

Book Review

Manottama. Narrative of a Sorrowful Wife (Anon.)

Introduced and Translated from the original Bengali by Somdatta Mandal. With a Foreword by Rosinka Chaudhuri. New Delhi & Kolkata. Shambhabi. The Third Eye Imprint. 2021. pp.72. INR 300/-

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Shambhabi have taken upon themselves, the important task of making available, rare texts from the past in contemporary reprints. The translator of the work under review takes it to be the first Bengali novel penned by a woman, though for reasons adduced below, I personally have some reservations on this score.

This is a slim, delicious looking book that finishes in just about 70 pages, though going by some internal evidence it appears as though the author intended to go further. The brief but insightful foreword by Rosinka Chaudhuri familiarizes us with the relevant literary and historical terrain, further replenished by a useful Introduction from Somdatta Mandal.

Manottama, we gather, came to light more as a result of patient and persevering searches conducted in the British Library, than some chance discovery. It was originally serialized in a journal by the name of *Nabaprabandha* and subsequently published as a book in 1868. Although researchers and literary critics were aware of its existence we managed to retrieve and reprint the original text only about a decade back.

As a narrative, *Manottama* is quite insipid, didactic and unentertaining. Didacticism was a common occurrence in contemporary Bengali literature but in some notable cases, as with the novels of Bankimchandra, it was at least partly mitigated by the richness of the plot and evocatively bold language. Since the original Bengali version is not before me, I cannot possibly comment on its literary merit but there is every reason to claim that the historical importance of this work appears to far surpass the literary.

The story revolves around the life-experiences of an educated woman by the name of *Manottama*, mainly set within the twin frameworks of Hindu marriage and

conjugality. Although neither Chaudhury nor Mandal suggests this, I detect a certain purpose behind naming the woman thus. The story, in essence, is a highly idealized picture of an individual, who reveals none of the follies or frailties of the contemporary woman and wife. She is learned, sagacious, selfless, truthful, candid, unassuming, forgiving, accommodative, freed of all 'womanly' jealousy and bickering that characterized a polygamous family, that one might reasonably glean from reading Bharatchandra. Here, the name *Manottama* (*mon+uttama*), I suggest, stands for the exalted (*uttama*) state of her mind (*mon*).

In substance, the novel seeks to reiterate and reaffirm two ideas: first, how the lack of education in either the man or the woman produces maladjusted couples and second, how, notwithstanding every ignominy or insult that a wife is subjected to by the husband or his family, her place ultimately lies in that household. From this Mandal concludes that there is, in the story, a conservative rhetoric at work (p.14, 21). But conjugal happiness and the domestic economy of the Hindus were matters that equally concerned the reformist Brahmos. On the contrary, I have reason to believe that the author was generally on the side of reform as can be seen from the very pejorative portrayal of manipulative politics among village elders (pp 39-40) but equally on the side of reckless and conservative young men who frown upon female education, late marriages in women and widow-marriages. This is reminiscent of the problems that Vidyasagar himself faced. The author's suggesting that the Sastras themselves offered viable and acceptable resolutions to reigning social evils (p.41) also brings Vidyasagar back to centre stage. What intrigued me though was the author's characterizing British rule as 'barbaric' and 'uncivilized' (pg. 61). No nineteenth century Hindu reformer was likely to say this; this is an

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allegation that only the xenophobic, socially reactionary strata within *bhadralok* society could be expected to make. But this class, to the best of my understanding, had not arisen until after the 1880s in the wake of a buoyant Hindu revival.

There are some other oddities and unlikely occurrences in the novel which belie commonsense explanations. The idea of an educated wife tutoring her illiterate husband (p.19) is severely at odds with contemporary social reality and stands in some dramatic contrast with Tagore's poem '*Nabadampatir Premalap*' where the educated husband is exasperated at the child-bride playing with her dolls. On page 32 *Manottama* argues how parents educated their daughters only so that they could better run their households. This too, I have to say, stands in contrast to the reigning discourse of the day which increasingly accused educated housewives of squandering their time in reading romantic novels, neglecting household work. Late nineteenth century Bengali literature repeatedly points to how the engagement of domestic help was bound to put a heavy strain on petty clerical salaries and small domestic budgets. What looked more unlikely was Nilabrata's (*Manottama*'s husband) 'banishing', whether wholly or partly, people from their ancestral caste (p.60). The novel nowhere hints at just how he might have acquired such social power. I also found it very unrealistic that a petty businessman such as he, could readily secure a loan of 5000 rupees at a steep interest rate for merely holding the *annaprashan* ceremony. I am unable to gauge what the purchasing power of this sum might have been in the 1860s but it does seem an extraordinarily large sum for a lower middle-class householder to spend on an *annaprashan* ceremony That Lord Siva could be

appeased by offering Tulsi leaves (p.54) was news to me and probably reveals a somewhat casual and slipshod approach to the understanding of the folk and everyday life of the Hindu.

I personally found the quality of translation to be somewhat indifferent but the blame could equally rest with the copy-editor. On page 45 for instance, 'bonding' is inexplicably substituted by 'bondage'! I also think that Mandal should have resorted to the use of annotations, as, for instance to explain typically Bengali words like '*Mitraja*', '*Shiromani*' etc. (p.55) Were novels written on educational texts as Mandal claims (p.12) or as educational texts? Also, the phrase '*dukhini sati charit*,' as it appeared in the original, is better translated as 'narrative of a chaste and sorrowful wife' rather than simply 'narrative of a sorrowful wife'. After all, in the context of the story, *Manottama*'s unfaltering sense of love and loyalty, even towards a rogue of a husband, is of intrinsic importance here for no degree of sorrow or suffering can ultimately dislodge these.

It is interesting that while Mandal gives us to believe that the author was a woman, Chaudhuri sounds more skeptical. I am personally inclined to think that this work was the work of a man who chose to write under the name of a woman. In contemporary Bengal, this was far from an uncommon occurrence. The almost academic knowledge of Hindu mythology that *Manottama* reveals, looks quite extraordinary for a woman in the 1860s as does the close familiarity with factional politics (*daladali*) in urban and rural settings.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the excellent production quality of the book for which I complement the publishers.