

## Feminist Poetry in 20th–21st Century Bengal: A Reading of the Poems of Mallika Sengupta

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Mandakranta Sen, a representative urban Bengali poet (born in 1972) celebrates the “disobedience” persisting at the centre of girlhood experience, that informs the basic premise of her poetic adventure in the title poem of her award winning volume *Hriday Abadhyay meye* (may be translated as *The Girl with the Soul of Disobedience*). Exploiting common everyday words that are suitably appropriated to portray the essential difference of modern Bengali verse by women poets in the contemporary canvas, from the erstwhile conservative manner of communication preferred by their forerunners, Mandakranta bypasses conventions to reveal the dynamic changes in manner and mode of artistic expression Bengali literature had hitherto witnessed:

She is a girl with the soul of disobedience  
Don't make her learn any lessons.  
Books torn, tattered miserably, she has erased  
The bold dark letters in books of ethics and conduct  
With her saliva.  
She has written down names of boys across the pages of the  
blue grammar book...  
A few sketches too may be found!  
She is a girl with the soul of disobedience  
Punishment may be meted out to her as you deem fit.(1-9)  
*(my own translations)*<sup>1</sup>

Biographical information reveals that she had initially been a medical student who refused to appear for her final semester examinations in order to become a poet. Mandakranta is thus a perfect prototype of the version of “unruly”, “disobedient” disenchanting vision of girlhood painted by her. Her craft reflects the distinctive nuances that shape Bengali feminist literary creativity in the present day. Abhorring the typical querying after an ideology and dismissing the need to “prove” or “justify” herself or her aims before an audience, the politics, outlining her art favours her firm, irresolute voice. Disallowing intrusion into her space, the young poet acquires a symbolic victory for and on behalf of her

tribe and all those who dare to nurture similar values of female sovereign existence.

The feminist attitude of Mandakranta places her closer to her black American counterparts who spell anarchy for well-ordered and customized social life programmed to depend on patriarchy. But the present argument is not in favour of a Rich or a Walker who has achieved standards of eminence securing international fame. One feels threatened to note that a class of post-graduate students recall only the handful names of those Indian women poets who write in English, live or have lived in India and have been included in the syllabi of Indian universities. Thus anthologies of verse contain Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu from the pre-independence era and Kamala Das, along with Gauri Deshpande, Mamta Kalia from the post 1950s to reflect quite literally how the “empire writes back” (to borrow the phrase from Bill Ashcroft) following centuries of colonial rule. The neglected domain of regional literature continues to enjoy a backward thrust. Analyses of these regional texts are essentially required to support the view that they are potential signifiers of the phenomenal increase in cultural diversity and multiplicity of form and content through “counter-culture” within the sub-continent and elsewhere beyond its physical limits, in the remarkable development of exclusive diasporic literary achievement of the polyphonic Indian sensibilities at work.

Accordingly, it may be worthwhile to hoist sail with the perspective of Nivedita Menon, a contemporary Indian social activist and thinker, regarding what receives and constitutes the label “feminist” naturally presupposing the indigenous feminist temper resident within that condition of non-western, marginalised frame of history that has been exposed to sufferings of the coercive imperial colonialism and foreign rule. She contends:

To be a feminist is to understand that different identities located hierarchically as dominant or subordinate are produced at different times and in different spaces, but also to be aware

particularly of the processes of gendering. By 'gendering', I mean the ways in which people are produced as 'proper' men and women through rules and regulations of different sorts; some of which we internalize, some which have to be violently enforced. To be a feminist is to recognize that, apart from gender-based injustice, there are multiple structural inequalities that underlie the social order, and to believe that change is possible, and to work for it at whichever level possible. Feminism is not an organization that one formally joins, and it can never be the isolated achievement of individual women. To be a feminist is to feel part of the history that has produced us; it is to insert oneself into two centuries of thick, textured narratives of struggles and celebrations that transcend national boundaries; to hear the strains of songs of anger and sorrow and militancy in many tongues....(ix)

