

Impossible Loves

The Implications of Narrative Recuperations in Sailabala Ghosh Jaya's *Sheikh Andu* and Begum Rokeya Hossein's *Padmarag*

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I

Love was an exceedingly troublesome concern in late nineteenth century Bengal, mainly because of the intense preoccupation with the family.¹ The family occupied, as many scholars have argued, a crucial position in the reform movements that shaped early nationalism, since it was regarded as providing a sphere of autonomy from colonial domination. The crucial element of the new family was the preoccupation with the husband-wife relationship. A natural byproduct of this concern was the question of tackling love. On the one hand it was a cementing force for the family; on the other hand, the unruly passions that it involved could either disrupt the husband's duties towards the extended family or worse, engage him in extra-marital affairs. While domestic manuals could blithely banish love from the economy of affections, emphasizing instead the safer bondings of companionability and/or duty, in the sphere of the novel, which was crucially concerned with conflicted subjectivities, love was generally invoked and experienced in order to be dismissed or overdetermined by the husband-wife relationship. In other words, the convention of impossible love was a recuperative device to both experience and contain the violation of family norms.

As it stands, this understanding of the nineteenth century Bengali novel is homologous with the conception proposed by some scholars,² that the reforms of the family and of the woman's condition simply amount to a remoulding of patriarchy. The spheres of literature and that of social reform can be seen as forming mutually reinforcing parts of a reformulated patriarchy. I wish to emphasize this correspondence since it gives to the novels—and their acts of recuperation—of women writers a significance that goes beyond that of the literary sphere. Seen

in abstraction, the acts of narrative recuperation in their novels may seem to support the argument of a reintegrate women with patriarchy. Seen, however, in the contexts of what happens in these novels, the author's lives and the social possibilities of representation, other stories emerge, some so different that they alter the very meaning of these seeming acts of recuperation.

I have sought to understand the implications of recuperation through the ways in which these novels relate to the Hindu-Muslim question. The latter is actually a good testing ground for the problem I have outlined above. A crucial boundary of the woman's question that limited its scope, was its religious exclusivism. This was a consequence of the reform movements of both Hindus and Muslims. Since women's rights belonged to the sphere of personal laws—which were personal not to individuals but to religious communities—the norms for either changing or maintaining the woman's condition had to be religious. Thus, for instance, to justify widow remarriage, the *shastras* were invoked. This was a situation that not only gave the idea of the family a mooring in religious exclusivism, but worse, it often reinforced this with a quiet dose of communal antagonism, such as advancing the well-known argument that *purdah* was the result of Muslim sexual depredations. What is significant about the two novels I will deal with here, is that they both desire and repudiate the breaking down of religious exclusivism. *Sheikh Andu* does this through a love story and *Padmarag* by an institutional romance.³

II

Sheikh Andu is a picaresque which has two socially defiant moments as its nodal points. It is about the story of Andu, a Muslim chauffeur, who runs away from the house of Chaudhury Sahib, his Hindu master, because the latter's daughter, Latika, proposes to him. Andu then proceeds on various travels, undergoes various educational experiences and adventures and at the climactic point of the novel—which extends over twenty odd pages of intense and charged writing—he falls in love with Jyotsna, the widowed friend of Latika, who reciprocates his love. The concoction of such a plot was (and remains) an act of daring. It is true that 1914—the year of this novel was published—was a favourable time to broadcast an inter-communal love story. The reunification of Bengal had brought into the foreground a new crop of Muslim leaders like Fazlul Huq, who advocated closer ties with Hindus, thereby helping

to prepare the grounds for the Lucknow Pact of 1916. But what Ghosh Jaya violates is a genealogy of literary representation that was more long-standing than this particular conjuncture. Nineteenth century Hindu Bengali authors like Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Bankim Chatterjee and Jyotirindranath Tagore had delineated stories of inter-communal love, but the man had always been Hindu. These stories had reinforced the importance of Hindu masculinity so dear to Hindu exclusivist ideologies. The importance of this convention can be gauged from its reversal of the entrenched stereotype of the sexually aggressive Muslim male and the ineffectual Hindu, images that greatly contributed to communal violence. In the riots of Pabna (1871), Jamalpur (1907) and in the Hindu communal commonsense of abductions that filled the public space with communal acrimony in the nineteen twenties, a repeated allegation was that Muslim males abducted Hindu women.⁴

