The 'Beshya' and the 'Bahu': Re-Reading Fakir Mohan Senapati's "Patent Medicine"

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Abstract

Similar to the peasantry, the tribal, the working women, the housewives, and all of those of the 19th century who engaged the attention of subaltern historians and Marxists, the prostitutes too merit critical attention and space in literary discourse. A number of Bengali texts throughout the 19th century had contributed in disseminating the image of the prostitute as the other of the good woman. We, in the course of this paper, focus instead on the early twentieth century and on Fakir Mohan Senapati and his epochal story, "Patent Medicine" that typified this societal understanding in the Bengal province, of which, Orissa was a part. The paper undertakes a hermeneutical attempt to unravel the unexplored aspects of sexuality, feudalism, patriarchy, domesticity and toxic masculinity.

Keywords: Patent Medicine, Prostitutes, Patriarchy, Odia Literature, Bengal Province, Feminism, Gynospace, Toxic Masculinity

1. Who is Fakir Mohan Senapati?

Fakir Mohan Senapati was born on 14 January 1843 at a place called Mallikashpur in the Balasore district of Orissa (now Odisha). By the age of three, Fakir Mohan lost his parents and was consequently looked after by his paternal grandmother Kuchila Dei. Struggling though orphan hood, physical illness, personal tragedies, financial obstacles, and cultural constraints, Senapati persevered to justify his life and times through several stints he would undertake later on. Fakir Mohan was a school teacher at the Mission School, Balasore; a Dewan (Administrator in King's Court) at several places like Nilgiri, Dhenkanal, Daspalla, Keonjhar, etc. in colonial Orissa in the Bengal Province; a translator of the Mahabharata, the Geeta, the Ramayana, the Boudhavatar Kavya; a poet of immense poetic sensibility as noticed in his poems "Puja Phula", "Puspamala", "Abasar Basare", "Dhuli" and "Upahar"; a traveller as witnessed in the first Odia travelogue of his Utkala Bhramanam (1892); a writer of first Odia autobiography of his life in Atmajibanacharita (written in 1918, published in 1927); a master story teller of forty stories such as, "Rebati" (1898), "Dak Munshi" (1912), "Patent Medicine" (1913), and "Randipua Ananta" (1913); and above all, the greatest Odia novelist for his four masterpieces Lachhama (1901), Chha Mana Atha Guntha (1905). Mamu and Prayaschitt (1915). Apart from being called as 'Byasa Kabi' for his rendition of the Mahabharata in Odia, Senapati's monumental literary achievements have earned him several laurels:

In words of Dr. J.V. Boulton Fakir Mohan is the Gorky of Odisha. Durbar of Damapada state conferred on him the enviable title Saraswati. Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh calls him

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Thomas Hardy of Odisha. People call him the forerunner of Premchand and the first Indian author to deal with social realism through rustics and pastoral theme. Fakir Mohan has contributed only four novels and twenty-five stories, which endowed him the title of Katha Samrat (Emperor of Fiction) of the literature (FMU NAAC SSR, 2015, p.8).

Fakir Mohan was ahead of many Indian writers such as Premchand in addressing certain Indian realities through literary genres. His fiction *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (1905) predates Premchand's *Godan* (1936) and was written much before the October Revolution (1917) in Russia. As a writer, Fakir Mohan successfully experimented with multiple literary genres and made them milestones in Odia literature, before he breathed his last on June 14, 1918. One of the best colleges in Odisha is named after him, Fakir Mohan College (Estd. 1944), as well as a new university called Fakir Mohan University (Estd. 1989). Jitendra Narayan Patnaik has succinctly captured Fakir Mohan Senapati thus:

A versatile genius who wrote novels, short stories, poems, essays and school textbooks as well as translated a number of Sanskrit classics into Oriya, Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) is an integral part of the cultural history of Orissa. His relentless struggle to assert a distinct Oriya identity in the face of the growing dominance of Bengali and western cultures and his immense contribution towards the shaping of modern Orissa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have turned him into a legendary hero of the Oriya race (Patnaik, 2008, p.56).