The vicissitudes of multiplicity are noted in most Indian women engaged in the realm of the arts, be it music or visual culture, inclusive of films, photography, poetry, drama and performing arts and the like. Bengal catalyses the creative spirit further in mapping newer borders of the feminist expedition against the odds of custom pitted against orthodox, outworn values of religion, caste, gender or faith. The symbiotic nature of Bengali literature and cultural ambience accommodates fresh stakeholders who establish the tone of non-conformity to predetermined patriarchized notions dominant within the matrix of those principles circumscribing to the consciousness of denial in the current tide of post-modernism. Yet, as it must be acknowledged, the prosperity of the lot of women authors and poets and their infinite enthusiasm to muster the courage to provide themselves with a language and a diction for the purpose of exhibiting and explicitly illustrating the once supposedly tabooed issues of womanhood such as childbirth, labour pains, breastfeeding or the more hushed confined spaces of marriage, sexuality, conjugal bonds, rape, anxiety and desire, menstruation, gynaecology and obstetrics, complications during and after menopause and hormonal disturbances affecting the female body, eroticism, sexual behaviour and indeterminacies, along with the psychic imbalances of infertility, mental health and health care, trauma, stress, madness, fear, child abuse, single parenthood, and all forms of violence possible to conceive against women imposed through rituals, rites, superstitions, cults and beliefs, inclusive of innumerable other aspects in post-colonial cultural developments, is due to those who chose to write notwithstanding both visible and invisible barriers of their creed a few hundred years ago.

Tagore's sister Swarnakumari Devi -- one of the earliest of women authors in the days preceding independence is a significant model for many aspiring artistic freedom. Madhusree Sen Sanyal refers to numerous other women who hailed from aristocratic families and tried their hand

at writing verse. She names Girindramohini Dasi, Kamini Roy, Mankumari Basu, Radharani Devi (and several others) as poets who aspired to prove their literary genius.

Post-independence Bengali poetry discovers a new idiom in Kabita Singha—a lady who survived the odds, voluntarily resigning from zones of comfort to experience the pains of toil. A feminist to the core, Kabita Singha critiqued the norms and opinions society (not merely restricted to the Bengali or the Indian) expected women to observe. An apparently "blasphemous" outrage is heard in her signature poem "Iswarke Eve" ("Eve addressing God") that refutes the conventional biblical myths held true by generations:

I was the one to initiate/propitiate  
The fracture.  
Dared to refuse  
To remain  
A puppet  
Enjoying mobility  
At the pull of strings  
By your hand.  
As disgraceful as Adam  
Had been.  
I am the first rebel  
In your creation  
I am the first. (*my own translations*)<sup>2</sup>

This tempts readers to revise opinions concerning the western theological texts upholding the sanctity of Adam and Eve as the first parents of mankind. Kabita's non-Christian, third world regional text is an extreme retaliation to the phallogocentric creation demanding the expulsion of God from convenient complacency of supreme authority. Kaminsky's observation strengthens this Bengali outrage, reconstructs the polarities of power condemned to silence for ages through cultural hegemonic constructs. "Speaking from a subordinate position", Kaminsky argues, "the position feminists are used to occupying, offers both moral and epistemological support to one's analysis. The disempowered have earned their right to speak, and they have been required, as the powerful have not, to understand the workings of the systems of the powerful in order to survive" (4).

Feminist poetry of Bengal in the post-independence phase, enlivened with the presence of Debarati Mitra, Krishna Basu, Nabanita Dev Sen, Mallika Sengupta, Ishita Bhaduri and Monalisa Chatterjee, to name only a few, understands and estimates the "systems" mentioned immediately above. These poets prefer to articulate their response, comprising the individual and collective interests of a community, amidst the dilemmas, traumas and conspiracies designed to damage and control their artistic endeavour. They refuse the limitation of parochial confinements, awaken liberation through self-generated

resources assimilated from a cultural hinterland that has cultivated denial for the “weaker” other sex from the earliest periods of social history.

