

## Historicizing the Peripheral: Speech Genres in Titas Ekti Nadir Naam

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### Abstract

*The paper seeks an understanding of the implications of manifold generic imports that went into the construction of the novel as a genre, located in a space infused with the aesthetics and politics of colonial contact, focussing as a case-study Advaita Malla Barman's Titas Ekti Nadir Naam. The actively mediated nuances of reception of oral forms, transmuted to the printed domain, is looked at as a historical phenomenon of inclusion whereby the marginality of the former comes in dialogue with the canonical, institutionalized domain of urban, standardized, 'rational and refined' modes of expression. Bakhtin's notion of speech genre provides a plane of departure of the study by enabling the social signification of these forms to subsist in the wholeness of their dialogic or relational character. However, the placing of them in a novel cannot sustain their being as performance due to modal constraints of the printed medium. Therefore, they are made to function as narrative events which in turn imply their relevance in informing the very historicity of the narrative world. This paper attempts to locate these significations as the very making of the language of the novel as a conversation between the oral and the written, the canonical and the peripheral, the traditional and the modern modes of being.*

**Keywords:** Historicity, Genre, Novel, Marginal/Peripheral, Being

While speaking of the manifold nuances of African literatures, Abiola Irele remarks of orature being 'a constant reference for imagination that is implicated in the process of transformation of the function of literature and the preoccupation of the formal means of giving voice to the African assertion' (78). This feature, where residual oral genres come to be implicated in the fashioning of written

narratives is shared across all spaces where oral modes of dissemination was predominant prior to the arrival of press and culture of literacy hand in hand with colonization. The task of this paper shall be to examine a particular instance of such phenomena in Advaita Malla Barman's novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, and to critically comment on the historical-political dimensions relevant *en route*.

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As suggested by the title, the novel constructs in fiction a world centred on the lives of the Malo community alongside the river Titash, sometime during the early-middle phase of colonial contact at what would now be known as North Bengal. Based on such a *chronotope*, it is not unseemly for its plot to pan over a plethora of characters and events rather than focus on one central protagonist as is wont to the European *bildungsroman* and social/realist novels. In the rigidly hierarchical familial and social structure of nineteenth century India, individualism was not an easy quality to render in literature (Mukherjee 9). The simulation of such a period by narrative could understandably focus on creating a societal cross-section over an individual's journey or development. In his introduction to the novel, Hiren Chattopadhyay quotes from W.A. Worsfold's *The Judgement in Literature* in order to clarify what he understands as the 'local colour': 'the author uses a thin thread of plot to connect what are practically a series of descriptions in which the natural scenery of a given locality, or the salient features of a particular community, are faithfully drawn.' (Malla Barman 9).

Before delving into a study of the process via which such a local colouration is achieved, it is necessary to critically reflect on such a coinage. All narratives are localized in space and time, why then do we harp on such a classification while encountering works like *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, or Debesh Ray's *Tistapaarer Brittanto* or let's say Satinath Bhadhuri's

*Dhorai Charit Manas*, just to cite few examples from the gamut of Bangla *sahitya*. This can most certainly be attributed to a hegemony at work, one that recognizes a particular- incidentally urban and based on middle and upper class usage-lexical and significative language-world as the sole benchmark of language, while relegating all other possibilities as dialects and variants of it. Whether or not to understand such a trend as a neo-colonial offshoot, since standardization of language began due to needs of the colonial enterprise can constitute another discussion. But what is essential to be taken into consideration while engaging with the poetics and politics of the novel is to cognize a certain peripherality that prefigures its *stoff*.

A brief examination of this cultural peripheralization would help us better locate and understand the roles and functions of residual genres in the world of the novel, and whether and how their inscriptions come to bear any historical significance. To being with, the lexical array in vogue along the villages of Titas is quite far from the language of the cities, and hence of compiled dictionaries. Secondly, the people who drift in and out from what Alan Friedman regards as an 'open novel' in his book *The Turn of the Novel* belong to caste and class positions which are marginalized. Thirdly, the mode of dissemination of these genres being oral, they have limited mobility and hence largely absent in the collective memory of the *bhodrolok samaj* at the cities. And finally the ontological and epistemologi-

cal aspects of their worldview are incongruent in relation to post-Enlightenment Europe's rational outlook that has largely been assimilated during the consumption of European novels and their subsequent aesthetic influence in the emulation of the realist mode during the emergence of the novel in modern Indian languages.

