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## The Nouveau Panache of Poiesis: Reading *Kallol* Era as the Modernist Mirror of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal

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### Abstract

The advent of modernism in Bengal was heralded by multiple signs. While the nationalist uprisings were in order, literary evolutions were also on their way. Moreover, the British government failed to implement the territorial division of Bengal based on religion in 1905. With the First World War in the picture, there were socio-political upheavals all over the world. Experiences altered and so did human perceptions and the politics of representation. As the epicentre of colonial Bengal, Kolkata witnessed major cultural transitions at the awake of the twentieth century.

Although Rabindranath Tagore was the most favoured face of Bengal literati, a group of young writers too, tried to make their mark by exercising their power of radical penmanship during this period. Their collective journey started with the beginning of a magazine named *Kallol* in 1923 which gave the writers a platform to articulate their understanding of the changing world. Their motive was to present before the readers the hitherto underexplored narratives of the society, things that the respectable *bhadraloks*, the conformists and the conservatives would not even acknowledge, let alone accept. Influenced by European avant-garde aesthetics, the writers of the *Kallol* age tried to establish a counter movement in Bengali literature, much to the displeasure of the conservative reading circles. In this paper, we propose to investigate select works of the *Kallol* era and study how they influenced the course of thoughts and action within the Bengali intelligentsia. Although some poets would be discussed in the course of the paper, but the focus will be mostly on the select short stories associated with the magazine.

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‘Modernity’ is a subjective term, and it has always operated on a fine thread of intersectionality between the past and the present which would eventually influence the course of the future. Modernism on the other hand is specifically denoted by a large body of artistic, literary and other aesthetically rich creations that hugely affected the socio-cultural as well as the literary history of the twentieth century and beyond. Appraising the bold assertion of Virginia Woolf that around December 1910, a radical change in human nature could be seen, writes Robert Martin Adams: “I think she’s right. Within five years either way of that date a great sequence of new and different works appeared in Western culture, striking the tonic chords of modernism.” (19)

But in this regard, it has also been noted by many that modernism in the West was a cultural phenomenon which boomed in between 1905 to 1925 (Adams 33). There is no single definition of the term because the number of events were many and so were the responses. However, modernism did try to break free from all the former traditions of art and aesthetics and in the spirit of innovation a visible attempt was made at the construction of a new cultural identity, a new face commensurate with the fin-de-siècle. As Nicholas Daly has rightly observed, modernism operated upon the overlapping components between the past and present and provided with selective ‘stylistic compensations for the loss of the ability to map the historical totality’ (Daly 9).

However, the totality was ever evading, and it echoed in almost every modernist work. The generation was almost haunted by verses of poets like T.S. Eliot who wrote: “My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark.” (Line 101). As a visible rebellion against the tradition of nineteenth century realism, modernism had slowly become the face of twentieth century with a prominent urge for rethinking and reshaping almost every existing construct of human culture. During the 1890s, the existing traditional structures and constructs were absolutely rejected. In the domain of science, newer discoveries such as the “Theory of Relativity” came into existence and Social Sciences had also begun to shift towards uncharted courses. As the nature of reality itself was changing fast, the politics and aesthetics of representation were also refashioned accordingly. Mário de Andrade in his essay “The Modernist Movement” writes:



Most evident in art, but leaving a profound mark on social and political mores, the Modernist movement was the precursor, the promoter and in many respects the creator of a national mood. The transformation of the world through the gradual weakening of the great empires, the emergence of new political ideals in Europe, the swiftness of transport, and a thousand and one other international factors . . . (95)

In the broader canvas of art and literature, it is evident that modernism has invariably been associated with a prominent break from the past and an advancement towards new modes and mediums of expression. In such times of transition, there was indeed a trend that marked an inclination towards change, an emancipation from the past towards a gradual acceptance of the loss of the bygone. A new era was born in the West; and also in the East a swirl of the tradition was on its way. In his essay, “Modernity in Bengali Literature: The Search for Norms”, Dhurjati Mukherjee writes: “...social flux has been evident since the beginning of the twentieth century and in the realm of literature, Bengali literature to be exact, modernity started with Rabindranath Tagore” (101). Nevertheless, later writers such as Manik Bandyopadhyay or Bibhutibhusan or even Buddhadev Bose were also marked as modern writers which made us to think about the multiple understandings of modernism across the continents and in the process also analyse the necessity of such pluralistic reading of the concerned concept.

