

THE GYPSY WOMAN

Translation of

“Bedeni” by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay

Translated by

Soumya Mohan Ghosh

Research scholar

Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad

soumya.rkmv@gmail.com

Abstract

The story, “The Gypsy Woman”, is an exploration of the psychology of women and portrays the multifarious primordial facets of women’s mind— their hopes, aspirations, cravings, love, desire, lust— without being judgmental. The protagonist of the story, Radhika, is a human being of flesh and blood, full of lust and passion, driven by basic instinct, whose passionate outburst disregards the traditional system of the domestic household. The present translation of “Bedeni” by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, one of the foremost short story writers of Bengali literature, is an attempt to faithfully render the complexity of the original text and the nuances of the dialects spoken by the nomadic communities. A judicious blending of metaphrase, or word for word translation, and paraphrase, or sense for sense translation, is followed throughout to present the pleasure of the source language text.

Shambhu magician used to come in this fare every year. He had full claim on this particular place like the permanent settlement in the register of Ma Kali’s¹ estate. People used to call it magic; but Shambhu said, circus- ‘charkach’. It was written on a signboard of painted cloth at the top of the entrance of the small tent ‘Bhojbaji- Circus’. There was a picture of a tiger beside a man, in the other side a man having a blood smeared sword in one hand, a truncated head in the other. Entry fee was only two paisa. Circus in this case meant show of ‘Golokdham’². Shambhu used to put up a thick lens on the screen setting up a canvas inside the tent, villagers saw much to their amazement ‘War of the British people’, ‘Badsah’³ of Delhi’, ‘The mountains of Kabul’, ‘Tomb of the Tajbibi’⁴. Then Shambhu showed tricks with an iron ring, in the end throwing the curtain showed an engaged Cheeta! Shambhu’s wife Radhika Bedeni⁵ mounted on the tiger bringing it outside, gave it food standing in front of the tiger and pulling its two front paws above her neck, later put her huge bun inside the tiger’s mouth, it seemed that she had put her head inside the tiger’s mouth. Simple villagers began to clap watching motionless in amazement. The show then ended, spectators came outside. Shambhu also used to come outside

with the last spectator and beat the war-drum at the entrance of the tent— dum dum dum; his wife Radhika Bedeni used to ring a pair of huge cymbal— jhon-jhon-jhon.

Shambhu shouted during intervals— tiger! That big ti-ger!

Bedeni asked in wonder, what does the big tiger do?

—Pakshiraj⁶

becomes horse, likes human kiss, takes living human's head in its mouth, but doesn't eat. After saying these he poked the tiger with a sharp iron rod, it roared repeatedly at that instant. The crowd in front of the entrance advanced towards the tent with a frightful curious heart.

Standing beside the entrance the gypsy woman let them enter taking two paisa per head. In spite of that the gypsy woman had her own shows. She had a goat, two monkeys and some snakes. She went out in the village in the morning taking her small bag-basket, earned money showing feats and singing in domestic households.

This time Shambhu became furious coming in Ma Kali's fare. One more magician's tent came from somewhere and settled there. Though his fixed place was lying vacated, but this tent was quite big and had some pyrotechniques. There were two horses outside, a cage above a bullock cart, there must be tiger in it.

After putting three bullock carts down Shambhu cast a cruel glance at the new tent with grievous hatred, then murmured in a grudging low voice, bastard.

His face became terrible. Shambhu had a cruel ruthless impression mixed with his entire appearance. He had a merciless cruelty-implying rough brownish look— his body was that dark brownish coloured; he was tall, having an ugly harshness all over his body, a furrow just below the forehead, small rounded eyes like a snake, above all he was a dentate, two front teeth always remained outside in a rude, cruel manner. He became more dreadful in jealousy and fury.

Radhika was also sparkling in envy and spite just like a knife in contact with light, she said, wait, I'll put baby cobra in tiger's cage.

Shambhu became more roused in contact with Radhika's excitement. He advanced towards the new tent in furious long stride and entering the tent asked — who's here, who's the owner here?

