Review Article

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Gunabhiram Barua, *Ramnabami-Natak: The Story of Ram and Nabami.* Translated with an Introduction by Tilottoma Misra. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2007. pp. lxxxvii + 72. ₹ 295.

Every translated text encounters the simultaneous birth of a reader at the cost of the death of the author (Barthes, 1977). The translator's 'readerly' self is transformed into a 'writerly' self thereby making the reader, as Roland Barthes (1970, p. 4) insists, '… no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'. In this sense, the double register of *reading* and transcreating through *writing* is what Tilottoma Misra's translation of Gunabhiram Barua's *Ramnabami-Natak* performs in its sparkling reappearance; it was first published by the author in 1857, a year significant for many reasons. More significant is the fact that playwright Gunabhiram Barua's play *Ramnabami-Natak* has not been staged at all since its conception, yet it remains one of the most significant 19th century progressive texts of drama, striking and uncompromising in its social and cultural underpinnings. The translator's attempt to breathe fresh life into an important text, lost in the nexus of the politics of publishing and marketing, is what needs to be appreciated. What Tilottoma does significantly is to re-present the text to a contemporary audience which is engaged with feminist discourses and the rights of widows in Indian society.

In her translator's introduction, Misra introduces a new dimension to the problematic of widowhood through an interplay between womanhood, patriarchy and modernity. She charts out the terrain of redemption from widowhood not only as part of the larger project of emancipation from shastric cultures, but also as part of achieving woman's selfhood from all forms of discrimination and forced alienation. The peculiar features of caste-divided Indian society such as tales of barren women, harrowing stories of widow's lives and enforced alienation, constricted

conjugal relations and maintenance of caste boundaries are some of the issues that the introduction highlights. It would be of great interest to scholars looking at the emergence of the 'modern subject' in Assam, 19th century Assamese writings in general and the women's question in particular. *Ramnabami-Natak* as interpreted by the translator also opens up the interplay of Western influences with Assamese literature as is evident from Shakespearean influences in this particular play.

The play in its central thematic engagement portrays the sad denouement of the life of the young widow Nabami, who had to end her life because society cruelly indicted her courtship with Ramchandra, the brother-in-law of her friend Jayanti, as a grievous violation of moral norms. Nabami's behaviour was considered an indecent defiance of established norms of chastity after widowhood by the guardians of society. Misra explains the prevailing moral environment of 19th century upper-caste Assamese society as entrenched in the morass of decadent and retrogressive patriarchical values that never allowed freedom of thought and action to most women, particularly widows. Widowhood itself as a state of *being* is socially and culturally constructed particularly in oriental societies where the rituals and restrictions surrounding the life of the widow are more important than the widow herself. This is also evident from discourses on sati where a sati is an in-between of wife and widow and only after the complete enactment of the ritual will the widow's identity as a 'good wife' be confirmed (see Sarkar, 2009). Societal restrictions are an added burden to a widow, who is already a part of the world of death through her intimate experience of pain at losing her husband. The poet Sylvia Plath has captured this moment of loss through her intimate experience of her mother's mourning of her father's death, in her poem entitled 'Widow' (cited in Sarkar, 2009, p. 37):

> Widow. The word consumes itself…
> Body, a sheet of newsprint on the fire…
> …Widow. The dead syllable, with its shadow
> Of an echo, exposes the panel in the wall…
> …Widow: that great, vacant estate!
> The voice of God is full of draftiness (Gilbert, 2002, p. 23)

One can hear this emptiness in Nabami's helpless cry in the play, '…I am a widow and have no freedom…' (p. 40)

And even while in love with Ramchandra, her fears speak of her vulnerability: 'Your name is Ram! What if you do that to me which Ram did to Sita?' (p. 40)

Tilottoma's reflective introduction explains the 19th-century context of the emergence of this play. The most significant influence of the time was Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's reformist step towards widow remarriage; this move constituted an essential component of the Brahmo religious movement. The reform had two distinct components: one, a challenge to and reform of Hindu social norms and second, freedom of the individual, especially of the woman in deciding her conjugal relations. Interrogating the authority of Brahminical patriarchy in setting conjugal norms, Vidyasagar gave institutional and legal support to any widow choosing to re-marry in 19th-century Bengal. *Ramnabami-Natak* derives its social and cultural origins from this reformist agenda of Vidyasagar in a very novel and challenging way. Indeed, it takes his agenda a step higher, by exposing the amount of cruelty and violence that were embedded within Brahminical norms.

The tragic suicides of Nabami, her friend Jayanti and lover Ram exposes Brahminical society that destroys the very basic values of a liberal social order, still in the making. Misra analyses the complex interplay between Brahmo ideals and Vidyasagar-inspired liberal-humanist values that privilege freedom of choice, thought and action in sharp contrast to Brahminical social mores that merely follow set patterns of social and individual behaviour within the *varna-jati* framework. One of the important constitutive element of this *varna-jati* framework is guarding a woman from her sexual drive and, especially if she is a widow, she is supposed to undergo an enforced penance and celibacy for the rest of her life. Whenever she deviates from patriarchal standards, she has to expiate her sins, a process which according to the *Manusmriti* was meant only for men. Such societal discrimination reveals not just a deep-seated denial of equality with men, but establishes that even the right to expiate is a male one alone (for details, see Kakar, 1990, pp. 18–19). In *Ramnabami-Natak* a deviant woman like Nabami does not enjoy the right to expiate because society leaves no room for her to survive with honour and dignity. What the play dramatises is the subversive potential of her suicide that comes as a performative act to expose the embedded cruelty of the *varna-jati* system. *Ramnabami-Natak* re-describes this subversive and liberatory potential of women in terms of not just reform of prohibitions attached to

widowhood, but in terms of a counterforce to male reason of exclusion of widows from the sphere of marital/conjugal relations. The suicide of a deviant woman constructs an alternative subjectivity to escape the male symbolic order. The irony in Jayanti's wish is heightened by the death of Nabami and Ramchandra: 'Today is Ramnabami day. I wish to see the two of you together tonight like the auspicious union of Ram and Sita!…' (p. 44).

