist a version while narrating to the next generation

- Hence oratures do not have any fixed narrative, rather many versions are available thus making it difficult to decide which is the very first unaltered version.

## 2.

Among different genres of Folk literature women centric genres are Folktales, Riddles, Ballads, Maxim & Proverb, Songs, Rhymes & Lullaby and Vows. But before any further discussion, three important questions need to be pondered upon :

1. How should women centric oratures be read?
2. Why women centric oratures were created?
3. What is the medium of women centric Orature?

These Oratures can be read in two ways:

- Orature for women – may be or may not be created by women
- Orature by women – created by women

Orature created by women makes it extremely important to answer the 2<sup>nd</sup> question. Connection of women with orature was mostly confined within a few genres namely child pacifying rhymes, marriage songs, keeping vows for the welfare of the family or performing rituals with mantras. But there is much more significance to this connection.

It is important to remember, oratures are prevalent mostly among socially marginal people and in this marginal life, women can be termed as marginal of marginals. Because of this social position, in the name of heritage and tradition women were taught to adhere to embargos since childhood both by family and society. They were conditioned to believe that *বুক ফাটে তো মুখ ফোটেনা* (buk fatey toh mukh fotena / even if the heart breaks the tongue will remain tied). In any family, women of any identity, that of mother, daughter, wife, bride sister have to fight through several obstructions many of which are not visible. Hence it is not difficult to understand that women in rural households of yesteryears undoubtedly had oceans of anguish, pain, trauma and humiliation bottled within their hearts which they couldn't express in public, and even to the male members of the family.

But this *নীরব ভাষা* (Nirab Vasyo) or silent annotation sometimes wanted to break the social dictum and purgare out the inner feelings. So in the *অন্দরমহল* (Andarmahal)-- inner house, when women exchanged/ shared feelings on these, what emerged was essentially *মেয়েদের কথা* (meyeder katha)-- the dialogue of women. The oratures created by them, thus became the tool for their purgation or even catharsis of emotions which definitely serves a therapeutic purpose as well. While discussing about Oratures, therefore one must keep in mind that these are just not forms of literature, but **VOICES** of women through the ages by which they wanted to be heard and understood, which was a small expectation indeed.

## 3.

This VOICE is expressed in a specific lingo called মেয়েলি ভাষা( *meyeli bhasa*) or the women's language which has certain specific annotations like :

1. Adhering to taboo or social reservations / সংস্কার(/*Samskar*): Using substitutes like উনি(Uni) or ও(O),while referring elders like brother in law and/or father in law and husband respectively,instead of calling or mentioning by name.
2. Using alternative words:
  - a. At night calling snake as লতা(*Lata*) instead of সাপ(Saap)
  - b. Calling tiger as বড় শেয়াল(*Barosheyal*)
  - c. Referring broken conchshell,a sign of marriage as শাঁখা বেড়ে যাওয়া ( *Sankha beRe jawa*)
  - d. Referring exhausted stock of rice in kitchen as চাল বাড়ন্ত ( *Chal baRonto*)
- 3..Using special words & exuberant expression like মাসিক হওয়া ( *Masik howa*/having periods) or ওলো (Olo/ addressing a woman)
- 4..Swearing & curses (দিব্বা দেওয়া/গালাগাল)
  - আমার মাথা খাও ( *Amar matha khao*/Swear on my head)
  - আবাগীর বেটি,( *Abagir beti*) অলপ্পেয়ে(*Alappeye*),মিনসে(*Minshe*), খালভরা ( *Khalbhora*), ভরড্যাকরা(*BhorDyakRa*), এঁড়ে(*EnRe*), বিটলে(*Bitley*).....addressing in slangs.

Such languages find expression in women centric oratures.

#### 4.

This article will focus on 3 subgenres of women – centric oratures namely Riddles, Maxims & Proverbs and Rhymes.