The initiation of Bengali literature in the world was intrinsically associated with Rabindranath Tagore, more so during the colonial period, which further became glamourized as Tagore received the coveted Nobel Prize for *Gitanjali* in 1913. The style in which Bengali literature was being shaped in the nineteenth century could be best located in the works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, one of the most influential literary predecessor of Tagore. However, Tagore was desperate to develop a unique voice of his own from the beginning of his literary career and thus he never came under the direct influence of any of the writers before him. A closer reading of the literary history of Bengal in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century exposes, that, Bengali men of letters were rather quasi-blindly either following the themes and literary styles of Tagore or absolutely imitating him. In an interview in 1964,



when Buddhadev Bose was asked about the direction in which Bengali poetry was moving towards after Tagore, he remarked:

Immediately after Tagore, there was a group that tried to write very much in his style. But beginning in the 1920s, a reaction against Tagore started. I call this the revolt of the *Kallol* group. These poets, who are now regarded as the older representatives of modern poetry in Bengal, were, with the exception of one, deeply influenced by Tagore. At the same time, they broke away from the ethical and spiritual ideals, and the conception of the universal harmony, harmony of man and nature, with which Rabindranath's poems and writings are permeated. (43)

An iconoclast writer such as Bose does affirm the unhealthy literary practice of blind imitation within the larger oeuvre of Bengali literature, a phenomenon that was otherwise unacknowledged, even denied by the greater population of Bengali readers. An admittance of the elitist preference for Tagore was also rooted in the fact that he was greatly admired in the West, for several reasons, literature being definitely one of the most prominent one.

Ezra Pound's excitement to include a space for Tagore, a fascinating poet from Bengal could be seen as a proof of his growing popularity in the West, not only in Europe but also in the literary circles of America. To Harriet Monroe he wrote on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 1912:

This is *THE Scoop*. Reserve Space in the next number for Tagore. We'll be the only American magazine to print him, or even to know. I don't remember what I wrote to you. But he has sung Bengal into a nation, and his English version of his poems is very much wonderful. (as cited in Parisi 46)

It is a fact that the voice of Tagore had an appeal which perfectly timed with the disturbed political ambience of pre-world war Europe. The point of conflict in this regard however remains that to what extent did his literary acceptance was shadowed by his philosophy of universal harmony or vice versa. Mario Vallauri in his essay, 'The Universal Faith of Rabindranath Tagore' writes: "In a good many places in his poetic and philosophical works



Tagore refers to a personal representation of the supreme God (transcendent in the concept of pantheistic monism), and addresses words of invocation, prayers and infinite love to Him” (120).

On the other side, critics such as Poulomi Saha in her essay, “Singing Bengal into a Nation: Tagore the Colonial Cosmopolitan?” suggests that it was not just his philosophical ideologies that gained him a wide acceptance across Great Britain, it was also his ability to present before the world an alternative perspective of Indian nationalism, a hitherto much debated matter where he exhibited his ‘nationalist disillusionment’ (Saha 1), an act that emancipated him from conventional nationalist commitments and perhaps earned him a place among the early modernists. Tagore’s modernism, however, must be seen in the light of the socio-cultural as well as literary history of Bengal. Abu Sayeed Ayyub beautifully suggests in *Adhunikata o Rabindranath* (1971) that Tagore was a romantic, may be a complex one, but nevertheless, his work was not absolutely removed from the imprints of modernism. *Shesher Kabita* or *The Last Poem* (1929) can be considered to be a poignant example of the poet’s latent complexities. For Ayyub, Tagore’s literary sense was modern indeed, yet it did not have the vulgar spurge to become counter-romantic, a trend of poetry which developed after Tagore’s wide success and distinctively identified itself as modern by gathering attention from the quarters of literary criticism and of course from the group of the readers (14). However, it was discernible that owing to the combination of a lot of things ranging from Tagore’s rapidly growing global identity to the fact that nationalism was taking a defiant turn in Bengal, the growing political turmoil, and the Bengali literary world too, perhaps, was getting ready for a change: all these contributed towards modernity. In this regard, Tagore played a pivotal role, as Buddhadev Bose mentioned in his 1964 interview that modernity in Bengal with all its early nuances and limitations had been initially touched upon by none other than Tagore himself. He asserts: “There was a direction toward what was then called “realism,” but this new realism was also blended with romanticism, romanticism divested, generally speaking, of the mystical elements or mystic overtones which we find in Tagore” (43). The question therefore remains, if Tagore was a modernist, why was there a visible urge to break away from the thematic and stylistic coalition in the sphere of Bengali literature.



