

**Revisiting 1960s and 1970s:  
A Selected Reading of the Female Voices of Bengal**

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**Abstract:**

The society and literature of Bengal underwent many changes in Independent India. The socio-political changes brought along with it changes in the world of Bengal literature as well. This paper would restrict its discussion on the Bengali society as reflected in its literature in the two tumultuous decades of 1960s and 1970s by discussing some of the selected writings of female authors of the decade. The paper will attempt to discuss on the following ideas:

1. The position of women in the socio-political decades of the 1960s and 1970s.
2. Selected reading and discussions of the writings of Mahasweta Devi, Pratibha Basu, Nabanita Deb Sen and Kabita Singha [and their distinguishing approach towards the decade]
3. The reason behind the distinctive approach of the four female authors towards the similar decade.
4. To find whether these writers were able to provide any new direction to literature during their period.

**Key words:** Women literature, time, society, politics, culture.

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Literature is a reflection of life. Hence it is perhaps impossible to create a 'neutral' literature - one that is devoid of the influence of its people, time and society. This has been rightly pointed out by the poet Jibananda Das in his books 'Kobitar Katha'<sup>1</sup> where he says that it is important for the poet to understand his society. It is in the essence of his poetry, that the poet would inculcate the essence of history and the understanding of his time and society. This understanding of the concept of time in respect of the society has been underlined in the work of historian Ashin Dasgupta, and he distinguishes them as 'Big Time' (*Boro Samay*) and 'Small Time' (*Choto Samay*)<sup>2</sup>. 'Big time' (*Boro Samay*) would suggest ideas about nation and 'Small Time' (*Choto Samay*) would suggest ideas about an individual or small group. Albert Einstein is his concept about 'Time Space Continuum' suggested about the relativity of time and its relation to all other objects in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, it is clear that it is impossible to ignore time. Shakespeare expressed his fear and grief about the 'power' of 'time' in his *Sonnet No. 63*, where he expressed that "Time will come and take my love away."<sup>4</sup> Thus the discussion of the literature without the discussion about the time in which it is created is thus impossible.

Post independence, the society in Bengal along with its literature underwent certain significant changes. This paper would discuss on the two most influential and controversial decades in Bengal, the 1960s and 1970s, and the influence it had in the writings of the selected female writers of the period. The focus of the paper will be mainly on:

1. The socio-political atmosphere and the position of women in the 1960s and 1970s.
2. The distinctive approach towards the decade in the reflective writings of Mahasweta Devi, Nabanita Deb Sen, Pratibha Basu and Kabita Singha.
3. The reason for selecting the above mentioned authors.
4. Whether the selected authors were able to provide any new dimension in their writing during this decade.

Question may arise regarding the selection of female authors for this discussion. This has been done to bring out the differences in the opinion and point of view of the female vis-a-vis a male and the paper would like to bring out the distinctiveness in this regard.

The Independence in 1947 brought along with it rays of hope and aspirations as well as the fear and the pain of uncertainty and partition. Bengal was no different in this ensuing current. The abolition of *Zamindari* system, Five-Year Plans and infrastructural development in the country ushered hope in the minds of the people. But it was soon overpowered by the aggressive corruptness of the *Jotdars* along with the failure of the Five-Year Plans and lack of proper infrastructural development. Bengal was particularly affected by the problems in the Tea and Jute industry, change in the ownership of the factories and the mills, lack of raw materials (like jute) due to the partition of Bengal and the heavy influx of the refugees from East Pakistan. In the global sphere, the fear of Cold War loomed large. The USSR had a profound influence on the countries following the socialist regime and they fuelled in spearheading many movements and agitations in this regard. Bengal too was affected by such movements. This was aggravated by the failure of the Congress Government to contain the people. Their failure and measure of oppression made the middle-class intellectuals, their strongest critic. It was the time when the dreams started crashing and was about to give rise to a decade of nightmare. The initiation was the Khadya Andolan in 1959. The Indo-China war broke out in 1962. This led to a split in the Communist Party of India in 1964. One group supported the Chinese and considered the Chinese Chairman as their own, while the other group opposed it. The Communist Party was divided into CPI and CPI (M). In 1966 the Khadya Andolan reached its zenith. The Congress Government was replaced by the Coalition Government. In 1967, a new movement started, the Naxal Movement, which later changed the political scenario of Bengal forever. The struggle of the farmers of North Bengal against the *Jotdars* soon spread across Bengal. The educated middle class (especially the under-graduates) immediately got involved in the movement. The Naxals were led by Charu Majumdar and this movement further split the Communist Party once again. One group still believed in the democratic proceedings of the State, while the other believed that true independence could only be achieved by force. Thus was formed the CPI (ML). But this led to further factionalism. With the death of Charu Majumdar in 1972, this movement lost its momentum, but not before it gave rise to a generation who believed that their dreams have been destroyed. The period also saw the state organized torture procedures which made a generation of young people crippled if not dead. The declaration of Emergency in 1975 brought in India, as