- 1.Riddles or ধাঁধা ( *Dhnadha*) are considered to be wisdom of many, wit of one. These are basically brain – games played mostly by women in the interior household to create an atmosphere of group entertainment.

Subtypes of riddles are:

- জামাই ঠকানো ধাঁধা ( *Jamai thokano Dhnadha*/ riddle to fool the groom – By fooling the groom beforehand is probably a way to set scores even in advance for the situation the daughter of the house as bride will have to face in her inlaw house where she has to prove her competence in several occassions. If the groom can be fooled in the বাসর( *Basor*/ night gathering after marriage), then the female family members of the bride as if will feel a kind of respite about the impending judgement for the girl of the family. eg. কালসাপ দোলে বাপ / ছোবল মাল্লে পরে / বিষের বদলে বুকে ঘৃত মধু বরে ( *Kalsap doley baap/ Chhobol malle porey/bisher bodole buke ghrito modhu jhore* /If the deadly snake bites,it will pour honey and

butter instead of venom.) Answer : Hair plait or *বিনুনি* (Binuni)

- Riddles with sexual overtures – used as a shield to hide the actual meaning and also is used as a form of adult entertainment which is not possible for women to enjoy anywhere else.

Eg. *দিই তো দিই পরপুরুষকে দিই/ দিই তো দিই পথে ঘাটে দিই, দিই তো দিই যখন তখন দিই/ তোমার আমি আমার তুমি তোমায় দেব কী?* (I give it to any man, ami give it in public, I give it anytime I want, but you are mine, I am yours, why will I give you?) Answer : Veil or *ঘোমটা*

Clearly riddles reflect intelligence of women and also their resolve to get advance justice for another woman and also entertainment inside the periphery of the house.

## 5.

2. Maxim or *প্রবচন* & proverbs or *প্রবাদ* is also another important genre :

*খনার বচন* (Khanar Bochon) – *যদি বর্ষে মাঘের শেষ/ ধন্য রাজার পুণ্য দেশ* (Weather prediction)

Or *যদি দেখো মাকুন্দ চোপা/ একপাও যেও নাকো বাপা* (Human nature)

Such maxims about weather & agriculture, about human nature were uttered by *খনা* / Khana a woman of high intellect who got married to Baraha, son of Mihir, a wellknown Pundit. A legend remains alive till date that father in law Mihir was not comfortable with the rising popularity of the bride of the house and had severed Khana's tongue to stop her from making accurate prophecies anymore.

Proverbs or *প্রবাদ* overtly portray discrimination of women in 2 forms :

a. Situation of women in male dominated society

egs:

- *পুরুষের দশ দশা/ নারী শুধু শোওয়া বসা* - Non acknowledgement of household work/ unpaid labour
- *পুড়বে নারী উড়বে ছাই/ তবেই মেয়ের গুণ গাই* – A woman has to die to be praised
- *নারীর নখের মরণ ফাঁদে/ বন্দী হয়ে পুরুষ ফাঁদে*- women allure and misguide men

b. Power struggle in women- controlled *অন্দরমহল* which is actually a form of patriarchy proving patriarchy is gender neutral.

egs :

- *ভালো কথা মনে পড়ল আঁচাতে আঁচাতে/ ঠাকুরঝিকে নিয়ে গেছে নাচাতে নাচাতে* – Brother's wife gets reminded of the good news that crocodile has taken away her sister in law while bathing in the river
- *একলা ঘরের গিনি এবার হলি নাকি মা? / নিশ্চেসকে বিশ্বেস নেই, নড়ছে যেন পা* – Mother asks daughter whether her mother in law has passed away, then daughter can become the mistress of the house. Daughter is not sure as she doubts the feet of the body may be moving
- *শাউড়ি ম'ল সকালে/খেয়ে দেয়ে মনে থাকলে/ কাঁদব আমি বিকেলে* – Daughter in law says mother in law died in the morning. After having lunch if she remembers it, she will cry in the evening

