

Representation of Sex-workers' Plight in Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala* and Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood*

Md. Maruf Ul Alam

University of Chittagong

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala* and Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood* portray the life of sex-workers in colonial Bengal and post-independence Bangladesh respectively. They are gripping tales of the marginalised lives of prostitutes. These two novels by Devi and Rahman can intimate great insight into the plight of sex-workers. Academic surveys and studies are not readily accessible or available to common people. Fiction has wider access and so novels like Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala* and Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood* can achieve what academic studies or narratives sometimes fail to do. This paper will attempt to analyse the potentials of the two novels in portraying the plight of sex-workers.

Keywords: Sex-workers, plight, brothels, narratives, representation

Prostitution is an age-old practice which has been continuing for hundreds of years all over the world. Indian subcontinent is not an exception to that though brothels are of recent origins here. Brothels were established in India during the British Colonial rule (Tahmina & Moral, 2004, p. 52). While the conditions are quite different in India now as sex-workers have strong organizations to represent them, talking about brothels or sex-workers is still a taboo in Bangladeshi society. So it is not difficult to assume that when Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood* was originally published in 1978 as *Rakter Akshar* in Bengali, it received mixed reactions.

But at the same time, it was like an eye-opener to sympathetic people of the country. Both Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala* and Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood* represent the wretched lives of prostitutes or sex-workers.

Mahasweta Devi was an Indian Bengali novelist and a recipient of Sahitya Academy Award for her contribution to Bengali as well as Indian literature. She, in her novels, portrayed mainly the lives of downtrodden people. *Bedanabala* is an enthralling tale of prostitutes, yet to be known and recognised as 'sex-workers', in colonial West Bengal. The first person narrative of the novel makes it an arresting tale of lives of prostitutes in and outside brothels. The narrative begins mentioning a year in the very first sentence, 1910, the year in which the narrator was born. So, here is a tale of colonial India. The narrative starts with the story of Kamal, the narrator's mother, who escapes the 'destiny' of becoming a prostitute herself despite being abducted in her infancy by a Mashi, the owner of a whorehouse, and raised among the prostitutes. In the brothels, "a girl's great value" (Devi, 2005, p. 1). Realizing the value of girls, the inmates of brothels try to keep the girls, not the boys; which is quite opposite of the world outside the brothels. Kamal who was born to some *zamindar* (landlord) family falls prey to Did'ma. Did'ma runs a whorehouse and so hunts for pretty girls especially from rich homes or respectable households. She buys infant girls and employs them as prostitutes when they reach their puberty after a certain ritual which involves marrying the girl to a *boti*, an iron blade, before initiating her into the age-old business, prostitution. While the brothel in *Letters of Blood* is not something like the one that one finds in Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's novels *Srikanta* or *Devdas* or the inmates in the brothel in *Letters of Blood* are not like Rajlakshmi or Chandramukhi, two prostitutes from these two novels by Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, the characters in *Bedanabala* remind the readers of Rajlakshmi or Chandramukhi. The prostitutes in *Bedanabala* learn to read and write as well as to sing and dance which make them more alluring to their customers. One or two of them, though rarely, can manage to get a 'bandhababu' (regular customer) who sometimes builds them a house and gives them a regular pay. But the other girls who are not so lucky live their days in miseries, get infected by sexually transmitted diseases and die. Even murders of some of them are not unlikely. Throughout their lives they remain branded as sinners but their customers, the men, do not have to bear the shame. For men, it is simply a change of taste. They go to brothels for "new flavours" and nobody brands them sinners (Devi, 2005, p. 10). A whore girl cherishes the dream of having a household, and in the hope of getting one, elopes with an eager customer only to return later when her customer-cum-lover ditches her. Mani is such an example in *Bedanabala*. When she returns after her lover betrays her, Did'ma does not want to take her back but ultimately relents giving her a sound beating. Committing suicide after being betrayed is also not uncommon in a brothel. Did'ma's own biological daughter commits suicide failing to bear the pain and insult of betrayal. Otherwise "whores die when their bodies break" (Devi, 2005, p. 6). Some of them die on the streets begging having no customers and no income due to aging. After death, "No whore gets to heaven" (Devi, 2005, p. 7). The male accomplices in their 'sin' might go to heaven, but they, the whores, will not. Such is the religious sanction.