well as in Bengal, a state of suppressed terror. The defeat of Smt. Indira Gandhi, the rise of the Janata Party and the establishment of the Left Front in Bengal in 1977, saw the emergence of a new era. The Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971, the Vietnam War, the Chinese Cultural Movement and the French Movement led by its students, turned the young generation in Bengal into true world citizens.

Now we will try to find the position of women in this socio-political scenario. The women movement in Bengal, which started in 20th century, suddenly found its momentum after independence. The bigger change that was observed was in the field of education, which saw active participation among women and the coming of women from the home front to the world front. The women slowly started achieving economic independence. Though this independence was not always voluntary but sometimes depended on the needs of the family. Though the level of educated unemployed youth increased, the educated women had a better chance of employment. But this did not ensure the upliftment of the status of women as they were (even after being employed) guided by the whimsies of the male member of the society. But the scenario around the world was changing. The status of women is equal to that of men was soon incorporated in many constitutions around the world. The women started receiving their share of property from that of their father or husband's. The UNO took several measures to ensure that the rights of women were truly established and implemented. 1975 was declared the International Year of Women. Betty Friedan's NOW (National Organization for Women) established norms of marriage<sup>5</sup>. It was the time of Simone de Beauvoir's famous exponents "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."<sup>6</sup> She urged women to "Change your life today. Don't fumble on the future, act now without delay".<sup>7</sup> Hence it was a decade when women were not only satisfied with the proposition of equal rights and economic freedom but they made their voices heard in issues like motherhood, right to pregnancy, sexual torture etc. This had a tremendous impact on the educated females of Bengal.

We will now try to discuss through the selected reading of some texts, as to how, the female authors viewed this decade of turmoil and we will also try to understand the difference in their point of view in analyzing the decade.

The most prominent voice that registered its document in these decades is Mahasweta Devi. Her works during the period - *Hazar Churasir Ma* (Mother of 1084), 1974, *Agnigarbha* (Agnigarbha - The Womb of Fire), 1978, *Aranyar Adhikar* (The Right of the Forest), 1979, *Behula*, all speak of struggle. The struggle may include Brati and her mother, the historic Birsa Munda, the honest master from short story *Jal* (Water) or Kali Santra from the story *Operation Basai Tudu* or Draupadi from the story *Draupadi*. She had her own justification in her act of speaking for the voices of the downtrodden. To her "*sreni sangramer khetre spostotora hochhe ithihas er ei sandhi lagne ek dayittaban lekhok ke kalam dhortei hobe shoshiter pokhhe onnothai ithihas taake khomma korbe na*"<sup>8</sup> [the struggle of the classes is becoming more intense and as a responsible writer it is ones duty to write for the oppressed or else history will not forgive us] . *Mother of 1084* written in the backdrop of the Naxal Movement, speaks of Brati and hundreds like him of the same age who had to lay down their lives to protest against the artificiality and