Thus in the very opening of the novel, we are told that Titash, unlike a major river like Meghna, has no *itihās*. After a few pages, the narrative becomes self-reflective in asking whether it is indeed so. What comes to light is the absence of *punthi* or parchments wherein documented history could be found. The novel subverts the aforementioned Eurocentric notion of history that has to be mandatorily written in nature as well as empirically descriptive, saying 'true that this history has no such ingredients to fill one with pride as do the pages of annals, but histories of mother's care, brother's love, pains of wives and maids are painted on its banks. Perhaps some know of that history, perhaps none knows of them. Still, that history is true' (27). Titas that functions at the same time as the skeleton and organic base of the novel, comes to imagined 'not a river, but a thousand years' unheard tales flowing between the two banks' (7).

To historicize in language inevitably compels one to resort to shared templates that allow generation and reception of text, or in other words, genres. Here Todorov's understanding that 'it is because genres exist as an institution that they function

as horizons of expectations for readers and of models of writing for authors' has to be extended beyond written forms of expressions as well as institutionalized, frozen structures (qtd. in Mukherjee 9). 'The proof of a genre's life is its dynamism in response to history' (Chanda 31). The truth of this statement becomes clear when oral genres come to be implicated in a written art-form, that of the novel, in this case. This implication entails a modal transformation, the nature of which is modulated by the novelist depending on how and where he places the literal (written) representation of oral forms in the novel's world. Such a 'placing' belongs in fact to the ambit of reception where there occurs, in the words of Dionyz Durisin, 'relative creative or non-creative transformation of literary value within the aesthetic system of the recipient phenomenon and in both cases there exists in the course of this process active factors which are connected with the concrete rendering of the work in the recipient structure' (qtd. in "Reception" Chanda 57). One should emphasize at this point that such actively mediated imports of forms and templates constitute a moment of historical inscription whereby so-far regarded peripheral beings/expressivities undergo positional displacement in the network of discourse from their erased and/or ignored status. This moment is but the coming-into-being of the novel itself that totalizes or at least attempts to totalize a repertoire of generic elements that without it would very possibly be forever lost.

Proceeding centrifugally from *ghare* towards *baire*, that is, from the inner quarters to the world outside, we first encounter a host of templates associated with events that are primarily practised by women and girls, due to occasions and socio-ritualistic aspects peculiar to them. *Maghmandala Brata*, undertaken by girls in a bid to be blessed with able husbands, derives its name like many other events, from the winter month of Magh. Here we see an interaction of *mantra* as poetry as well as *geet* or song. *Dhol* and *Kasi* are instruments that accompany the celebrations. The ritual ends at the river, with girls making drift *chouaris* made by the brothers along the tide. Another event pertinent to women is *Manasha Puja* in reverence to the goddess of snakes and fertility. Here we find songs based on the theme of Lakkhinder and Behula particularized to suit the occasion. Tradition, that comes from the Latin root *tradere* meaning that which is handed or passed over, is thus witnessed as localization of Sanskritic forms as well as popular legends that are shared across spaces. Apart from these modes, other utterances come to acquire historical value in the novel like *jokar* or ululation. Hannah Ardent's understanding as all speech being political extends beyond the linguistic unit of sentence to the unit of *speech*, conceived by Mikhail Bakhtin as *utterance*. The norms dictate five *jhars* or rounds of *jokar* the birth of a male child in contrast to three *jhars* for a girl child. The novel while trying to phenomenolize oral genres in print medium sediments sociological underpinnings of gen-

der and prevalent patriarchy as amply apparent from this example.

The novel offers a fundamental picture of poetry as opposed to an eclectic one for we find a wide range of generic compositional templates being harnessed in the day to day activities of illiterate villagers, mostly boatmen. These expressions are fundamentally poetic for they *defamiliarize* language and operate outside what Viktor Shklovsky calls automatized or algebraic language use, thereby functioning outside the precincts correspondence or reference. And since almost all of these genres thrive in communion between people, their scope and relevance are decided upon by social events and not in individual isolation. While *majhigaan* speaks of the loneliness, adventure and perils of river travel in solo, choral *saarigaan* are performed during *nao dourani* or boat races, and obviously have a sharper display of vigour and passion. Again we must tread beyond compositional elements to utterance in order to fully engage with the sweat and blood of the boatmen and their travails. At the commencement of a long journey to *prabas* or distant, foreign areas, boatmen intone the names of five *peers*, or Sufi ascetics. *Paanchpeer Badar Dhvani*, as this 'genre' is named makes us critical as to how should we formulate the togetherness of a Sufi marker, which is a non-institutional non-idolatry mode of devotion, with *Dhwani* which is the Sanskrit word for sound or tone. Would we regard this as what Hans Robert Jauss would call a 'fusion of horizons'?

