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Widow, Wife and Woman: A Reading of the 'Cultural Biographies' of Jewellery in Aparna Sen's *Goyner Baksho*

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Introduction

"Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it." (Freud, 42).

Sigmund Freud's lines from his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) often compelled to re-read the notion of beauty. What is beauty? A cultural construct. How certain things/people are deemed more beautiful than others? What exactly goes behind the politics of beauty? Are some of the thoughts steamed when we ponder over the idea? Culturally, different societies have their own standards of beauty. And ornamentation is an essential part of it. In the reading of the film *Gaynar Baksho*, the paper reflects upon the idea of beauty, and its irreversible ties with ornaments. How ornaments/jewelleries become a political weapon from a mere cultural artifact. How is it granted agency even when displaced?

Aparna sen is one of the most well known film-maker. She is well known for the feministic movies such as *Parama* (1985), *The Japanese wife* (2011). Her other works include *36 Chowrangi Lane* (1981), and *Goyner Baksho* (2013). Sen started her career as an actor in Satyajit Ray's movie *Teen Kanya* in 1960s and gradually went on to become a film maker herself, enlisting her name in a small group of female actors turned directors, others being Hema Malini, Pooja Bhatt, Nandita Das etc. The era she entered the film industry, the time was marked by an avant grade kind of cinema whose main focus was not to be seen as mere entertainment but to be able to produce a radical political statement, the industry was undergoing a change, starting from Satyajit Ray's *Pather panchali* (1955). The Bengali film industry gradually started making films not for the sole purpose of entertainment but towards 'serious' art, often regarded as a political weapon that recorded the turmoil of changing political scenarios.

Textual Analysis and Close Reading of the Film

Aparna Sen's *Gayner Baksho*, a cinematic adaptation of a novel by Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay, a renowned Bengali author. The narrative of the film encompasses the lives of three generational Bengali women (Rashmoni, Somlata and Chaitali), linked by the same family line. Rashmoni, the daughter of the Bengali Hindu zamindar from Faridpur, now situated in Bangladesh, was married off at the tender age of eleven and within a year of marriage, she stepped into widowhood. As seen in the opening of the film, the camera pans to capture the innocent smile of a young child decked up in wedding jewellery. In the same scene, she is tragically widowed and eventually wrapped up in a white borderless *thaan* (white cloth), with her knee-length hair cut off against her will reminding us of Belind's locks in Alexander Pope's renowned mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* (1712). The scene blurs into desperate cries of the child panting and protesting "Please, not my hair." The rest of the film focuses on Rashmoni's transition from a helpless child into a young lonely adult, and gradually an old frail woman on the death bed. The portrayal of widow's transition and her subdued longing for jewellery has been a much debated topic in Bengali literature and been touched upon by various writers and film makers, the most renowned being *Chokher bali* (1903) by Rabindranath Tagore and eventually Rituparno Ghosh's brilliant cinematic adaptation starring Aswariya Rai.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing the film *Gayner Baksho*, the paper offers an extension of Igor Kopytoff's concept of *Cultural Biography of things*, an anthropological concept that examines how inanimate objects or things have social lives just like human beings. Propagated in his essay *Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process* (1986), Kopytoff holds the view that meanings evolve as they move through different contexts and relationships over time. The central idea of the essay also disseminates the object-person biographies, i.e. how "people and objects gather time, movements, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other" (Gosden and Marshall 1999, 169). Utilizing Kopytoff's idea of cultural biography and object-person biography, the paper analyses the complex relationship of Rashmoni with her jewellery box. How the value and symbolism of the box shifts over time in respect to its geographical location and how it interacts and shapes the identity of the said characters - the widow and the wife.

The understanding of the timeline becomes extremely essential in understanding the film, as an apparently simple looking plot transforms into a complex story that travels and intersects different geographical locations along with the ever changing history. Spanning over three generations of family members, the narrative re-constructs the histories of three eras: Colonial, Postcolonial and Naxalite Bengal. Beginning in late-Colonial Bengal, the timeline culminates in postcolonial Bengal in the year of the 1970, the background being the Bangladesh Liberation War.

In understanding the timeline, the transfer and migration of the jewellery box from East Pakistan to India becomes a significant act in the narrative. Rashmoni, the child, inherited the jewellery box as a gift in her marriage at the age of eleven. A year into the marriage, she steps into widowhood and returns to her maternal house, with her returns the unwornable jewellery where she remained confined to the second floor, much like Bartha Mason, the mad woman at the attic. The word, "widow" has its Old English origin *widewe* from an Indo-European root meaning 'be empty', Sanskrit equivalent of the term is *Vidh* meaning 'destitute' inherently has a negative connotation to it. The crux of patriarchal society recognizes the nameless stance of women only by their fathers, husband or sons, Rashmoni had none. Therefore, as a widow in the 19th century, the jewellery box was her locus of power, weaponised to shield herself from the exploitative patriarchy. Rashmoni's jewellery transform her from the status of an outcast in her own household, to a magnificent feminist agency which continuously questions systematic oppression as recounted in a conversation

with Somlata, she exclaims: “But I heard that you were the head of the family.” “Bollocks! All they cared for was the box of jewellery. It earned me shelter in my own father’s house. Otherwise, they would’ve kicked me out.” (Goynar Baksho, 1:22:21)