—What do you want? Pushing the curtain of another room came out a young man, more than six feet tall, every part of his body was strong and firm, in spite of that eyes can be soothed seeing him; tall light figure; — his light yet strong firm body had a grace, just like a powerful horse sparkling in fascinating lustre. His complexion was dark, pointed sharp long nose, ordinary eyes, over the two thin lips a pair of moustache twisted at the end as a pointed needle like one painted with brush, long winding hair, a small golden ring hanging in a thread on his neck— he stood in front of Shambhu. Both were looking at each other.

—What do you want? — the new magician asked again, the layer of air under Shambhu's nose diffused with fragrance of wine as he spoke.

Shambhu suddenly seized his left hand by his right hand and said — it's my place. I've been occupying this place for five years.

The young lad also responded by holding Shambhu's left hand by his right hand, laughed like a drunkard, replied— ok, let it be, first let's drink—

The fast music of jaltarnga⁷ sounded like cardinal notes of a musical air behind Shambhu, he sneered, how many bottles do you have nagar⁸ to cause me to drink?

The young lad focusing behind Shambhu from his face and seeing Radhika became dumbfounded in wonder and bewilderment. The tall gypsy woman's whole body, slim as a

snake, was filled with intoxication; in her thick curly black hair, in the thread like sinthi⁹ in between the hair, intoxicating glance in her partially closed stretched eyes beside slightly curved nose, in her pointed chin— intoxication pervading her entire body. She might have bathed in the ocean of intoxication. It was oozing out of her whole body. The gypsy woman's black beauty made the eyes addicted just like the scent of mohua¹⁰ filled the air with enchantment. Not only of Radhika, it was the characteristics of the beauty of all the gypsy women. This feature has created a symbolic resemblance of Radhika's beauty; however, there was a hint of razor like sharpness amidst infatuating intoxication, a sharp ferocious rough indication was everywhere, even an enchanted man had to startle, a consciousness of fear aroused in the mind, heart would get torn to pieces if held against her bosom.

Radhika's giggling didn't stop, she asked again seeing the new magician tongue-tied in a daze, nagar has become so dumbfounded, eh?

The magician now told smiling— I'm a son of a gypsy, eh. Crisis of wine in a gypsy house! Come.

It is true, this race never bought wine. They brewed secretly, sometimes they were caught and put behind the bars; but they never abandon their habit. Their crime had become quite venial even to the jurisdiction.

Shambhu's heart became large expanding in air. The inviter was also of his own race, otherwise— he turned back and looking at Radhika in a stern glance, said— why do you come here?

This time also Radhika giggled, go to hell! Won't I drink?

They took up abode in drinking in a small cell inside the tent. Small broken bones of fowl and heaps of parched rice lying everywhere; still there were some fowl in a leaf and some parched rice, onion, chili and salt in another, two empty bottles were rolling, one half finished. A disheveled gypsy woman lying unconscious in intoxication nearby, her hair dry with dust, two hands were rolling on the ground lifted up above her head in an upturned manner, still the bubble of wine remaining in her mouth like effervescence. The girl was healthy and calm in appearance.

Seeing her Radhika began to sneer, said, your bedeni? She's lying like a broken banana tree, eh!

The new magician smiled, then he advanced towards a place in a loosened step and brought out two bottles laying aside the mud.

The only conversation was taking place between the new magician and Radhika while they were drinking.

Shambhu was seating gravely even in drunkenness. Radhika enquired drinking the first pot— what's your name magician?

The new magician cutting some part of a chili in his teeth answered, you'll reproach me if you hear my name Bedeni.

—Why?

—Name is Kishto Bede.

—So why should I reproach?

—Because your name is Radhika Bedeni, that's why I'm saying.

Radhika started roaring in laughter, very next moment she took something out swiftly from inside her dress and throwing it on the new magician's body said, let's see how you can subdue kaliya¹¹, Kishto!

Shambhu became anxious; but Kishto Bede put it down hitting with his swift hand. A baby black cobra! The wounded serpent was about to bite raising its hood in hiss-hiss roaring

sound at once; Shambhu shouted— unshaved— that means it was yet to be extracted the poison-fangs. However, by the time Kishto started laughing holding it tightly by his left hand. He took out a small knife from the fold of his loin-cloth tied in his waist while laughing and opening it using his teeth he threw the serpent back to Radhika after extracting both its poison-fangs and poison-sack. Radhika also caught the serpent by her left hand; but she got puffed up in anger like the serpent itself a while ago, bellowed, why did you shave my serpent?

