

Living with the Violence: Women Suffering throughout Pandemics with a special reference to Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Rebati*

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The pandemic will come and go, but in the course of action, it battered all the socio-political-economic systems into dust and setting forward new dimensions and patterns into force. This ongoing Coronavirus pandemic is also collapsing every foundation of our lives and times; snatching away our normal order and pricking us into the saga of creeping uncertainty and chaos. Crawling over the mountain of dead bodies, putting social and educational institutions into rest it is baring all the fractured and fault lines of social norms and discriminations into open. The enforcement of lockdowns and shutdowns might have succeeded in flattening curve of the spread of virus, but it has erupted a vast epidemic of gender inequality and discrimination into forefront. The underlying social structures and constraints are pushing boundaries of the gender-specific vulnerability of the pandemic. The super spreading surge in cases of domestic violence, sexual abuse around the globe is making the life of women and girls in this pandemic more bizarre and nightmarish. Amplifying the social standing and position of women downwards it raises concern about gender issues and dimensions. The patriarchal architecture of the society twice marginalized the position of women in the family, burdening them both mentally and physically in this gloomy time. This paper will focus on the women suffering as part of this faulty social norms and prejudices. The women suffering and the pandemic have a long history, which worsen their place and position more backward. This paper aims to introspect pandemic literature to understand the gender dimension to the pandemic, with a special reference to Fakir Mohan Senapati's short story 'Rebati'.

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In this age, when we are talking about the blurring lines between genders, this coronavirus outbreak has proved that the gender role divide is still there. The UN WOMEN's declaration of 'shadow pandemic', growing violence against women in the pandemic is pushing us to rethink about the gender roles, prejudices and gender dynamics at home and work. Whether as frontline workers, or homemakers or working folks; women are facing the brunt of the gender discrimination to the most in this unprecedented time. The rising violence against women in this

pandemic is the warning signal of existing gender inequality which is aggravated with the contact of the virus. The upward surge of domestic and sexual violence against women at the time of the pandemic and epidemic triggers us to think about human behavioral patterns which work at a mixed ways. Though it is believed that humankind come together when their lives are at a stake, but it is a matter of concern that rather than standing united, we stand divided, act more inhumanly or heinously in case of gender discrimination. Studies show that domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence

upsurges during pandemics and epidemics; whether it's Ebola and Zika epidemics, Spanish Flu or Swine Flu pandemic. This COVID-19 crisis is not only the trying time for health, economic, political and educational, but for social and humanitarian point of view. Especially we should be more concerned about the gender inequality which is there despite constitutional declaration of equality.

Gender inequality of treating person differently according to their gender, is all-pervasive in the society; which needs to be addressed. Despite gender equality as a human right, it is hardly in practice. The institutionalization of patriarchy putting normative femininity into force, imprint a clear gender role divide in the society. This gender inequality hammered the progress of women, but of the whole human improvement. Women are assigned with unpaid caretaker jobs; and adding more to it, institutionalized motherhood and fixed private space debase women identity, deteriorate their self-image and confidence and devalue their talent and skills, displacing them to a secondary place in the society for generations. The status of women deeps down in the graph of power, hierarchy and inequality in the society, burdened by housework and childcare and this pandemic is exposing the gender inequality into forefront. This gloomy situation teaches us to think about the traumatic condition of women who are struggling hard with the physical and mental torture due to existing gender discrimination being accelerated by this pandemic.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological psychic or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society: it is civilisation as a whole that elaborates this intermediary

Product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. Only the mediation or another can constitute as individual as another.” (Beauvoir, 330)

Women always have been the prey of gender discrimination constructed by deep-rooted patriarchy. Right from their birth they face discrimination in terms of nourishment, care, education and other career privileges. Pressurized marriage and compulsory motherhood further spoiled their position in the society, depriving them from all the basic rights as a human being. Patriarchal society is designed to subordinate women pushing them to the margin by depriving them from their basic human rights. Fixing the domestic space for them, making them economically dependent, and above all deprived them from all the basic rights to equality and education, women are structured to be dominated and silenced. Institutionalized patriarchy works in subtle ways towards normalization of subordination women to men.