Of the poets mentioned above, Nabanita Dev Sen, however, belonged to a family where thoughts and actions were not necessarily “gendered”. Her mother Radharani Devi, had been a pioneer in women’s liberation. Nabanita’s poetry deliberates through an apparently unhurried language, blurring images of love, nature and the self, declaring autonomy of existence, securing grace even in the process of resistance. A lady who prepared herself for unwearied toil, Nabanita represents a poise in the poetic dignity that discards excess. Debarati Mitra, on the other hand, is better known for her poems on love where the spirit is spent in a neat equation with the body. She alternates between romance and sexual passions, involving the binaries and admitting the metamorphosed bodies that make love, defying clichéd roles assigned to partners. The subtleties are synchronised in the contours of the domestic spaces traditionally assigned to the female of the species and travel far beyond the land to search for “Cleopatra’s naval fleet”.

It may be mentioned that the women poets under scrutiny develop their multidimensional subjects primarily through the manipulation of the “I” – an impregnated style of confessional poetry. Critics of language and of poetry in particular observe it as an egoistic enterprise on the part of women who await reception. Bengali verse prefers it under the prevailing socio-political circumstances of the phases of history concurrent with its aesthetic progress. Venturing later into the elements of autobiography and further into autography or autothanatography as the present discussion will reveal, the feminist perspective of regional poetry of Bengal aspires to sketch an *avant-garde* for its electorate. Attention may be drawn to Redell Olsen’s research into the “I” of *avant-garde* feminist poetry inclusive of the lyric of the “modernist and postmodernist, or late modernist, periods” around the globe. That the lyric “I” does “more than merely developing a subject” is contradicted by the thesis that it “might itself be seen as simply a subtle remodelling of the existing and limited categories through which work by women writers is discussed” (Olsen 378). The opposing views are assimilated at the conclusion and due acknowledgement is made of the argument that critics

...also need to include other strategies of critical attention. These discussions must be expanded to incorporate poetry and poetics by women in relation to a mixture of identity and formal concerns such as feminism, social history to a mixture of identity and formal concerns such as feminism, social history, modernism, politics, theory, race, the visual arts, performance, and architecture, as well as through modes of poetic practice as criticism. (378)

The complicated mechanism operating the ‘I’ of feminist poetics are sufficiently altered to meet the crises emerging from situations ranging from the primitive and the ancient to the medieval, pre-modern and post-modern episodes of women’s history in the works of Mallika Sengupta. Mallika’s career in poetry began in the 80s. An academician and lecturer at a college in Kolkata where she taught sociology, she falls in the line of the urban, educated women artists of her milieu, being exposed to the affairs of the home and the world.

Mallika’s poems can be variously categorized. Yet her assertion with regard to the “political” content of her literature deceives readers compelling them to interpret the term along literal lines often threatening the aesthetics of creativity. A few of her early poems refer to the prerequisites of the system outlining the institution of marriage that look on the reproductive, rather than the productive aspect of women. The perspective of a sociologist who questions the worthlessness embodied in theories that are “taught” in the classroom and explained in academic debates, forms the subject of one of her poems bearing the title “Kaalshite” (“The Bruise”). The tortured body of a newly married student in the examination hall while Mallika performs her role of the strict invigilator unites the observer and the observed and arrange for a “strange meeting” in broad daylight :

Dark clotted marks of bruise on the skinny back of the girl  
The pale, white girl bent over her desk, writing  
Complete silence in the hall, the movement of pens heard  
Suffocating humidity of the summer month, long cobwebs  
from ceilings,  
fans rotating at great speed  
I placed my hand on her back, standing behind  
A strangely shrunk, startled countenance, eyes with the look of  
dread visible  
I wished to ask what had happened, what mark was there on  
the emaciated white skin?  
I wished to ask but words refused utterance  
“No, it’s nothing...no”, I stepped away shaking my head  
The student of sociology answers to the best of her capacity,  
The primary unit of society is the family  
The institution of marriage binds it together  
Who are bound? Who are made to roam freely in the high skies?  
The girl remains as ignorant as her fingers  
Only the dark clotted bruises wish to make a loud, painful cry

She continues to write of the immense strength  
Wielded by the male member of the family  
Others exist because he brings home earnings  
The words that went unwritten in the pages  
Those deeply hidden matters made themselves prominent in  
Dark, bold letters on her back.  
The bruises trembled with fear of counting the days yet to come.

