Interpreting Identity: An Introspection into Select Bangla Novels on Fishermen in Post-1971 Period

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The relationship between language and culture is a complex one. The relationship between language and culture suggests that the structure of a language defines how speakers of that language view their world. If we look at how users of different languages view the different relations in the society, linguistic etiquette and kinship systems etc., we will be able to understand that such things do help to illustrate that there is an intrinsic relation between the two. Culture cannot be completely mastered without language nor can it be successfully expressed and communicated. This leads us to cogitate that language, culture and identity are connected so inseparably that it is difficult to define the parameters of the three separately. It is basically the first two that has a bearing upon one's identity. It is this bearing that we will study over here with particular reference to the representation of fishermen in select Bangla novels in the post-1971 era.

Through a survey of relevant literature this paper also wishes to illuminate the fruition of nationalism in Bangladesh and its range of potentially baffling identities. Language, religion, culture, shared history, ethnicity or citizenship has each been individually upheld, in this paper specially in reference to a marginalized class.

1. Research Objective

Relationships between language, culture and identity in recent times have become a chosen subject matter in both Culture Studies and Sociolinguistics. Differing and different interpretations on the role of language in defining one's identity (or one’s multiple identities) are held by scholars such as Roosens (1989), Dorais (1991) and Stairs (1992). The most important matter of contention that transpires out of such interpretations is that whether a culture or ethnic group be treated inimitable, if it does not possess an individual, identifiable language of its own or, at least, its personal version of a common tongue – that could be a speech variety, or a pidgin, or a unique dialect?

The present paper proposes to explore the interconnectedness of the three and how the first two (language and culture) impact upon one's identity with particular reference to the representation of fishermen in select Bangla novels in the post-1971 era.

2. Language, Culture & Identity: Theoretical Background

It is understood that though culture is inextricably linked to language, the relationship between
language and culture is a complex one. Wardhaugh (2002) defines language to be a knowledge of rules and principles and of the ways of saying and doing things with sounds, words, and sentences rather than just knowledge of specific sounds, words, and sentences (Wardhaugh, 2002: 2). Although, culture, *per se*, has not been mentioned by Wardhaugh, there is an inexorable connection between the speech acts we perform and the environment they are performed in. Edward Sapir holds that “…language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives” (Sapir, 1921: 207). A close connection between language and culture was perceived by Edward Sapir (1884-1939) (Sapir, 1921, 1929 and 1983) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) (Whorf, 1956), rounding off the fact that it was impossible to comprehend or appreciate one without knowledge of the other (Wardhaugh, 2002: 220; Nordquist, 2018). According to Wardhaugh, there unfurls to be three assertions to the connection between language and culture (Wardhaugh, 2002: 219-220):

We could elaborate on these claims, which are as follows:

i) The way in which speakers of a particular language view the world is determined by the structure of a language. In other words, speakers of a language get inclined toward embracing a particular kind of world-view.

ii) Reflection of the culture of people in the language they engage is important, i.e. people employ their language in ways that reflect what they believe in and what they do.

iii) The third claim, which says that there is little or no relationship between the two, is a ‘neutral claim’.

Many sociolinguists dispute the first of these claims, commonly associated with Sapir and Whorf. The ‘neutral claim’, that a relationship does not exist between language and culture, when considering language for its communicative powers and its role in the culture that uses it, does not appear to be quite convincing.

The second suggested relationship, which advocates that the value of a particular culture gets reflected in the language the people of that culture use. It is a divergent view of Sapir and Whorf in that it is the ‘thoughts’ of a culture, which are reflected in the language and not the language, which decides on the nature of our thought. This statement entails that cultures make use of languages that are as diverse as the cultures that speak them, and consequently linguistic functions vary in terms of a culture’s level of technological development.