Tagore's classic preference for eighteenth and nineteenth century English literature has always been a well-known fact and his literary style did reflect his constructive preference for realist fiction. Of course, he was a man much ahead of his times as one can understand through his character portrayals that are timeless in their own merit as well as his way of narrating them. Following the thematic style of his significant predecessor Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay initially, Before Rabindranath Tagore, it was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay who had written several social novels which dealt with complex relationships between men and women such as *Bishabriksha*, *Krishnakanter Will* etc. Chattopadhyay was quite an orthodox in his approach and illicit liaisons outside wedlock was not encouraged even in his works of fiction which often led to the sudden death of the female character, the 'other woman', trying to corrupt the marital bliss of a couple. Tagore explored the quarters of gender politics in his novels such as *Chokher Bali* (1903), *Ghare-Baire* (1916), *Chaturanga* (1916) and also in his array of short stories such as *Samapti* (1893), *Khata* (1891), and *Manihara* (1901) and it can be said that his representations were not as orthodox as his predecessor. However, his fictional resolutions to complicated heteronormative relationships also did not carry the shade of radical unorthodoxy, at least in his early works of fiction. Not only Tagore, but his other contemporaries, such as Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, Pramatha Choudhury, Hirendrakumar Dutta and several other writers of fiction and non-fiction in spite of having the sharpest of critical minds did not transcend the standard social as well as literary tradition of conformism: partly due to the rise of the nineteenth century class of *bhadraloks*, the Victorian principles and way of life that had seeped into the Bengali culture in a visibly intense manner. It could be understood that Tagore's concept of morality was much influenced by the British appropriation of the term which advocated for an ethical and social code of conduct, a violation of which was unacceptable. Tagore was modern indeed but his sense of modernism did not mean to imitate the European aesthetic practices in this regard. Rather, he wanted to create an independent identity of the Bengali social class through his literary compositions. However, a raging fascination regarding the Western school of modernism did grow in the second decade of the twentieth century where an overdose of novel thoughts, overtly sexualised, often transcending the lines of existing cultural codes of the society did emerge and as Barunjoyti Choudhury observes, a few literary



circles developed and tried to create a separate name and identity for themselves on the basis of their counter-Tagorean practices. Identifying them as ‘ultra-modernists’, Choudhury writes:

Actually, having been attracted to colourful smokescreen of colonial cultural politics as well as westernization plus urbanization, they voluntarily surrendered to them, rather it is better to say that they accepted incarceration. As the action of the poison does not work on the body of most of the addicts even if they are bitten by snake, so also likewise the so-called ultra-moderns addicted to and overwhelmed with intoxicant of west . . . could not feel the bites of ultra-modernism and here lies there reason of opposing Rabindranath. (18)

Historically, the birth of a magazine named *Kallol* in 1923 came as a shock to the existing Bengali literary tradition. The magazine ran for a while and stopped being published around 1935. However, within that short period of operation, they collectively turned the Bengal literati upside down. As a magazine, *Kallol* embodied everything that could be identified as a counter culture movement. From the selection of the themes, the art of characterisation to the politics of representation, the group of young writers were literally calling out for attention.

The history of *Kallol* magazine goes back to an informal establishment of a club that was named as the ‘Four Arts Club’ and had Gokul Chandra Nag, Dineshranjan Das, Sunita Debi and Manindralal Basu as its founding members. The closed door club was famous for their persistent debates about several issues ranging from realist mode of representation to the ideal themes fit to be catered to the readers of modern Bengal. The lurking question regarding the necessity for the change in the thematic, linguistic and representational style that the new authors so vehemently wanted to address through their new age prose was not much accepted by the literary veterans of colonial Bengal. Although *Kallol* as a magazine was often harshly criticised by many, it eventually took the form of a literary movement, a debut avant-garde literary school of Bengali literature that had an array of brilliant writers such as Premendra



Mitra, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Jagadish Gupta, Buddhadev Basu and many others. Unlike the European Art movements which were nearly celebrated as the mirror of high modernism, *Kallol* as a literary movement faced severe criticism from the Publisher's Guild, literary clubs and even common readers. Their literary bravado was understood as a steady submission to vulgarity and abominable promiscuity on the part of the authors where their works would be read as a further proof of their abnormal sexual fetishes and problematically rising perversion.

The literary contributions of the *Kallol* had caused much uproar in the society and the severity of criticism only increased with time. Even though several men from Bengali intelligentsia were exposed to European education since 19<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance, almost every one of them denounced the works of the *Kallol* writers and refused to acknowledge their literary merit altogether. People were particularly critical of the unhindered use of profanity by the *Kallol* writers. A popular weekly magazine *Shanibarer Chithi* with Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay as its leading voice took over the moral responsibility of putting an end to such "misguided" literary culture and corresponded with Tagore regarding the matter. Tagore, however, was quite unwilling to participate in this literary feud from its onset. Ironically, owing to Tagore's larger than life image which persists in Bengal, the moralist literati and the *Kallol* group further complicated the issue by seeking Tagore's opinion in their own ways. While the former wanted Tagore to exert his influence as a moral guardian of the literary culture of Bengal, the later wanted him to accept their radical literary practices as the beginning of a new era of Bengali literature.