shallowness of the modern society. The narrator, Sujata in her reminiscence of her son Brati, not only speaks of the self sacrifice of Brati and his friends but also protest against the male dominated society, one that hides its hypocrisy and blames the mother and the woman for the misgivings. The image of mother takes a new avatar in Sujata and turns her from being Brati's mother to 'Mother of 1084'. The concept of 'mother' as defined by the society is put to serious challenge. Sujata not only rejects her husband but also disapproves her other children - who are also a part of this hypocritical society. She only wants to have one true identity - as that of Brati's mother. Mahasweta Devi's other short story *Draupadi*, too speaks of the female protest. The tribal communities are often oppressed are put to severe challenges from the 'educated' and 'cultured' society on a daily basis. When the Captain fails to extract any confession from Draupadi, then he orders – “oke baniye niye eso” [get her ready]<sup>9</sup>. That such an incident is not a mere figment of fiction is evident in the confessions of Ila Mitra or Jaya Mitra, who were actively involved and later punished for their participation during the *Tebhaga* Movement. Tortures included ramming of rods in the female genital organ and further worse. In the international scenario also such crimes against women saw the famous Brussels Tribunal, which began on 4th March 1876.<sup>10</sup> Draupadi too, after being raped, bluntly challenges the male ego which stands tall in the society they created. Just like the mythical Draupadi, who was attempted to be disrobed in front of her husbands and elder relatives, this women from the tribal community, through her bold statements in fact disrobes the charms that this modern society is conceived of. In Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (The Right of the Forest), Birsa Munda's revolt only reflects the spirit that as long as there will be corruption and oppression, so long will the adivasis, who have been the most neglected lot of India, will rise against their oppressor. Thus as historian Ashin Dasgupta pointed out, this is how Mahasweta Devi wanted to capture the *Bara Samay* (Big Time). In her story *Operation Basai Tudu*, she not only highlighted the positive things about the Naxal movement, but also of brought to the forefront the negative aspects of the movement. Basai Tudu and Kali Santra though comrades in the beginning, soon part ways just like the dissipation of the communist ideals in collaboration with the Congress Governance which led to the death of hundreds like Basai Tudu & Kali Santra. Thus these writings truly become the document of the time.

We will now look at the works of Pratibha Basu and see how 'time' has been captured in her works with respect to the society. Though Pratibha Basu's novels were published in the tumultuous decade of the 1960s and 1970s, yet there is no reflection of the political state of affairs reflected in her works. Though Mahasweta Devi would consider this as 'turning away from reality' yet we differ in our opinion regarding this. Basu's pen discusses the relationship of the average, middle class and though the voice of revolt is not loud, yet, it reflects a woman's individual feelings. In her novel *Madhyarater Tara* (The Midnight Star), she brings up the topic of unmarried Motherhood (*Kumari Matritya*). The relationship shown in the novel reflects the typical masculine mentality of considering the women's love as something 'taken for granted'. Hence Anu's character is shown in sharp contrast to that of Sujata who continues to love Anu in spite of this mentality and in turn reflects the conservative middle class outlook of the time. The woman finally expresses her protest in her death which raises the natural question as to whether

Pratibha Basu was trying to deny the natural voice of her time. Perhaps this conclusion would be inconclusive since the time when this novel was written, women like Sujata would have committed suicide even before the birth of her child. In fact the coverage she had shown in bringing this ‘illegitimate’ child to this world reflects the successful voices of the women’s liberation movement which demanded the women’s right of choice in giving birth to her child, even though abortion is legalized in many countries. Not only does the novel speak about the position of a child who comes to this world deprived of his father’s identity, but also the mentality of the two daughters of the Banerjee family who stood against the taboo of the time. Thus, even though this novel does not bring to foray the problems of the nation at large or the concept of ‘Big Time’ - it brings into picture the concept of ‘Personal Time’ (*Baktigoto Samay*) which tries to capture the ‘Small Time’ as described by Ashin Dasgupta. Hence it reflects a society that existed outside the tumultuous political cauldron - a society where men and woman loved each other, got separated and the relationships are put to question by the ever engaging society. Her novels *Ghumer Pakhira*, *Prothom Basanta*, *Padmasana Bharati*, *Eswarer Probesh* are reflect the same theme- the love between the man and the woman and the reflection of society through this relationship. The change in the conception of women and the appreciation of their beauty as reflected in the society, just after the independence, is showcased in Basu’s *Ghumer Pakhira* where Shakuntala is accepted by Soumitra as his life partner. In her novel *Malatir Upakhyan* the protest against Malati is the symbol of the society where the male considers the female as the symbol of the gratification of lust and an object of desire. Once the desire has been fulfilled, the woman is immediately thrown out of the man’s life. Thus we see that Pratibha Basu in her stories and novels sees time in her own periphery where the flow of life continues in spite of the atmosphere of terrorism which engulfed the decade. She expresses in her own point of view, that even in the male dominated society, one has the capacity to find her own voice through the acts of unrequited love, the power to give birth to the ‘love child’ and to continue with the struggle of life in spite of all odds. Malati was its true representation.

