

## UNDERCURRENTS OF BOLD SOCIAL CRITICISM AND PROTEST IN *SELECT STORIES BY JYOTIRMOYEE DEVI*

*Rama Chowdhury, Assistant Professor in English, Bir Bikram Memorial College, Agartala*

### **Abstract:**

*This paper is going to confer on the hefty undercurrent of social criticism from gender-specific viewpoint manifest in three thematically and structurally connected short stories of eminent Bengali writer Jyotirmoyee Devi (1894-1988). Jyotirmoyee Devi grew up in Jaypur, Rajasthan and composed most of her literary works while living in Patna, Bihar and later in Kolkata. The three stories Annakali, Pinjrapole and Martyer Apsara, published separately in the beginning-the first two between 1937-1948 and the last one after 1980, have been anthologised in a single book under the title Martyer Apsara (1987). These stories together can be treated as an exquisite documentation of the saga of deprivation, oppression, and anguish of a clan whose existence, though weaved into the mainstream of our social life, have been that of an isolation and agony. The stories expand spaces to present the deplorable conditions of women, particularly of Bengali Hindu widows thrust to live a life of an ascetic under rigid customs of Hindu widowhood while being deprived of the basic human needs. Along with the precarious position of widows in joint Brahmin families, the 2nd story in the anthology is a bold and powerful commentary on the plights of widow clan residing in Kashi. The value of such literary documentation of social evils in the three stories lies both in their true depiction of the then societal conditions as well as in their relevance in today's world where gender discrimination and various forms of atrocities against women are rampant. This paper is an attempt to explore the aforesaid stories as valuable social document engraving courageous criticism against the tormenting, gender-biased social customs and practices.*

**Key words:** *widow clan, gender-bias, discrimination, feminist undercurrent, social criticism, social document.*

Jyotirmoyee Devi (1894-1988), one of the eminent Bengali women writers of the previous century, stands out conspicuously for her considerably large bulk of literary works inspired both by creative urge and reformative zeal. Her literary works include novels like -*Chayapath, Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*; short story collections like- *Rajjotak, Arraballir Arale, Sonarupa Noy, and Martyer Apsara*; travelogue- *Somay o Sukriti*; collection of essays- *Nari Katha, Chirantan Nari Jignasha: Sekaliner Smriti* and autobiographical sketch -*Smriti-Bismritir Taranga*, besides other genres of nonfiction. She also wrote a good number of poems. The scattered works, originally published in various newspapers, magazines etc. were compiled and published mainly under the sincere initiatives from her children and relatives. The series *Jyotirmoyee Devir Rachana Samkalan 1, 2, and 3* from Dey's Publishing House anthologize most of her works.

It is interesting to know that Jyotirmoyee Devi was born in the Princely State of Jaipur where her grandfather and father served in the royal court as ministers. At the age of about 10 she was married to a lawyer, Kiran Chandra Sen and went to live with him in Patna. She lost her husband in 1918 when she was barely 25. With six small children she returned to her parents' house. From 1959 to until her death in 1988 she resided in the Shyambazar area in Kolkata. However, she kept on travelling different states of India as it was her passion to watch and observe people and places. Besides a brooding onlooker on the flux of happening around her, Jyotirmoyee Devi was an avid reader. While observing the long-established rites

and rituals of a Hindu widow she remains stoic to strike a chord of disagreement with the unfair imposition of such religious and social restrictions on the weaker sections, particularly on women. While courageously fighting with the misfortunes of her individual life, she became aware of the conventional social strictures that were distressful for women in general. Soon writing became the obvious space for communicating her understanding of the social predicaments.

Set in Rajasthan, Varanasi or Bengal, Jyotirmoyee Devi's fictions talk about marginalized and oppressed women as well about the dalits or harijans. With the consciousness of a social reformer she kept on exposing and interrogating the monstrous nature of exploitation of the weak and the marginal in the name of religious and social codes. The worlds she creates in her writings are invariably prone to include the weaker sections of the society, particularly women in precarious conditions. Her attempt of addressing women's issues that of a commune was evident in her articles and fictional writings. To elucidate this gender-conscious depiction of social world *Martyer Apsara*, an anthology of Jyotirmoyee Devi's stories is being referred to in the following discussion.