The situation was difficult for Tagore for a few reasons. Primarily, his family name was phenomenal in Bengal and by no means his actions were supposed to tarnish it. Secondly, as a Nobel laureate he had by then made a world recognition for himself which had helped him in establishing an educational institute in Santiniketan in 1901 which he could not endanger over any kind of literary or cultural disputes. Also, as Mafruha Mohua observes, Tagore never really accepted that there was a need to appropriate the changing times of Bengal in the fashion of European modernism. She writes:



Tagore was unconvinced by the young poets' call for a new poetics to reflect the changing world of Bengal. He did not accept the younger generation's claim to being more attuned to the real world, for the reality they had turned to was, according to Tagore, not that of Bengal or India. The socio-political disturbances of the West which led to the development of Modernism in Europe did not, he explained, reflect Bengal. (Mohua 217)

However, when Rabindranath Tagore finally gave his opinion about the content that was being published from the quarters of *Kallol* magazine, to the utter surprise of the conservative literary circle, he advised *Shanibarar Chithi* to refrain from indulging into such bitter squabbles lest they wanted to provoke the other party into producing such works of literature. While everyone looked forward to a conclusive remark of Tagore that would bring a closure to a rather unacceptable and vulgar group of young writers, his remark only suggested his neutral submission to the issue. Tagore neither supported the act of literary distortion nor did he overtly take the side of the moral guardians of Bengali literature. He simply chose to stay neutral, respectfully and of course silently. In this context it needs to be noted that despite being at the centre of negative criticism, the magazine *Kallol* did make a mark for themselves in the history of Bengali literature in their tireless attempt of introducing modernism in Bengal. Their success lies in the posterity when they are celebrated as the mascots of modern age Bengal and named their literary period as 'Kallol Yuga' or the era of *Kallol*.

Modernism as a movement was highly influenced by an array of multiple ideas. The aesthetic influences were visibly different from the political ones, nevertheless the contributions could be clearly discerned in the works of art and literature. Of the many influences that determined the course of modernist values and principles, psychoanalysis was of great importance. The psychoanalytical theory invited critical engagements from the contemporary intellectuals to identify the connection between cultural receptivity and human existence. In this context, John Brenkman observes:

Freud's most concrete invention, psychoanalytic therapy itself, is corollary to significant strands of modernist art and literature. Like other modernists,



Freud responded to the double imperative of newness and mastery, that is, expressive newness and expressive mastery...Freud invented an utterly new form of expression: an autobiographical project carried out in an asymmetrical dialogue via an amalgam of free association, dream, and transference continually reworked by constructions, rememberings, and interpretations. A dialectic of fragment and totality, Freudian psychoanalysis promised its initiates a new mode of mastery at the level of individual self-narration. (173)

The train of Freudian thought however had transcended to the British colonies too and in a way that had irked the placid cultural totem of Bengali elitist literary society. Among the writers of *Kallol*, Buddhadev Basu was mostly affected by this. In his short story 'Abhinay Noy' (*Not Playacting*) he had nearly confessed that after reading Freud he had reached the conclusion that there is nothing in the universe that he could really not understand (as cited in Ghosh 28). The Bengali writers were highly influenced by the wide-ranging Freudian such as unconscious, libido, dreams, sexual repression etc. and it began to reflect in their writing. The authors chose subjects which were hitherto unmentionable, at least within the conformist respectable space of colonised Bengal. The easeful submission to the tradition of conventional beautification by using literary means was now being discarded. The modernists all over the world were bravely accepting the hitherto discarded and disregarded mundaneness of human life with all its limitations, ugliness and morbidities. The colleges and universities established by the colonial government had good institutional libraries which provided an easy access to literatures from all over the world. Also, the Bengalis of the twentieth century by then had their own ways of procuring their favoured read by personally subscribing to the lending libraries of Calcutta or becoming members of intellectual societies and literary peer groups. A close reading of the exemplary works of the *Kallol* age writers would strongly suggest that they wanted to spread the influence of foreign literature in Bengal but although their motive was clear, their radical ways of thinking and representational style not only caused a lot of uproar and excitement, it also created an environment of discomfort. Apart from the fact that these writers wanted to introduce world literature to common Bengali reader, there was another reason that worked behind the rise of



*Kallol* age that is the socio-political environment of the country in the Inter-war years. They knew that a social consent was never going to be easy to achieve but their works functioned as their continuous attempts at correspondence with the masses. They were ready for criticism if only their work would be read by the people in the society.

