

SEX WORKER: THE REALITY OF A FICTION

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A girl. Her name is Shova. She used to be in the city - 'on the line'! She earned money through bodily transactions in the blue light of the night. In the village, she had siblings. She loved them, cared for them. Teaching her siblings, arranging her sister's marriage -- all was for Shova's livelihood. But suddenly Shova's conscience awakened -- she decided to spend her 'retirement life' with her family in the village. Because, living in the artificial environment of the city, she had imagined, there is affection, love, fondness, illusion, attachment, empathy. There are relatives. There is social life and human well-being. There is assurance of happiness. As her thoughts, so her actions. After many days, Shova returned to the village. Where there used to be a small mud house with patched walls, now stands a big concrete house. Next to the entrance is a Kali temple and right in front of it is a big pond. Young boys and girls are playing in the busy yard. Hearing the received news, Shova learned that with the money she sent, land was bought and a house was built. But as soon as she stepped into the house, Shova heard the harsh rejection of her brother: 'House? Whose house? Do you want to stay with us? How dare you! Go wherever you used to spend your nights. There won't be any place for a girl like you here.' Crushed by the roots of her dreams, Shova returned to the city. The desire to live a dignified life bound her in the chains of her hidden heart's torment, extinguished in the black fire of kerosene the pain of the heart that bleeds on that night.

-- This story has been told to us by Krishna Dutta in his book 'Lalbatir Nil Parira'.

-- No, this is not a fiction! Shova's past is just like her present. Shova is one -- Shova is many.

In his book 'Kamasutra', Mallanaga Vatsyayana mentions, 'The courtesans are the cause of men's indulgence and the origin of sexual pleasure.' It can be said that the arousal of men by courtesans and the creation of means of earning money have been prevalent since ancient times. Moreover, the expression of 'shringar' (love and romance) observed from the narratives of Yama-Yami in the Rigveda, continued to be glorified by Amaru, Bhartrihari, Bilhana, and Kalidasa later on. Additionally, references to this context can also be found in the Aranyakas and Samhitas. In Kautilya's Arthashastra, along with economics and politics, there is extensive information on the profession of courtesans. Furthermore, immediately after that, Vyatsayana wrote:

"Abhir bhuchchhitabeshyashilarupagunanavita

Labhateganikashabdamsthanamchajanasansadi."

The meaning of this verse is that a transparent woman, proficient in her conduct, is addressed as a 'courtesan' or 'ganika'. Sukumari Bhattacharya has said:

"In India, from ancient times, whether in cities or villages, when the ownership rights of women over men began to be accepted by society, the profession of courtesans also started, and it has been prevalent since then" ('Prachin Bharat: Samaj O Sahitya').

Courtesans had a special status in society as proficient in dance, music, acting, education, cooking, etc. The references to courtesans in Buddhist literature and Sanskrit literature are familiar to us. It is known from the Mahabharata that before entering the city, Yudhishtira conveyed his wishes to the courtesans. In Jain literature, it is mentioned that kings considered courtesans as the jewels of their kingdom. Besides professional aspects, courtesans were also noticed in the religious context. For example, in South India, there was the tradition of Devadasis in temples, and Armenians worshipped their goddess Anaitis through the practice of the courtesan profession. Vyatsayana, who identified them as 'Vaishik' (meaning, courtesans). In pure Bengali, they are addressed as 'Barangana' (ganika, patita, panyangana, barbonita are also synonymous words). In ancient times, they were addressed as Pungshali, Mahanagri, Rupjibee, Rupdasi, Rajnartaki, Nagarlakshmi, Devdasi, etc. Durgapada Chattopadhyay, a researcher of ancient Bengali literature, according to him, due to the patriarchal social system prevalent from ancient times, women were expelled from the patriarchal world due to sexual-social reasons, and they became courtesans (Barangana). They had to adopt the life of a prostitute to sustain themselves as generally, they were abandoned from society due to the belief that a

woman must live a life of subservience, as commonly perceived. In this context, researcher Sangita Choudhury explains:

"Courtesans had a respectable position in ancient India. They were not considered as immoral or illegitimate in society. However, from the 8th century AD, there was a decline in the status of courtesans due to mutual traditions." ('AdirasJounota :Sekal-Ekal').

However, from ancient times to the present, those whom we generally refer to as 'courtesans' in common language -- their social status has remained almost the same. They are the enjoyers. The carriers of pleasure. In her 'Atmucharita', Binodini Dasi wrote:

"Who will donate their hearts to us? There is no shortage of stories that enchant us with desires. But who wants to test our hearts to see if we have one?"