(my own translations)<sup>3</sup>

The marks of painful torture being written on the body are signifiers of the post-marital violence against women. These are borne by the oppressed in a patrilinear society that may show its approval for female education but that may not necessarily imply liberation from tyrannical subordination of the “other”. Third world terrorism which is a much hyped subject of research in global contexts is a macrocosmic affair requiring international socio-political interference. Mallika’s mortified student is a victim of terrorism following marriage and perhaps an unsatisfied husband’s family that refuses to compromise the expected dowry. The student internalizes the trauma, revising for those who read her, the Foucauldian postulations concerning crime and punishment. Mallika’s inability to speak is not due to any linguistic confinement of the poet in the post-colonial ethos but rather due to her unique response to the situation that compels her muted status. This paves way for a distinctive critical condition with the body at the centre of all artistic experiments. To quote Cixous, “All literature is scary. It celebrates the wound and repeats the lesion” (12) is to take into consideration the fact that “Stigma hallmarks, for the best and for the worst: stigmata on the body are as noble as they are ignominious, depending on whether it is Christ or the outcast who is marked.”

The female examinee is both person “properly or figuratively stigmatized”. She is at one and the same condition “the martyr and the condemned.” She recommends the picture of “banishing judiciary customs,” where the branded criminal, the criminal marked with the red iron is” the one “who is marked as one of the guilty. When marked, the innocent person is ‘guilty’. And this is one of the tricks of our psychic cruelty: the victim is designated, distinguished, shamed, guilty. Every victim is accused”. Cixous affirms, “The stigma is the trace of a nail’s sting. The mark of the pointed object. The stigma is a scar that is difficult to efface. The stigma resists being worn down... The scar adds, the stigma digs, excavates...” (12)

The helplessness of women suffering marital woes and “stigma”, continue to be surfaced in many other poems. “Sweta” tells the tale of Sweta (meaning “the fair lady”) whose initial refusal to allow her husband his share of the masculine pleasures is met with threats in the dark bedchamber. The dominant masculine nocturnal affairs make a demand on her body. Though the “acceptance” of “pleasures” does not come naturally to the woman’s body, since her eroticism is performed for her husband who buys her the much coveted security, Sweta’s status may be critically examined as no different from that of a prostitute’s who lends herself to the alien body for a livelihood. In both instances, sexuality is a tool that is handled carefully by the woman to survive the odds.

The interface of the Bengali wife and her insolent male counterpart is forced to break away from tradition as is proved in the terse poem of about 15 lines where the narrator is the wife who has voluntarily resigned from the shackles of the unhappy marriage and has decided to flee. The attitude of no-compromise is supplemented in the tone of mockery established in the reiterative refrain: “because I love you...”. Such instances of wives refusing to cohabit occur in earlier fictional prose of the pre-independent era and Tagore’s *Streer Patra* enacts the denial in strong, unrelenting terms. Mallika’s narrator prefers to terminate the relationship with her egoistic partner who delights in its sadistic outbursts. The poem is the body of the letter conveying her decision, bearing her hand and her signature. Blissful marriage and nuptial comforts are replaced with the uncertain vagaries of a gipsy life and indeterminacies of the road not previously taken. “*Paliye Asha Bouer Chithi*” (“Letter from the eloped wife”) mirrors the anxiety of the husband who fails to rehearse domestic violence to establish himself against an apparently ordinary Bengali woman. This portrays a feminist’s abolition of all the legal procedures engaged in finalising a divorce or a separation between husband and wife. Documented complaints, objections of non-compliance or instances of alleged adultery seem redundant to Mallika’s fleeing wife.

The poet’s enigma at the hapless condition of women directs her to question the authenticity of a phallogocentric order that resists interrogation in any aspect whatsoever. Thus the pre-conceived notions of a patriarchy are, according to Mallika to be discovered in Freud’s explanation of “penis envy”. “*Freudke Khola Chithi*” (“An Open Letter to Freud”) challenges archetypes and biased knowledge, perpetrating continuous abuse of women through generations. Freudian interpretations of ego, id, or libido are pronounced grossly incorrect in a dismissive, matter-of-fact tone:

An extra organ in the body  
Has given eternal strength, brought the world at his feet  
According to Mr. Freud, since woman lack it they are doomed  
to be depressed  
Suppressed and controlled, she envies his masculinity  
Nature is not benign  
Man is not benign  
The Child is is not benign  
Except for Mr. Freud who is so benign to women!  
Who has plead for your mercy! Chitrangada! Joan of Arc!  
Simone de Beauvoir or the dark damsel Draupadi!