"*Martyer Apsara*", the sixth collection of stories of Jyotirmoyee Devi, was published in 1987. The three stories -*Annakali*, *Pinjrapole* and *Mortyer Apsara*, published separately in the beginning-the first two between 1937-1948 and the last one after 1980, have been anthologised in a single book under the title *Mortyer Apsara*. The earlier five collections of Jyotirmoyee Devi were *Rajjotak*, *Araballir Arale*, *Band Masterer Ma*, *Araballir Kahini*, and *Sonarupa Noy*. The varied thematic dimensions of her stories range from shades of human relationship to diasporic experience, from women's distressful conditions to everyday phenomena and predicaments of the society. However, one distinguished feature that characterises her stories is the authorial outlook of critical observation on the flow of events. A sharp and accurate deductive attitude in her helped her to expand her views from particular to general. The three stories *Annakali*, *Pinjrapole* and *Mortyer Apsara* best illustrate this.

The three stories *Annakali*, *Pinjrapole* and *Mortyer Apsara* by Jotirmoyee Devi are thematically and structurally connected as they chronicle the saga of endless miseries afflicted upon women, particularly the Hindu widows. The time span of the stories expands over three generations of women invariably being marginalised and oppressed under the functioning of a gender-biased and ruthless mechanism of patriarchal society.

In the stories anthologised in *Martyer Apsara* Jyotirmoyee Devi delineates upon the social customs that put women into different forms of subjugation in various situations which the patriarchal society often tend to naturalise. The title of the first story 'Annakali' refers to the pivotal character in story. But at the same time it reflects the unwelcome arrival of a girl-child in a family that feels already overburdened with girls. The birth of the fifth daughter set the middle class family into panic and frustration out of which they named her 'Annakali', a colloquial for "Aar na Kali" that means an appeal to goddess Kali for no more girl child in the family. So from the very first day the ignominy of being a girl had to be borne by Annakali. Her status was further aggravated by the fact that she was not as fair as desired of a would-be bride. So as if by default such a girl was fated to grow up without much affection and attention of the elders. Marginalisation of the likes of Annakali here embeds double layer. The kin and kith of such a girl were fettered by social customs and tradition. So no sympathy could be extracted from them regarding the existential predicaments of Annakali. Soon she was given in marriage to a widowed man, much older than her.

The second phase of Annakali's life seems to be a better one than the first. She was apparently rescued from the aphorised humiliation embedded in her maiden name. The new name 'Annapurna', given by her husband, showcases her elevated status. However, this also proved an illusory one as gradually Annapurna came to face the intricate and oppressing patriarchal manoeuvre operating both at the surface and the subtle levels. In course of time she imbibed the very dominant customs and social practices that once tormented her as a girl child and started to overlook the discriminations meted out to her own daughters whom she had promised to save from such humiliation and deprivation. Two incidents- the

eldest daughter Uma's early widowhood with two children and her husband Shibeswar's death forced Annapurna to resume her mute and passive role in the household. Even she could not cope with her youngest daughter Atasi's choice of an independent life. The perpetual and pervasive nature of women's subjugated position crushed her spirit of protest and sense of justice and turned it into mere hopelessness. The author observes that women's marginal condition of living even numbs their sense of self-respect.

The oppressive nature of prevailing gender norms of the early part of twentieth century blatantly privileged the male members while denying the basic rights of their female counterparts. This many-layered mechanism of subjugation of women is realistically depicted in Jyotirmoyee Devi's 'Annakali'. The story encompasses the diverse but contextually correlated conventions and rituals which are socially and habitually imposed upon women. These include negligence of girl child, denial of right to education and right to paternal property of girls, child marriage, dowry system, rigorous and inhuman rituals for widows, and wretched condition of widows disowned by the in-law's family. The same thematic contexts are carried forward to the second story '*Pinjrapole*'. The structural connectivity is also established as the second story relates to the lives of Annakali's daughters Uma and Atasi, along with other new characters.

Jyotirmoyee Devi, whose personal life itself is an interesting subject of study, had direct experience and close observation of the working of patriarchal machinery through religious and cultural practices. Many of her compositions, both fiction and nonfiction, narrate how the brutal social, cultural and religious customs swayed the then collective mind set and operated pervasively against the interest of women. Fettered to the chain of conventions and religious customs over a long period of time, women's existential conditions came to a stake. For widows in orthodox Hindu Bengali families the predicaments of existence were multiple as were their levels of marginalization. While living in the cocoon of widowhood herself, Jyotirmoyee Devi captures the precarious position of chiefly widow women in the second story '*Pinjrapole*'.