## 6.

3. Rhymes or *ছড়া* have quite a few types:

- a. General *সর্বজনীন ছড়া*
  - b. Child pacifying / *ছেলেভুলোনো ছড়া*
  - c. Game rhymes / *খেলার ছড়া*
  - d. Lullaby or *ঘুমপাড়ানি গান/ ছড়া*
- of which b,c,d are women-centric.

b.ছেলেভুলোনো ছড়া (*chhele bhulano chhora*) are very much women centric as child rearing happens to be predominantly a woman's responsibility in all societies. So to put a child to sleep, to stop him/her crying,or for pacifying women have to adhere to many tricks, methods which find best expression in rhymes. One inevitable condition for rhyme is rhythm which usually attracts a child. But a careful analysis of rhymes will show much more than child pacifying. The name *ছেলেভুলোনো* itself shows the gender bias, as if only the male child needs to be pacified. Hence in rhymes one can find positive portrayal of *খোকা*:

- *খোকা যাবে মাছ ধরতে* ( Khoka will go to catch fish)
- *খোকা যাবে বিয়ে করতে, সঙ্গে যাবে কে/ বাড়িতে আছে হলো বেড়াল, কোমর বেঁধেছে* ( Khoka will go to marry, the male cat will accompany him)

The portrayal of *খুকি*(*khuki*), the girl child is different :

- *দোল দোল দুলুনি রাঙা মাথায় চিরকনি/ বর আসবে এক্ষুনি নিয়ে যাবে তক্ষুনি / Rock my child rock/ let me comb your hair because your groom will come soon to take you away*
- *কে বকেছে কে মেরেছে কে দিয়েছে গাল? /তাই তো খুকু রাগ করেছে ভাত খায়নি কাল / Someone has scolded and beaten up the little girl which has made her angry and she did not eat*
- *চাঁদ উঠেছে ফুল ফুটেছে কদম তলায় কে/হাতি নাচছে ঘোড়া নাচছে সোনামণির বে / Moon is shining, flowers are blooming, who is there near the Kadam tree? Elephant and horse are dancing because Sonamoni is getting married*

This utter difference of portrayal of male and female child is due to the social & familial attitude that male child is the heir of the family, pride of the family. A girl child is sent off by marriage as per social custom and the benefits go to the inlaws.

- c. But a horrific portrayal can be seen in a *খেলার ছড়া*(*Game Rhyme*)-

*এলাটিং বেলাটিং সই লো/ কিসের খবর আইলো/ রাজা একটি বালিকা চাইল/ কোন বালিকা চাইল/ এই বালিকা চাইল/ নিয়ে নাও নিয়ে নাও বালিকা / (What news has come from the King? King has asked for a girl. Which girl does he want? He wants this girl ( a girl is selected in the game). Please take away the girl).*

This rhyme portrays a society where Raja is the representative of the wealthy and powerful upper class which unabashedly tortures the commoners, snatching women for pleasure being a part of that. ( Zamindar/ king could send paiks/ sentries to abduct any girl from the house of any subject). Folktale depicted a cruel demon / রাক্ষস whose demand was one woman per day for not attacking the village. One is reminded about the poem titled 1946-47(১৯৪৬-৪৭) by

Jibanananda Das where a similar picture has been shown, only the demon has been replaced by men of power. In the apparently innocent games- rhyme played by children, a terrible picture of social injustice towards women have been portrayed.

d. Lullabies or *ঘুমপাড়ানি গান* contains both rhyme & music to put the child to sleep. Normally the tune gets more importance in a lullaby since it is more effective to bring sleep. But just like other rhymes the narratives often contain much serious utterances by women in the disguise of child- minding. Hence in lullabies often such themes can be noticed which depict society, history, even personal pathos of the woman.