A probe into the different kinds of research on language and culture suggests that the structure of a language defines how speakers of that language view their world. If we look at how users of different languages view the different relations in the society, linguistic etiquette and kinship systems etc. – as is discussed in the literature on this topic, we will be able to understand that such things do help to illustrate that there is an intrinsic relation between the two. Culture cannot be completely mastered without language nor can it be successfully expressed and communicated and this leads us to cogitate that language, culture and identity are connected so inseparably that it is difficult to define the parameters of the three separately. These three intertwined notions finally help us assume that language and culture shape identity, thereby contributing to the building up of a culture in a more pervasive manner. In the context of Bangla, there is a lacuna of research on how language and culture impacts one’s identity and have bearings on the culture as a whole or *vice versa*.

The linguistic system is enormously involved in shaping one’s identity primarily because language is the system of communication consisting of codes and symbols used by human beings to accumulate, consolidate, retrieve, arrange and communicate knowledge, skill and experience. Language is thus not an immobile, stationary process. In the manifestation, diffusion, and adaptation of culture, language has always been a key device. It is used to uphold one’s own culture and to acquire a new culture and new knowledge.

Culture, according to Taylor (1958), is that multifarious whole which comprises knowledge,
belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other proficiencies and behaviours earned by man as a member of a society. Culture in veracity, is not an inert, gridlocked entity. It is variable and continuous and has the capacity to acquire new features, forms and practices. To the social scientists and conventional anthropologists, who are proficient in true sense, culture however is “still composed of socially shared elements, socially shared norms, codes of behaviour, values, and assumptions about the world that clearly distinguish one sociocultural group from another” (Trueba, 1993: 34). If culture is such a changing and powerful site of mediation, then there is much in linguistic and cultural enterprises that need to be acknowledged, and a lot in learners’ roles and characteristics that need to be deconstructed and discerned.

3. Identifying the Race through Language and the Associated Cultures: Looking at the Lives of the fishermen from a Regional Perspective:

Particular languages are associated historically with particular cultures, although theoretically a given culture could be related with several languages at the same time. All these languages provide key to associated cultures, and especially to their literature. Languages themselves cannot be fully understood otherwise, as they come alive in the context of cultures in which they are inextricably embedded; subsequently, the two match up to form an interplay.

Exploring, language and culture from a regional perspective, it could be said that the culture of Bengal embraces the Bengal region comprising of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, where Bangla is endorsed as the major and official language. Bengal which has a documented history of one thousand four hundred years depicts the Bengali people as its primary ethno linguistic tribe. The region has been a historical melting point, amalgamating ethnic traditions with cosmopolitan impacts from Pan-Indian sub continental territories. The partition of Bengal led to the extirpation of its own cultural heritage. Bangladesh became the center of an overriding Bengali Muslim culture, whereas the Bangla-speaking regions of India, especially West Bengal were characterized by a Bengali Hindu majority. Although Bangladesh is a fairly young sovereign state, but, it has an old legacy as a portion of the historic region of Bengal, situated in South Asia. Modern Bangladesh has been shaped out of the region’s scuffles with colonialism and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War have shaped modern Bangladesh.

The key purport of this work here is to show the unfolding of a merged culture in Bengal, that arose out of partition and to explain its nature and character through the language of the literature based on a certain marginalized class, especially from the liberation war period which is the period when the blended culture evolved and flourished in the region more distinctly.

The notion of language, culture, religion and different class segregation made the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 inextricably related to dreadful and unforgettable images of armed gangs or mobs affraying the vulnerable and the weak groups of men, women and children trying to cross a border that had just been scratched on the map. Literature records the shudder in works that make traumatic reading. A major chunk of Bengal literature, is thoughtfully dedicated to the period around the war of Independence. The writings are based on both the powerful and the marginalized section of the society. The wary circumstances of wars chiefly of the war of independence of Bangladesh and their fallout on people left bottomless bearing on poets, novelists, academicians and columnists around the world. All the litterateurs became keyed up to cover these wars in their work.

The literary interventions on the time period around 1971 examined and demonstrated clearly the brutality of the war experienced by various marginalized groups as well. One such marginalized section of people were the fishers. As we focus on the literature available on the livelihood of fishers, we see that poverty allegorizes with professional fishers. It is this poverty coupled with other tales of the society that have been depicted in some select riverine novels that we have taken into consideration.

