

WOMEN AS THE “FENCE” AND THE “FORCE”: A DETAILED STUDY OF REBATI

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Abstract

Present paper is a critical analysis of female subjugation in the name of customs. The writer has depicted the social taboo against women education in the rural society of Odisha. Rebati is the protagonist of the story who is interested in education and suffers in the whole story. There is no one to morally support her. She was the product of a society based on communal rural tradition where values regarding women's role were historically embedded in socio cultural structures of the society. Through this story Fakir Mohan Senapati has tried to empower Odiya society and Odiya womanhood.

Keywords: Rebati, Society, Culture, Education, Family, Evils, Reforms etc.

The position and practice of Odia Literature among the Indian literatures comprises indisputably one of the predominant voices. A particularly conscious dealing with the social issues of Odisha has been a visible factor of Odia literature. Be it the class struggle and agrarian representation of Odisha landscape in *Six Acres and a Third*, or the comprehensive treatise on the tribal life of Kondhs, Parajasetc as in *Paraja*, or dealing with the core issues related to women emancipation as in the short story ‘*Rebati*’, consciousness of the complexities of the above issues, like many others, have been not only a hall mark of the rich tradition of Odia literature but also the markers of its modernity. ‘*Rebati*’ as a remarkable short story by the eminent novelist Fakir Mohan Senapati is a testimony to support the intellectual forwardness of his time.

The story has been presented by the writer in a typical way. Rebati is the only daughter of Shyamabandhu who is interested in education. Shyamabandhu is the revenue collector of Patapura village. Rebati was not only interested in education but also without any formal education she had acquired knowledge to learn Odiya books and had an admirable determination to learn by heart the holy Bhagavata with the help of her father. The educational system then was not good. There was an upper primary school in that village and Basudev was the only teacher in that school. As one of the leaders of the village Shyamabandhu calls Basudev to his house on festivals and other occasions of the village. By knowing the enthusiasm of Rebati he teaches Rebati and also encourages Shyamabandhu to give opportunity to Rebati to learn more. After that Rebati gets opportunity to learn. But soon befalls misfortune on Shyamabandhu's family. All the dreams of Rebati get spoilt after the death of her father and mother. The landlord take away all their properties. There remains no one to earn in the family. Her grandmother sells all the accessories of the house to arrange for food for them. Except Basudev there is no one to help them. The ruthless stride of time continues its terror as suddenly Basudev also dies of cholera. Ultimately death of Basudev brakes her, she falls ill and dies. The family of Shyamabandhu is completely wiped out.

In '*Rebati*', Fakir Mohan Senapati deals with the social taboo against women education in the rural society of Odisha. The eponymous text has a Rebati that faces the severest criticisms of her grandmother when she decides to get education. The grandmother, a symbol of old world order and orthodoxy, does not favour the decision to educate Rebati. She becomes the principal impediment on the way of Rebati. Further, with her superstitions about women education, she creates a "fence" around Rebati. In truth, she herself embodies the reckless "fence" to confine Rebati from the emancipating embraces of modernity knocking at the door through education. On the other hand, Rebati as the lone "force" against the social taboo undergoes several trials and tribulations. Rebati withstands humiliation and accusations in her enthusiasm to study.

It is interesting to note that the exploiter and the exploited being women does not dilute the severity of women subjugation in this story. On the contrary, it sensitizes in a comprehensive way the real problems of feminism. Vysakabi Fakir Mohan Senapati is seen here as a social commentator, reformist and an artist of the highest order.

The main theme of the story '*Rebati*' apparently revolves around Rebati's education and her dream. The way in which she was learning was absolutely different because it was informal education or on the other hand it was home tuition only. In a pure sense '*Rebati*' is all about female education and about superstitions in the then Odia society. Fakir Mohan Senapati wanted to highlight the importance of Women and to open the eyes of those people who were thinking that women are just like puppets or they are born to serve male. Through this story Fakir Mohan tried his best to show something different about that time when women had no identity in society. Consequently in the story few peoples are supporting the protagonist Rebati to get education and on the other hand her grandmother has been changed in to her enemy. She has raised the age old question: What does it mean for a woman to be educated? Then towards the end of the story after experiencing the agony of death of her son, daughter-in-law and Basudev, she considers Rebati's education as responsible for all the misfortunes. It is very clear that Rebati's education is not responsible for this. But the argument is that blind belief and superstitious attitude of a woman towards an innocent girl and towards the female education is the central point. In the whole story the author has not supported the character Rebati but he has proved that women have energy to fight against the anti-human society and cultural norms.

Rebati was the product of a society based on communal rural tradition where values regarding women's role were historically embedded in socio cultural structures of the society. Rebati is suffering in the whole story, she has lost her father and mother but the psychological torture of her grandmother affecting her more. There is no one to morally support her. She has lost everything, her dream has spoiled and her grandmother's taunts are venomous. Here one can understand the problem of a woman and the internal pain of a woman. Rebati became victim of such Psychological torture and abuses because she inherited inequalities and discrimination, being born as a girl in a traditional and conservative Oriya society. The tragic consequences of Rebati's life are symbolic of a highly oppressive, conservative social order.

Fakir Mohan Senapati as a social reformist, knowing the contemporary social philosophy very well, he did not dare to endow Rebati with an identity of her own. After this vast changes came in Odia educational system but still there are restrictions in conservative sections. Time has changed but for some groups like tribal people nothing has changed. They are still living in a world where there is no education and modern amenities. Like the grandmother of Rebati still in tribal area there are so many grandmothers who do not permit their granddaughters to get education. Women education is still very restricted and is not appreciated by the conservative section. More than that, pre-marital love was almost forbidden. It is astounding for Fakir Mohan to have empathized with such issues in those times of narrow living standards and superstitious attitude in village folk.

