

Dissecting A “Radical” Literature : A Critical Study of the play “*Neel Darpan*”

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Abstract

The Revolt of 1857 saw the congregation of the peasants and the rural landowners in order to display a collective consciousness against colonial power. This coming together of the binaries was not only limited to that event but could be witnessed again in the context of Bengal. The atrocious acts of the Indigo planters on the peasantry compelled the rural landlords to support the cause of peasants, leading to an Indigo rebellion in 1859. The rebellion caught the attention of many writers, however what overshadowed all literature on the Indigo rebellion was the play, *Neel Darpan* written by Dinabandhu Mitra, depicting the plight of peasants of rural Bengal who were forced to cultivate indigo against food crops. Through this essay, I attempt to study and incorporate new possibilities of understanding, questioning, reviving and writing of the ‘subaltern past.’ The essay will primarily deal with understanding the nature of the play, away from the nationalist approach and dissect important themes embedded in the play.

Employing the methodology of reading the play “along the grain” and “against the grain”, I aim to bring forth certain new questions which might contribute to re-think the play from a new perspective.

Keywords: Indigo Rebellion, Bengal, Subaltern, Gender Roles, Class and Caste Dynamics

Introduction

The “radical” play written by Dinabandhu Mitra has been attributed as an important 19th century text which contributed in raising a nation wide consciousness for the atrocities committed on the peasants. The popularity of the play was so immense and the characters so real that it is rumored that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar threw a shoe at the character of English planter, Mr. Wood. The popularity and the controversy accentuated with the English translation and publishing of the text by a native and an English clergyman, respectively. Renowned Bengali poet and contemporary, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee emphasised that it was the display of empathy which gave revolutionary colour to the text. Furthermore, Sivnath Shastri comments that the plight, emotional distress and tragedy of the peasants made the spectators so furious that if they had a chance, they would tear the planters with their sheer teeth.

However, the central question which arises at this moment is what makes this text so “powerful and revolutionary”? Ranajit Guha claims that neither the author was an established writer nor was the author writing about a new theme, as the atrocities on peasant was a recurring theme covered by agencies like the Hindu Patriot regularly, then why did the native landlords were heavily influenced by the text and came out in large support of the peasants.

The answer lies in the reaction of the planters towards the text which gave the native landlords an excuse to lend their support to the peasants. Guha asserts that even though the text was published in September 1860, it was not before May 1861 that the Calcutta liberals and intellectuals took notice of it. The reason for this delay was some administrative miscommunication between the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal and the Secretary to the Government of Bengal which upset the planters and hence they decided to make the play as a cause for libel. It might be at this juncture that the native intermediaries saw it as an opportunity to tilt the balance of power in their favour by appearing as the messiah for the peasants, behind the veil of an English clergyman Rev. James Long. Hence, the *Neel Darpan* emerged as a political instrument in concocting the myths of a liberal government and a ‘conscious’ *bhadralok* community who stood against the ‘bad English planters’.

The play, *Neel Darpan*, is about a small landowning class, the Basus of Swarapur in Bengal who are entrapped in the vicious cycle of indigo plantation, which not only ruin them financially but also destroy their socio-cultural life. It further depicts the plight of this family and the peasants of rural Bengal through elements of rape, physical torture, death by suicide and madness. However, embedded in these horrendous acts are important themes and understanding of the Bengali rural and middle class *bhadralok*. Mitra, who himself adheres to the ideals of liberalism and reformism created the play to uphold the idea of British legal system as the emancipator of oppression and the idea of non-violence as depicted from the statement of the main protagonist, Nobin Madhav – “Torap, what is the use of beating him (Mr. Rose)? We ought not to be cruel, because they are so; I am going.” (Act 3, Sc.3). Moreover, Mitra frequently suggested that there were good sahibs, who run the government and the bad sahibs, who run the indigo factories. Nobin Madhav’s mother, Savitri Basu claims this as her social distinction and described the white planters as “*chandals*” (Act 1, Sc. 4). The social and cultural ideology reflected by the Basu family were almost identical with that of Mitra himself.

The idea of Neel Darpan being anything but “radical” and “revolutionary” could further be demonstrated through a continuous defense and adopting a loyal-cum-liberal attitude towards the planters, even by the peasantry. Torapa, one of the peasants, is seen to be reprimanding a fellow ryot who had been falsely framed twice, by stating that not all planters are like that and the ryot must be at fault.