The authors of Bangla literature have never been unfair in portraying the lives of the fishermen, thereby identifying their miseries and plight especially during and after the liberation war of 1971. Their river or sea-centered perilous profession and insecurity, financial hazards and discrimination, penury and ignorance, struggle and tension, creed and rituals, language, society and culture have made their places in the writings of these novelists.

In order to understand the socio-cultural scenario, the present paper undertakes a critical, discursive and an in-depth study of reflections of various cultural aspects of the lives of fishermen, a marginalized section of the society. In view of that, the present study would draw our attention to the culture and lives of fishermen (known as jele জেলে, dhīvara ধীবরা, mālo মালো, kaivarta কেবর্ত, jalaputra জলপুত্র, jaladāsa জলদাসা, etc. in Bangla), through the languages of Bangla novels written in the post-1971 era in both the Bangla speaking regions i.e., Bangladesh and West Bengal.

The novels, specially the style of the language the authors have employed will be studied to understand the picture of a blended culture with a battered society, broken minds, trauma & triumph portraying, an image of both power and powerlessness of the society.

4. Portraying Language-Culture Interplay through Select Post 1971 Novels on Fishermen:

To shed light on the logic behind choosing the Bangla novels on fishermen of the post 1971 era, it is worth our while to mention that most of the novels of that particular time provide an important landmark in our cultural history. The political cataclysm, known as the Bangladesh Liberation War, shook the geo-political boundary of what has previously been known as East Pakistan which came into being on 14th August, 1947 with the partition of India by the British colonial rulers. This gave birth to a new nation state called Bangladesh with a different socio-cultural scenario. It affected their language, culture, and ways of thinking, world views and attitudes towards life as a whole. It has, in a sense, redefined the ethos of Bengali culture in a very radical way.

The literary interventions on the time period around 1971 examine and demonstrate clearly the brutality of the war experienced by various marginalized groups as well. As we focus on the literature available on the livelihood of fishers, one of the downgraded groups of both West Bengal and Bangladesh, we see that poverty allegorizes with professional fishers. That is exactly what has been depicted in the riverine novels taken into consideration.

Since our point of contention here is the environmental vulnerability, natural calamity, livelihood war, poverty, livelihood resilience and many other things revolving around the fisher folk, during that time, we have counted on books like Jalaputra and Dahanakāla by Harishankar Jaladas, Samudra Bāsara (1986) by Shamsuddin Abul Kalam, Padmāra Palidvīpa (1986) by Abu Ishaq, Kaivarta Khaṇḍa (1994) by Mahashweta Devi, Gahin Gaṅ (1980) by Sadhan Chattopadhyay and Abagāhana (2000) by Ghanashyam Chowdhury.

Fishermen are endowed with their own folklore, history and literature. These literature form valuable sources of information about their convictions. In concordance with their natural environment, the fishermen of both Bangladesh and West Bengal have developed songs and stories, sayings and folklore, jokes and riddles that have come up live in many of the writings based on their lives. These cultural components of the community life of fishermen help them to survive as distinct entities. These components are proficiently taken care of in the literature based on their lives.

The ground-breaking works of Harishankar Jaladas have been the best suited examples in this regard. Jalaputra (2008) and Dahanakāla (2010) by Harishankar Jaladas have been the two most
germane works as these novels have been written in the post-1971 era, the era which provided an important landmark in the cultural history of Bengal and the era which has been chosen to undertake a critical, discursive and an in-depth study of reflections of various cultural aspects of the lives of fishermen, Jalaputra (The Son of Water) published in 2008, generated much uproar as an inheritor of Advaita Mallabarman. Jalaputra (Sons of Water) un wraps with Bhuvaneswari waiting for her husband, who went on fishing the previous night but did not come back. Bhuvaneswari, a woman of only nineteen who is the mother of a child named Gangapada, keeps waiting for her husband for eternity. When the story is almost on the verge of wrapping up, we find her waiting for the baby of Gangapada in the womb of Sumitra, to come to the family. Since his boyhood, Gangapada has experienced the ruthlessness on the fishing folks in matters pertaining to accessing education. With the prudence that he has developed by dint of the light of a little education, Gangapada attempts to bring the people of his community together against the treacheries of the people who belong to a solvent class. Undeterred by all kind of hostility, even from people of his own profession, Gangapada tries to fight and eventually is killed. Dahanakāla, the other book mentioned above, is a novel about the fishing community of Pateña in Chattagram in Bangladesh. In 2008, this debut novel came out and the advent of a mighty subaltern in the novel world of Bangladesh was discovered. In the large canvas of Dahanakāla, the total picture of the fishing community is portrayed meticulously from a socio-historic standpoint.