Kamal, in the narrative, can escape the life of a prostitute but Mani fails to do so. When Did'ma says to Mani that Kamal is "not such a one" and so she does not want her to join the trade, a protest from Mani is heard, though faint (Devi, 2005, p. 27). She says, "Which girl is, Ma? Which?" (Devi, 2005, p. 27). Mani was abducted by Did'ma when she was six years old. Since she comes from a village, she has no chance of escape. Is it because she is not as beautiful as Kamal or does not come from such rich home as of Kamal's, that she lacks a chance? This question seems valid. If someone is fallen once, she is fallen forever. After Kamal's marriage with Balaram-Babu, Mani initially pays a few visits to Kamal. But later she discovers that she is unwelcome there since her presence can raise suspicion among the people of the society. Balaram-Babu does not even allow Did'ma to meet her foster daughter Kamal whom she loves so much that she has transformed herself completely. She is even unwanted to her daughter. Kamal, being married to zamindar family now, does not want her mother to visit her in fear of a scandal.

With the plot constructed in the backdrop of Swadeshi movement in colonial India, the novel *Bedanabala* presents the outlook of *swadeshis* regarding the sex-workers. *Swadeshis* do not refuse donations from the brothels. Rather they appreciate their contribution to the noble cause. Prostitutes like Satayabhama are ready to spend their hard-earned money for the cause of homeland. Brothels give shelter to the revolutionaries. But the typical mindset surfaces when the young man fails to hold back his shocked state seeing Balaram-Babu married to a girl from a brothel. He asks the 'shocked' young men, "Is just the burning of foreign goods enough? And what about the superstition heaped upon your soul?" (Devi, 2005, p. 53). It is hard to imagine what would be his reaction if he was not directly involved in the situation. But all those tall talks by Balaram in defence of marrying a girl from a brothel fall short if his treatment with his mother-in-law comes to mind. Negligence of the society of the plight of these women is evident when people like Vidyasagar and Rammohan Roy who did so many things to alleviate the predicaments of women were so forgetful of the oppression that the prostitutes endure.

Even after the death of prostitutes, their lot does not change. Their shame continues. Kaminibala Dasi cannot go to see her pregnant daughter Kamal, now that she is married in a respectable family. She cannot feed her with her own hands before her child is born. It is an unbearable pain to her. She cannot keep in touch with her since Balaram does not "want any of them coming and going" because "people will talk" (Devi, 2005, p. 42). Birth of Kamal's child Bedanabala is a happy event but it could be the very opposite if she stayed in the brothel. Phulmoti's child is unwelcome in *Letters of Blood* since the child is a 'whorechild'. Kaminibala Dasi's daughter, Kamal, escapes the inevitable lot of a whore's daughter of becoming a whore because she is not born of a whore but there is no escape for Phulmoti's daughter. Phulmoti is a whore and the destiny of her biological daughter is nothing but the life of a whore.

Some prostitutes consider leaving the trade a sin. One enters the profession performing some rites. Some fear to fall in love seeing or hearing about Taramoni murder case. Taramoni falls in love with Selim, the jockey. But she does not want to marry or have a household. She

does not like the idea of being “a mother at thirteen and an old hag at twenty” (Devi, 2005, p. 6). Lakshmidas-babu wants to ‘keep’ her and failing to do that, he gets her killed. Some prostitutes like Mani want to go back to their families but their families do not take them back once they are ‘polluted’. Mani meets her mother and comes to know the reality of the society. Her mother cannot take her back as the society will make their life miserable. The two younger sisters of Mani will not get husbands if Mani’s truth is revealed. Mani understands her foolishness meeting her mother that she cannot return home as “the police records had her name down as a professional” (Devi, 2005, p. 14).

Another cruel reality of a brothel is sexually transmitted diseases. People with filthy diseases visit the brothels with the belief that if they copulate with virgins before they reach puberty, it will cure their diseases. And “the girls rot and crumble soon after” to meet their death ultimately (Devi, 2005, p. 15). Society does not bother about the death of a prostitute, neither does law. *Letters of Blood* shows that situations have not changed even after freedom from a foreign rule.