-- The dilemma of that heart is peripheral here. The main body. As Jatindranath Sengupta put it, 'In the language of the 'colorful evening's balcony and colorful courtesans' held by the male-dominated society, the ultimate external manifestation of uncontrolled desire is found!

Short story in Bengali – In places where the real-life issues and complexities of life find expression, we notice that from the very first part of establishment, this disease of social injustice has also sought to hold onto its direction. Has it been caught? Rabindranath Tagore expressed in his poem 'Patita' how Baranari conveyed her thoughts –

"I left religion, they call it religion.

Have I really left it at all?

I haven't done any work, I'm not ashamed,

I know the tradition of a woman's virtue since birth –

saying that forgetting a bit of a woman's femininity,

is that the truth?"

-- She could not forget that bit of femininity, and that's why the judge sentenced Kshiroda (who transformed from childhood widow Hemshashi to prostitute Kshiroda due to the bizarre twists of fate in life) to death by hanging, handing over her golden anklet ('Bicharak', Rabindranath Tagore). How did a normal middle-class widow Hemshashi from a middle-class family transform into Kshiroda at the age of twelve, how did the innocent Kshiroda suffer from pain due to not being able to feed her son for three years, how did she not become the sole inheritor of 'a corner of a house to live and die in' and how did Mohit, the offender and protector of a woman's chastity, bring her life to a tragic end – 'it was necessary to describe all those details in detail', isn't it! The statutory civilian judge becomes sentimental seeing the anklet – he remembers her youth history, the story of past love – the consequences. He feels ashamed and, in the bright glow of Kshiroda, he transforms into the 'golden goddess' ('Swarna Mayee Debi' in Bengali). But in that, the sharpness of punishment does not diminish, and hidden in the form of policies and morality, women's flesh is devoured, and the invisible form of ethics ties their hands, and the social laws of meat eater's condemnation are giving them the responsibility for punishment, pressing on others' shoulders. Just as Manu branded women as 'adulteress' and put all sorts of punishment laws on them, and that tradition continues equally!

But even in the pigsty, there is a pawn within the victim. When Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay writes 'AandhareAalo' (Light in Darkness), we see that despite being subjected to a hundred abuses on her body, the femininity of the educated, beautiful, dancer Barabonitaremains untouched. So, when the landlord's son Satyendra, in remorse for his abandonment of love, touches her with the touch of remorse, Baiji dies – and a woman awakens. Trying to establish the pride of love, one may end up ruining one's own life.

Yes, this is a story. As a result, generation after generation, it is said that in the original religion of the world (meaning, the profession of the body), women became enemies. Sometimes a mother dedicates her first daughter-child to the deity in the temple. Sometimes a wealthy man, in the desire to earn merit, buys beautiful poor girls and donates them to the feet of gods. Sometimes, in the name of caste, a young widow is condemned to live a cursed life. Sometimes, tempted by the desire for earning, parents send their young daughters to the city. Sometimes, in the guise of a job, women's positions are in the brothels of the city.

Although the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act was enacted in 1956 AD and transformed into the Immoral Traffic Act in 1986 AD (which was further amended in 2006 AD) for the return of sex workers to a healthy-normal life, it remains an ironic twist of legal and moral protection. Where

'prostitution' is explained as 'sexual coercion for commercial purposes', it is not officially recognized as the oldest profession in the world. The harsh reality crafted by the state wants to keep people in darkness. Due to the division of countries, we see how many women crossing borders lose their physical hygiene, family security, and social respect, but such stories are rarely found in Bengali short stories. Although in Jyotirmoyee Devi's story 'Sei Chheleta' there is a hint of the unwritten narrative, where a Hindu Punjabi bride who crosses borders cannot protect her physical hygiene and may not be able to reunite with her family in the future. Living in a male-dominated society, she is forced to keep her mother away, even if she finds her son far away.

When the beauty of temporary body paint fades away, it transforms the lives of 'lost' women into a struggle devoid of national or religious identity. Social breakdown and shame push them further into darkness. Even though they provide for their families through their own life exchanges, they may not be able to express their identity. They want to keep their relationships with relatives and family secret to maintain the dignity of social morality. Stories like Premendra Mitra's 'Mahangar' or Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's 'Bipod' reveal a poignant aspect. Despite being caught in the vicious cycle, the narrative in these stories, though reliant on fictional stories, attempts to shed some light. In Probodh Kumar Sanyal's story 'Angar', the suffocating environment is depicted, where the protagonist, when told to go back home because Meenu has left, says,

"Meenu has gone to her parents' house, she won't be back today, go away! Go away, shameless! I said, Shova, I said, it's only me, no one else, I'm leaving. Shall I open the door? Leaving? - Shova immediately opened the door and came to sit by my feet. In a tearful voice, she said, Leaving, why have you brought us to hell with the fire in my belly?"