Senapati is widely revered for his historical role in shaping Odia language, Odia print cultureⁱ, Odia nationalismⁱⁱ and Odia literature too. He is known as the father of Odia fiction for dexterously depicting rural and feudal Odia realism through common and colloquial Odia language. In fact, with him would begin a radical departure from earlier Sanskritic tradition to modern realistic writing in Odia literary history. Most of his thematic concerns center around the world of peasantry who were pitied against feudalism and caught between tradition and modernity. According to the current theoretical standards of subaltern studies, Fakir Mohan was a true historian of Odia subalterns whose works entailed a panoptic gaze on agrarian problems, problems of feudalism, English education, rising urbanity, widow remarriage, women's issues, crisis of religion, modern education, poverty, untouchability, superstitions, rural transformations, and above all Odia nationalism. As a chronicler of his times, he encrypted the anarchic Maratha invasion in Odisha in his Lachhama (1901), feudal history and impact of 1866 famine of Odisha in his Chha Mana Atha Guntha (1905), not to mention of his autobiography Atmajibanacharita (1918) which is a compendium of cultural criticisms on people and places, besides his numerous stories that are more akin to fact than fiction. What makes his language unique and interesting is his employment of foreign phrases and vocabularies from Persian, Urdu, English, Sanskrit and Bengali, making his literary oeuvre a potpourri of irony, satire, humour, and hermeneutics. Fakir Mohan was a fierce conjurer of art and its utility, as he juggled his readers between two extremes of art and didacticism. He never took an authorial positon to impose his intention or teach, rather he was a master exposer who left his works to the posterity to be pondered over. Considering his unique life as a curious bundle of personal and administrative success, failures, conspiracies and creativity, it would not be wrong to view him as the Francis Bacon of Odisha. Like Bacon's essays, which are full wit, humor, epigrams and practical wisdoms, Senapati's writings are similarly replete with sharp satires, experiential realities, and covert poetic justice.

2. Women of Fakir Mohan's Oeuvre:

Writing during the colonial Orissa, Senapati was not far away from the trans-state cosmopolitanism of Bengal Presidency, i.e., the cultural hybridity of Banga, Bihar and Orissa. It is at the backdrop of the Bengal Renaissance, the Bramho Samaj, early English education in Orissa, transformations in feudalism, and influence of European modernity, that Fakir Mohan created a set of women characters who, though hailed from rural backgrounds, were agents of exposing patriarchal and feudal culture. It is through these women characters Fakir Mohan intervened in the continuing feudality history of women's subjugation, and created a gyno-space in Oriya the literature. Women like Rebati in the story "Rebati", Sulochana in "Patent Medicine", Saraswati Dei in "Pathoi Bahu", Chemi in "Bagala Baguli", Champa and Saria in the novel Chha Mana Atha Guntha, the young widow Singhani in "Randipua Ananta" and the real women characters he encountered in his Atmajibancharita are victims of patriarchy, and Senapati salvaged them from their buried history to criticize patriarchy and usher in a new Orissa that would rise from their gendered amnesia. Rebati, due to her introduction to education, is blamed for bringing series of deaths to her family; Sulochana is schooled to forebear her husband's misdeeds and enslave herself to patriarchal norms; Saraswati is lampooned for her illiteracy; and Singhani is projected as a manly-widow yet pampering her son even to his death. These women characters in Senapati's writings become literary parallels to the real women struggling for female identity, dignity and individual choice in both public and private spheres. Ironically, however, none of these women, except the young widow Singhani, have either their own voice or identity to take on patriarchy on their own. Rather, they are appended to husband, father, landlord, family or community acting as controlling authorities, leaving a question mark on the writerly intention and artistic responsibility Fakir Mohan. Nevertheless, his women characters would be inspirations to women writers (Rebati's sistersⁱⁱⁱ) such as Kokila Devi, Kuntala Kumari Sabat, Sita Devi Khadanga, Sarala Devi, Basant Kumari Patnaik and Bidyut Prabha who would lay the foundation of women's writing in Odisha.