On the question of Governor being a business partner in the Indigo enterprise, Torapa asserted that the Governor was nothing like the cruel English planters and if he continues to hold office, then “the great burden of Indigo shall no more hang on our (their) shoulders” (Act 2, Sc.1). This feeble mentality of siding with one figure of atrocious authority to counter another figure of atrocious authority reflects Mitra’s appreciation of the British authority and how he converted peasantry into a non-rebellious body which was filled with hope for a good administration someday.

The support for the British institutions and administration was not only reflected from Mitra but also reciprocated by the British government, which awarded the title ‘*Raisaheb*’ for his service to the British Empire in 1871 (10 years after its publication). Had Dinabandhu Mitra written a radical, anti-colonial and peasant conscious play, would he be honoured with such title?

It thus becomes imperative to question the anti-imperialist stance taken by the contemporary “nationalists”, wherein a selective appeal is presented by the petty bourgeoisie against the foreign exploiters. The essay hence attempts to dissect and mine out certain ideas and conceptions of the 19th century Bengal which ultimately helps us in examining the rhetorics of the *bhadraloks*, as well as the *ryots*.

Hierarchy and Power Dynamics

One of the most important, rather the central theme of the text is the socio-political settings prevailing in 19th century Bengal. Reading the text, we can grasp on the inert contradictions visible among the characters of the landowning class and the peasantry. Through his play, Mitra has successfully asserted the paternalistic traits in the agrarian relationship between the two classes. Nobin Madhav is depicted as an utterly dedicated man who is seen as the protector of the peasants as evident from the scene when a ryot who was taken away by the Bailiffs of the Police, and a Taidgir of the Indigo Factory appealed to Nobin Madhav to preserve his two children from starvation (Act 2, Sc.3).

We also find hints of his noble idea of making a school for the children (Act 2, Sc.3) and how he was providing food for the families of the arrested ryots and having their lands cultivated at his own expense. (Act 3, Sc. 1). Mitra not only presents his protagonist as the ideal human and the embodiment of the *zamindari* system but also justifies why the *Mahajans* (or the moneylenders) were popular among the *ryots*. In one of the scenes, Gopi, the Dewan who was working under Mr. Wood, informs Mr. Wood that it was the paternalistic attitude and activities such as, accepting the produce in place of payment and shifting the debt into the next account which made the Mahajans more approachable, unlike the planters who took refuge to “shamchand”. (Act 5, Sc. 1)

However, the most surprising aspect was the Dewan’s claim that “the Mahajans never bring an action against their debtors” (Act 5, Sc.1) which casually hides the various exploitative measures employed by the Mahajans in order to extract the loan and interest granted to the peasant. The important question is why did Mitra hide the exploitative nature of the mahajani class and why did the mahajani class support the peasantry?

In my view, the support lent by the landlord-mahajan class towards the peasantry against the planters was due to the hampering of the former’s business of giving out loans. Since, the peasant was already in deep debt due to the indigo plantation, it could not dread to beg for

more loan from the mahajans and even if they did, the mahajans might have had a tough time in generating back the loan, along with interest. Hence, Mitra not only assured his stance as the defender of the landlord-mahajani system but also presented the position of the peasant who was crushed in the power struggle between the planters and landlord-mahajani class.

Gender Roles

Another interesting theme depicted in the play by Mitra, presses on the gender roles prevalent during the 19th century countryside Bengal. A strong distinction could be found in the play of who was a “good woman” and who was a “bad woman”. The women of the Basu family were depicted as “good women” who remained indoors and tended to the needs of the family members. In one of the scenes, the youngest daughter-in-law, Saralota talks about the dullness of being a “good woman” as they are neither allowed to go out in their own garden nor allowed to have a walk in the town. They also have no college, no law courts and no source of entertainment. (Act 2, Sc.2).

A staunch orthodoxy is also found when the house helper, Aduri, objects on the question of widow remarriage which was one of the major events during that period. Moreover, the women of the Basu family were not allowed to write letters to even their husbands and hence communication was one sided.(Act 2, Sc. 2). This depicted that whatever information they received was from a secondary source and hence, had limited knowledge of the public sphere. Further, Khetra, daughter of the neighboring ryot Sadhu Churn, informs that she chopped off her curls, as her curls displeased her husband's elder brother who said that it suits best on prostitutes and women of rich families. (Act 1, Sc.4)

The “bad women”, as depicted by Mitra, were the British women who rode horses and sent letters to the Magistrate to support her husband. Sabitri in one of the scenes curses the British

women by saying that something unfortunate will happen with her someday. (Act 1, Sc.4). Also, we have reference to Podi Moyrani, a prostitute and a pimp, who was a person of contempt and disgust as she had no “virtue” and was the one who took Khetra to Mr. Rose, who then raped her. In one of the scenes, she is seen to be lamenting as Khetra considers Podi to be her aunt and it breaks her heart to send her to Mr. Rose.