-- However, in the midst of all this darkness, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay reveals a nostalgic sentiment in his short story 'Hinger Kochuri', describing the life of Kusum, a girl in his extensive canvas of thirty years, he only sees the warmth and sweetness amidst the light and darkness of the atmosphere. His perception remains stable over time. Even though Kusum lived a straightforward life in her youth, how she transformed into the realm of a mess house -- the real history does not fall into his eyes.

Similarly, there is a life like Dhananjaya's in Subodh Ghosh's 'PorashuramerKuthar'. Near the bustling city of Nawabganj, Dhananjaya's days are as incompatible with the light of day as with the darkness of night. During the day, Dhananjaya's mother is the 'milk mother' of the respectable wealthy family; in the evening, men come to his house! In need of both lives, she becomes the regular instrument of 'mother'. The social and economic changes of urbanization lead to the necessity of Dhananjaya's decline -- she remains in the past. Social leadership, with cooperative governance, decides - Dhananjaya's only identity now is the shape-shifting woman ('Calcutta Sex Worker' in the prose book 'CholomanJounokormi' described by the calligrapher Subodh Das, who gave the definition of the following words: 'Another name for death is Prostitution'). Those who Dhananjaya once provided with the elixir of life, they are now visible, igniting the torch of desire at her door. Although Dhananjaya is forced to accept prostitution as a profession, she expresses strong condemnation against the selfishness of social rulers/oppression. According to our understanding, in the end, an elderly woman of eighty, distributes the final drop of maternal nectar to 'Prasad' in the last ritual of maternity. Although the conclusion may not be available, it gives us a very sharp and poignant glimpse into the story of modern urbanization -- Subodh Ghosh unveils this through a series of dramatic events and narrative fractures, not only in the naming of the story but also in the story itself. And in the midst of such a dark world, there is also the desire for life like in Santosh Kumar Ghosh's story 'Kanakari', where Manmatha wants his wife to dance with a doll in her hand. He pushes his wife on the path to becoming 'commodified' -- maintaining her dignity as 'motherhood' without letting go of 'femininity,' according to the woman in the voice of her husband -- "Wash the honor and fill your stomach." Manmatha began to say:

"They are playing with me; they want to make a profit. They help when they're happy. After messing up all the soil, why should they care about hygiene?"

-- However, as Bertrand Russell described it, 'A life against instinct,' it is not easy to think like policy makers. Many of them say they provide recognition and dignity for their (body-based) labour. Although there was an attempt to place 'Important Service' within the framework of labour standards and mention the participation of both sides, if we see the truth, there is a subtle duality in it.

The creation-theory of *baranganas*, commonly found in 'astakud', usually represents the place of abandoned, orphaned, and abducted women. Sometimes, they end up in the role of 'field-prostitutes' right in their own villages! No, this is not some transformational story plot! It's the liberated brothels outside the mainstream values, where house-breaking, divorce, or pseudo-divorce women find their refuge. According to a study conducted by the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, 49.10% of women are compelled to enter this profession due to the relentless pressure of limitless poverty. Ranjit Ray, a former director of Development Dialogue, had reviewed a banned neighbourhood of Kolkata, where he found that 99% of the girls couldn't even write their own names. And 62% of residents were infected with AIDS and other various diseases. Almost based on these topics, Samaresh Basu's story 'Shubhra-Sandhya Samvad' is created. Where the story is just a name. It mainly highlights the socio-economic perspective, where women become commodities. I hear the echo of Sandhya: "Eating to fill the stomach is not an option at home. In such situations, when one is barely sixteen, she first goes to a brothel named Khalikuthi in Kolkata. The big men, the debauched, the revelry of wine, the crowd of girls, it's all seen for the first time. I worked for only one hundred rupees on the first day, just from two people".

Even if 'prostitute' is acknowledged as a 'sex worker' and her labour is established, she still cannot be integrated with other prevalent labour. Why not, when the prostitute or sex worker satisfies others in exchange for money, it is doubtful how much satisfaction she herself gets – it is doubtful! Although Havelock Ellis has called those whose 'nature is prostitution', do they really find pleasure in it? Even though it usually happens in the realm of their 'accepted' and 'chosen' men. Counted as an exception. Why not, even though the women who are bound to the regulated men give them company, give them time, their hearts do not connect with them. Physical contact forces them to sell their bodies. So, they say, 'Today I settled so many.' Not, 'Today I worked with so many!' Even the most desolate truth is often expressed in verbal communication with most prostitutes, and it has been said in the report of the International Labor Organization in 1998 that 'prostitution is one of the least wanted occupations among the oppressed.' From their conducted review, it can be learned further that women associated with this profession work with a 'broken heart', 'coercion', and are 'tormented by conscience', and their 'self-respect' receives no value!