Kishto retorted, as you told to subdue. Now he began roaring in laughter.

Radhika got up from her place in no time and went outside the tent.

Before the dusk.

Show is going to start in the new tent today, excitement is everywhere. Music started playing on a dais set up outside the tent; a petromax light was put up to illumine. Radhika came outside their small tent. Their tent was not yet set up. Radhika's eyes were flaring ferociously.

Shambhu was performing his namaz under a tree nearby, Kishto was also performing his namaz beside a tree some distance away. These gypsies were a strange race. They claimed that they were bede if asked about their race. But they follow Islam as religion. However, they observed Hindu religious rites, they worshipped Manasa¹², observed vow of Mangal-Chandi-Sasthi¹³, they prostrated before Kali-Durga¹⁴ on the ground, gave names like Shambhu Shib Krishna Hari¹⁵, Kali Durga Radha Laxmi¹⁶. They have learned Hindu-Purana¹⁷ by heart. There was another community like them who used to sing Hindu-Purana loudly, they called themselves Potua¹⁸, an extensive painter's race. Marital exchanges did not fully take place within the Islamic community, it was confined within this peculiar community. Marriages took place in Islamic manner in the presence of a mullah, they didn't burn bodies after their death, they used to bury. The magicians caught snakes as their profession, sang making snakes' dance, showed entertaining feats with monkeys, goats. Some of the courageous among them showed feats with tigers like that, but nobody from their community showed feats in a grandiose way like this new tent. Tears were bursting out of Radhika's eyes. The image of their young tiger was always occurring in her mind's eye. Already she had a glance at the tiger from the opening of the timber, strong firm swiftness indicating appendages, bright lustrous hair; face always having a kind of smiling posture. Whereas their tiger was decrepit and slackened, very hoarse, Radhika's body was stricken with a feeling of loathing seeing its rough hair.

How many times she had told Shambhu to buy a new tiger, but she couldn't understand the reason behind Shambhu's affection for it.

She alleged Shambhu with intense hatred and disgust after he came back performing his namaz, nobody will come to see your old tiger's show.

Angry Shambhu retorted, you know everything!

Radhika shrinking her nose replied, no, I don't know anything! You know everything!

Shambhu remained silent, but Radhika didn't stop, remaining silent for a while she spoke again— you gonner, who enjoys dancing of the dead, eh! He's telling me you know everything!

Shambhu became frantic in no time, he drew his two ferocious lines of teeth in a manner like the tiger itself and replied— I see you've so much affection for that young lad.

Radhika roared like a serpent— what did you say you unfaithful?

Shambhu didn't utter a single word anymore, he left like a tiger afraid of iron goad.

Tears rolled down Radhika's eyes in anger and indignation. Unfaithful! How could he accuse her like that? Has he forgotten everything? He didn't even remember his age. Forty years. You are an old man! What are you if you are not old in compare to Radhika's age? Radhika only

stepped into her twenty second year. What obligation did she have that she had accepted Shambhu? Radhika quickly went inside the tent.

It was true. It was five years ago. Radhika was seventeen then. She was married to Shibapada Bede three years before. Shibapada was three years older than Radhika. Radhika felt sad thinking about him even now. He was calm in nature, having soft facial look, big eyes. That look of his eyes was like enchanting. He didn't have any sort of attraction towards snakes, monkeys, goats etc. He used to prepare handiworks of cane and weave basket, polish chairs, make small delicate high-rimmed flower-trays, and his earning was more than anybody in the village. The couple used to go out together; he used to carry his cane handiworks on his shoulders, Radhika took her snake-basket, monkey, goat. Shibapada had one more instrument with him, a bamboo flute was thrust into his waist. When Radhika sang making the snakes dance, Shibapada played flute in concordance with Radhika's tune.

In spite of that Shibapada had one more virtue. He was invited even in the gathering of the aged people. He was very calm and composed, he also learned a little in his own endeavour, that is why even the elderly people took his counsel. How much he was respected! And this Shibapada remained as a slave to Radhika. All the money was kept by Radhika. Radhika liked to wear loom woven sarees¹⁹ of black texture with closed segments of white thread, Shibapada gave her those sarees all through the year.