The new Bengali intellectuals were different from their predecessors in several ways. While the former kind despite being trained in English education did not abandon the values and principles of their own culture altogether, the later dared to do so. A closer probing into the cultural and literary traits of the writers of *Kallol* age compels us to analyse them through the postcolonial lens offered by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).

According to Fanon, it is through three phases that the native intellectual develops in a colonial space (153). Beginning with an absolute assimilation into the Western culture, the native slowly moves towards the second stage where a connection to the past is formed only to discover a violent sense of individuality in the third (Fanon 155). It is the third stage that marks the rise of the new intellectual who is quite significantly emancipated from the colonial influence (in this case Victorian morality also needs to be taken into account) and is quite able to establish a separate identity of his own, uniquely different from its shadows of the past. The writers of *Kallol* era could largely be historically located within the time frame of colonial rule that is the early 1920s, and their knowledge about the socio-political reality was stained by the lived experience of their own people which compelled them into believing that cultural rebellion was truly required to achieve liberty. Not many of them were overtly involved with the freedom struggle but their affinity towards a wider psychological space for their larger community could also be read as a deep-rooted thirst for freedom in a way. The group of *Kallol* writers did show a possibility of a different future which was hitherto unexpected, that did not present a politically as well as socially correct image of the colonised, as the colonisers expected its subjects to follow a standard moral code of conduct that suited their larger image across the seas. However, the second or even the third generation of the socio-culturally oppressed colonised section had by then developed an identity of their own and they most earnestly wanted to declare that to the world. Therefore, it could be said that the attack of the *Kallol* was not just against their own literary predecessors,



but their target was the conservationist and conventional construct of the society that was under the influence of English moral dogmatism which worked hand in hand with elitist orthodoxy of Bengal. The ‘*Kallols*’ were the new political, social and cultural face of the state who would by no means be accepted by the considerably senior group of authors for their occasionally lewd linguistic prowess, thematic promiscuity and lack of social reverence. Stories such as ‘Rajani holo utala’ (The Restless Night) written by Buddhadev Basu, *Byathar Pradip* (The Lamp of Pain) by Gokulchandra Nag or Sukumar Bhaduri’s *Pnaker Poka* (The Vermin of the Mud) along with several other narratives published in *Kallol* magazine had created quite an uproar in the Bengali society, thereby inviting major negative response from the readers. The continuing debate between the two literary sections of the society clearly marked the moment when Bengal entered the period of modernism. The reading patterns of both the groups were extremely different from each other which partly explained their starkly different ways of literary creation. While the former authors were heavily indebted to the Neo-Classical, Romantics and Victorians, the modernists of Bengal were keener in reading literature from all over the world. Baridbaran Ghosh in his anthology titled *Kallol: Galpo Panchashat* (1996) affirmed that continental literature had so charmed these writers that works of Ibsen, Turgenev, Strindberd, Tolstoy and several others had become a part of their regular reading. They were excited by them and heavily influenced too, so much that it went on till the publication of other similar modernist magazines such as ‘Kalikalam’, ‘Pragati’ and even ‘Uttara’ (Ghosh, 2-3).

The prominence of the thematic transcendence could be observed in select stories which were published in the magazine. The treatment of sexuality evolved to a different level with the writers like Buddhadev Basu and Gokulchandra Nag. The shadow of discomfiting guilt over tabooed sexual relationships was being vividly described through powerful narratives such as *Byathar Pradip* (The Lamp of Pain), written in 1925 by Nag where a man and a woman from different parts of the society fell in love and the author boldly denied calling their union a marriage. The author simply concluded that a connection like that was unstoppable as they only had God to look over their restless hearts and raging bodies, a statement that suggests the absence of a guardian in picture, a matter regarding which his



support could be read as steady. He writes: “. . . it could not be called a marriage or a wedlock. Union would be the right word” (qtd. in Ghosh 90). Though it is lost in translation, the word “union” in Bengali sounded rather scandalous in a conservative society (1925), thereby, opening up the possibility of a live-in-relationship where only a heteronormative marriage was accepted and acknowledged. Nag uses his fine craftsmanship to jiggle with the trope of language to introduce the reader to a different kind of a heterosexual liaison.