Historically, marginalization of women across cultures have been accomplished in various ways. In the Bengali community cultural interpretation of a woman’s body is historically conditioned by colorism. The idea of ‘fair’ equating beauty was a Western conception, therefore it is the colonial mindset of the post-colonial society that is compelled to equate colour with beauty. Somlata, the newly-wed, belonged to an improvised background. She often faced discrimination and was looked down on pertaining to her dark complexion. She is the bride, decked up in jewels yet exploited beyond measure, she who possesses no autonomy of her own. She extends the saree to cover her head, beneath which is a vermilion bindi marking the status of her blissful yet restricted marriage. She wears a piercing on her nose, a gold chain/marriage pendant around her neck, glass and golden wrist bangles, anklets with or without bells, and rings. Along with the sheer weight of the jewellery, the clattering of bangles and the bells on the anklets serve to track her movement and help enforce confinement in the domestic space. She is the omnipotent narrator and Rashmoni is her paternal aunt, fondly called “Pishima”. She witnesses pishima on her death bed and is haunted by her apparition to keep the box safe.

Consumer research examines how people select objects and things, bring them into their domestic space, reward them with personal meaning/value that strip them off their commodity status. Igor Kopytoff explains this macro process using the concept of *cultural biography of things* that tracks an object’s origin, exchanges traces and transitional points. His work highlights the point where the object enters the home and becomes ‘singularised’. I.e. given a personal meaning. In the movie, the object : *Goynar Baksho* enters the household as a gift to eleven years old Rashmoni as a marriage present by her father. From being a commodity at a jewell shop, the box and its contents soon become Rashmoni’s most beloved object. Singularization takes place the moment the jewelry box is bought off from the market and gifted to Rashmoni, making her the sole owner. Therefore, Goynar Baksho, becomes the marker of her status that grants her alone the space of the whole second floor. In a conversation with Somlata, Rashmoni expresses how the box has earned her a place in her father’s household. Such dependence and a cloistered lifetime spent obsessing over them the jewellery box transforms Rasamayi’s unworn ornaments into a fetish which she fails to abandon, even after death.

Somalata is the person Rashmoni entrusts her jewellery to after death. Her ghost comes and instructs her to keep the jewellery safe. Initially, their relationship looks more of control than of female solidarity. Between the colonial ghost apparition and submissive daughter-in-law. But their bond glows over shared survival under patriarchy. In the course of the movie, Rashmoni shares instances from her life, how the men of the family had kept women outside marriage. She complains about her own physical needs , how it has been disregarded since her widowhood. She gives an instance from her youth, where she becomes attracted towards their house gardener . How she flirts with him and calls him to meet her at the dead of the night. But while climbing the rashmoni’s window, he slips and falls. Therefore making a loud sound and waking the entire family up. Consequently, he is beaten black and blue by the same brothers and uncles who the next day sprinkles perfumes and goes to their kept women.

This is a direct assault on the ‘Brahminical patriarchy’ a term coined by Uma Chakrobarby in her article *Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender Class Caste and State* (1993) , in which, upper caste “women are regarded as gateways - literally the point of entry into the caste system The lower caste male’s whose sexually is a threat to the upper caste purity of blood and therefore has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access, so such women have

to be carefully guarded.”(Ganesh 1986, 16). As evident in Manusmriti, *pratiloma* which translates to “against the hair”, a marriage or union between an upper caste woman and a lower caste man is reserved for severest condemnation. As seen, any kind of hypogamous relationship represents the breakdown of this social order. In a patriarchal household, a person’s social identity is culturally conditioned. While Somlata gets cheated on by her husband, Rashmoni laments her lonely life. Their bond grows stronger over restricted freedom, denied autonomy and repressed desires. The jewellery box becomes not only a property but also a secret shared across generations. A pillar to their female solidarity.

The intergenerational female solidarity circles around the jewellery box as it changes meaning in the course of action. For Rashmoni, the box travels from East Pakistan to India following the partition, recording the journey of various important historical discourses. It remained a blocked capital, referring to funds/assets that were inaccessible for the movement. While in the hands of Somlata, the jewellery box is pawned against money to start a new business, helping the family gain its lost status. It is through Somlata, the zamindari family survives the name across the wave of time. For Chaitali, the scenario remains extremely different as she chooses her own kind of battle to fight. Not for freedom but for agency. Being a modern educated woman, she decides to utilise the value of the jewellery box to buy the rights of Naxalites. In the end, the box remains a pivotal element in the journeys of three women who fight their own battles.

Conclusion

The tabooed nature of this metonymical connection of widows and jewellery that destabilises the discourse of Hindu brahmanical patriarchy becomes my justification to explore the alternative discourse in the film. For although the jewellery box, as a locus of power, couldn’t have and can never liberate the widow, it does punctuate the collective narrative of historical and quotidian marginalisation by sustaining her. In this paper, I have argued for a similar approach in the domain of gender through an investigation of the conflicting strategies of Brahmanical patriarchy that resignify the trope of the wealthy widows and their jewellery box beyond the politics of denial and desire.

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