Then Shambhu came back out of nowhere after went out missing for ten years, along with that tiger, a torn tent, and a woman past her youth. Everybody was amazed seeing the tiger and the tent. The day when Radhika saw Shambhu for the first time, she could remember that day even today. She became astonished seeing that rough insolent yellowish brown coloured stern strong bodied man.

Shambhu was also looking at her in captivating wonder, he talked to her at first calling her— hey Bedeni, let me see how's your snake!

Who knows what happened to Radhika, she replied giggling— I see you've so much fancy? Will you pay?

She could remember easily, Shambhu replied, no, I won't; I'll show you tiger if you show me snake.

Tiger! Radhika became dumbfounded in amazement! Who's this man? Strange in appearance and speaks strange words as well; claims— he'll show tiger. She asked looking at his face with a sharp eye, really?

—Fine, see, first see my tiger then! He indeed showed her a tiger taking her inside the tent. Radhika asked in wonder— what do you do with this tiger?

—I fight, show feats.

—What!

—Yeah, wanna see? — saying this he opened the cage and bringing the tiger out stood face to face holding its two paws in his two hands. She could remember very well that she was struck dumbfounded. Shambhu stood in front of Radhika putting the tiger inside the cage, said, now you show me snake.

Radhika didn't answer, said, has it come under your control?

Shambhu embracing her tightly while laughing told her, yes, I'm specialist in taming tigress.

Who knows what happened to her, she didn't even protest to the slightest extent.

A few days later she came to Shambhu's tent taking all of Shibapada's savings. Tears trickled down from Shibapada's eyes, but she was neither compassionate nor ashamed, her heart

was burning with hatred and disgust. Her father-mother, all the villagers denounced her, but Radhika didn't pay any heed to it.

Shambhu's tent and other instruments were bought from the money fetched by Radhika. That money had exhausted now, life moved on amidst drudgery; whatever Shambhu earned he spent in drugs and liquor. But Radhika didn't regret even for a single day. Now this unfaithful has told this? She sat taking a bottle of wine.

On the other side, music started playing again in the new tent. Second round of the show was going to start. Radhika became ferocious drinking wine, she was irritated by the sound of that music. How will it be if she set their tent on fire in the midnight?

Suddenly she heard a loud angry voice of Shambhu outside their tent and being excited in intoxication she came outside. She saw Kishto standing in front of Shambhu. He was wearing glittering robe, reddened eyes, he was speaking, what's wrong in it? You were seating idly, our show is running! So what's wrong in inviting you to my show?

Shambhu shouted top of his voice— great player will show us feats eh! You've come to humiliate us!

Kishto started saying something, but before that excited Radhika picked up a piece of brick and threw it firmly aiming at him. A sure aim, however Kishto was strange, he caught it like a ball, then left catching it repeatedly. Radhika was stunned in amazement for a couple of minutes, freed from illusion she picked up one more piece of brick in her enhanced excitement; Shambhu refrained her, he took her inside the tent holding her hand affectionately. Radhika began to sob embracing his neck in impassioned outburst.

Shambhu consoled her— I'll buy a new tiger after this fare.

Kishto's voice came from the other tent, throw your tent-shell away.

Radhika saw from an opening of the tent, he was opening a side of the tent, so that they are forced to see even without entering. She roared in anger, I'll set the tent ablaze.

Shambhu was contemplating seriously. Kishto was showing his acrobatic feats standing on a running horse. Radhika heaving a sigh said, devise some new shows, otherwise our reputation will go down, no one will see our show.

Shambhu replied clinching his teeth, I'll get that bastard arrested. I'll inform police about the wine.

On the other, side parrot fired a canon ball, that girl danced standing above a wire holding an umbrella above her head, Kishto fought with the tiger, eh— it implanted a paw on him!

Radhika began to cry incessantly thinking about the miserable condition of their show. She was also inflating in rage at the same time. Tents get burn easily if they catch fire! How will it be if it were set ablaze pouring kerosene?