Obviously Andu and Jyotsna's love could only be presented through a romance. When Andu meets Jyotsna, class differences and boundaries of character melt away, and both look into eyes that mirror the other's gentle, controlled forbearance. At this point the novel cannot offer any recuperative strategy, any twist of plot or slip of character, that it generates from its own resources. On the other hand, a sudden, miasmatic sense of wrongdoing appears from nowhere and encloses the two lovers. It is this profound and peculiarly unrooted sense of sin that stands between them and the scandal of inter-communal love. They part, thereby normalizing the situation through tragic pathos. The profound importance of religious exclusivism in constituting their subjectivities is indicated by their belief that to establish a relationship would violate their *pavitrata*, their purity. To drive the point home, Andu departs for Mecca, while Jyotsna goes off to Dwarka.

What is interesting is that their love is never named. The naming of love is replaced by the feeling of violation it causes. Involved here is not simply the implications of the plot but the act of public representation itself. As readers we know what is involved in the relationship, but the separation of naming and implication which Tanika Sarkar perceptively observes as an enabling function of print for women like Rashundari,⁵ is not evident here. Here there is only grim forbearance. The consequences of an unattainable love—represented through Andu and Jyotsna's experiences of loss of self-control, self-dissolution and wasting—becomes co-extensive with the inability to name their love. What is at work here is really the effect of self-censorship, that, in an uncompromising person like Sailabala Ghosh Jaya, involves masochism.

It is not coincidental that she maintains a silence regarding the love story in her preface to the novel. Admittedly a comparable story of inter-communal love was provided fulfillment in Tagore's *Mussalmani Galpa*. But that short story was published in 1941, when Tagore enjoyed unrivaled literary and moral authority in Bengal. *Sheikh Andu* was the first novel of a *mofussil* housewife. In her situation, Ghosh Jaya could not assume that her desire to write would be accepted by the extended family. There was already a powerful propaganda against the reading of novels by women. She altered her surname to Ghosh Jaya (the wife of Ghosh) in order to camouflage her identity. True, her husband was supportive, but she could not take that for granted: he was certified insane in 1917 and inflicted a great deal of torture on Sailabala. And writing for her was precious resource. In 1962, when she renounced the world to join an *ashram*, she observed, 'If circumstances had not been so complicated, so contrary, I may not have joined the *ashram*. I would have continued my literary activities, I would have got satisfaction, I would have got peace, I'd have been happy.'⁶

It is a little uncanny that this sense of religious renunciation as a suspension of human possibilities, involving a trade-off between a simplified life and a dark pessimism, is articulated by Jyotsna as she ponders over the parting words of Andu. She observes, 'In the rites of renunciation there is a dedication to the process of amelioration; that is our sole resource till death. In that there is no forgiveness! no peace, no end!' We do not know what the act of renunciation specifically meant for Sailabala at the end of her life, but some of its effects can be discerned in this novel. Andu finds a mitigating point in the Koran precisely because it imitates the experience of possession that he had earlier got through love. But this displacement also involves the invocation of an exclusivist Muslim identity. After the cremation of Jyotsna's father, he returns to his own house despite everyone's implorations, including those of Dadaji, his mentor, because he says that as a Muslim he is untouchable. This stubborn insistence on his segregated identity not only narrows the broad idealized values with which he is associated, but together with this, there is a palpable diminishing of possibilities in the fact that the freedom and expansiveness of his picaresque becomes a pilgrimage with its single-minded relationship to space.

That all this has to happen to Andu himself is itself a profound act of self-destruction wreaked by a woman novelist on her imaginings in order to negotiate the constraints of a literary career. For print, specifically the novel, allows a new imaginative resource to the woman