Or is such logic of syncretism historically inaccurate for the horizons that we consider as separate entities were yet to branch out at such a time? No doubt are such formations secular in nature, but whether they are due to concatenation of distinct horizons or if they are monadic in nature from which these horizons have subsequently been yielded is a point that remains to be questioned, and if possible, clarified.

If indeed we are to regard utterance as historical-political, then we must revisit the definition of genre. Our long standing acclimatization in print culture and understanding of literariness as something exclusive to individual composition according to grammatical logic have perhaps made us insensitive to language's verbal aspect. Grounding his understanding on utterance rather than the unit of sentence, Mikhail Bakhtin offers the following perspective on what he calls speech genres;

'All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language. Quite understandably, the nature and forms of this use are just as diverse as are the areas of human activity. This, of course, in a way disaffirms the national unity of language. Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the lan-

guage, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of these aspects - thematic content, style and compositional structure- are inseparably linked to the *whole* of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*' (60).

Such 'spheres of communication' are set up by the confluences of several categories that themselves are general reductions which never almost exist singly. For instance, religious genres are always embedded in a particular situation which may be a seasonal festival like Holi or songs sung on the occasion of newcomer's arrival at a riverside village. We find mention of Shivamantri and Krishnamantri, literally followers of Shaivic or Vaishnav forms of *bhakti* (devotion), which open up an entire gamut of *bhajan*, *geeti*, and *padabali*. Religious lyrics are accompanied by musical instruments such as *Gopijantra*, *Ghungra* and *Karatala*. Exoteric performances are found in passages describing the festivities of *Dol utsav* or Holi. Songs woven around the centuries old motifs of Radha and Krishna are sung by groups of men and women, composed mostly in *sringara* rasa, the heroine portrayed in her *bipralambha* state. The culmination of these classical aesthetic and thematic features to particular usage forms the basis of tradition and culture of the

Malos, that which would later be subject to tension from without and within. Other than these *saguna* traditions, we find parallel existence of *niguna bhakti*, or devotion towards the inarticulate and formless. *Murshida Baul gaan* poeticizes *niranjan* and shows us the pan-Indian appeal and spread of Bhakti right up to the eastern river delta belt.

Much of these religious genres are invoked on special occasions which contribute to the cognition of time in the Malo worldview. *Uttarayan Sankranti* following Kali Puja is when singers tour the villages singing, a tradition that perhaps has its origins from the days of Chaitanya at Nabadwip. *Nagar Kirtan*, as these tours are known by, is one of the many modes through which community feeling is sustained. Similarly *Padmapurana* songs are sung at the month of Shravana, involving specialized training due to their complicated structure. Malla Barman not only presents us with lyrical specimens but through discussions among singers, throws light on the formal aspects of these peculiar genres. The songs begin with *lachari* that ends at a *tripad*, giving way to *disha*. Often there is a choral function called *dohar* alongside the main lines. Another instance where seasonal aspects inform a genre is *baromashi gaan*, which could be translated as songs of the twelve months. Each season song is based on the specific activities undertaken during that time, and is formally composed of *stabak* and *pada*. What we realize is that the novel as a written form not only documents oral

compositions in print, but actualizes their generic existence by simulating the social conditioning that goes into the very making and sustenance of these genres. This is how, despite modal transformation from oral to written, their historicity is sought to be preserved within another secondary speech genre, that of the novel.

Some of these speech genres hail from antiquity. Trickling down across centuries and across vistas, their names and features are almost always transformed though retaining the basic frameworks characteristic of them. The *sloka*, for example, has become *shilok* among the Malos. This is not only a result of regional accentuation but the content matter cusped in the form too has been trivialized in contrast to metaphysical utterances as were in vogue during Vedic times. Udaytara revels in composing shiloks and is known village wide for her poetic prowess. Though the rhythmic outlines as well as some of the motifs are received from traditional handover, her lines are steeped in the particular events and characters at which they take digs. We can take note in passing that the *sloka* gets analogously transformed to *sholok* in Akkhtarujjaman Elias' novel *Khwabnama*, where it assumes another distinct social function, that of dream exegesis. Thus creativity within a received framework has to be understood as contributing to the very vitality and prolonged existence of speech genres across space and time, which leads us to a historical understanding of individualism in these societies different from the Cartesian 'I' which has been univer-