3. The Story of "Patent Medicine"

The narrative of "Patent Medicine", written in 1913, revolves around an upper middle class family comprising of the husband Chandramani Pattanaik, wife Sulochana and the manservant Makra. It seems that Sulochana has kept a tight leash for months on Chadramanibabu and has restrained him from indulging in the three vices of opium, wine and women. On the morning of the story, Chandramani receives an invitation from his paramour, a dancing girl Usmantara. To keep this rendezvous, Chandramani weaves an elaborate plan of ritualistic penance from within the house wherein Makra would act as his proxy. In the meantime, he would leave the house to seek out Usmantara clandestinely. Before his return, though, Sulochana discovers the mischief and lies waiting for Chandramani in the place of Makra. Thinking the covered and prostate body to be Makra's, Chandramani in a fit of drunkenness, reveals all the details of the rendezvous. Enraged beyond words, Sulochana pounces on Chandramanibabu and gives him a tremendous broom bashing which then is referred to as 'Patent Medicine'.

Ever since the story came to public domain, the term 'patent medicine' has become a popular penal metaphor to be used for any kind of serious or trivial mistake that an Odia commits. Such is the prominence and permanence of this story!

4. Analysis:

Similar to the peasantry, the tribal, the working women, the housewives, and all of those of the 19th century who engaged the attention of subaltern historians and Marxists, the prostitutes too merited critical attention and space in literary discourse. A number of Bengali texts throughout the 19th century had contributed in disseminating the image of the prostitute as the other of the good woman. We, in the course of this paper, focus instead on the early twentieth century and on Fakir Mohan Senapati, and his epochal story "Patent Medicine" that typified this societal understanding in the Bengal province, of which Orissa was a part. Odia scholars often ignore the literary resonances and cultural affiliation of Senapati with the colonial Bengal Province. Senapati couldn't see his separate Orissa state as he breathed his last in 1918, eighteen years before Orissa was declared a separate state in April 1, 1936. His apprenticeship in maritime business (salt) with Bengal, his familiarity with literary developments in Calcutta, and above all the geographical proximity of his native district (Balasore) with Bengal had undoubtedly shaped his creative criticality. Therefore, it would not be entirely wrong to suppose how certain colonial provincial ideas were undercurrent in his literary works. In this text, we probe the binaries of the chaste wife (Patibrata Stree) and the prostitute (Beshya) and how this divide is modelled into visible and obvious signs. It is in the story that Senapati explores two institutions of urban society: debauchery and prostitution at length, and how ingenious methods were necessary to possibly cure men of those indulgences that brought disrepute to kulin households.

The story, set in the first decades of the twentieth century Orissa, in the city of Cuttack, revolves round the upper middle class family of Chandramani Pattanaik and his wife Sulochana. The pampered sons of prosperous Dewans or Banians or Zamindars after having inherited their fathers' wealth would often squander it on drinking, whoring and other amusements. Such sons were to be found not only in and around Calcutta which emerged "as the main flesh pot for the new patrons of prostitution in the beginning of the nineteenth century" (Banerjee, 1993, 2463) and onwards but also in neighboring state of Orissa and Bihar which were still undivided in colonial times. Our Chandramanibabu too is one such spoilt son of a wealthy zamindar, Shyam Pattanaik, who had sought to cure the ways of his wayward son through marriage to Sulochana, the virtuous and dignified daughter of Ramakrishna Mohanty.

The narrative at the very onset projects Sulochana as a model of the ideal wife, caring, concerned about the welfare of her husband and household. If we are to acknowledge the importance and impact of conduct literature written in those times we realise how "conduct books" by writers like Jagabandhu Singh "created and promoted a discourse, which advanced a male- oriented agenda. It often took recourse to intelligent and skillful means for pushing an ideology of female containment. It aimed at propagating the ideal of the good housewife. The heroic women of India, the great Ramani of Bharat, would give birth to noble souls. A woman has to cook and take care of the health of the family members. She has no use of makeup when the husband is away, for a woman her husband is truly the source of joy and fulfillment" (Nanda, 2010, p. 2). Our mistress of the story, likewise, has a life revolve around the home, the hearth and the husband. She through regimentation, discipline and care had brought about a change in the husband's health for the better- "four months under my constant care has made you somewhat healthier, when I had put an end to your drinking" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p.140). This controlling nature of the wife is resented by the master who devices various ways of escape. On the day of the story, our Babu receives a letter from one Usmantara seeking a rendezvous with him. From that moment on, the story focusses on the various ruses contemplated by Chandramani to fructify the rendezvous. He complains to his wife how he was not keeping well and how his astrologer had suggested that he travel and offer penance to various deities at Khandagiri, Udayagiri, Bhubaneswar and so on. He begins to weave a tale of deceit to his wife. "Do you know that for the last four days, I am having terrible pain in my stomach? My head reels, my whole body feels faint and queer!" (Senapati, 2000, p.139). His wife is quick to deduce it as a fabrication though:

