

**THE GREAT BENGAL FAMINE AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN  
SELECT SHORT STORIES BY MANIK BANDOPADHYAY**

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**Abstract**

The Bengal famine of 1943 or The Great Bengal Famine struck the Bengal province of pre-partition British India during World War II following the Japanese occupation of Burma. Out of Bengal's 60.3 million populations, it is estimated that between 1.5 and 4 million people died of starvation, malnutrition and disease; half of them dying from disease after food became available in December 1943.

The term 'history' refers to the chronological documentation of the past. But it is also a form of narrative. A historian is not free from his own ideology. He cannot keep his neutral position in responding to the past. The narrative what we read today as history is thus loaded with the narrator's viewpoint. There are contradictory opinions about the cause of the Famine. The economists like Amartya Sen mark this Famine of 1943 as a natural disaster. But the alternative view regarding the cause of The Great Bengal Famine is also present. They point it as man-made.

During this period and even much later, literary responses are found to describe and comment on the omnipresence of death lurking everywhere. The short stories of Manik Bandopadhyay of 1940s depict this crisis distinctly. Aesthetic and social aims, in some cases one aim is privileged over the other. We have to admit that nothing is apolitical. Neither the authors, nor the readers are beyond politics. The objective of this paper is to explore whether literature actually mirrors the society or it represents dominant ideologies. It is that very ideology which influences an author to read the situations and represent the same in his own way. We see what he makes us see, and we interpret them accordingly. Behind the representation there is politics. By going through the representation of the Famine in the select stories of Manik Bandopadhyay, and by analysing the data found from various socio-economic, political and historical sources, the objective of my paper is to create a link among history, politics and the literary representations of The Great Bengal Famine.

**Key Words:** Representation, Ideology, History, Politics etc.

### Analysis

Before entering into the main discussion that concentrates on ‘The Great Bengal Famine’, its diversifying aspects and how authors like Manik Bandyopadhyay has presented Famine in his short stories, it is better to focus on some technical terms that are largely associated with this topic – the terms like ‘representation’, ‘discourse’, ‘politics’ and obviously, ‘ideology’ and to show how these operate in shaping the meaning at large in the interpretation of texts and in guiding the readers to follow the narrator’s ideological as well as political design.

In his essay, entitled “Politics of Representation”, Jiyun Wei points, “Representation embodies the notion that the media assists in the construction of meanings in the world: the ways in which we look at the world”. It is not only the media that asserts their supremacy in showing world as they want us to see, but also the litterateurs and cultural propagandists. Wei marks that there are two key approaches to representation:

a) ‘Reflectionism’, which is based on the platonic concept of mimesis where *mimema* is a vehicle for “man-made dreams produced for those who are awake” (Plato); the task of representation in this context is to adequately reflect existent meanings of “the real”;

b) ‘Constructivism’ or ‘Conventionalism’ which involves the “recognition that signification systems have a central part in conveying meaning”.

This representation is operated through language which frames the structural basis of one’s ideology. According to Sapir:

It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group [...] We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir, 1949)

The representational politics is guided by the ideological overpowering of the presenter, which is termed as Discourse, which, as defined by Foucault, refers to:

...ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon 108).

... a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance (Diamond and Quinby 185).

In defining politics, Anita L. Wenden, in her essay “The Politics of Representation: A Critical Discourse Analysis of an Aljazeera Report” cites Chilton and Shaffner (2002, p.5) and marks politics as “a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it” on the one hand, and on the other “as cooperation, as the practices and institutions a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, power, liberty and the like”. The role of discourse as the instrument of politics has been recognized by the theoretical writings of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and the power of language in the realm of politics is recognized by all, similarly, there is no denying the fact that discourse can also be the focus of struggle, i.e. a struggle for the power of representation. So far as the analytical perspective of discourse is concerned, representation refers to the language in any form of text to assign meaning to groups and their social practices, to events and to social conditions and

objects. It implies that regarding the role of language in social life, meaning is not embedded in the reality that is perceived but rather linguistic representations construct it. And the modes of representation vary largely in respect to different biographical, socio-cultural, historical perspectives from which they are constructed. In this scenario, ideology also plays a big role.