As continuation of the account of women's affliction the narrative '*Pinjrapole*' intensely focuses on plights of Bengali Hindu widows at home as well as in Kashi, Varanasi which can be called a place of exile and seclusion for this clan of women. The word 'pinjrapole' (Gujrati) literally stands for enclosures where the sick, old, strayed, and abandoned animals are kept. Like the previous story, this title also carries immense connotative implications. The narrative is a palpably gender-conscious literary documentation of the social evils that work in the form of orthodox notion of rites and rituals enforced particularly upon widows whose space and voice are both negotiated by doctrines that invariably favour men.

The narration of '*Pinjrapole*' begins with a third person voice rendering a graphic description of a group of Hindu widows huddled in a house in Kashi. The condition of most of these widows living in penury can be visualised in Deepa Mehta's critically acclaimed 2005 film *Water*. In the story Jyotirmoyee Devi provides us with poignant anecdotes of the lives of widows like Biraj, Tarini Thakurani, Surabala, Manorama, Kusum and others whose social identity transforms drastically as soon as they lose their husbands. The erstwhile conjugal status of being someone's wife somehow ensured a hold over the kitchen, pantry and observation of or participation in religious and social occasions. But with the accession to widowhood these women are found to be outcasts as they lose all rights of socialisation. The stringent restriction on choice of food, attire and participation in social ceremonies and events transform them to a condition of non-entity. The bare provisions for livelihood and observance of stern, self-disciplining sacraments render most of them sickly emaciated in body and gloomy in temperament. The degree of alienation from normative familial life increases the highest when the households are no more willing to have the widows living among them. Here too the lure of earning 'punya' or 'moksh' is used to goad the widows leave their home and throng in holy places like Prayag, Kashi etc.

In course of the story this clan of widows emerges as a class being the prey of multi-level marginalisation. In the texture of her narrative Jyotirmoyee Devi dexterously merges her authorial voice with that of the collective consciousness of this deprived and exiled class. A few widows and two

independent, educated girls Atasi and Haima, contemplate over the collective experience of this state of social, physical and mental segregation from the mainstream life. The imposed tag of abstinence crushes the individual dreams and desires and snatches every possibility of a new beginning.

The title 'Pinjrapole' resonates the deplorable condition of dingy ghettos in which the widows crowd together in abandonment. With minimum or no monetary provisions from their own families, the widows in Kashi are flung into beggary conditions. They have to work as housemaid, cook, and cleaner at temples or plunge into utter beggary. Some of them even step into shadowy lanes of prostitution. The period which Jyotirmoyee Devi depicts here was a crucial one in respect of advent of Indian Renaissance. While the intellectual sphere was being set to change many of the old and stagnant practices, the concern over women's miserable conditions, particularly of the widows in Hindu orthodox families was a relevant one. The strong and integrated address to this issue by a widow writer herself adds an unparalleled authenticity and precision to it. Jyotirmoyee Devi took a gallant stride in this respect in spite of the risk of displeasure and anger of the then social norms.

In the story '*Martyer Apsara*' Jyotirmoyee Devi has peeped into another wound inflicted on female entity. Here she delineates upon the deserted and lonely path which women who are forced to trade in their own flesh tread upon. These women of ill-repute who live by prostitution are 100 times more marginalised than any of her sex in social sphere. The voiceless and lone journey of life of these women receives a sensitive treatment in the author's hand. She does not hesitate to rip open her society's disgraceful practice of encouraging and even legitimising the licentious male desires at the cost of social expulsion and humiliation of a section of women. The darkness of misery that engulfs these women is formidable and at the same time bluntly points to the brutality of patriarchal conventions woven into the social texture. Jyotirmoyee Devi stops to paint woman as object of desire. She talks as woman and allows her fictional women to question the injustices conventionally imposed upon them. Defying the banishment and prohibitions imposed by the society, these women bond together to arrange for a ritualistic cremation of one of their deceased companions. When the daily male visitors of the brothel vehemently decline to assist, the women rise collectively to perform the funeral rites. This can be seen as a gesture of protest and resistance to social discriminations they are subjected to.