However, what intrigued me was her caste consciousness when she says, “How detestable is this, that for the sake of money, I have given up my caste and my life; and also am obliged to touch the bed of a Buno (rude tribe)” (Act 2, Sc.3) Being a prostitute not only deprived her from basic dignity but also evicted her from the caste hierarchy as her non-reproductive sexuality challenged the Hindu norms of monogamous relationship. Since she is evicted from her caste and is also shunned by the society, her body has no security or dignity and is available to any and everyone.

Further, the rape of Khetra not only demonstrates the animalistic behaviour meted out on women by the English planters but also shows how Mitra skips the same behaviour or even lesser atrocities meted out on the women from the upper caste (Basu family). One might guess that the reason for exclusion of torments faced by upper caste women was due to the fact that Mitra himself was an upper caste male and did not want to portray women of his own caste in bad light. Thus, the onus of upholding caste honour lies upon the women, synonymous with the present times.

Caste and Class Consciousness

Simultaneous with the theme of gender roles, the caste and class consciousness among the characters is also embedded in the play. Mitra, through his play, assures that the caste of a person is omnipresent and could not be detached from an individual. In many instances, he depicts how caste is embedded in the insults showered by the person in authority towards the

subjugated person. Gopi, the Dewan in one of the scenes states to Mr. Wood, “My lord, true, your slave is a kayastha by caste but I do my work like a Keaot (shoemaker)...the work I have done for these, I can dare say, can never be done by a Keaot.. It is my ill-fortune only that I don't get the least praise for doing so much” (Act 1, Sc.3). Through this statement, Gopinath asserts his loyalty to the planter by degrading the Keot caste (Dalits) and informs Mr. Wood that the nature of his work is so inhuman and malevolent that he is transformed from a Kayastha to a lowly Keaot, which was unimaginable for him.

In another instance, Nobin Madhav was harshly abused by Mr. Wood, who called him “beef eater and a lowly fellow”. Insulting an upper caste Kayastha Hindu to be a lowly fellow and a beef eater was an act of utmost disrespect towards Nobin Madhav as cow is considered as a holy symbol. The insult impacted Nobin heavily as in the next sentence he “begs” mother Earth to engulf him as he never suffered such insults. (Act 1, Sc.1)

Further, in one of the scenes, Sadhu Churn is shown to have used the word ‘pratapshali’ (mighty) during the exchanges between Dewan, Mr. Wood and Sadhu. This enrages the Dewan who admonishes him for his “show off” and mocks him for his use of a language above his class. (Act 1, Sc. 3) The shunning of Sadhu for using “sadhubhasha” or elite words demonstrates the idea that the peasants could neither think nor speak in the language of the dominant class.

The idea of a stagnant peasant, not only economically but even culturally, was the prevailing custom so that the power relations, constituting the upper class-caste people, shall not get disturbed. Thus, Mitra's play not only legitimises the bourgeoisie liberal attitude towards the peasantry but also accepts the Brahmanism-patriarchal domination as witnessed through the tripartite nexus between caste, class and gender.

Colonial Law and Education

The play also demonstrates the immense trust and emphasis on colonial law which the liberal bourgeoisie class exhibited. It is in one of the first few dialogues that we find Nobin Madhav informs his idea of taking action against the factory and plantation with the help of law (Act 1, Sc.1). The belief in the idea of a good Magistrate could be found in instances where Mr. Wood states that the Magistrate of Amaranagara listens to the complaints of the peasants and even Nobin Madhav states that some of the Magistrates are dispensing justice (Act 3, Sc.2). However, during the trial of Goluk Chandra, the Magistrate of Indrabad decided to side with the planters even after hearing the woeful cries of Goluk Chandra and how the planters deceitfully concocted a case against the landlord. The play is centered around the idea of legality with binaries of good and bad proponents – Nobin Madhav and his family uphold the law, while the planters obliterate and use law for their own purposes.

An important observation which struck me was the relationship between English education and colonial law and how Mitra shows that the emergence of English schools in the countryside made the English planters uncomfortable. The educated liberal middle class could counter the British through their own laws, but who would go against the powerful planters in support of the peasant? Even if some did, then until what point?