“Women's general subordination was essential at the stage because it was only then that the mechanism of control upon women's sexuality could actually become effective. Both in terms of economic autonomy through a denial of control over productive resources, and autonomy in law, women are made appendages of men. Indeed women themselves were the property, both in terms of their reproductive and their productive labor, of men. Even in terms of performance of major domestic rituals women did not have autonomy—they were part of the domestic rituals women but could not perform rituals by themselves or for themselves. Only fasts for the benefit of their husbands, sons or brothers were to be undertaken by them on

their own. The general subordination of women was thus the basis of the specific controls that the patriarchal structure placed upon them." (Chakravarti, 73)

In this period of depression and uncertainty, literature or more particularly pandemic literature gives us a new way to look at it to understand human and humanity in the pandemic. Turning to literature is not merely to escape the cruel reality but to have an insight into human experience, learning from the past, to know human nature and conditions, and how people from the past cope with similar tragedies.

"Literature is the brain of humanity. Just as in individual, the brain preserves the record of his previous sensations, of his experiences, and of his acquired knowledge, and it is in the light of this record that he interprets every fresh sensation and experience; so the race at large has a record of its past in literature, and it is the light record alone that its present conditions and circumstances can be understood. The message of the senses is indistinct and valueless to the individual without the co-operation of the brain; the life of the race would be degraded to a mere animal-existence without accumulated stores of previous experience which literature places at its disposal."(Goodman, 9)

Literature reflects human experience, life, society and contemporary reality, which shaped society and human civilization. Life, literature and society are the connecting dots of human behavior and experience. It not only transmits knowledge, events, experience but life through its discerning exploration into human psychological arena. Invading into the reality, literature teaches,

motivates and transmits; and exploring the imaginary world, literature relives, entertains and uplifts human and its spirit. Literature is a way of life which provides meaning to our life and the world in which we live in. It not only interprets life, mirrors the essence of life, but also revolts and reforms life and society.

"Hence, with regard to literature, our idea or its value depends on the extent to which it has been able to express the changing conditions of social life; the emergent truths that supersede the discredited falsehoods of the past. Great literature always grasps and reflects these emergent truths that rise triumphant over the wreckage of the past. Indeed, literature as its deepest has a revolutionary content, and is violently condemned by unreasoning orthodoxy." (Goodman, 8)

Human civilization has survived many a pandemics and literature captures the trauma and devastation of past pandemic. Seeing pandemic through literature is not only sense the fear and chaos of that period, but deep and insightful look at human and humanity in their social and psychological fronts. The outbreaks of deadly disease like Cholera, Plague, Smallpox and Black Death are depicted in literature for generation. Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, John M. Barry's *The Great Influenza: The story of the deadliest Pandemic in History*, Daniel Defoe's *A journal of the plague year*, *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley, *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Albert Camus's *The Plague* are some of the best works on the pandemic and epidemic which depicts the essence of life in those dark periods. The havoc of these outbreaks of disease in the community, the mental trauma, the pain and human suffering of the deadly

contagion; the then society and human condition are portrayed in these pandemic literature. *Pahighar* by Kamalkant Tripathi, *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of fevers, Delirium and discovery* by Amitav Ghosh, *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali, *A Ballad of Remittent Fever* by Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, *The Soiled Border* by Phansihwar Nath Renu, *Vasoori* by Kakkanadan and *Rebati* by Fakir Mohan Senapati are some of the best known works on portrayal of pandemic through literature by Indian writers.

***Rebati* by Fakir Mohan Senapati**

“Rebati” is not only a text of pandemic literature, but as a social text about 19th century Odia society, its values and culture, its prejudice and superstitions, its social discrimination towards gender. It acutely details social behavioral patterns and deigns towards gender keeping the Odia sensibility of 19th century. It can be read as a rich text of folk Odia literature with typical Odia colloquial language and Odia idioms. When female education is considered as a sin, this story is a social reform on female education. This story stands at the crossroad of the east-west confrontation leading female education and emancipation towards a balanced and progressive society. This story can be read as a text of women emancipation through education.

Being in 21st century, female education is still an issue and ‘Rebati’ is still relevant. Education is the first step towards women empowerment. The educated woman can only break the age old belief system on female subordination and it is through education she can gain confidence and lead a financially and socially independent life on her own. A well informed and educated woman can only question the deep-rooted social system like Sati, Purdah, child-marriage and gender

discrimination. Education gives them voice to speak about all types of gender discriminations, exploitation and social biases. Education awakes them about their rights and equality and to claim their individual identity. And ‘Rebati’ has inspired many girls to stand against all odds for education. Though, at the end of the story, Rebati died, but she is still inspiring and will inspire the generation to come, to pursue their passion despite hurdles and devastation. Rebati will be the eternal lighthouse for girls to get education as their basic rights as an individual.