(my own translations)

The unique debate inspires her to make a case-study of real-life phallogocentrism concentrating on her son Rohit, (nicknamed Roro). She observes in Rohit the signs and symptoms of a male child obsessed with ‘gendered’

preferences for soldiers and guns, uttering the battle-cry and imagining a war with invisible opponents who are male but always less powerful than him. The playful child unconsciously enacts for his mother the Freudian ethics that she wishes to destroy. Morose at her son's attitude to the concept of what constitutes the brave, she imagines a field where a woman warrior, riding a mare, challenges him to a duel and looks forward to a deadly combat. Mallika wonders whether her son shall be ready to face his female opponent and meet the challenge or whether like the classical epic heroes of the land surrender arms and declare it "unethical" to fight a lady. The reference to Bhishma (Debrata) reinforces the imagination. Seen as an act of deprivation made in most sophisticated terms, the shrewd impulse of an omnipotent, malevolent force imposes itself on women's lives and mars her desire for power or creativity. Mallika clarifies her own position critiquing Freud while concluding the poem:

I have not known any sexual envy  
I have been complete in my own identity  
To this day—perfectly confident, a complete woman,  
A sensitive coloured girl from the Third world  
Dare to oppose you staunchly.

Mallika was aware of the feminist psychoanalytic approach to Freud in the west. Her straightforward rejection of the Freudian cult (since it appears to propose a trap of denial for women merely on the ground of physical difference) enumerates her position as a Third World feminist. The disapproval of the Freudian phenomena, may be dated even much earlier when, Luce Irigaray responded to the issue in "This Sex which is not One" (1977) supporting and posing that, "So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed she has many more." Irigaray disturbs the male psyche extending her argument further by confirming that, "But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere...the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle than is commonly imagined..." (362)

The mother-son binary takes readers into the otherwise ordinary, domestic sphere of the poet's own life. "Cheleke History Porate Giye" ("While teaching my son History") prompts the sociologist-cum-teacher-cum-mother-cum-feminist to admit that history has been allowed to record the facts that were appropriated by the patriarch-historian from pre-historic days. Mallika claims that the delivery of knowledge has been defined and framed within the contexts he considered acceptable. She begins the poem with an epigraph from Karl Marx's *The Holy Family* which places Man at the centre of all persuasion:

"history," says Marx "is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims". The presence of the father in the Marxian debate is therefore a historical mandate and the mother goes unmentioned. Mallika applies this premise to her classification of masculinist history as a subject that denies the basic laws of nature and biology. The heterosexual aspect of creation becomes an invalid truth since it is feared to "damage" the historian's assumptions. Irony penetrates each line of this poem which runs thus:

The forefathers, alone and all by themselves were ancestors  
There were no fore-humans, no foremothers  
History is replete with power, masculine vigour, completely  
His-story  
We realise then that women were then non-existent.

Mallika decries the illogical hypotheses of history but carries the bias to the verge of the extreme when she tries to feign "support" the male version of the past in her "conformity" to the idea that:

The Java man bore the boy-child in his womb  
Neanderthal man gave the babies his breast...

(my own translations)

Steeped in contemptuous rage she employs her language in prescribing that "Man alone was the penis and the womb". This revolutionary statement foreshadows the tropes of violence that subordinate femininity to prejudiced male prerogatives. Hence the domestic and the public, the academic or the artistic, the scientific and the political are systems enforcing exploitation of the "(m)other". Pushed beyond all tolerable limit of humility, femininity may be on the verge of extinction. The concept of female sexuality as discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick may be highlighted at this point of the argument:

...it has held implicitly to a view of female sexuality as something that is essentially of a piece with reproduction, and hence appropriately studied with the tools of demography; or else essentially of a piece with a simple, prescriptive hegemonic ideology, and hence appropriately studied through intellectual or legal history....Marxist feminism has been of little help in unpacking the historical meanings of women's experience of heterosexuality, or even until it becomes legally and medically visible in this century,.... (514)