Egs of society and history:

- *খোকো ঘুমালো পাড়া জুড়ালো বর্গী এল দেশে / বুলবুলিতে খান খেয়েছে খাজনা দেব কিসে* -In 1742 Maharashtrian dacoits better known as *Borgi* created economic crisis by their plunders thereby disrupting common lives. Remnant of that history can be traced in this song.
- *মগিরে মগিরে মোর এখন একটু ঘুমো, আর কত দোলাব তোরে কত দেবে চুমো/ বড়সড় হবি যখন করতে পারবি কাজ, সকল মানুষ মাতায়ে দিবি দেশের ঘুচাবি লাজ* (sharing with the baby about the pangs of being in a subjugation. subjugated country / boycott of foreign goods, brain drain, financial independence / mother also performing as a freedom fighter from inside)
- *মায়ের ছেলে কাপড় বোনে, কিনতে হবে তাই/ অন্য দেশের ভাল কাপড় খোকন ছোঁবে নাই* (বিলাতিদ্রব্য বর্জন -the historical incident of boycotting foreign goods is referred to here)

Personal pathos/ social situation also find expression in rhymes :

- *খোকন খোকন করে মায় খোকন গেছে কাদের নায়/ সাতটা কাকে দাঁড় বায় খোকন রে তুই ঘরে আয় / Khokon has gone away in a boat, mother begs him return home. We get reminded of old parents of NRIs or a popular song titled *বৃদ্ধাশ্রম* (old age home) sung by Nachiketa which shows the painful separation of mother from son when he grows up.*

7.

This brings us to another important question: what is the need for documenting Oral literature of women?

- a. Bronislow Malinowski, the revered Anthropologist in his book *Magic Science & Religion* described his experience in the Trobriand Island, Papua New Guinea where he was living with a tribe. The bard of the tribe died with the hidden knowledge of the entire tribe which is preserved only in his memory. Malinowski felt that with the death of an old bard, a rich treasure of history would be lost forever. Similarly if women centric oratures are not preserved in written form, the tradition of female literature, voices of women who are not educated, neither privileged to express like men, will be lost forever taking with them an important treasure of the legacy of indigenous culture of Bengal, which is portrayed in women-centric orature.
- b. *Roots* – Alex Haley – Black American author / family ritual - with birth of every new child in family, story of the first man of the family Kunta Kinte narrated by the oldest

woman of the family. Kunta was abducted by white men from Jufre Village in Africa as slave to USA about 300yrs back. Resisted, fled but finally settled with another black woman and started the family Alex Halley belongs to. Kunta's wife had started the practice of narrating the past history so that the family never forgets the roots.

Adult Alex found a file named Toby ( Kunta's slave name) in US Archives, which corroborated the story of Kunta Kinte that he grew up listening. Intrigued to know the origins Alex visits Jufre village in Africa with an interpreter who introduced him to the village chief, and told him the story Alex heard at home in USA thousands of miles away. Chief called the entire village and the tribal women started a ritual song and dance surrounding Alex, where they gave their babies to Alex to hold and then them took back. The interpreter explained that the entire tribe, while singing the same story of abducted young Kunta many years ago and giving their children to Alex, were also performing the 'ritual of touch' which signified that these children who belong to Kunta's tribe and Alex who belongs to Kunta's family --- are now unified and Alex is now accepted as one of them.

This completed a full circle as in USA women of Kunta's family had kept the legend of Kunta alive for 300 years through their oral story telling, and thousands of miles away in Africa, women of Kunta's tribe also did the same for centuries. Two countries, two languages, two cultures and multiple generations thus became unified in **Roots**, which is not just a book but the authentic documentation of the history of black men in USA.

It is needless to say this book could only be written because women of both countries preserved the history through their orature. Documents in US archives are only the official substantiation of that.

Therefore it is obvious why it is absolutely necessary to document and preserve Women Centric Oratures, because these not only show true picture of the situation of women in the society but also portray the immensely important role women play in preserving unrecorded history. Thus women become bearer of intangible library, of the heritage that is an integral part of Bengali literature.

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