The character of Gangapada can be seen in juxtaposition to the protagonist Haripada of Dahanakāla. Hailing from the same societal conditions, Ganga meets death but Haripada endures. This results in making the first and larger part of Dahanakāla an improved edition of Jalaputra itself. The differences that are noticeable in these two novels lie in the last phase of the second novel where we discover the story of Dahanakāla delving into the time of the Liberation War. With a story comparable to that of Jalaputra, Dahanakāla proceeds and with the passage of time it takes on a different story to bespeak life, society, culture and the struggle of people who live on fishing. Another incredible work that needs to be mentioned and has been taken into consideration in this paper is Kaivarta Khanda by Mahasweta Devi. Kaivarta Khanda is a Story about The Kaivarta Revolt that was regulated and repressed by Rājā Rāmapāla. This historical novel is written, keeping in mind the 11th century kingdom of Varendi, located on the Bengal-Bihar border and governed by the Gauda dynasty. Damara, the capital city of Varendi, is a flourishing one and houses the fallen women and the people who are proficient artists, dancers, painters, writers, horticulturists, and so on. King Bhima, an honest ruler, tries every possible thing to make his people be in blissful state, and the women enjoy a prominent position in society. But Bhima gets slayed by a person whom the king himself had raised. Vidūra, the scholar who is to perform the last rites of Bhima, also gets murdered. But the life-force of the noble king could not be shattered. It so happens that from the funeral pyre rises an earthen pot, from which a young peepul tree flourishes and the whole place gets filled with such peepul plants. It is Kāñcana, who, coming to know about the conspiracy behind the burning of houses, warns the people and support them to protect themselves. In this novel, the confusion and disarray in social life is brought into fore through the experience of the individuals.

Another very powerful riverine novel is Gahin Gān by Sadhan Chattopadhyay. Sadhan Chattopadhyay in his novel, Gahin Gān has added a creative dimension, to the battle of the life of the Mālos in the Sundarbans. Sadhan Chattopadhyay, through his novel tries to bring out the tough battle that the fishermen fight for their survival. The discrimination and deprivation of the fishermen, the fabrication of dreams and struggles of Śripada, the hero, the handling of responsibility in the light of contemporary social reality, the belligerence and infringement made by money-lenders and religious preachers taking benefit of fishermen’s poverty—all have been represented very genuinely.

Another magnum opus is Abu Ishaq’s Padmāra Palidvīpa. Compared to the first novel, the entire background and plot of Ishaq’s second novel Padmāra Palidvīpa is a different one endowed
with a theme of unconquerable human temper. An epic nature is bestowed on the book with a large gamut enveloping the entire hamlet of the story’s locality, their beliefs and feelings, love and abhorrence, their unbeatable fervour and their defeat. Padmāra Palidvīpa is about obtaining a cara (the strip of sand bar that is constantly rising out of a riverbed). The story of the novel is shaped by Ishaq on the theme of this procurement of cara through might. The writer has been meticulous in touching upon the personal lives involved in the issues related to the main story of the novel. The fights created from the procurement of a cara play most crucially to form most of the characters of the novel. Besides, the touch of agrarian village life, the distinctive traits of a cara life have added uniqueness to the whole background of the novel.