salized in our globalized consciousness. Another Sanskritic genre *prastab* or *prastabana* (narration offered to an audience) is moulded as *parastab*. While this genre marked the introduction to the different kinds of *natya* like *nataka*, *dima*, *prahasan*, *prakarana*, etc as we find mention in Bharata's *Natyasastra*, *parastab* here more or less conformed to a tale that is repeated after having heard from elsewhere. Here too, individual creativity is offered scope where we find Ananta's Ma playing within the generic framework by depersonalizing her own life experiences and yet making it seem to her listeners the vicariousness of the tale. Bakhtin mentions that not at all speech genres are conducive to individual creativity but some do offer scope for self-fashioning where individualism can be discerned as an epiphenomenon (Bakhtin 63). The actual invocation of these generic frameworks and the characters' expression within these templates highlight the truth of this statement.

Some of these genres have a tradition of apprenticeship and have specially trained performers who are professionals. One such is *pala gaan*, which has further has two sub groups; *jatra pala* and *kabi pala*, the former consisting also of dramatic performances alongwith lyric renditions and thus narratives. On the other hand, there are *ustads* who receive patronage from villages to train apprentices *Jaari gaan* for a month after the harvest is over, thereafter followed by performances.

Abiola Irele in his book *African Oral Literatures* mentions how significant life events like birth, initiation, marriage, title taking and death form the basic pretexts of performances, each having its own set of genres. Being an orature driven society, the Malo's songs and rituals too are similarly based on such events. Childbirth songs borrow heavily from tales of Gopal, showing once again the role of religion as a way of life, intricately bound with thought and expression in culture. Each ritual such as *Doyat Kalam*, *Aat Kalai* and *Ashoucha Anta* mark different stages where distinct generic utterances find opportunity to survive and be expressed. *Gurubachan* at the end of marriage ceremonies align with the stories of Uma and Shiva, once again providing grounds for mythic elements to thrive in the daily lives of villagers.

Towards the end of the novel, we find a new tension arriving at the horizon. Populist culture of *jatra* with inane derogatory lyrics acquire day by day increasing appeal with the villagers and genres which had till now held the community together, gradually recede to oblivion due to lack of patronage and appreciation. The *sampad* (treasure) and *sanskriti* (culture) of the Malos consisted of these forms, rich with formal intricacy and philosophical gravity. These give away to more superficial genres based predominantly on visual pomp of actors and unbridled display of romantic, profligate sensibilities. Mal-la Barman constructs a parallel desuetude of the Malos alongside this event, for the

river Titas which had been the life source of the villagers dry up, totally disrupting the community's fishing activities, leading to mass scale migration and deaths by starvation. The premonition of such a fate is as if heralded by the incoming jatra troops juxtaposed against the obsolescence of genres like *Bhatiyal* and *Hari-vangshi gaan*, which now neither has capable artists nor patrons for survival. This form of erasure, that develops from within a system, takes us back from where we began, if we ask ourselves 'do the canonical and the peripheral exist in genology or in history? And is there any way of separating the two?' (Chanda 24). Peripheralization of this kind most often prefigures the subsequent erasure of expressive modalities when cultures come in contact with fresh generic forms. Malla Barman's novel acquires the rare virtue of self-criticality regarding one's culture, almost reminding us of Chinua Achebe's suggestion to look back in history to locate that juncture when the 'rain started beating down on us'.

What do we understand after having probed into the diverse collection of speech genres in this novel? One, that genres are not transfixed forms universally applicable to all space-time conjunctures

but are socially conditioned, hence historical particulars that allow relatively stable repetitions. Second, this repetition and the degree of alteration in it decide the valency of a genre, which proves the study of literary history and literary genres are but two sides of the same coin. Just as the genre of *Tumri* whereby supernatural transformation of matters through incantations is already long obsolete in the very first segment of the novel, likewise a shift in culture makes hitherto prevalent genres seem antiquated. Whether or not the implication of these oral generic elements within an altogether new genre with a written mode of dissemination, in short the novel, marks a reclamation of erased history is a decision that rests on the peripet's intentionality and his/her personal understanding of the relationship with art and reality. But that such implications thoroughly contribute to the making of the novel's world thereby leading to its disclosure as a historical phenomenon both as an instance of human production (by the novelist) and a possible phase in human civilization (chronotope constructed by the novel) does not require any additional interpretative lenses in order to be affirmed of its unique truth, at once artistic and historical in nature.

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