Wenden defines ideology as “sets of fundamental and often normative ideas and attitudes about some aspect of social reality shared by members of a group, society or culture. They are used to frame, legitimate or validate opinions and actions in the domain to which they are applicable” (Wenden, 2005). Thus, indirectly, they control how people plan and understand their social practices, including their use of language.

Now, let me focus on the thrust area of my paper. The Bengal famine of 1943 or The Great Bengal Famine struck the Bengal province of pre-partition British India during World War II following the Japanese occupation of Burma. Out of Bengal's 60.3 million populations, it is estimated that between 1.5 and 4 million people died of starvation, malnutrition and disease; half of them dying from disease after food became available in December 1943.

There are contradictory opinions about the causes of the Famine. The economist, Amartya Sen considers the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 as a natural disaster. He states:

This was largely the result of a cyclone in October, followed by torrential rain in some parts of Bengal and a subsequent fungus disease. (Sen, 52)

But the alternative view regarding the cause of The Great Bengal Famine is also present. They point it as man-made. In the sub-section entitled “Behind the Man-made Famine” in his essay “Who Lives if Bengal Dies”, P.C. Joshi comments:

‘The rice harvest in 1941 and ’42 was exceptionally good, it was definitely in excess of local requirements.’ This is what Sir John Anderson, ex-Governor of Bengal and at present Member of the British Cabinet said in the latest House of Commons debate.

In a good year the normal deficit in Bengal never was more than 4%, i.e., negligible.... After gathering last year’s harvest and at the beginning of this year Bengal faced a deficit of one million tons, i.e., of only about 14% of its total needs. Much more than a million tons has already been pumped into Bengal.

Why then have the entire body of poor, whether in the town or the village, been starving ever since march? Why then have five to ten thousands been dying every day?

Where lies the guilt? (Joshi 10)

The search for this ‘guilt’ has been the primary concern of many of the researchers through decades. As marked by them, the major reasons for this disaster are:

a) The administrative failure that can be seen in the lack of statistics regarding the condition of Bengal which could make other provinces aware of the impending disaster, inflation, increase of food prices due to black marketing etc.

b) The failure of policy which could be seen in Government inaction and in the refusal by other provinces and countries to send food grains to Bengal.

In both these cases the political agenda of the British Government are held responsible. The first one is the ‘Denial Policy’ propounded by the then Governor of Bengal Sir Herbert John. To stop the Japanese from entering India through the eastern provinces, Government forcefully acquired corns from the farmers, and forced them to burn the remaining corn in the field. The Govt. policy forfeited and destroyed the boats and the bridges so as to restrain the movement of the Japanese

soldiers. But ultimately, when famine came the starving people failed to relocate and consequently died.

During this period and even much later, literary responses are found to describe and comment on the omnipresence of death lurking everywhere. The short stories of Manik Bandopadhyay of 1940s depict this crisis distinctly. Aesthetic and social aims, in some cases one aim is privileged over the other. We have to admit that nothing is apolitical. Neither the authors, nor the readers are beyond politics. As described earlier, ideology influences an author to read the situations and represent the same in his own way. We see what s/he makes us see, and we interpret them accordingly.

At the advent of World War II and few years after, Manik Bandopadhyay began his search for the causes behind a rapid moral, social, philosophical and psychological decadence of the society. In 1944, he took membership in the Communist party and remained faithful to this dominant Marxist communist ideology till his last day. Most of his stories written in this period reflect his concern for the society and economic breakdown.