"Here now, what new trick is this of yours? ... She looked hard at his face. She knew in her heart of hearts that he was lying; for three days he would only leave the house to be drunk somewhere or visit some shoddy whore house in Telenga Bazar" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p.140).

The lack of appeal of the wife to men like Chandramani could be understood by the contrast that was set up as a binary between the chaste wife and the prostitute. The anonymous author of *Advice to Women* offers two distinct moulds into which he casts all women - "the beshya is loud mouthed, always restless, bares special parts of her body, falls on men, demands jewellery and continuously wears revealing clothes" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 167). The chaste wife on the other hand is "shy, silent, does her duty and is totally undemanding, stays away from men, keeps her whole body covered and does not wear flashy clothes" (Chatterjee, 1993, p.167). Fakir Mohan has Sulochana fulfilling all these requirements albeit a couple. She is loud and she demands loyalty. Is Fakir Mohan then inaugurating the possibility of the acceptance of a new idea of chaste woman here? In the words of the Brahmin cook of the household,

"Our mistress is a strange woman. When the master is ill, her devotion knows no limits. She nurses him all day without touching a morsel of food herself. But when she is angry with him, she doesn't hesitate to strike him with anything she can lay her hand on! But she is a good soul. She has a large heart: just a little bad-tempered, and a striking tongue - that is all" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p. 142).

When Chandramani realizes that there are now ways of his leaving the house for the rendezvous he plans to stage a mock ritualistic penance from within the house. He would, in the storeroom, lie prostrate with a blanket covering his entire body from noon until late night on an empty stomach, all the while taking the names of all the known deities. Sulochana acquiesces to his wish hoping that the Gods do take mercy on her husband and relieve him from his suffering-

"Oh Goddess Cuttack Chandi! O Goddess Mother of Kali Gali !' she wailed. 'I promise you both two black sarees and two goats to be sacrificed as soon as the master gets well" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], pp. 142-143).

All the while Chandramani is supposedly offering penance alone in the storeroom, Sulochana is restless and cannot keep still. She can only think of providing support and nourishment for her husband once he emerges from his ritualistic penance - "Fruits of course: she kept banana, slivers of fresh coconuts, cheese and milk ready for him" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p. 143). The master, on the other hand, has bribed his man-servant Makra to lie as his proxy in the storeroom. This allows him the coveted opportunity to visit Usmantara. He sets out not only to deceive his wife but also the gods in his desire for the other life, the other woman.

As the name would suggest Usmantara could only be conceived as a heavenly cosmic star, attractive, enthralling and ethereal. Various literature of the nineteenth century have offered precious glimpses into babu culture. If we draw particulars from these satirical pieces, we find that one had to indulge in *'khushi'*(pleasure), and *'Khanki'* (whore) to achieve a semblance of success in becoming a true babu (Banerjee,1993, p. 2463). Chandramanibabu's acquaintance with Usmantara was not new, but she had been his paramour for the past three years-

"But was this the affair of one day? From the time she came to dance at Gopal babu's house, we have been friends. And that was three years ago!" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p. 144).

It is truly the *khanki* who can bring *khushi* to Chandramanibabu-- "Änd when I met her I felt as if I had got back my old treasure! Ah, the excitement, the ecstasy! Everything was there" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p.144). Sumanto Banerjee in his article on the prostitute on her clientele writes, "stripped of all emotional and intellectual attributes she becomes the female body" (Banerjee, 1993, p. 2461)-- a necessary reduction to fuel the "fantasy of pleasure that deceptively fills up the vacuity of the soul" (Banerjee, 1993, 2461). What of the pleasure of the prostitute? She is a mere body with no dream, no hopes, no desires, no home, no hearth, no husband and no children. She performs no constructive role as a wife or as a mother.