Kabita Singha’s work in the same period in reflects a similar theme. The derogatory position of women in the male dominated society is shown in her story *Khelte Khelte Ekdin*. Anima, a woman of 35 years is suddenly termed as ‘infertile’ by her sister-in-law Kana. That she and her husband had planned a couple of abortions in the first three years of marriage reflects the poor socio-economic background of their society. This kind of mentality was unthinkable in the previous century. Through this event, the writer tries to capture the ‘Big Time’ (*Boro Samay*) through “Personal Time’ (*Baktigoto Samay*). Anima does not make a charity of her emotions in front of her husband. In fact, her love towards the little child of her sister-in-law remains unchanged, even after the event and she does not hesitate to kick away the unruly cat (which incidentally is the carrier of the Goddess of Fertility - *Maa Shasti*). In her story *Tulir Borodin*, the relationship between the mother and her child makes her reject the love for her beloved. In turn the child grows up to reject the loveless and lifeless gift of his father and accepts his uncle and remarks “*Kalke khub boro din*”<sup>11</sup> [Tomorrow is a big day]. This story published in 1976, showcases the changing relationship of the family, mother and the child. In her story *Chiit*, the protagonist Pulin reflects about her mother who was a prostitute and ends in Pulin’s relationship

with Putul, a victim of rape. Hence this story reflects the liberation from the taboos of the society about a woman's love, motherhood & profession and rape - some thing that the female activists around the world wanted to do. Where as the characters of Pratibha Basu's novels are mostly from the educated and elite middleclass section of the society, Kabita Singh brings to foray another section of society living on the fringes- in the dingy slum areas - where characters like Ashalata, in the story *Ekdin Ashalata* is a prostitute and in the story like *Swami o Na Premik o Na* speak about free love.

Another female author who made a mark during their period was Nabanita Deb Sen. In her only novel, published during the tumultuous decade *Ami Anupam*, she has shown the protagonist to be a part of the intellectual community, a community that enjoys its beer, raises a storm in the tea cup regarding changing the society, enjoys the company of woman but do not have any respect for them. Through her pen, Deb Sen tears apart the hypocrisy that surrounded the intellectual middle class in the period. The novel finally shows the transformation of Anupam from this pseudo-intellectual being to a real human being. In some of her other stories, Nabanita Deb Sen has very subtly mocked the fops and follies of the time. In one of her stories, during this period, from the collection *Monsieur Hulo'r Holiday in Pranabindubabur Khorghosh*, we see the activities of Pranabindu Babu's wife's pet rabbit named Sona. Through the rabbit, Deb Sen allegorizes the miscreants existing in the society at the time, who in spite of the illegal activities enjoyed the patronage of the powerful people in the community. In her essay *Doctor Deb Sen Er Bidesh Yatra* we see the problems faced by the author when she goes abroad to represent an international seminar. It is interesting to note here that the western countries who are always vocal about the equal status of women in the society, fail to provide adequate justice to Ms. Deb Sen when she went there to represent a seminar. It is easy and interesting to guess that if an educated women like Ms. Deb Sen faced such a problem in the first world country, then what would have been the plight of the ordinary women there! Nabanita Deb Sen had represented this entire picture in her works but she did that in the mode of comedy and satire. In her story *Mesomoshay er Kanyadaay* she shows the further decadence in the society. On one hand while the bride's father is repeatedly raising the question about material wastage arising out of the marriage, on the other hand his relatives was splurging the wealth in the marriage. The bride's father himself too indulges in such opulent practices and thus making his previous claim of wastages as false. This story reminds us of Bijan Bhattacharjee's epic play *Nabanna* based on the historic Khadya Andolan of the 1960s (1959-66). Thus Nabanita Deb Sen through her impeccable style reflects the decadence of the period. Her wit and style of writing makes her stand apart in viewing the age distinctly from that of Mahasweta Devi, Pratibha Basu and Kabita Singha.