As a strong proponent of female education, Fakir Mohan Senapati immortalizes ‘Rebati’ as the symbol of female force to claim the right to education against the backdrop of orthodox and superstitious 19th century Odisha. Rebati shines as a ray of hope for female emancipation, desire to learn and to dream in the age of severe gender discrimination and prejudice. The story depicts the blind beliefs, superstitions of the then Odia society. This story can be read as a text of tradition and modernity, a wonderful power play of contrasting ideas by two opposite strong female characters. Rebati is inked as the new woman who dares to dream about education living in the world of tradition and age-old orthodox value system, where education of a girl child considered as a taboo. Her character is contrasted with her grandmother who holds on all the traditional prejudice and superstition to its core, and holds Rebati responsible for all the misfortune that befalls on their family as the result of rebati’s desire for forbidden thought of learning.

‘Rebati’ is considered as the first Odia short story by one of the great writers of Odia literature, Fakir Mohan Senapati. The story revolves around the protagonist Rebati who is

passionate towards learning. Shyamabandhu is the father of Revati, who is influenced by liberal attitude, encourages her to study. But on the other hand, the idea of educating a girl child is opposed by Rebati's grandmother who thinks education is not meant for girls and it will bring ill omen for the family. But her father decides to get Rebati educated through a tutor, Basudev, a young man is a school teacher in the village. Basu is an orphan and a regular visitor to the family and well received by the family. Rebati is excited to receive education from Basu, whereas her grandmother is never happy about it. And in the course of action, Basu and Rebati grow inclination towards each other. When Rebati finds the wings of happiness through education, her life turns devastated when the village is hit by the Cholera and her parents died out of it. Rebati underwent unbearable pain after her parent's death by the Cholera epidemic. And no one in the village ready to help the family because it is believed that if they will help them, they will also affected by this disease. And the only hope of the family is Basu who helps them, without caring about the opinion of the villagers and not believing in the superstition relating to the epidemic. But to the utter dismay, the last hope of the family, Basu also died due to this disease. Rebati and her grandmother suffered a lot as there was no one to help them at this crucial point. Rebati is also died coming under the grasp of the cholera epidemic, leaving her grandmother alone.

Rebati suffered miserably as everyone from the village including her grandmother blame her desire to get education as the root cause of all this tragedy. Rebati is mentally tormented by her grandmother's blaming and taunting her rigorously for her passion towards education and the disaster it fetches. It acutely depicts the social taboo relating to women education in that period

of time. Women are not meant to be educated nor independent. They should be in the four walls of the home, should learn to cook and they are not allowed to be educated. And the idea to educate women is considered to be evil and it will bring misfortune for the entire community. It depicts the social prejudice against women education in the rural society of Odisha.

'Rebati' tells the tale of female education and along with tells the sage of female suffering at the hand of biased society and societal system. She suffered throughout the story because of gendered society and its perception towards female education. She faces heavy criticism from her grandmother for her desire to get education. She tolerated all her verbal abuse and false accusation, who made her responsible for all the misfortune happened. After her parents death to her own death she was distressed mentally for the sin she has not committed and silently endured all her scolding. Not only her grand-mother, but the entire society blamed Rebati's desire to learn as the root cause of the Cholera epidemic. Till the end she was mentally tormented with the sense of sorrow, guilt and discrimination. It reflects women suffering at the hand of social prejudice and biased norms as the result of still prevailing gender discrimination.

As pandemic is not new to the human civilization, similarly women suffering is also has a long history. Whether it's pandemic or any other natural or human crisis, women suffered more, which proves that gender inequality is still the core question which society and individual should address. Women are tormented physically and mentally more at the time of crisis, exposing the asymmetrical gender divide into the forefront. Violence against women at the time of pandemic

is the alarming bell for all to look into gender issues as a major social crisis. Despite many generation of strive towards equality of gender, the gender gap is still here as threat to human progress. In every time of distress, be it pandemic, recession, war or any other crisis women suffered more both mentally and physically. Rebati's suffering at that Cholera pandemic and rising violence against women around the globe in this coronavirus pandemic is the proof that we should think afresh about gender issues and gender inequality. Gender equality in every aspect and prospect should be prioritized for the progress of human race.

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