One very interesting story in *Bedanabala* is the story of Surjomukhi. Her name was Chhoto-potli. But after she has played the role of Surjomukhi, “that named stuck” (Devi, 2005, p. 17). She becomes a Muslim and changes her name. She marries a Nawab who gives her a house and her mother is also taken care of. She is no longer a professional whore. “Chhoto-potli had been a Hindu. But Firoza Begum is someone’s legally wedded wife who had neatly slipped through a loophole in the government’s laws” (Devi, 2005, p. 18). But Surjomukhi’s case is “one in a million” (Devi, 2005, p. 18). There is no such case as of Surjomukhi in *Letters of Blood*.

Formal education for ‘whorechildren’ is not available. Did’ma understands that no school will take Kamal since “she’s a whore’s girl” (Devi, 2005, p. 19). Even a man like Vidyasagar forgot to think about them. So in the hope of securing a better future for Kamal, Did’ma starts teaching her whatever she knows. “Did’ma was fairly fluent at reading Bengali. She was in fact addicted to reading” (Devi, 2005, p.18). She cultivates this reading habit in Kamal too. Her teaching and her love save Kamal from being a ‘damned woman’. Kamal declares, “If I am made to join the trade I shall hang myself” (Devi, 2005, p. 29). But all are not as lucky as Kamal. Bedana says, “Few are as lucky as my mother and I” (Devi, 2005, p. 37).

Bedanabala is written in the first person narrative, the narrator being Bedana. While she narrates the household of Kamal from her own experiences, she relies on Mani for her stories on the brothel. The reliability of the narrator is not beyond question here. For example, Bedana says, “Ma was born in 1892” (Devi, 2005, p. 47). How does she know it? Kamal was abducted by Did’ma and her parents were never found. Bedana learns the whole story of Kamal’s childhood from Mani. How can Mani tell her the year of birth of Kamal? Here and there such incongruities are found in the narrative. Probably fact and fiction are intermingled here. While in *Letters of Blood*, realistic portrayal of life in a brothel is pretty evident, *Bednabala* is not free from elements of romance.

Now if we turn to the work of Rizia Rahman, who is a Bangladeshi novelist who won the prestigious Bangla Academy Literary Award and Ekushe Padak for her outstanding contribution to Bangla literature, we see that her fictional characters come mainly from the margins of the society. In her novels she has portrayed the lives of sex-workers, tribal people of Bangladesh, Arakan migrants in Bangladesh, tea-garden workers, fishermen, etc. Rahman's *Rakter Akshar*, *Letters of Blood* in English translation, is a novel about the miserable and tormented lives of women in brothels. Rizia Rahman in her "Author's Note" section of *Letters of Blood* says that she got inspiration to write this novel reading the cover story titled "The Prostitutes of Dhaka" in a weekly Bengali magazine *Bichitra* some thirty years ago. The article presented the day-to-day lives of prostitutes in brothels. The author initially decided to visit a brothel to write the novel but it was not possible for a woman from a respectable background to visit a novel as it was quite dangerous. So, in writing the novel, she had to depend on reports prepared by journalists and enlarged photos of brothels taken by the *Ittefaq* journalists. That is how she got introduced to the living areas, kitchen, bathing well, etc which helped her to portray the domestic enclosures of the sex-workers efficiently.