On the basis of his ideological orientation, Manik Bandopadhyay's stories can be divided into two major phases: a) Pre World War II phase (1935-1944) when he joined the communist party, and b) Post 1944 phase when he became the ardent admirer of Marxist consciousness. In Post 1944 phase, his stories show Famine, Black-marketeering, the helplessness of the destitute due to extreme poverty, malnutrition, disease and epidemics, economic exploitation, class differentiation, and moral breakdown. All the stories are set at the background of The Great Bengal Famine of 1943. Apart from giving a simple description of the Famine and its effect on Bengal, Manik, through his stories, voices a protest. He writes:

.... I thought, if by placing a mirror in front of my face, I could break the illusion of thinking my ugly face as nice and beautiful, the society would certainly arrange for the desired balm (Bandopadhyay 1945. Trans. mine).

This search for the 'balm' was his constant search throughout his academic life. His ideology here reflects a dominant 'Socialist realism'. In defining 'Socialist realism', Harkins writes:

Socialist realism demands that art must be true to life, yet must depict some aspect of man's struggle toward socialist progress and a better life, regardless of the historical period depicted. For Soviet critics there is no contradiction in this insistence on both fidelity to life and progressive tendency, since for them the true meaning of life is expressed in human progress toward communism, and not in what they consider isolated facts of a negative character. Works of art must breathe a spirit of hope and optimism, at least for a better future. There, heroes must be positive in action, and capable of leadership. (Harkins 364)

Maxim Gorky wrote, "Life as asserted by Socialist realism is deeds of creativeness, the aim of which is uninterrupted development of the priceless individual qualities of man" (Thomson 66). Regarding the role and responsibility of a writer, Thomson further cites Mao Zedong:

Our writers and artists must make it their duty to shift their roots and move gradually towards the workers. This will not be easy for them; on the contrary they must be determined to undergo a long and sometimes even painful tempering process. (Thomson 81)

Manik Bandopadhyay was a Marxist and his stories showed the existential crisis of the working class, the 'Proletariat' who were struggling against the class differentiation and economic exploitation. The short stories that are set in the background of Famine struck Bengal are "The Right to Suicide", "Burnt Turmeric", "Why Didn't They Snatch and Eat", "Duswasanio" (III

Treat-worthy) etc. Though, the texts have differences of their own, but the basic structure of all the texts prefigures the author's politics of representation. All the scenes are heavily loaded with the dominant Marxist ideology. Here, I shall discuss on one of the above mentioned texts where Manik Bandopadyay represents 'nudity' as a form of protest.

What happens when nudity does not represent a form of art, when it fails to bear the concept of beauty within, is shown by Bandopadhyay in his story "Duswasanio" which centers round the condition of Bengal just after The Great Bengal Famine which came as an aftermath of the World War II. The economic slump led people to such an extreme situation that even the primary needs i.e. the food, clothes and shelter, remain unfulfilled. In this story, such disastrous situations come to the forefront through the collage of different family pictures which, actually provides a complete picture of the crises, the people were in.

The story opens with a description of a village, namely Hatipur, with descriptions of its past and present. Hatipur does not refer to any single village; rather it becomes each and every village of Bengal in the post-famine period. The story moves on with presenting the female characters that are marked by the author as merely 'shadows'. These shadowy figures do not have any cloth to put on. They exist, not like an existing individual being, but like a shadowy non-being, keeping them hidden from the general eyes. What torments do they actually feel, is presented through the description of different families via different characters of the story. Each of the characters is shamefaced as they are compelled to come out bare. The shamefaced exasperation because of their compulsion for remaining nude before others is sometimes felt by the mother (Bhuti) in front of her son (Kanu), sometimes a wife (Manoda) in front of her husband (Baikuntha), and sometimes a sister in front of a brother and so on. Some of them live completely lonely waiting for the dark to come out for daily works; some even live in a cluster by drawing an end to the self-esteem. Some women do not have any thread to cover; some family has only one cloth to wear and they use it one by one; some women, however, sell themselves just to wear a new saree. As the story progresses, we find the villagers have one single hope of survival i.e. the probable help from the Government which also ultimately fails because of some villainous middle men (Abdul Aziz, Suren Ghosh and his brother Naren Ghosh). The story ends with the suicide of Rabea, the wife of Anowar.