Manohar Das, a mechanic from the jetty completely loses his heart to a daily wage labour Rangan and they spontaneously start living with each other. The introductory phase of the story itself did cause a wreck into the collective conservative psyche of the readers. Marriage was a fundamental component of Indian social structure from the very beginning of the civilisation. *Manu Samhita*, an ancient Indian text articulates an entire segment on marriage and confirms such a bond between the sexes to be of divine importance (cited in Dutt 354). Not only did the classical text, Bengali champions of literature also wrote in favour of marriage, highlighting its importance in maintaining social order. Rabindranath Tagore went ahead of his time and wrote about an extra marital relationship in *Chokher Bali* (1903) where Mahendra and Ashalata’s marital bliss is challenged by the entry of a young widow, Binodini. The course of the novel however did not allow the illicit relationship to develop into something more promising. Perhaps it was the time that did not allow Tagore to present before his readers a blasphemous take on marital sanctity, a bond so dearly held for generations; however, the possibility of such an incident did cross his mind which he clearly wanted to share with his readers. Writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay took this phenomenon one step ahead in his novels such as *Charitraheen* (1917), *Grihadaha* (1920) and a few others too. The transition in the politics of representing such forbidden matters becomes more vivid in works of *Kallol* age writers. Something that Tagore could not bring himself to, was fulfilled by the likes of Guha who dared to bring Rangan, a girl working in a factory and Manohar Das, a robust working-class man with considerably stable economic condition, into a look-alike structure of a domestic household without stating for once the legal or social identity of their relationship. The linguistic structure of the story goes hand in hand with the natural fluidity of its narration unless it brings the reader to a new point of shock where the nexus of morality is questioned once again, this time through the issue of



female polygamy, a theme that was hitherto unexplored in Bengali fiction in such a radical way. The discourse of ethical stability and sensibility is shattered because not only the female protagonist settles for a relationship outside wedlock with Manohar, she acknowledges her boredom with a single man and hence engages into sexual relationships with multiple partners which causes her pregnancy. The unprecedented pregnancy occurs after Rangan chooses to go back to her working life in a factory to deal with her boredom at the quasi-domestic set up that she had established with Manohar, that too out of her own conscious choice. Rangan's situation propels the readers to acknowledge that fact the experience of her sexual liberation goes parallel with her economic independence, something that had charmed Manohar at the initial days of their relationship. Rangan's polygamy questions the concept of fatherhood itself as with the birth of the child, the weight of Rangan's guilt heavily returns to her. Manohar's growing love for the child irks Rangan to such a degree that she finally confesses about the real identity of the child which is unclear even to her. To her utter shock, a confession as bold as that does not stir an emotional change in Manohar. Her guilt and confusion, however stays. The readers do not get the chance to form any kind of opinion about the narrative but like Rangan, their discomfort continues to linger like an aftertaste. Rangan's character shatters the binary between the domesticated female entity and the slut. She cannot not be identified as a slut and she chose not to become or remain a domesticated entity.

In The *Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities* (1997), Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy defined the term 'slut' as an individual of any gender who has the courage to enjoy a radical living experience with a bold liking for sexual pleasure (3). The acceptance of the possibility of an individual enjoying sexual encounters outside conventional structures of relationship without being identified as a cheat however came to existence in late 1990s. The sexual behaviour of Rangan therefore stood as an exemplary moment of female sexual liberation in its own right in the second decade of the twentieth century, establishing Nag who in his treatment of gender and sexuality was an equal match to D.H. Lawrence.

Multiple marriages were not quite uncommon in Indian societies; however, it was radical for a woman to choose her multiple partners and that was not quite acceptable even in



20th Century Bengal and thus Gokul Chandra Nag's short story created quite an uproar in the reading circles leaving the readers in absolute cultural shock. The infamous narrative however laid threadbare a few possibilities of relationships between men and women that were far from being considered in those times. Of course, the story was subject to notorious criticism for its objectionable content but nevertheless it showed a different facet of Bengali fiction.

The writers of the Kallol group appropriated sexuality with a remarkable boldness hitherto unknown to the Bengali readers. Buddhadev Basu in his short story *Rajani holo Utala* or *The Restless Night* (1926) explores the sexual experiences of a man in the form of a tale within a tale. The story is about a man travelling with his fiancé on a steamer where he tells her about his first sexual encounter during his early student years. The story is rich in sexual content and the language used perfectly caters to the mood which the author wishes to stress upon.

Nilima smiled at me, and asked, what are you looking at? I brought her head closer to mine and answered to her by bringing my lips upon her two beautiful eyes...Nilima closed her eyes...I carefully held her close and then tightly embraced her...She was excited. Her body heaved every time she breathed. The movements caused by her breathing made her breasts swell..." (qtd. in Ghosh 331-332).