The next day Radhika was late in rising up from her bed; she saw waking up, Shambhu was not there; probably he'd have gone to the village in search of a couple of workers. She was seized with fear coming outside. Police were standing in front of Kishto's tent. An inspector was seating in front of the entrance. What happened! She put a salute going straightaway in front of the inspector. Observing her from head to toe he said— call everybody, we'll see the tent.

The gypsy woman again putting a salute asked, what offence have we committed, sir?

—We'll search for wine! Summon all the men. Call them from here.

Radhika realized that the inspector took her to be the inhabitant of this tent; but she didn't dispel his mistake. She said— my infant son is inside sir—

—Ok, you can take your son. And call the men.

Radhika laid aside the ground from that previously seen place swiftly entering the tent and saw three bottles were still there. She took a cloth and covered the bottles folding the cloth and held it against her breast in such a tactful way that it looked like nothing but a baby covered with warm clothes with utmost care in a winter day. Kishto was profoundly sleeping inside the tent, Radhika pushing him with her leg said— police has come, seating at the entrance, get up and go.

She went outside as if keeping her baby in her breast like a breast-feeding mother in a controlled stride without trembling! Kishto stood in front of the inspector following her.

Inspector enquired— is it your tent?

Kishto replied putting a salute— yes sir.

—We'll see whether you've any alcohol.

The gypsy woman had already disappeared into the crowd like water vapour inside mass of water.

Shambhu was seating motionless, Radhika was sobbing incessantly lying with her face on the ground. Shambhu had beaten her mercilessly. Radhika fell drooping on his body after he came back relating the incident of deceiving the police in amusing laughter, she said, I've deceived the inspector.

Shambhu was staring at her with wrathful stern look. Radhika did not pay a slightest heed to that, she asked amusingly— will you drink, drink my boy?

Shambhu had beaten her mercilessly pulling her hair suddenly and said— you've spoilt everything, I've informed the police to put him in jail, and you did this!

Radhika became very violent at first, but listening fully to Shambhu she remembered last night's discussion, really he had told about it! She didn't resist further, she was sobbing lying with her face on the ground enduring all his torments.

Today show was going to start in this tent from afternoon.

Shambhu put on his torn robe, a black tube like thin pantaloon, and a short length black coat. Radhika was wearing an old colourful skirt and a very old full bodice. She used to hung her hair making a braid, but she didn't even tie her hair today, she was intent on dying in shame in disregard and perturbation to their all kinds of distress and impoverished state. In their tent that cat-like thick chinned, decrepit like corpulent girl put on tight vest-like slacks, blouse, on top of that a short drawer made of green satin embroidered with thread of gold and a corset-like bodice. Even that ugly girl was looking beautiful. In the music of their war-drum a lingering resonance of a faint sound of metal or brass utensils jingled at the end. But here was a several years old war-drum, chi²⁰!

However, Shambhu tried strenuously, beat the war-drum very hard.

Shambhu shouted stopping his music, tha-t bi-g ti-ger.

Radhika asked somehow cleansing her choked voice— what does the big tiger do?

Shambhu replied in ardent enthusiasm— Pakshiraj becomes horse, fights with humans, takes living human's head in its mouth, but doesn't eat.

He then poked the tiger jumping from there and going inside the tent, the emaciated aged wild beast roared in pain.

The strong beast's youthful ferocious angry cry filled the air from inside the other tent instantly. Radhika was standing over the dais, she was feeling dizziness, she saw with cruel envious look that Kishto was laughing in the dais of the other tent. Seeing Radhika he shouted— once more.

Their tiger, being poked for the second time, roared with a violent cry from the inside of the tent. Radhika's eyes were filled with anger. Crowd rushed to Kishto's tent like water current.

A few people entered Shambhu's tent for watching amusement in cheap. After finishing the show, Shambhu sat with his horrible ferocious face. Radhika went into the fare hurriedly and returned sometime later taking a tin filled with something.

Shambhu asked in wonder in spite of disgust— what's that?

—Kerosene. I'll set their tent on fire. Didn't get full, there's two seers less. — Her eyes were flaring.

Shambhu's eyes were also flaring up in a ferocious glow. He said— bring wine.

Radhika spoke while drinking— when it'll burn in flames!

She started giggling. She came outside in the dark, show was still going on in that tent. She could see from the opening above the tent, Kishto was showing feats swinging from a wooden stick hanged from a string. Uh:, he was swinging and catching one from the another! Crowds were clapping.