From the authorial/third person commentary that connects the narrative passages in all the three stories mentioned above it appears that the author deliberately took this project of addressing the grave questions of women's oppressed conditions from different dimensions. Particularly "*Pinjrapole*" grabs our attention more as in it Jyotirmoyee Devi brought forward a distinct tone of disagreement with the prevailing gender-based customs and rituals which were further cemented by religious dictum. The ideas and criticisms on injustice, patriarchy, and oppression by way of religion, that come to one's mind while reading this story are undoubtedly what the authorial voice, aimed to evoke amongst the audience. The author remains successful in provoking deeper brooding on several gender-specific crises without any melodramatic treatment of the themes like negligence of girl child, child marriage, widowhood, prostitution and so on.

From the thematic analysis of the three stories it is evident that in Jyotirmoyee Devi's literary compositions feminism reaches, by disregarding the might of the conventional society and thoughts coupled to it, new heights and dimension. To understand the implication of such gendered delineation of fictional contexts, we may refer to some relevant observations of scholars and critics. In her book *Fiction of Authority* Susan S. Lanser, a leading figure in studies of women's narratives, speaks of a need for identifying three narrative modes in women's writings, namely 'authorial, personal and communal voice' (1992). According to Lanser 'authorial voice' can be identified in "narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential" (9). On the other hand 'personal voice' is the voice of those "narrators who are self-consciously telling their own stories" (18). And by 'communal voice' Lanser refers to the "a practice in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and



textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community ” (21). Among these Lanser holds that the 'authorial' and 'personal' voices serve as the most strategic modes for women writers. The complex working of these two modes, though often within the gross framework of traditional narrative forms, transforms the narrative world to a site for interplay of 'powers, dangers, prohibitions, and possibilities' (FOA 15).

Jyotirmoyee Devi's selected stories illumine the subjective representation of the social realities in detail. On the other hand the reflections, judgements, generalisations about the events beyond the story-world, comments on the social trends and biases by the narrator may be related to the Jyotirmoyee Devi's discursive status or 'public' voice that speaks for a class who, at that time, was denied a voice. She does not simply predicate the words and action of fictional characters, rather becomes one of them to endorse a collective nuance to the saga that overlaps boundaries of time and geography.

So the stories of Jyotirmoyee Devi are pregnant with rebellious possibilities. She presents a multidimensional world dotted by sharp and accurate observations on social evils generated from conventional patriarchal framework. Women in different phases of their life, as well in different roles, are dominated and oppressed by conventional practices that demonstrate gender bias while in operation. The multi-layered representation of women's marginalisation in Jyotirmoyee Devi's writing emits a strong note of dissent against such oppression. Time has marched ahead since she documented her experience and observation in those stories. But the relevance of the questions she raised has not yet lost. The questions of liberty from the fetters of self-repressing customs and prejudices, of freedom of exercising self-determination and of right to education and economic self-sufficiency for women still pose as great concerns for us. While living through a more disadvantageous milieu, Jyotirmoyee Devi, both by in her life and works, blew the siren for revision and in some cases rejection of some profit-driven unfair practices concerning women and womanhood as a whole.

### References:

1. Ghosh, Gourkishore (ed.). 1994. *Jyotirmoyee Debi Racana-Sankalan*, vol. 2. Calcutta: Dey's Publishing and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.
2. Ghosh, Gourkishore (ed.). 1994. *Jyotirmoyee Debi Racana-Sankalan*, vol. 3. Calcutta: Dey's Publishing and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University.
3. Gupta, Ashoka. 2002. "Jyotirmoyee Debi". *Women Pioneers in India's Renaissance*. Sushila Nayar and Kamala Mankekar, (eds). New Delhi: National Book Trust, India.
4. Jackson, Elizabeth. *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
5. Lanser, Susan S. *Fictions of Authority*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1992. Print.
6. ---. "Gender and Narrative", *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, 17 June 2013 <[www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/genderandnarrative/](http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/genderandnarrative/)>
7. Mookerjea-Leonard, Debali. "Jyotirmoyee Devi: Writing History, Making Citizens". First Published February 1, 2005. <http://journals.sagepub.com/author/Mookerjea.Leonard,+Debali>, 2 August, 2017.
8. Ray, Sangeeta. 2000. *En-gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives*. Durham: Duke University Press. <<http://scholar.google.com/scholarlookup?>>, 2 August, 2017.
9. Roy Chowdhury, Subir & Abhijit Sen (eds.), 1991. *Jyotirmoyee Debi Racana-Sankalan*, vol.1. Calcutta: Dey's Publishing and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University