'Rebati' is not only a story but also it is an image in the history of literature through which Fakir Mohan Senapati has showed the society and its condition where an innocent girl is suffering in the name of tradition and custom. It was the society of 19th century but still there was a hope in the pen of Fakir Mohan Senapati, for which he created the character like Rebati and it has been considered by the readers that it is a story which not only shows the rays of hope to adopt girls but also it provides an energy for those fathers who still hesitate to send their girl child to schools.

In this story Fakir Mohan Senapati has showed the traditional society where people were thinking that girls are only for house hold work and they cannot acquire education because if they will acquire education then their family will be destroyed and all the members of their family will die. And all these things are happening in the story Rebati. When she is excited to learn by listening her father's decision and teacher Basu's dedication at that moment her grandmother is against this decision and grandmother's reaction was like this: "What good will it do? How does book-learning help a girl? It's enough if you learnt cooking, baking, churning butter and painting walls with rice-paste." (Rebati)

She wants to join school for study but her grandmother denies her and strictly says to her father that if she will learn then there will be problem in their home and without any cause their family will be destroyed. Unfortunately all the sayings and hope of her grandmother becomes true as all the members of her family die because of cholera. It is not the fault of Rebati but it was the blind belief of her grandmother who thinks that all these things are happening because Reba is learning. However, the matter is different because everyone is dying out of cholera. Here it can be considered that through this blind belief Fakir Mohan Senapati has tried to show the rights of a woman and also the dream of a woman. The story is presenting the scenario of 1871 in Odisha where for the first time a school was established for girls to get education. Rebati is the artistic creation of Fakir Mohan Senapati but through this story he has showed the reality of society, where there was no educational facility for girls and also girls were despised by their parents. It is a story but Senapati has tried to show the bitter truth of society through this story.

Because in profession he was a teacher and he was strictly fighting for the freedom of women. In his short stories and novels he has showed the importance of women and talked about the rights of women.

Fakir Mohan Senapati has raised question of education and identity of women through the character Rebati. And through this story he has tried to experiment on all those things which was totally different from modern world. This story talks about the situation of 19th century but still these things are happening in 21st century. But here the question is on identity of individual human being which shows the status of empowerment and conditional situation of women where she acts as a puppet. In the late 19th century Odisha, women's identity was definitely a problematic issue because it shows not only socio cultural issues but also economical condition also. The story also talks about the identity of Odiya people and regional entity. Women were treated differently at that moment as they were victim. If one will talk about the situation of 19th century then it is not only a problem in Odia culture but also it was large problem in the whole Indian culture. So on this basis the contemporaries of Fakir Mohan Senapati like Radhanath Roy whose famous 'Kavyas' such as 'KedarGauri' and 'Chandra Bhaga' end with death of female characters.

Fakir Mohan's most acclaimed story 'Rebati' acts as an important adhesive force in tracing the continuity of women literary tradition in Odisha. Through this story Senapati has tried to show the private education and how women were getting formal education. Here the main point is that at that moment those girls were getting formal education whose family was well established or the girl happens to be the daughter of a zamindar. Through this story Fakir Mohan Senapati has tried to show various conditions of women in traditional society. For example when the teacher of Rebati is coming to their home to teach her at that moment there is so many questions arise in the mind of Rebatis's grandmother. According to the situation in the story when Rebati is at the marriageable age at that moment her father thinks that he will accept the teacher as his son-in-law but the grandmother is not ready to accept him as their son in law because he has no caste identity and his standard of living. Here in this scene Fakir Mohan has tried to reflect one important thing that is choice and wish of Rebati in an indirect way. Because throughout the study of whole story the reader can understand the wish of Rebati because she is secretly loving the teacher and as a human being the teacher is very good. But here the grandmother is not accepting him. And when all the major characters are dying at that moment she is scolding Rebati that everyone in the house dying because of her education. And women are born to cook and not for education. And her Scolding is something like this:

Lo nea lo Reba lo pani
Chulikuja (Rebati)

Here this means you Reba go to hell, everyone is dying because of you and you are responsible for everything. At last when Rebati is feeling alone she is not coming out because in every moment her grandmother is scolding her that she is a witch. It is the time of 19th century but Fakir Mohan Senapati has reflected the image of woman through the character Rebati that is very much contemporary. At last Rebati dies in Fever because there is no one to help and her only grandmother is scolding her at last moment. Here Senapati has presented all the concepts related to life of woman. How girl child became a demon in the eyes of her grandmother and it is very clear that she is not responsible for all the matters but according to time and situation, she became the victim.

Thus it can be said that the protagonist Rebati is symbol of women education and subjugation. In some sense characters like the grandmother and Mangaraj are essential podium from which the stature and substance of a character like Rebati could be visible. So a juxtaposition of these two characters helps read the text better. As a responsible human being, knowing all the social obstacles of society Senapati presented 'Rebati' in such a way that which will provide a new way to all the girls like Rebati. Time has been changed still there is a woman suffering for education and free life. After 19th century educational status has been changed and there is so many opportunities on educational sector but still there are tribal girls who are enthusiast to get education. Through this story Senapati has tried to empower Odiya society and Odiya womanhood. It was his greatness and his understanding through which he has explained a character that is very silent, courageous and her seclusion appearing in desolation and poverty. But still she is strong and acts as victim for the modern world. It is about the reality of society and the culture where a woman is suffering till the end of her life.

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