"While the gentle woman was deified as 'grihalaxmi and kulabadhu^{iv}', the deviant was marked as an outcast- 'alaxmi, asati and kulata^v' (the latter also meaning the prostitute)" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 167).

Usmantara seeks out Chandramanibabu out of no love or loyalty but because of his indulgent nature, because of his depravity. The immorality of the liaison is paralleled by the indulgence and lavish food and wine- "everything was there, the special opium, the rum. Not the local rum as you think, but real English stuff, number one" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p. 144).

The understanding that prostitutes were materialistic, and who made fortunes by exploiting and praying on men was widespread. In the words of such a self-made woman working in the flesh trade –

"We do not have any lasting relations with the babus. They are from outside; they are here today, but may disappear tomorrow. But they have cash.... As long as the babus fancy us, however learned they may be, they submit to one word uttered by a whore--the word is 'Aan (bring). My darling'...Once you utter it, no babu can resist it. He will have to bring it to you even if he has to steal or sell his wife's ornaments" (Banerjee, 1993, p. 2476).

At the behest of Usmantara, Chandramani promises to bring her money of a desired amount even if it meant stealing from his wife's safe deposit box-

"Do you know where I will get the money from? Your mistress has stacks of money in the chest where she keeps the revenue receipts so carefully. Thrice I have tried open the chest and taken money. Your mistress doesn't have an inkling of it" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p. 145)- he tells Makra.

All this while, the paper has sought to establish two separate and definite categories of women; the chaste women and the fallen women, much like the two terms popular in Victorian England , 'the angel in the house' and 'devil in the flesh'. Universal patriarchal ideologies have attempted over time to prescribe and proscribe a stringent code of conduct for the women. Feminist thinkers have written in protest against such categorization both in the West as well as in the East, much to the chagrin of the dominant patriarchy. Sarala Devi in her feminist treatise, "The Rights of Women", poses a very potent question- "a separate code of conduct exists for women. For instance, a term such as chaste which we hear so frequently, seems always to refer to women. Strangely we never find a corresponding term applicable in the case of men" (Devi and Sachidanan Mohanty, 1934 [2003], p.150). She also goes on to reiterate how women when rendered helpless and vulnerable accept "the conventional codes of the male dominated society treating them as the will of God" (Devi and Sachidananda Mohanty, 1934[2003], p.150). There was no conduct literature written specifically for men subscribing them to lead a moral and virtuous life.

Rather there are instances of literature where men have been shown and encouraged to indulge in various immoral proclivities. Our story picks up on those rampant cultural practices of the times like with reference to the fashion of "arranging 'nautches' for family occasions of a son/daughter's marriage or religious festivals like the Durga Puja" (Chaterjee, 1993, p. 165). The first time Chandramanibabu encounters Usmantara is probably at once such 'nautch'. The new generation of prostitutes had to cultivate various skills for the entertainment of the male clientele and "the skills did not remain confined to skills of sexual entertainment. It embraced the fine art- music, dance, painting" (Banerjee, 1993, p. 2461). Usmantara to Fakir Mohan was probably an amalgamation of the old school of prostitutes and the new having acquired few added skills to the old "like "*thamak*", flaunting an affected gait and "*chatak*", dazzling the customer with gaudy glamour (Banerjee, 1993, p. 2467). Usmantara then becomes the typical other of the chaste and domesticated women, a repository of the skills acquired through ages to entrap, deceive, seduce and entertain men.