The above ideas prompt readers to deliberate on the association of Feminism with history. That historical evidences delete the matriarch is a preliminary step to the widespread global oppression even within the most enlightened and enriched societies, is acknowledged by many leading social scientists of the day. Joan Wallach Scott elicits the opinion that:

By recovering stories of women's activism, feminists provided not just new information about women's behaviour, but new

knowledge another way of understanding, of seeing, women, and another way of seeing and understanding what counted as history. For if women were present and active, then history was neither the story of 'man's' heroism nor the means by which exclusive masculine agency (rational, self-determining, self-representing) was affirmed.[...] Since new visions of history depended on the perspectives and questions of the historian, making women visible was not simply a matter of unearthing new facts; it was a matter of advancing new interpretations which not only offered new readings of politics, but of the changing significance of families and sexuality. The feminist recovery of women for history has been a far-reaching, complex, and contradictory project. It is beset by a version of the 'sameness versus difference' conundrum that feminists have long faced as they argued for equality with men. (3-4)

Mallika's teaching of history to her son may have compelled her to re-write Indian history along democratic lines aimed at making women's history compatible to readers. Draupadi's contempt for her brave husbands who were calm in the court that witnessed shame and dishonour, is a brilliant monologue that reverses traditional roles assigned to the sexes. A menstruating queen of the royal dynasty of kings of Bharat (after whom Bharatvarsha i.e. India gets its name) is hurled to the court of the "noble men" (whose tales of virtue travel far and wide) to be abducted and molested by those to whom she must pay obeisance since her mighty husbands have "lost" her at the regal game of dices. The "ethics" of the Pandavas accepted Draupadi as an object worthy of a gamble and claimed her body as their own recommends a pathetic civilisation. Mallika's Draupadi addresses the vicious lust of men and makes a public speech in the space where "justice" is supposed to reign free from the shackles of man made prejudices, when her enslaved husbands preferring silence remain mere onlookers:

Oh Man!  
 ...you pronounce  
 Since Draupadi caters to multiple husbands, she is a prostitute  
 If I happen to be a prostitute, so are you, a male prostitute great  
 Karna!  
 Many wives share your bed, diverse women too,  
 Let the laws that guide you, be appropriated by me  
 The texts that you men write may be rewritten reversely by us  
 topsy-turvy  
 Hear oh Karna! Oh the courtiers hear!  
 The hopeless nonsensical dogmas are directed to me, I am your  
 chief query  
 When I raise a question  
 You recoil  
 You, my much revered grandfather Bhishma  
 You too avert your eyes!

(my own translations)

Draupadi's unanswered questions depict the futility of the masochistic heroism that fails to show regard for

women. Mallika's enumeration of women's status drives her to enter the dark, distressed regions of medieval Bengal and direct her attention to Khana—the girl who must lose her tongue for articulating that which does not "become" a girl. Khana, who, according to legends is rendered speechless is rewarded with a "voice" by Mallika, to voice her vehement indignation against the patriarchs who deprived her of her tongue and denied her right to prophecy. The mutilation is forced upon her and her wounded body suffers in her powerlessness to resist the brutalities of men who posit themselves as masters.

Mallika's re-casting of myths and re-modelling of the existent discourses focussing on women, envisage new selves, re-shape familiar identities as the myths are re-composed (at least partially) with the vision of the bodies of women not being doomed to remain passive but retaliating in their chosen language against their male counterparts cherishing the ideals of tyrannical forefathers.

The above discussions betray the presence of a feminist who is dismissive of the canonical or the illogical propounded by the gloomy masculinist temper. The explorations into the worlds of women inspire her to "justify" the negative treatment Mary Magdalene has suffered at the hands of Christianity. Numerous innovative experiments with her art continued till she discovered the rapid spread of carcinoma in her body. Mallika Sengupta, a victim of breast cancer, like hundreds of many other women all over the globe in the present century, did not survive. Although initial treatment showed signs of improvement, the disease relapsed within a few years giving her no further scope to combat her fatal opponent. And in spite of all the pains she bore, she did not cease to write. It would not be wrong to suggest that she wrote until she could write no more. The feminist in her refused to surrender to physical turmoil. Her "last" poems do not reveal any plea for sympathy from her readers, critics or admirers. These "last" poems bear the hallmark of a woman who has always felt her own existence to be perfect and complete in spite of all adversities that may affect it.