The present intimacy is interrupted by the man's sharing of a sexual encounter from the past with his fiancé. Although he displays an initial reluctance to confide in her but then gives in to her loving request. The tale within the tale elaborates on his days as a student at a household in Bhawanipore, a rather elite neighbourhood in Calcutta where he confesses that he was exposed to repeated sexual encounters in his room with a person who chose not to reveal her identity. He could not find out who she was because the house was inhabited by seven young women and the trespasser could be any one of them. He speaks in detail about his growing anxiety and how he undergoes a nervous breakdown as he fails to cope with the unfathomable sexual mystery. To the utter surprise of the readers, Nilima probably happens



to covertly enjoy the story as her expressions does not show the slightest kind of displeasure. However, female characters in the past were seen to display extreme unhappiness regarding the liaisons of their male partners. *Krishnakanter Will* or *Krishna Kant's Will* (1878) by Bankim Chandra Chattaopadhyay, Bhramar, the wife of the protagonist Gobinda Lal could not accept the rupture of her marital bliss with her husband due to the presence of the other woman, Rohini. Neither she could abandon her marital status altogether, nor she could forgive her husband (88). Not that Bengali literature was untarnished by depictions of sexual encounters before, but to provide the readers with such vividly detailed graphic descriptions came as a jolt to the readers of Bengali literature. For months, the story received negative criticism from all over the society as mentioned by Baridbaran Ghosh in his introductory essay in *Kallol: Galpa Panchasat* (2018). Possibly what irked the readers about the story was simply not the premarital sexual experience of the man but the fact that the episode was initiated by a woman who was unmarried as the narrator affirms. Moreover, she not only chose to keep a secret identity as she would only visit him in absolute darkness, but by no means initiated any kind of social or emotional commitment from her side. It was an arrangement of physical pleasure, a conscious decision to which women were not privy to, in the past. The nervous breakdown of the narrator could also be read as the collapse of masculinity as it fails to understand or control female sexuality in this case which further questions the existing patriarchal values within the core of heteronormative social structures. Basu's short story touched upon several intertwining issues in a manner that engaging with it would be to further invite cultural discomfort, something that the readers in the 1920s were not quite comfortable with. It can thus be asserted that the *Kallols* through their narratives potentially attacked the fundamentally puritan value system of Bengali society.

As a radical magazine, *Kallol* was actually able to offer its writers, irrespective of their gender or social identity, an independent space emancipated from socio-cultural or moral censorship. The magazine provided equal writing opportunities to both male and female authors and therefore in the free flowing narrative of Nilima Basu, the readers were made to experience the liberated female voice of twentieth century. Basu's short story *Abhiman* or *Pride* (1924) explores the trope of modern marriage in the backdrop of Bengali



nationalist movement. The story revolves around a married heterosexual couple, Sudha and Bimal. Bimal is a devout nationalist and has an aversion for everything that is western. Sudha, on the other hand, appreciates life as it appears to her. She enjoys the little pleasures of human existence and fails to understand the reasons of her husband's displeasure. Their tiff over Sudha's visit to an urban exhibition invites the readers to think if nationalistic ideologies and principles could actually have greater weightage than one's personal affections or to what extent can one's political principles compete against private emotions, raising critical questions about the idealistic notions of nationalism. The domestic feud comes to end with a romantic closure which the author presents with vivid descriptions, a surprisingly candid literary moment for a female Bengali author which at certain moments allows the former nationalistic principles of the male protagonist take a backseat, encouraging the romantic side of him to come to the forefront. The story is unique also at another level; it was written during the heyday of nationalism, where nationalism supersedes any private emotions. The story challenges the supremacy of the movement over domestic life and put both on the same pedestal. The affinity towards straightforward representation was another feature of the Kallol writers. The publication of the story *Abhiman* manifests *Kallol's* acknowledgement of a female author and the robust advances of her literary competence as she portrays the intimate nuances of marital life.

In the narratives produced by the *Kallol* writers, a visible fascination for the narratives of the common people, far flung from the quasi-comfortable middle-class abodes reeking of bourgeoisie sentiments and ideologies could also be discerned. In this regard, a reference can be made to Sukumar Bhaduri's short story *Pnaker Poka* (1925) where the author unfolds the daily histories of the people from the underbellies of the urban Calcutta and the unimaginable miseries which were a part of their daily existence. The narrative of a chance encounter of a watchman with a beggar woman reveals a horrific side of the upper-class society. A beggar woman is denied two square meals by a family who has employed them for begging and handing over her earnings at the end of the day. In exchange of that, she and many like her are provided with two meals every day and whenever they fail to produce a substantial amount, they are deprived of the bare minimum as well. As the woman desperately tries to



get some food, her child dies in her arms from hunger, and this horrendous episode takes place in front of the watchman who loses all his regard for the world around him. For him, the death of the child also confirms the death of humanity.