The story does not portray any particular hero, heroine or even any influential character as are found in the traditional texts; rather it provides us a collage of diverse characters who are different in numbers and names, but similar in their sufferings and crises. The most noteworthy semblance is that they are all nudes, as if representing archetypal primitives. The presentation of nude female figures is an age-old exercise found in all forms of art, but Manik Bandopadhyay is the first author in Bengali literature who writes his story working on the presentation of nude female figures on a collective level. The famous French post-impressionistic painter Paul Cézanne in his works *The Bathers* painted the nude female figures in different bath-taking postures. The concept of beauty also finds its root in various sculptures and paintings of nude figures. In most cases the artists create the art for art's sake. But, the alternative portrayal is not completely obsolete.

Regarding the paintings concerning Bengal, the renowned art-historian Dr. Asok K Bhattacharya in his book *Indian Art and Iconology* has tried to mark a finishing line to the form of painting that bears the essences of romanticism. He points out that the very roots of these forms of romanticism became fragile from the World War-I. Some artists of the Twenties and Thirties tried to concretise the abstract feelings of pains and despairs in their art. Art is no longer taken as a form of entertainment; rather, it becomes the powerful weapon against the

subjugations. The paintings of the artists like Chittoprasad Bhattacharya, Atul Sur, Debiprasad Roy Chowdhury depict the fall of humanity at the advent of The Great Bengal Famine. They portray the nude figures as a form of protest, a biting satire against the unbearable domination. It shows the untimely death of the so called ‘civilization’.

The heart aching anguish and cry of these artists find reciprocation in the hand of Manik Bandopadhyay who presents his anti-fascist temperament in this story. The title of the story alludes to the mythical reference of Duswasana, the brother of Duryodhana and his villainous deed with Draupadi who has been made almost nude by going against Dharma. Draupadi is an emancipated woman. She protested against the Adharma, and thus the Kurukshetra occurred causing an end to it. Likewise, the suicide of Rabea at the end of the story certainly begins a form of protest, anticipating the punishment for the wicked. The exemplary nude female figures thus poignantly present a form of protest which invokes and instigates all to break themselves free from the clutch of the bourgeois hierarchy.

All of the stories of Manik Bandopadhyay that are set on the background of Famine, show different sides and effects of Famine on the Bengali society, culture and life in general. Whereas in the stories like “Who Saves and who Lives” Manik directly refers to the active participation of the main character to the Relief work led by the activists to the famine destitute, “Duswashanio” (“Ill Treat-worthy”) shows a surrender of the villagers to something they cannot change. The other stories like “Burnt Turmeric”, “Sáre Sát Ser Chál” (“A Handful of Rice”), “Why Didn’t We Snach and Eat” etc. all are focusing on diversified aspects of famine. In some cases they focus on the villages, in others on towns like Calcutta; some concentrate on an individual, others on a class in general. All the texts inclusively make a collage and that actually shows the authors position. What he wants us to show. The black marketing for example that is shown in “Duswashanio” adds misery to the villagers of Hatipur. Apart from the politico-historical reasons of the famine of 1943, that there were other reasons like the presences of characters like Abdul Aziz, Suren Ghosh and his brother Naren Ghosh (mentioned earlier) who were held responsible in making the situation worse, is repeatedly pointed by Manik Bandopadhyay in his stories. The casual references of the relief work in some texts, the participation of characters in it, the loopholes and drawbacks traced in the work etc. all underscore the author’s political and ideological standpoint. The politics of representing famine and its effects successfully move the readers to consider The Great Bengal in a way that Manik Bandopadhyay wanted us to see.

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