Now we have to analyze what makes these authors, writing in the similar period so distinct in their approach towards the representation of the same period. Mahasweta Devi though was not a political person, yet she was an active leftist thinker at that time. Secondly, she had dedicated her entire life for the upliftment of the tribal people and she did it by not merely writing about them but by being actively interested in the various activities of their community. She was like an elder sister (*Boro Didi*) to them. Thus, the reality expressed in her writing during

the period, all stemmed from her own experience. Hence she was able to express the ‘Big Time’ (*Boro Samay*) in her writing. Kabita Singha expressed the representation of womanhood in a different way. Her personal experience helped her to shape the woman she represented. She herself confessed – “*E barite cheleder jonno saint Xavier’s mayeder jonno oti onnichha sotte Beltala girls. Amar biyer path agle daryechilen maa...matritantri bolei babar probol pratap sojjho korechi...bibahar por...goto chobbis bochor je bureaucracy adine achi tar nam Bimal Roychoudhury*”<sup>12</sup> [“Boys in the house had a privilege for St. Xavier’s whereas for the girls it was Beltala Girls after sheer reluctance. My mother refused to get me married at a young age.... being a matriarchal supporter helped me to withstand the terrible rage of my father ... after marriage ... for the last twenty four years I have been a subject to bureaucracy named Bimal Roychoudhury”.] Thus this gives us a distinct idea that ‘Personal Time’ [*Baktigoto Samay*] had a profound influence in shaping her stories Nabanita Deb Sen has represented this decade in her own impeccable way by means of wit. The negativity of the time has been represented in her writing through comedy and not directly as had been done by Mahasweta Devi, since unlike Devi, Deb Sen was not an ‘activists’. Pratibha Basu, the senior most author among them, represented the struggle of woman and motherhood in her own romantic style, which was her true signature.

We have so long discussed in the selected writings of the women in 1960s and 1970s the socio-political setup and have also discussed how each of these authors have represented the time in their own distinctive way keeping true to their identities. Now we will try to find out if these writings have provided any new directions in the field of literature:

When we discuss Mahasweta Devi’s contribution we find that the in the Mother of 1084 she created a new mother figure. Also, at a time, when most of the other male authors were avoiding discussing this much debated decade, Mahasweta Devi not only brought to forefront the incidents that shaped the decade but rather her words became the literary-historical documents of the time.

After Devi, if we look into the works of Nabanita Deb Sen, we find that she too had opened up new annals in literature of that time. She did not speak about the direct events and incidents of the time but in her works we find how she subtly removes the mask behind which the petty-bourgeois class hides themselves. Though the Sudha-Anupam episode she shows how transient love makes way for permanence. Her *Monsieur Hulo’s Holiday* too has elements of feminism. What Deb Sen very distinctly does is brings back the element of humor in Bengali fiction which was lost since Aparajita Devi’s writings.

Kabita Singha’s writings on the other hand represent figures from the lower middle class section of the society. Before her, there has been a dearth of representation from these lower sections of the society. Pratibha Basu, Nabanita Deb Sen or even Ashapurna Devi (though she is not a part of the detailed discussion here) has always represented the educated middle class section of the society. Mahasweta Devi, in her writings has discussed about the lives of the tribal; but Kabita Singha is distinct in bringing forth a world that exists perhaps, ‘invisibly’ around us: a



world where the slum dweller Putul, who in spite of being raped, is brought back to the mainstream society. Putul even gets married to Pulin, who is the son of a prostitute. In her story *Tulir Borodin*, Tuli is shown to accept her mother's paramour, which brings us face to face with a new reality. Feminism is shown in new light. This story also shows how a mother is not dependant on the money from her divorced husband, in order to bring up her children. Rather she finds a job to bring up her child and in turn shows the change in the outlook of women towards the society. This 'changed womanhood' is the new direction that Kabita Singha's works have contributed to literature.

Distinct from all the three authors, Pratibha Basu in her signature romantic style very subtly raises question on the status of woman and their thoughts and brings forth a new parallel existing in the society.

In conclusion, we can say that, the event of the 1960s and 1970s, created a huge impact in the society, an impact that has still left a mark. This impact still influences the literature of the day. The representation of woman in those tumultuous decade, too have left a distinct mark: a mark that has merged with the annals of time. Since literature and time go hand in hand, the characters too represent in them the experiences of the time. Whether the time is 'Big Time' (*Boro Samay*), 'Small Things' (*Choto Samay*) or 'Personal Time' (*Baktigoto Samay*) as pointed out by Ashin Dasgupta, it does not make much of a difference. Because reviewing a similar time can bring about several conclusions, since how we observe time depends on the 'on looker'. Hence, the similar decade brought about different perspective from the different authors all of which are equally true. Thus in the process they gave rise to different directions in literature arising from a common event in history.

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