Native Intermediaries in Colonial Bengal

The play further emphasises upon the functioning of the native intermediaries, who acted as the bridge between the peasants and the authoritarian class, in 19th century Bengal. The task of these native intermediaries was to generate information about the rich fertile lands which were to be converted into indigo plantation sites, coerce the peasants in taking loans and to collect the final product at cheap rates. In the play, we find references of the Dewan, Khalasi, Amin and Tadagir who are despised and loathed by the peasantry due to their harsh means and foul mouth. In several instances, we can observe the vile jealousy and the greed for promotions amongst these native intermediaries, such as when the Dewan informs Mr. Wood about the

lapses in generating more revenues and asserts his replacement for a dual position, as Dewan and the Amin. (Act 3, Sc.1) The desperation for promotion was so intense that the Amin and the Khalasi let their respective sisters sleep with the planters (Act 1, Sc.2 and Act 3, Sc.1).

The play not only depicts the atrocities committed by the native intermediaries on the peasants but also portray the abuses and physical ill treatment hurled at them by the planters. In one of the instances, the Dewan was abused and physically assaulted by Mr. Wood for pointing out the difference between the native mahajans and the English planters and how cruel and ignorant the latter are towards the woes of peasants. (Act 5, Sc.1)

Mitra, through his play, tried to depict a transformation in the attitude of the native intermediaries – from a stern authoritarian tendency of coercion to a conscious and sensitive understanding of the ill doings of the planters. However, I perceive this idea in the context of their fear from the authoritarian class. Since, they were servants to this upper ruling class, they had a deep fear to contradict the forces of the zamindar or the landowning classes, who were already pressuring the government in repealing the Act of 1860 which made indigo cultivation into a form of ‘forced labour’. Thus, it was no conscious realisation of the inhumane treatments meted out on the peasantry but deep seated fear of the authoritarian class.

Violence and Atrocities

The final act of the play depicts utter chaos and violence, which commences with the suicide of Goluk Chandra. Following his death, Mr. Wood cracks open Nobin Madhav’s skull when he goes to plead with the planter to give him a few days after his father's funeral before he begins to sow indigo in his leftover private property. After hearing the death of her elder son, Savitri, in a fit of rage and depression, strangled her younger daughter-in-law, Saralata and she too died of a broken heart, after she realised the grave sin she committed.

The play ends with Bindhumadhab's monologue lamenting indigo's arrival to their land along with the cruel sahibs. On the other side, we are also informed about the death of Khetro, who was earlier raped by Mr. Rose. The deep impact of violence on the individual and on collective peasantry was the central idea of emphasis by Mitra.

Through his play, he explored and presented various facets of domination and violence which included violent deaths, physical assault and rape and psychological impact in the form of PTSD and depression, depicting a picture that indigo plantation not only depreciated soil fertility and food crop production but also destroyed the very essence of a family, its honour, its body and its soul.

Conclusions

As proposed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, “the subaltern pasts are like stubborn knots that stand out and break up the otherwise woven surface of the fabric”. These subaltern pasts are difficult to locate and narrate, as they are conceived by the historian in unfamiliar elements, tucked deep within the grander narratives of power and hegemony. The struggle of a historian is not just to extract these embedded histories within the dominant narratives but also to question the source and the context under which a particular source originates. More important than answers, it is the right kind of question which enables a historian to analyse the past more effectively and inclusively.

Through the play *Neel Darpan*, I intended to focus on these ‘knots’, as emphasised by Dipesh Chakrabarty, in order to ‘entangle’ the various nuances of the socio-political cultural life prevalent in that time and space. The dissecting of various themes provided us with deeper understanding of the inert contradictions and power relations amongst the various social groups. Even though the play panders to the liberal bourgeoisie class and English administration, it generated massive response from both the colonised people and their

colonisers and cannot be dismissed as an unimportant literary contribution in studying resistance against the oppressive English planters. It is imperative to understand the various facets of violence and resistance for a postcolonial student, even if they present a limited one-sided portrayal.

The play allowed me to witness the complex realities and the various embedded themes which a liberal upper-caste male author would not problematise otherwise. *Neel Darpan* is not a play of only resistance and the atrocities meted out on the peasantry and the lower sections of the society but also compels us to peel out the layers of complex functioning of a society. It further depicts the failure of not including the mass peasant body and attributes them as conscious elements of the society. It is hence important and necessary to legitimise such nuances of the subaltern past, not limiting these findings to micro levels of historical understanding but employing these limitations from the past in understanding the present subaltern consciousness.

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BIO-NOTE

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