Shambhu said pulling her affectionately towards him— not now, in that, that late night.

They started drinking again.

The fare was calm and silent; everything was engulfed in darkness; the gypsy woman got up from her bed, she couldn't sleep for a single moment.

She was feeling a kind of restlessness in her heart, a kind of turbulent passion was afflicting her mind all the time. She came outside the tent. It was swollen with darkness. Everything was calm and quiet. She came back after a stroll, nowhere nobody was awake. She entered the tent, lighted a match, that kerosene tin was there. She saw while going to call Shambhu that he was sleeping profoundly crouching like a dog in cold. Her mind retarded in anger and hatred towards Shambhu. He has forgotten the insult, felt asleep? She didn't call Shambhu, went alone taking the tin and putting the match-box in her comb.

It should be given from the back side. People would notice the flame when that side gets completely burnt. She was walking fast like a spiteful ferocious serpent. On reaching the back side she was panting heavily putting the tin down.

She took some rest sitting there silently for a while. She pulled the curtain cautiously to check the inside of the tent for once putting her head crawling. It was completely dark. She crawled like a reptile to enter the tent and lighted a match bringing out the match-box from her comb.

Kishto was lying in deep sleep like a giant near her. The match in her hand was burning, what courage in Kishto's stern handsome face! Uh:,how large was his chest, how chubby his muscles were. There were marks of horse's hoof all over his body— Kishto used to dance on the running horses. There was that recent scar on his shoulder—the mark of that strong unruly tiger's nail. The match got extinguished.

Radhika's heart began to agitate violently just like the day when she saw Shambhu for the first time. No, today's excitement was far more intense. What unsheathed Bedeni did at that moment was far from imaginable. She rushed to Kishto's strong chest in an impassioned outburst.

Kishto roused from his sleep, but didn't startle, he asked holding her delicately slim female body in tight embrace, who's that? Radhi—

Radhika pressing his lips tightly replied— yes, keep quiet.

Kishto said kissing her face repeatedly— wait I'll bring wine.

—No. Come, get up, let's flee from here.

Radhika was panting in darkness.
Kishto asked— where?
—The-re, in a distant land.
—Distant land? This tent and all—?
—Let it be. Shambhu will take it. You'll take his Radhika won't you pay him?
She started giggling in a low voice.
Impassioned intoxicating woman, on top of that full of unruly youth, Kishto didn't
hesitate, said— come.
Radhika stopped while started walking, said— wait.
She poured the kerosene tin over Shambhu's tent and throwing it on the grassy field
while walking said— let's go.
She set wet grasses on fire lighting a match after the tin got over. She said breaking into
laughter, let that old man burn alive.

GLOSSARY

1. Ma Kali — manifestation of Goddess Durga in Hindu Mythology.
2. Golokdham — a kind of indoor game.
3. Badsah — emperor.
4. Tajbibi — wife of Shah Jahan, emperor of Delhi.
5. Bedeni — gypsy woman; wife of a Bede, a male gypsy.
6. Pakshiraj — winged horse, an appellation of Garuda in Hindu mythology.
7. Jaltaranga — a musical instrument.
8. Nagar — gallant, witty.
9. Sinthi — parting of hair on both sides by combing.
10. Mohua — a kind of butter-tree.
11. Kaliya — a terrible snake; Lord Krishna subdued a Kaliya, monstrous snake, in Hindu Mythology.
12. Manasa — Snake-Goddess in Hindu Mythology.
13. Mangal-Chandi-Sasthi —appellation of Goddess Durga in Hindu Mythology.
14. Kali-Durga — Hindu Goddesses.
15. Shambhu Shib Krishna Hari — traditional Hindu names for men based on the names of Hindu Gods.
16. Kali Durga Radha Laxmi — traditional Hindu names for women based on the names of Hindu Gods.
17. Hindu-Purana — Hindu mythical text.
18. Potua — painter, designer.
19. Sarees- traditional Indian cloth for women; worn over petticoat and blouse.
20. Chi- an expression of shame and disgust.

Reference:

Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar. "Bedeni". *Bichitrorupini*. Kolkata: Sahityam, 1974. 120-137. Print.