Ram and Nabami do unite like Ram and Sita but only through their tragic death. *Ramnabami-Natak'*s subversion of male reason assumes several sociological and historical counter-perspectives. In Act I Scene III, Kamdev quotes a Sanskrit verse to Ramchandra (p. 11):

> Haven't you read the Sanskrit verse which says 'the springtime is suitable for travelling, for warming oneself in fire, for taking digestive drugs, for consuming the leaves of the neem tree and for the company of the young women'?

The play creates several contraries: it privileges the fatal attractions between Ramchandra and Nabami in a language of romance used in Sanskrit erotic literature, while it bemoans the absence of widow remarriage (p. 54) and consequences of pregnancy, that is not socially sanctified for a widow. The play heightens the tension between a more abstract realm of social norms and personal inclinations. Misra recounts Gunabhiram's personal sense of loss at his father's abandonment of his mother and then his growing up in a family of six widows; this makes him an insider to widows' lives and his imagined search for a way.

Nabami's state of desperation in the play can be read in terms of what Simone de Beauvoir (1953, p. 562) stated, '[T]he varieties of behaviour reported are not dictated to women by her hormones nor predetermined in the structure of female brain: they are shaped in the mold by her situation'. Nabami's situation can be best understood in terms of Ramchandra's discourse on his involvement with Nabami and widow remarriage in general. He says (p. 45):

> All forms of moral degaradation, whether involving widows or married women, is evil. It draws you into the mire from which you cannot extricate yourself. According to my judgment, adultery with a married woman is even worse than that with a widow because it harms another person. In the case of a widow, however, no third party is involved.

Ramchandra's marriage with Nabami as a widow gets transposed into a duality of her feeling of 'bad faith' as she is aware of men's clever, cajoling and expressions of love. She underscores the fact that 'lies uttered by lovers' can even make Chitragupta laugh, indicating that she is aware of the hypocrisy of men's love. 'Chitragupta's laugh' in Nabami's words is a metaphor of impossibility of men's love towards women, especially towards widows.

Misra's attempted reconciliation of the male reformist agenda of widow remarriage within the context of the late 19th century negotiations between Assamese Brahminical patriarchy and Bengali intelligentsia falls short of searching for alternatives to widowhood. Reading characters like Nabami and Ramchandra as embedded within the limits of a reformist agenda is a travesty of sorts: the essentially gendered discourse of reform ironically strengthens the place of a widow as widow and not as a reformed and re-empowered woman. That her agency can be neutralised in the absence of a socially congenial atmosphere of reform re-establishes the essential connection between women's subjugated speech and death. Nabami's monologue on death in Act V Scene III carries out a performative speech-act of killing herself in the same vein as Plath's description of self-consummation. This speech-act needs to be understood in terms of inaccessibility to the 'feminine' that effaces itself in the speech-act of suicide.

Misra's introduction to the 19th-century context of Assam with respect to women's social rights and its legal and cultural underpinnings illuminates the complexity of transition from pre-modern to the modern. Especially women's sense of self and of belonging to a particular set of social mores come into sharp conflict because of embedded asymmetries through which patriarchy oppresses women from a variety of backgrounds. The question of femininity and feminist consciousness in colonial Assam did not quite emerge in the distinct process of social reform. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says in the context of the death of Bhubaneswari Devi, that as death iterates the position of a singular impossibility of reproduction of women's selfhood, the sameness of her being cannot be continued through the demands of equal rights with men (see Bhattacharjee, 2001). Nabami's continuous lament of the 'secrecy' of her love affair and its ultimate consequence demands something more than a widow's right to remarry as that merely means being equal to men only literally. One may surmise that through Nabami's suicide she negates

such a right and establishes how a woman's transition through various phases of her life signifies difference with men. It also changes her identity from a unified self to a commodified neutral agency of passage, exchange and possession in a man's world. Gunabhiram's description of Nabami's transgression of Brahminical norms of purity does not break the heremeneutic circle of dignity and equal rights; rather, she suffers because of self-pity.

Tilottoma's explanation of Nabami's death in terms of oppressive social norms and the presence of an attenuated social support for progressive reform is clear and categorical; how the death of Nabami metaphorically creates the possibility of a reformed and liberal patriarchy needs further examination. The argument that foregrounds the onset of Western modernity and Bengalisation of Assamese upper-caste society does not fully explain the context of the paradoxical agency of an Assamese widow; she remains at the margins of any social formation. Within colonial modernity several dichotomies of women's lives such as legal/personal, reason/emotion, mental/physical are erased to gain control over women's being in most genres of representation and so on. In the play, Gunabhiram Barua portrays Nabami as the stereotypical widow for whom freedom lies in nihilation. The translator's effort to connect Gunabhiram Barua with Vidyasagar's reform movement and the entire generation of Assamese literati as well as social and cultural debates of the time gives an engaged view of historiographical scholarship and literary interpretation. However, an alternative reading of the text might raise issues like how far were Assamese literati concerned with and responsive to rights of tribal and lower strata women of those days? How were other distressed women represented in literary texts? Comparing reformist agendas of Assamese and Bengali elites unite the discourse to a narrow *bhadralok* agenda of social reform. The trajectory of modernity is such that an effort to retrieve the voice of women as a collective must start from below. This would enable us to return to an ethical subjectivity and not just to their victimhood. Tilottoma's translation should be utilised for the purpose of sensitisation without populism.

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