writer. This concerns the production of a new male subjectivity and an alternate family. Domestic manuals had only permitted the imaginative recreation of the female subject, one that was necessarily constrained by her domestic demands. On the other hand, Andu represents a new male norm. Andu is a double other: he is not only a Muslim, but he also belongs the non-respectable class. This second strand of his identity provides a social resonance to what constitutes his chief characteristic, that is, his involvement with work: work, that by its contrast with the lassitude of Latika's upper class, brown-sahib husband, acts as a critique of male *bhadralok* subjectivity. More importantly, Andu's dedication to work is not attached to money or achievement, but to helping others. The significant aspect of his work is that it connects him to other servants, low castes, working people, all of whom he is ready to help. At the same time, his activities also intersect with the sphere of the woman's world: Andu sews, he even reads and educates himself—like Sailabala and a host of other women—behind locked doors. What makes the implications of this representation even more far-reaching—and more intimate for a middle-class readership—is the way the figure of Andu changes the conception of the family. Not only is Andu made the narrative centre, but he occupies this position in a household that is defined by two worlds, that of the masters and servants. The narrative privileging of Andu also corresponds with a transcendental place he occupies in this structure. Belonging to both worlds—he is emotionally tied to the servants, while his habits of works and selfless learning aligns him to the values of the masters—he offers a point of relative autonomy from where he can mediate in conflictual situations between the masters and servants. The Hindu middle class family, through this representation, becomes defined as not simply a kin unit, but one that includes all those who labour for it. This also means that the middle class family, far from offering an island of ordered peace, become continuous with the rest of society and its conflicts, while the moral presence of Andu, the chauffeur, defines a lack, an inability of this family to transcend itself through its own resources. Andu's self-exile means the banishment, the willful stamping out of all these possibilities of imagining, of conjuring (given the fact that it is a male who occasions these conceptions) a radicalized patriarchy. The story of Sheikh Andu's recuperations then, becomes also a tale of the emotional, social and imaginative costs of recuperation itself.

III

Begum Rokeya's story of love is articulated through a typical convention of transgression cum recuperation, that is, the discovery plot. Padmarag's story is about how she was unfairly repudiated by her betrothed, how she had to tragically flee her house because of the depredations of indigo planters and seek refuge under a false identity in Tarini Bhaban, a woman's institution run by Mrs. Tarini Sen, and how she met Latif there, whom she discovers is her former betrothed and now completely in love with her. The stage is set for a happy love cum duty marital consummation that formed the stuff of the novels of Nojibur Rahman, the first Bengali Muslim novelist. But it is here where impossible love is deployed. At the moment of her fulfillment, Padmarag rejects Latif. By doing so, Rokeya's narrative ruptures the equation between impossible love and its recuperative implications. The convention of impossible love is made to dramatize the impossibility of love in a patriarchal society. And yet, Padmarag's decision is not unambiguous. It is not divorced from the drive to reintegration with patriarchal society. But the terms in which this is carried out, the narrative context in which it occurs, changes the meaning of what has the formal features of an act of recuperation.

To appreciate the implications of her decision, it is necessary to look into what lies at the heart of the novel, that is, the romance of a woman's institution. Rokeya deploys very caring details to describe this place which looks after sick and destitute women, provides education and employment to women. It is an institution where women are constantly working; it runs on money initially donated by Mrs. Sen, the founder, and even gets contributions in secret from Muslim women in *purdah*. What is more remarkable is that Rokeya exploits the possibilities of the romance form to provide more than a blueprint of an ideal institution. She also produces an ideal community of women which defies the segregational logic of the reform movements of the nineteenth century. This community is crystallized by devising a convention of narrative exchange.

The scenes are as follows: Padmarag is sitting, lonely and sad by herself, when Saudamini tells her that she too has undergone persecution and torture by her family. This conventional scene of consolation dissolves into another in which the closest friends and co-workers of Padmarag sit and converse. Each one of them relates the

tragedies of their lives, but instead of a situation in which each one relates her own individual tale, another girl does it for her. They not only relate their story in the presence of the original subject of the tragedy, but do so in a manner that suggests the latter is doing it. The sense of possession over one's biography is replaced by a vicarious sharing: each one experiences the story of the other's life as one's own. Crucial here is the fact that this is a representative group of different religions, and consequently, each tale typifies patriarchal oppression—in both its external and internalized forms—in different religious communities. Helen and Rafiya's tales relate the sufferings entailed by Christian and Islamic divorce laws respectively, Sakina's about the superior power of males over their wives, and Usha's relates a tale of unmitigated suffering at the hands of a Hindu community that boycotts her following her abduction. This narrative exchange of autobiographies detaches female subjectivities from their roots in religious collectivities. This is not tantamount to a rejection of religious identities, nor does it map out a federative structure. It is really a conceptualization of inter-subjectivity as a collective circuit of experience, the preconditions of which are grounded in the general condition of gender oppression.