Mallika hurdles across many walls of shame, clichés and patriarchized notions of "aesthetic" creation when she defines and describes her own body, her "changed" self and the gradual emaciation of her "feminine beauty" (loss of hair, shrinking of breasts, sagging of skin)—situating all of the above in a peculiar combination where medicine, doctors, hospital wards and poetry share common space and "respond" among themselves, concentrating on the body awaiting treatment and diagnoses for cure. The fatal disease fails to cause any dis-ease to her metamorphosed exterior. She has been

fond of the common man's stuff—mixing Bengali words with some English expressions, like any other urban educated Bengali of her day to communicate and detail her journey through cancer.

The western feminists view the disease (and breast cancer in particular) enumerating and prognosticating vividly, disallowing social or familial inhibitions to overshadow their singular concern – describing cancer as one describes typhoid or pneumonia or other “common” forms of illness. Cancer literature thus emerges with the image of the patient and the pain in immediate context. Evelyn Accad quotes Steingraber in her book on breast cancer to locate the patients' response under treatment:

Like a jury's verdict or an adoption decree, a cancer diagnosis is an authoritative pronouncement, one with the power to change your identity. It sends you into an unfamiliar country where all the rules of human conduct are alien. In this new territory, you disrobe in front of strangers who are allowed to touch you. You submit to bodily invasions. You agree to the removal of body parts. You agree to be poisoned. You have become a cancer patient. Most of the traits and skills you bring with you from your native life are irrelevant, while strange new attributes suddenly matter. Beautiful hair is irrelevant. Prominent veins along the soft skin at the fold of your arm are highly prized. The ability to cook a delicious meal in thirty minutes is irrelevant. The ability to lie completely motionless on a hard platform for half an hour while your bones are scanned for signs of tumor is, conversely, quite useful. (Steingraber: 1997: 31) (qtd. Accad 44)

Mallika reaches the international standards of poetic creativity in etching out the pain, signing a contract-- a memorandum of understanding between disease and art, contemplating the loss of her hair as paralleling the “loss” of beauty according to the rules of traditional Indian norms of the feminine :

My hair as dark as the nights of Kolkata  
 My hair as free-flowing as the cascade of the hills  
 The day my hairs flew out to the heavens above  
 The pretty high-born thick-haired princess'  
     Cloudy tears  
 Fell upon the earth, the earth sucked me whole  
 My veins were then burning radiant with vials of chemotax and carboplatin...

(my own translations)

The fairy tale like ambience shudders against the sudden revelation—the dystopia dominates the poem which calls itself “Amar Chuler Elegy” (“Elegy on my Hair”).

The exposure of the body to alien names and faces, the drugs administered rapidly, therapies and cures with long names are unavoidable processes of the prolonged treatment. Repeated visits and stays at the hospital urge Mallika to express :

Hospital, oh hospital, please do not beckon me  
 The amateur nurse has again erringly administered the wrong medicine  
 The gloved hand of the doctor busily dressing  
 Pauses all on a sudden in a stance of dreamy forgetfulness,  
 Rajanigandha, the patient adjacent to me hails from Guwahati  
 And she counts the days from morn till eve awaiting release from the hospital  
 If monsoonal showers are heavy outside in the month of *Shravan*  
 I will remain completely ignorant as I lie in my cabin  
 If the oranges gain a “summer” glow  
 I feel cold and ask for the warm blanket  
 While the film festival continues out there, poetry celebrations, assembly of poets  
 I remain at the hospital a death-in-life corpse.