The novel begins with the description of a typical morning in a brothel. A typical day starts with quarrels, screams, and obscenities in a 'whorehouse'. Verbal abuses ring in ears of all who are in a queue at the common toilet. First of all, the readers are introduced with Golapjan, an inmate of Golapipotti brothel, who was once a prostitute, later to become a 'madam' and now a destitute. She now crawls about outside the doors of prostitutes and begs. After Golapjan, Sakina appears on the scene. Several generations of Sakina are in the trade, the flesh trade. "Stale green putrid water" of the brothel well presents a dark side of it (Rahman, 2018, p. 4). Mashi says that the well is full of rotting human blood (Rahman, 2018, p. 5). Murder is a common phenomenon in a brothel. At this stage, Kusum, a fourteen-year-old undernourished girl, appears and a truth about this age-old profession is unfolded. Flesh is the biggest capital in a brothel, charming rounded flesh. Kusum does not have that capital and very often she has to starve. She is not an independent prostitute and if she does not get a customer, she has to starve. Kalu, a goon in the brothel, bought her and she is still under his control. On the contrary, Shanti's fortune is on the rise. Like Shanti, the other prostitutes Jahanara, Bokul, and Manu are also well-off. They can afford meat twice a day and can bathe everyday while Kusum cannot sometimes afford a bath a week or even a month. One has to buy water for a bath. The skinny girl who can hardly eat one single meal a day cannot afford water for a bath. All these portray the miserable sanitary conditions in a brothel. Here and there, faint voices of resistance are heard. These voices are suppressed mercilessly. For example, after two days' starvation, when Kusum gives Thika Mashi, a woman who runs errands for the inmates of the brothel, one taka that she stole from a customer to buy her *Muri*, Kalu starts beating her because she is still his slave and can have no independent income. She is a 'chhukri' here. A chukri as a sex-worker is virtually bonded to her madam or her dalal, who pays an advance to the agent or to the sex-worker's relatives for her services (Kotiswaran, 2012, p. 142). Kusum raises her voice and declares that she is also a human being who gets hungry. Not only the goons and madam of the brothel but also the customers torture the girls there. A wealthy sadist customer

of Shanti once pressed a burning cigarette on her skin, not out of anger but out of lust. She still bears the scar. The girls in the brothel are at the receiving end of all the inhuman tortures. Girls who hail from different religious and social backgrounds often fight among themselves and murder is not even an unlikely outcome. They can fight over a *dalpuri* or a fistful of rice. In their competition to win customers, they can be murderous too. Such is the grim reality in a brothel.

Letters of Blood introduces the readers to the terrible reality of women trafficking in Bangladesh. Some girls are bought and sold even for a meagre amount of ten taka. Sometimes poor parents sell their daughters to the goons like Hiru Sardar in *Letters of Blood*. In other instances, girls land in a brothel cheated by their lovers who after satisfying their lust, sell them. Kidnappers sometimes kidnap the girls to sell them in brothels. Girls or women sometimes even join the trade voluntarily to support their family. Nalini Jameela (2005) says that she joined the trade after her husband's death to support her children (p. 23). Often illiterate and poor women have no other alternative to this. The novel shows how politicians and the law enforcers have their shares in the trade. Brothels are dark spots in civilised societies but the visitors are sometimes the so-called civilised ones who perpetuate the trade. In the novel, Piru is the representation of being victimised by the extreme lust of predatory male dominant society. She is only eleven and is sold for only twenty five taka. She has to bear the brutalities of men and her childhood is destroyed. Rizia Rahman has done an extraordinary job here in depicting the contradictions of a so-called civilised society.

Motherhood, otherwise, so relished in the society is a menace in a brothel. Phulmoti's life in the brothel becomes quite miserable after her giving birth to a baby girl. She loses her customers and fails to manage food both for herself and her infant daughter. To avoid pregnancy, girls buy Codopyrin tablets from Mannan's shop. This tablet makes their life miserable as it gives them intolerable headaches. Sometimes it is so intolerable that girls go mad or even hang themselves. Kazi Shaheb, the owner of the rooms in the brothel, shows no mercy to Phulmoti. He threatens her to vacate the room if she cannot pay the rent. Kazi Shaheb who is apparently a religious man now, was a regular visitor of the brothel before. Here he is a representative of predatory patriarchy. He loves his daughters but sells others' daughters to ensure extra income. Rizia Rahman's mastery in creating the character of Kazi is really commendable.

Women often come to the trade because of "negative circumstances" (Tahmina & Moral, 2004, p. 3). Moti, an inmate of Golapipotti, lands there after being raped in a Hindu-Muslim riot. All other members of her family were killed. Bokul, a character in the novel, was raped and tortured by Pakistanis and their local collaborators during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. After independence, the society does not accept her and so she has come to Golapipotti. *Letters of Blood* shows another facet of reality about plight of Hindu widows in Bangladesh. Mashī whose real name was Saraswati comes from a Brahmin household. She was married off at nine and became a widow the next year. Once "puberty suddenly [has] overflowed the banks of her body", her elder sister's husband makes physical relation with her (Rahman, 2018, p.