The convention of narrative exchange may superficially seem an extension of the idealized vision of the *andarmahal/antahpur* with their evocation of woman's companionship. It is actually its obverse. *Purdah*, as Rokeya realized, divided not only men from women, but also the latter from their own sex. The upper class family to which Rokeya belonged, imposed such severe injunctions on intermixing with lesser races, that it would fill the young Rokeya's heart with terror just to behold a woman from outside her immediate kin and servant network. What the convention of narrative exchange does seem grounded upon is a modern development, that is, the women's public sphere that was implanted and nourished by the acts of writing and reading each others works. About 400 works were written by women between 1856 and 1910.⁷ More importantly, there was a crop of journals which allowed women of different religions to express, shape and share their experiences and opinions. Taherunissa, regarded the first female Bengali Muslim writer, published her first piece in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, a Brahmo journal, while Rokeya herself published her major essay '*Strir Abanati*' in *Mohila*, a journal edited by Girish Sen. Of course, while journalism and discursive prose allowed, at best, a federated format in which women of different faiths could write separately, the novel permitted a new order of subjectivities to be imagined.

All this is at stake when, at the end of the novel, Padmarag not only leaves Latif but also Tarini Bhaban. She decides to return to her natal home, assume the socially acceptable persona of a widow, manage the family estates and rear up her nephew, who, undoubtedly, in due course will take charge of them. The relapse into religious segregation with all the patriarchal repressions that it involves, bears the signs of a recuperative act. Except for two things; first, that she will utilize her life in *purdah* to work amongst Muslim ladies segregated from society, and second, that her decision is conceived as a necessary component of a demonstratively anti-patriarchal act. The rejection of Latif is a purely political one. He is a good man, and at any rate the plot had positioned the two on the verge of marriage when the catastrophes inflicted by Robinson, the indigo planter, aborted the union. Padmarag clearly tells him that marrying him would confirm patriarchal prejudices: society would turn around and say that even Padmarag had to accept a husband who had rejected her. On the contrary, she would prove, through the example of her own life, that a woman need not be defined by domesticity. The rejection of Latif provides a new meaning to her relationship with patriarchy. She seems willing to negotiate with it, but unwilling to compromise with it. This is a paradox that underlies her activism: her rejection of Latif utilizes the political space that patriarchy allows (even if unwillingly) for her to intervene in the sphere of symbolic actions, while her acceptance of *purdah* is the form that commitments to anti-patriarchalism must take in order to satisfy the pragmatic need of reaching out to other women—and of possibly producing a collective that can, one day, bring them to the doors of another Tarini Bhaban.

It is possible to interpret this as a reformulated conflict between love and duty. But the novel treats these two imperatives in a manner that neither merges them nor treats them as mutually exclusive. When Latif offers to formally release her from her pledge of betrothal, Padmarag gets enraged and accuses him of heartlessness. She cannot release Latif because, after having learned to love him in the free and expansive environment of Tarini Bhaban, she is tied to that vision: the world where love is continuous with a gender equality that has shaken itself free of religious boundaries will be a necessary imaginary which she would need to pilot her in her life in the dark, narrow and segregated world of *purdah*. Involved here is not the commonsensical idea of a female activist subject who sacrifices love to social duty and relates to social pressures in a purely tactical manner. What Rokeya reveals are the profound anxieties of a doubled subjectivity: Padmarag will be wife

and widow, in her society and out of it, and finally, she will henceforth be known as Siddika, the name she has chosen for herself, one which also bears the imprint of Jaynab, her inherited family name, as well as Padmarag, the name that Mrs. Sen had given her in Tarini Bhaban. This, it may be added, is no easy resolution, for Padmarag will now be caught between the contrary pulls of self-repudiation and self-transformation.