Ironically, it is this category of women who could enjoy relative freedom and agency. Where the wife was restricted to the *andar mahal*^{*i*} women like Usmantara could travel in order to perform 'nautches'. Dancing girls would have been "invited from Agra, Banaras, and Lucknow to come to Calcutta" (Chatterjee, 1993,p.165) and we presume to cities like Bhadrak and Cuttack too. It was also noted how these performing women refuted the general "characterization of women as dependent and soft, diffident and submissive" (Banerjee, 1993, p. 2469). Interestingly, it is Usmantara who invites Chandramanibabu for the rendezvous after reaching Cuttack from Bhadrak. Juxtaposed against Sulochana, it is she who enjoys relative freedom. It is she who is apparently emancipated, although both are at the mercy of the diktats of the male.

On his return late in the night Chandramanibabu can utterly be disrespectful towards his wife and everything that stood for domestic and moral virtue. In a fit of drunken stupor, he maligns the image of Sulochana in front of Makra the manservant. In this following instance, we come across the inherent masculine toxicity of men like Chandramani reducing women to mere objects, either of pleasure or pain- "the tweeny of your mistress had held me back for two long months, my throat had gone dry, two months of pleasure I have had – all in a single day" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p. 144). And it is then that Sulochana is projected to be capable of some action which was unimaginable in those times of rigid and stringent patriarchy-

"A broom was lying nearby; she grabbed it and hit out left and right; striking his body, wherever she could! Chandramani Babu squirmed and tried to escape; but drunk as he was, he slumped to the floor while the flogging continued" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p. 145).

What could have compelled Fakir Mohan Senapati to propose such a remedy to cure the ways of recalcitrant husbands? Surely, he was not proscribing and prescribing flogging of husbands at the hands of wives as a possible medicine for the socio-cultural ailments ingrained and contained within husbands? How could this be a wife's 'patent medicine' as described by Chandramanibabu's neighbour Gopi babu- "Alcohol and antics, such gnawing diseases, vanish with the cure known as broom flogging" (Senapati, 1913 [2000], p.146). We realise herein how Senapati could only have been sarcastically suggesting of this husband bashing as a remedy. He adds further sarcasm to the term by implying the shames culturally inherent both in the broom perceived as a feminine weapon and the wife herself as his patriarchal servant. Fakir Mohan herein makes possible veiled criticism of the norms of patriarchy and a depiction of the disillusionment he may have experienced in studying the society of his times. The emerging popularity of the term 'patent medicine' and its colonial pervasiveness is also another point to reckon with, especially its permeation into cultural humor. The employment of this English term

that had its century's of scientific history^{vii} is also a possible suggestion of an objective and rational approach to oriental Orissa's feudal problems.

Endnotes

^{iv} Grihalaxmi is an austere and lucky daughter-in-law; Kulabadhu is the eldest daughter in law of the family.

^v 'Alaxmi' refers to a woman who doesn't have the characteristics of Goddess Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, and therefore brings misfortunes to her family; 'asati' is an unchaste woman who is not faithful to husband; 'kulata', in Bengali, means a prostitute.

^{vi} Andarmahal: This a interior room or space in a house earmarked for women folk only. The idea was basically patriarchal and practiced to demarcate the public from the private.

^{vii}"Patent", as a concept and practice, was applied to culinary dishes in the Greek colony of Sybris in Southern Italy. It was only in 1874, that a more formal and practical procedure evolved for granting patent for inventions in arts and medicine. Read "History of Patent System". www. english.rvo.nl > patents-otherip-rights-topic > patent-law. Accessed on 6/6/2020. Fakir Mohan, whose life and works were immensely influenced by this age of capitalism, might not have been altogether alien to this emerging global concern pertaining to invention, property rights etc.

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ⁱ It is Fakir Mohan who brought Printing Press in a Bullock Cart from Calcutta to Balasore in 1868, and published magazines in Odia language to curb the dominance of Bengali language over Odia. His publishing house was named "P. M. Senapati & Co Utkal Press".

ⁱⁱ Senapati published articles in the magazine *Utakala Deepika*, held public meetings and delivered patriotic speeches to foster Odia nationalism. The then district collector of Balasore, John Beams, helped Fakir Mohan to foster a linguistic movement for asserting supremacy of Odia language in Odisha.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sachidananda Mohanty uses this term in his article "Rebati's Sisters: Search for Identity through Education. *Indian International Centre Quarterly*. Vol. 21, No. 4. (1994).