42). This arouses “a new desire” in her and she elopes with a lower-caste man who ultimately abandons her (Rahman, 2018, p. 42). The novel shows how Hindu marriage law fails to protect her and as a protest she never takes a Hindu customer.

In *Letters of Blood*, Yasmin is the most shocking but realistic creation. She is a rape victim of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Kamal, a freedom fighter and a friend of Yasmin's brother, took shelter in Yasmin's house. The domestic help Ali informed the Pakistanis about the hideout of Kamal. Pakistani invading force killed her parents, sisters and brothers and abducted her to torture for months in their camps. Kamal, somehow escaped. After the independence of Bangladesh, the rape victims were declared *Birangana* which means ‘war-heroine’. But the society did not accept many of the victims. In Yasmin's words, they actually became “barangana” (Rahman, 2018, p. 106). The women who were raped by Pakistani soldiers and their local collaborators during the nine months of the Liberation War “encountered grave discrimination in post-war Bangladesh, as did their children” (Schendel, 2009, p. 173). Yasmin's paternal and maternal uncles refuse to keep any relation with her but her paternal uncle arranges her marriage with a greedy man who after selling her paternal property and sharing the money with her uncle starts showing his true colours to her. The man was already married when he married Yasmin. Now he forces Yasmin to sleep with other businessmen and officials so that he can get contracts from them. Finally, she leaves the man and goes to the brothel since she was reluctant to yield her body for the benefit of others. The real shock comes to her when she meets Kamal at the brothel. Kamal's turning into a corrupt beneficiary of independent Bangladesh becomes unbearable to Yasmin. To save Kamal, Yasmin's whole family had to pay a price. Her life has become a living hell. She hits Kamal in a fury. That is a sort of new beginning of her protest against injustice to her. Delwar, a young social activist, visits her in the brothel and kindles the revolutionary spirit in Yasmin. When Hiru brings a girl named Golapi to the brothel and tries to rape her along with some of his friends, Yasmin resists them and is killed in turn by Hiru. Thus, her voice has been silenced.

Among the disenfranchised people, the sex-workers are probably the worst victims of oppression. With the ever increasing poverty in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, the number of sex-workers grew. Women land in brothels due to different reasons. Sometimes they come to the brothels voluntarily when they are forsaken by their near ones like their families or their husbands or lovers. Some of them are sold in the brothels after their abduction and rape. Famine and river erosion also cause tremendous disasters in the lives of women. Some of them even support their families in their villages under false impression that they work in the garments factory or they work as domestic help, etc. Some of them even elope with their customers but once their customers are done with them, they have to return to their former abode, the brothel. “Often women join the trade on their own, driven by poverty, lack of livelihood opportunities and social pressures or negative circumstances” (Tahmina & Moral, 2004, p. 3). The society does not accept them though they contribute to the economy. They are very vulnerable to diseases too. Sexually transmitted diseases claim their life. If they are sick, they can hardly go to the doctors. Sometimes goons kill them and loot their property

but the police take no actions. The police are actually “one of the main links in the chain of power” that runs the brothels (Tahmina & Moral, 2004, p. 53). Such is the terrible reality of sex-workers in Bangladesh.

While *Letters of Blood* portray the lived experiences of women in a brothel in independent Bangladesh, *Bedanabala*, introduces the readers to subhuman status of sex-workers in colonial Bengal. Apart from being engaging novels, *Letters of Blood* and *Bedanabala* have potentials to become historical documents as well as functional narratives in sociology. What makes these two novels special is that they familiarize the readers with the struggles of sex-workers without exhausting them with academic jargons and details. They can even be useful in developing an understanding of the psychological tensions of sex-workers. So, fictional narratives like *Bedanabala* and *Letters of Blood* can help to create a more humanistic space and attitude for some of the most wretched people in our society, the sex-workers.

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