Like *Sheikh Andu*, *Padmarag* too is a novel poised at a threshold. If the former was located at the threshold of a woman's imaginings and its transactions with the demands of publication, *Padmarag* is located at a point where print becomes a sphere of intellectual sharing and begins to complement the sphere of institutional activism. It is not coincidental that it is in the twentieth century that women begin to band together in organizations of their own. The problems that this caused was even more than what Rokeya imagined in 1902 when she wrote this novel. After being hounded out from Bhagalpur in her newly widowed state by her husband's step-daughter and her husband, Rokeya proceeded to found the Shekhawat Memorial Girls School in Calcutta in 1911 and then the Anjumane Khawaitan Islam, a social welfare organization, in 1916. Rokeya was, it may be imagined, a person with immense authority by the twenties when Principal Ibrahim Khan went to visit her. He was surprised to find her behind a *purdah*. Upon finishing business matters, Rokeya immediately observed, with a mix of apology and defiance, that she was observing *purdah*. When the Principal politely said that it was *jayez* (permissible), she agreed, but said that she could have done without it in her old age. 'Yet', she continued, 'Do you know why I have observe *purdah*. I am old, I will die. I have been running my school for so many years, but I don't want it to die along with me.' In order to save the school, Rokeya had approached her influential nephew, Sir A.K. Ghaznavi. His sole condition for providing a government grant was that she observe *purdah*.⁸

IV

It has been argued that by the end of the nineteenth century, nationalism had exhausted the woman's question, following which (presumably) it slipped into a black hole till Independence.⁹ The novels that I have examined tell a different story. They radically reconfigure the shape of families, imagine new collectivities, set into motion subjectivities that

cannot be explained by the limits that nationalist thought is perceived to have imposed. The nature of their recuperations too cannot be described as acts of reintegration with dominant ideological structures of patriarchy. On the contrary they conduct troubled, self-questioning and even tragic negotiations. Nor are there any major appeals made to the norms of family or nation.

The shape of these romances suggest a social energy that is drawn from a place other than the triad of family-reform-nation. Such a source can be inferred from a recent suggestion made by Tanika Sarkar and reiterated by Judith Walsh.¹⁰ This concerns the impact of print on women's lives. Sarkar has talked about its relationship with self-formation and the opportunity it opened out for public intervention by them, while Walsh has shown how print allowed women, even very conservative women, to subtly alter the discourse of the family. While not agreeing with the specific observations of Walsh, what I do think can be interpolated from her research on domestic manuals is the fact that print allowed women to reconceptualise the family as a system, instead of being meshed in with its day to day logic alone. The necessary distancing from her life that this demands of a woman writer/reader, can explain the continued and ever extending range of questions that women explore through this century.

What is equally revealing is the organized self-activity that *Padmarag* imagines and which became the hallmark of the women's movement in the twentieth century. But far from resolving the women's question this development makes it even more knotty. Forbes study of the Women's India Association (1917) and All India Women's Conference (1927), has shown how these women's organizations were constantly plagued by the question of priorities, of what should come first, the demand for the male dominated project of political liberation or the social transformation of women's condition.¹¹ The most spectacular instance of internal instability is provided by the Women's Protection League. Formed in Bengal in 1923, it provided a forum for the intensely masculinist Hindu communal mobilization against alleged instances of sexual depredations by Muslims. By the 1930's however, it was talking about the problems of women's rights and sexual exploitation inside the family as causes for abductions.¹² These novels go some way in suggesting complementary and interlocking contexts for such instability.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I have greatly benefited from discussions with Dr. Jayanti Chattopadhyay.
2. See, for instance, Partha Chatterjee, 'The National Resolution of the Woman's Question', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, (eds.), Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi, 1989)
3. All citations to *Sheikh Andu* are drawn from the Calcutta, 1995 edition and to *Padmarag* from *Begum Rokeya Rachanabali* (Dhaka, 1973).
4. See P.K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Relations in Bengal in the Nineteen Twenties* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, forthcoming) esp. ch. 4.
5. T. Sarkar, *Mastering the Word: Nineteenth Century Makings of an Autobiography* (forthcoming).
6. Cited in Parimal Chakrabarty, *Sahityer Adhikar o Ananya Pradandha* (Calcutta, 1982) p. 121.
7. Cited in Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within*, (Delhi, 1991), p. 11.
8. Cited in M.H. Sufi, *Begum Rokeya: Jiban O Sahitya* (Dhaka, 1986) pp. 28-9.
9. Chatterjee, *op. cit.*
10. T. Sarkar, 'A Book of Her Own, a Life of Her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth Century Bengali Woman', *History Workshop Journal*, 36, 1993; J. Walsh, 'What Women Learned when Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Aug. 1997.
11. G. Forbes, 'The Indian Women's Movement: A Struggle for Women's Rights or National Liberation?', in Gail Minault, (ed.), *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan* (Delhi, 1981).
12. P.K. Datta, *op. cit.*