Of course, they, who are called 'beshyas' in the Mahabharata, also deserve our sympathy – that's another question altogether! Why not, amidst the darkness of the red-light area, Bengali short story writers have often attempted to shed some light, albeit it has often been illusory. The white light of pure eyes does not fall there. Even in attempting to talk about the plight of fallen women, poets like Kabita Sinha ('Leelar Gobhire'), Sunil Gangopadhyay ('Chhadmabeshini'), Narayan Gangopadhyay ('Timirabhisar') have resorted to writing elaborate tales. Jagadish Gupta ('ThikanayBudhbar'), Premendra Mitra ('SangsarSimante'), Tarashankar Bandopadhyay ('Beder Meye'), and Banaphul ('Nak') are prominent wordsmiths who have tried to glimpse into the eyes of those trapped in the abyss of distorted desires. And it's Prafulla Ray who diligently endeavors to capture this life-truth in a broader context. In his story 'Narak', he vividly portrays how a young woman from a remote village in Uttar Bihar, a practitioner of the oldest profession (Sagiya -- known for entertainment), manages to rescue a person from the clutches of a terrible disaster and saves a whole community, even when facing death head-on – this is the detailed description we find in the story 'Narak' by the author. The moralists of society, who despise those they call 'filthy', whose 'baths don't happen even ten times a day to purify their bodies when the shadow fades', their dwelling is "at the end of the city. Taking a dozen or so dilapidated tin houses, this group settles there. The houses are lined up facing each other, with narrow paths in between. The condition of the houses is so precarious that they could collapse at any moment".

And within this cluster, among the residents, the women who live as 'lost' beings, among their own professional competitors, their human dignity remains hidden – Prafulla Ray, by immersing a nearly drowned scholarly gentleman in this 'brothel' and carrying out the narrative of rescue through it, wants to convey to us that very story. Many want to forget this reality. The unpleasant stark truth, presented by a highly empathetic woman, Mrinal Kanti Dutt, in her research-oriented work titled 'JounokarmiderJibonsattya'.

Therefore, this labour is not legally recognized, nor is it declared illegal through rehabilitation or legal means. Jyotirmoyee Devi said, 'The business of prostitution should not exist'. Taslima Nasrin

also said, 'In any way, keeping this profession alive or glorifying it is against me'. Although, in this case, the path that provided the most benefit, the one whose direction was indicated by Debiprasad Chattopadhyay in the chapter 'Ganika' of his book 'Nishiddho Kotha arNishiddhoDesh', even though it wanted someone to help take that path, there is often not much enthusiasm. And in this patriarchal-controlled way of life, women also consider themselves 'lost'. This understanding sometimes encourages them to engage in forbidden activities, sometimes gives birth to distortions among them, sometimes or sometimes creates self-loathing. But it never fosters genuine connections, natural way of life, mutual affection, or self-confidence. Therefore, even when the state tries to raise awareness about AIDS through the police, these efforts often fail. Those whose existence is under the shadow of ignominy, who carry the burden of social stigma on their heads, even those who only want to survive in a decent society, they cannot trust the NGOs of a well-behaved society due to their ideological reasons. The hope, in this dusky sky, is that like stars in the celestial world, those affected by societal illness want to uphold their own demands through the 'Durbar Women's Coordination Committee'. Barbanitara's are considered most reprehensible by society (both in the eyes of men and women) precisely when it is suggested to give them the right to lead a normal life outside the prohibited areas. Actually, the hidden desire to play games with sexuality, to turn the female body into a tool for amusement and pleasure, and then to recoil in disgust afterward – this urge to maintain one's social status according to the caste system has been prevalent since time immemorial. Because by labelling women as 'prostitutes', society fulfils its own needs. In reality, those who are not sex workers are sexual slaves. As Sukhomoy Chakraborty said: "Behind the prevalence of prostitution and continued degradation lies the complex web of circumstances and people's lifelong sexual desires." The dependence of daily life, the fear of society's bloodthirstiness, the living of tainted days, inherited poverty, the onslaught of mistress-pimps – the days and nights of these 'fallen' women are quite pitiful – very cruel. Those who do not receive human dignity as human beings – where in Subimal Mishra's story 'Parijatak', in the story named Rani, a female entity craves to eat her flesh after her death – their twelve-month-long stories become just a separate celestial body in the vast universe of Bengali short stories. Their moral punishment in the realm of auspicious and inauspicious consciousness only ends up burning and destroying straw!