Narayan Chaudhuri in his essay, “Social Changes as Reflected in Bengali Literature” writes:

Unlike Rabindranath and Saratchandra who stopped at the borderland demarcating the bourgeoisie from the working people and did not proceed further, they zealously took up the cause of the have-nots and through a series of poems and short stories and novels threw the spotlight on all manner of under-dogs in the society and on the abysmal conditions of the squalor and misery in which they live. (49)

The collective tone of this group was that of rebellion, as if they wanted to explore literature as a weapon to device an absolute destruction of the existing cultural hegemony, so steeply guarded by the elitist champions of the society. The chosen themes appropriated by characters hitherto underexplored in the literary paradigm of the upper-class writers suggest that the new writers of the *Kallol* era were trying to represent the voice of the proletariat; probably with the advancement of the nationalist movements, these writers aspired for a more just and equal society.

Narayan Chaudhuri writes about how the focus of this young writers turned towards “. . . the oppressed and the depressed of all sorts living in is backwaters and other obscure crannies” (49). The question however remains, whether this new wave of counter cultural writing affects the former construct of the *bhadralok*. The term *bhadralok* in the colonial period primarily signified upper class landed Hindus who were educated and to some extent politically opinionated. Their cultural liaison with the colonial quarters further empowered them in the native society. However, with gradual erosion of the nineteenth century social structure, the emergence of the other castes into the periphery of the *bhadrasamaj* could be seen and at this junction one could witness the society slowly embracing Marxism. In his essay, ‘Rhyiming Revolution: Marxism and Culture in Colonial Bengal’ Rajarshi Dasgupta



asserts that Marxist egalitarianism altered the course of Bengali identity in twentieth century (81).

There is little room for doubt that Marxism had strongly influenced Bengali literature and specially in the writings of the *Kallol* era, a steady inclination towards Marxist values could be found. Like Mulk Raj Anand's narrative of *Coolie* (1936) or *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) which described the misfortunes of ill-fated manual labours, Sailajananda Mukherjee wrote about the mining population of the Bengal-Bihar border picking up on daily episodes of mundane and limited human existence. Another writer who needs to be mentioned in this respect is Premendra Mitra, a champion of *Kallol* ideologies whose novel *Pank* brilliantly depicted the wretched effects of urbanisation and the painful lives of mill workers. Narayan Chaudhuri uncovered a beautiful comparison between the American poet Walt Whitman and Mitra's poetry where the individual poets from two absolutely different countries advocated for the causes of "blacksmiths, potters, weavers, factory labourers, peasants and what not..." (49). Not only the underdogs but the vagrants, beggars and the vagabonds were also considered as steady literary characters by writers such as Achintya Kumar and Manish Ghatak who in their respective books, blasphemously shattered the social constructs of literary propriety. Achintya Kumar's *Bede* remains a document of unmatched merit, a fabulous collection of short stories about the fallen sections of the society and Manish Ghatak's *Pataldangar Panchali* is celebrated as a social document of Calcutta slums with all its dirt, morbidity and lurking dangers. The pattern and choice of subjects among the *Kallol* writers echo the theory of *Homo Sacer* (1995) propounded by Giorgio Agamben as almost all of them delivers a clear picture of the individuals who do not qualify as a significant whole for the society and therefore has no use per se. They could be cast away, shunned but not accepted, a practice that has been solidified by ghettos of political power (27). It was the writers of the *Kallol* era who probed into the paradigm of age-old social injustices and blatantly brought them under the purview of literary representation. The literary journey of the *Kallol* writers were influential in bringing in a visible change in the body of Bengali literature post-nineteenth century. The politically robust voices of the modern age poets reflected the new Bengal struggling with the communal and labour riots, swadeshi



movements and rising poverty in the early decades of the twentieth century. In their angst of addressing the present crisis, they found themselves in a desperate need of an alternative to the bourgeois politics of representation. Hence, they distanced themselves from Tagore and identified with the verses of T.S. Eliot, the face of European modernism (Mohua 212). The penultimate culmination of the aesthetics imbibed by the Bengali school of modernism, especially within the domain of fiction can later be seen in the fiction of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay and of course Shankar, whose treatment of realism within the broad canvas of their respective works faithfully reflected the crux of their crisis. The dawn of the new oeuvre of Bengali literature brought before the society horrific representations of contemporary Bengal that were hitherto unacknowledged. As long as Tagore was alive, he was constant at altering his ideas on modernism and in the later period of his life, he did reflect upon the positivity associated with detached, impersonal and objective literary aesthetics but that did not allow him or his works to come into any kind of negotiations with the other party concerned (Mohua 218). The continuing existence of the discordance between Tagore's literary culture and that of the *Kallol* writers affirmed that the junction from which their divergence had begun could be marked as the moment when Bengal Modernist Movement was born.

Notes:

The excerpts from the stories which have been collected from the anthology edited by Baridbaran Ghosh are all translated by me.



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