(my own translations)

Mallika's pessimism hurls the poignant truth at the face of readers. Reference to Evelyn Accad strengthens the psychic torment suffered by the poet-patient cribbed and confined

Treatment is administered by ‘specialists’ who, at best, know nothing of one another: the surgeon, the cobalt therapist, the chemotherapist. But does anyone imagine the anguish of the patient in this fragmented world, wondering whose speciality area is involved when this or that problem arises – that is, before he finally figures out that it's no one's area, because... no, no: there's no such thing, or, if this or that test has to be done, by whom, because each specialist believes, in good faith, that someone else is supposed to take care of it. (Hyvrard: 1987: 192) (qtd. Accad 391)

The issue of breast as the source of cancer has intrigued humanity with the concept of “the visual, spatial, and temporal dimensions of the disease; and the bodies and embodied experiences..” (Klawiter 278). Indian researches on cancer take several new turns in the present century but the oncologists and medical practitioners dealing with the subject appear to stand apart from the crowd. Cancer is to this day is believed to be the subject of serious research and intensive clinical experiment in our land. Mallika, may be looked upon as one who pioneers cancer literature that is inextricably woven in her autographical as well as the autothanatographical accounts of pain. *Fractured Borders* – a collection of writings by female cancer patients remembers the marginalised narratives that border on the elements of autobiography. These recount how cancer unites sufferers and creates cancer victims as a collective community. It, however does not any any significant reference to India. Mallika's anecdotes of cancer have been ignored largely because they have not been translated into the white man's language. Traces of Audre Lorde are found in Mallika though Mallika's struggle is culturally very different from the other.

An introduction to her long love poem addressed to Jibanananda Das—the representative Bengali modernist, post-modernist poet of the twentieth century, signals her desire to measure the unfathomable romantic deep, that infinite desire to overcome carcinoma. It failed to deduct poetry from the ailing, maimed and mutilated cancerous body. “O Janeman Jibanananda, Banalata Sen write to you” (“O my heartthrob Jibanananda, I, Banalata Sen write to you”) demolishes the archetype of the male lover importuning his mistress. Mallika assumes Banalata Sen’s persona—the very same lady who answers the poet’s (Jibanananda’s) eternal quest for beauty and epitomises the unique image of the ideal companion sought by him for ages. Jibanananda’s description of his mistress is a partial blazon—a sculpture’s delight. Banalata’s identity is shrouded in obscurity. She is reminiscent of the female mystic, the paradigm of the oriental mistress who maintains her artful silence and secures her lover. Mallika differs in recreating herself as Banalata Sen. She makes her a militant, her pulse vibrating with the need to rebel and liberate her people, spending sleepless nights in trenches of war infected lands. Banalata is envisaged as the new model storming the ramp making the seductive catwalk eluding onlookers, challenging male conventions. This very same Banalata is also a hungry, starving girl who “writes poetry with her rifle” as the pen is not her domain. The hospitalized poet looks forward to be loved by him in spite of all that has transformed her. She wonders if he would dare, “to offer space to his mistress” liberate her and be the “cure in cancer”. The letter in the poem or the poem in the letter as one may decide to observe, concludes with the final statement that transfix readers—her vow to remain alive and compose the epic for the man of her dreams. Critics may label this “melancholic” but this is structured to defy affliction in a manner of the post-modernist.

Bengali feminist writing has been continuing the post-modernist trend in its own way. It combines the variegated texts and textures, spills over definitions and attempts to leap across the traps that may ensnare their energetic spirits. “Women’s writing,” says Jones “will be more accessible to writers and readers alike if we recognize it as a conscious response to socio-literary realities, rather than accept it as an overflow of one woman’s unmediated communication with her body. Eventually, certainly, the practice of women writers will transform what we can see and understand in a literary text; but even a woman setting out to write about her body will do so against and through her socio-literary mothers, midwives, and sisters. We need to recognize, too, that there is nothing universal about French versions of *écriture féminine*. The speaking, singing, tale telling, and writing of women in cultures... need to be looked at and understood in their

social context if we are to fill in an adequate and genuinely empowering picture of women’s creativity. (Jones 380)

### Notes

1. It has not been possible to refer to the exact line numbers especially since these translations are made by me. The translated lines as always do not correspond to the original text.
2. Some of the poets I refer to are not easily available. I owe to Madhusree Sen Sanyal the information on the other poets I have provided at the introduction.
3. All the poems of Mallika Sengupta mentioned here have been published by Dey’s Publishing house in Kolkata. I have once again ventured to make my own translations.

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