The story of Padmāra Palidvīpa is shaped locating it in a place called Khunera Cara. The place was earlier known as known as Lotābonia and the new name was given to the place when five persons were killed in attempting to gain ownership of this cara. The cara ultimately went to the custody of Irfān Māṭubbar. Immediately after this incident, Cherāg Sardār attacked Irfān Māṭubbar and Raśīd. The eldest son of Irfān Māṭubbar died in the onslaught. After going through all the legal formalities, Irfan remained as the owner of the sand bar. But the most hazardous attack came from the river Padma itself: it grasped the cara some three years after its emergence! After some seven years the char emerged once again. There was the recurrence of the earlier incidence and Irfan continued his control over the bar.

Another great work is Samudra Bāsara by Shamsuddin Abul Kalam (1926-1997). Shamsuddin Abul Kalam is worthy of being considered as one of the key novelists of contemporary Bangla literature. In his novel, Samudra Bāsara (Coastal House, 1986), the author explicates the landscape of the southern coastal area and its people in a very meticulous way, but like other novels of common trend, it does not have a very vociferous plot. The novelist appears to be more keen on probing into the everyday life of the dwellers of those areas. Samudra Bāsara is also a novel of the similar trend but with a proper storyline. In the novel, Sujāt Āli takes the ownership of a new cara, wishes to cultivate it and lastly he makes it fit to live, where he himself and his fellowmen live peacefully. But dwelling peacefully in a cara is always one can ideally wish for but it never really happens. It is always some natural catastrophe, that leads the river to snatch the whole cara devastating everything there. The representation of the lives of the dwellers with all kinds of upheavals of the cara life has been the principal concept in Samudra Bāsara.

Abagāhana by Ghanashyam Chowdhury is a novel that was published in the year 2000. Abagāhana is a strange and peculiar addition to the class of literature based on the riverine life. The novel is incredible in the way that no other work, based on riverine life, prior to this, has displayed the political connection of the fishermen community in such a captivating way. It is different from the other novels in the way that in accordance with the earlier novels, Ghanashyam has not laid emphasis on the culture and belief of the fishermen.

It is a politically motivated work, which depicts the river Bhagirathi as a violent one but the river has never been as miserly as the Padmā, the Titās and the Gaṅgā. The Bhagirathi has time and again devastated the place where the Mālos dwelled but unhesitatingly ensured the livelihood of the fisher folk. It is the political ideology of the fishermen and not their religious beliefs that occupies a fair share of the novel.

All these novels, with little differences in their themes and notions, portray socio-cultural scenario of the marginalized of the post 1971 Bengal in a very delectable and in a winsome manner. Most of the novels figure out power relationships in society, by bringing into fore two types of stories of the society — one which sustains a dominant social order — relations of power that systematically honor the privileged class as a social group and disempower, disadvantage the so called marginalized sections of the society. Marginalization, being primarily a social phenomenon, the social needs and desires of a person or a sub-group are ignored and the person or the group is ultimately excluded. As is
relevant from different researches, based on the different aspects of the marginalized community, the fishing clan of Bangladesh and West Bengal is one such marginalized clan who have been forcibly socially marginal.

5. Conclusion:
On a note to conclude this chapter and to once again account for the reason behind selecting marginalized people and their text, one can say that literary depictions can best reflect the experiences of the marginalized groups because marginalized literature in India and Bangladesh is an attempt to bring to the fore, the experiences of discrimination, poverty and violence. The post-1971 era has been taken into consideration because marginalized literature is one of the most important literary movements to emerge and grow during this time both in Bangladesh and West Bengal. The transformation of the stigmatized identity of these so called ‘marginalized’ to a self-chosen identity as relegated and ostracized is a story of collective struggle waged over centuries. Though, after going through the novels thoroughly, one gets a feeling that most of the stories basically are very simple tales of little joys and tragedies that make up the life of the fishermen. The voice of the marginalized and oppressed, especially in literature, is a great tool to recognize the obscured conditions that exist in the world around. Oppression and discrimination are the common elements of fishermen life in these countries, but some unorthodox identities in the novels display tremendous stubbornness by taking major decisions, breaking the conformist stand.

References