

Devi's *Na Hanyate* and Eliade's *La Nuit Bengali*: Contribution of Ego to Plurality of Truth

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Abstract : Maitreyi Devi's *Na Hanyate* and Mircea Eliade's *La Nuit Bengali* are two opposite representations of the same story. Due to alleged distortions of truth, available in their narratives, it becomes indispensable to investigate what triggers their truths to be different. This paper argues that a sort of geographical (East and West) and gender (masculine and feminine) ego make the representation different in the two narratives. The study here has resorted to the theoretical perceptions of East and West and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis of human ego to analyze the difference in the representation of the reality.

Keywords: Truth, East, West, Ego, Masculine, Feminine

Introduction:

In Bangla literature, Maitreyi Devi's *Na Hanyate* has not been able to gain an enormous space, but raised a considerable debate over many crucial issues including the nature of truth, the distance between the East and the West regarding culture, and the wide gap prevailing between the masculine and feminine discourses. *La Nuit Bengali*, published in 1933, delineates a love story of Mircea Eliade, a Romanian National, who stayed from 1928 to 1933 in India. Maitreyi Devi, on the contrary, an Indian writer and "daughter of Sanskrit scholar and philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta" (U. Sen 1), wrote the novel *Na Hanyate* in response to Eliade's rendition of his controversial love story. These two novels are definitely a matter of much investigation as well as interest as "these textually interrelated documents describe this same relational moment in time from two points of view in conflict with one another" (Aguirre 1). As the same story has developed under two different perspectives, the truth, illustrated here in two novels, gets difficult to discern. It is, in a sense, "impossible" to dig out "the nature of the historical Devi-Eliade relationship based on these two texts" as truth here becomes "a consensus" and that certainly seems inadequate to "reflect the truth" (Aguirre 7). However, the question, in consequence, arises why truth gets divided – is it only because of two different individuals perceiving the world differently or is it because the geographical or cultural and gender difference Devi and Eliade share? In particular, the two narratives that Devi and Eliade bring out to the world demonstrate a sort of egoism which in Freudian terminology corresponds to "the consciousness" (Barry 97). This consciousness, however, is not uncontaminated; instead, it is shrouded in the constellation of East-West and Masculine-Feminine polarity. It will not be an exaggeration if claimed that "in the larger context of intercultural exchange western consciousness and its focus on ego (superiority), individuality, veracity and science, collide with Indian consciousness and its focus on unity, scholarship, philosophy and truth" (Aguirre 1). This study aims to explore how truth gets split into the East-West and Masculine-Feminine dichotomy because of the existence of two different consciousnesses.

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Literature Review:

Geoffrey James Aguirre, in his Masters' thesis submitted to The University of Montana, titled *Maitreyi Devi and Mircea Eliade: One Moment as Fractal* (2001) describes how the western consciousness collides with the Indian one in the light of postcolonial theory and thoughts. The study is groundbreaking as it intends to unpack a collective reality based on individual perceptions. In doing so, it has focused on a number of contradictions in the texts that essentially bring to notice the differences in truth. The present study gets hugely inspired by the abovementioned thesis. However, the cultural-geographical consciousness is not enough to discuss the narrative differences in the novels in discussion; instead, the gender distinction also plays a considerable role in making the truths in the texts different and the present study aims to unpack this in detail below.

Overview of the Text and Theory

Na Hanyate and La Nuit Bengali:

Maitreyi Devi's *Na Hanyate* and Mircea Eliade's *La Nuit Bengali* narrate a love affair that is differently perceived and described by these two writers. A twenty-three-year Romanian citizen Eliade stays at the residence of Dasgupta where he gets close to Maitreyi Devi, Dasgupta's daughter. Their relationship, however, fails to tie a final knot and Eliade leaves for his own country while Devi gets married to someone else. This linear storyline undergoes a set of turns and twists as the truths they narrate during the courses of the novels show a quintessential difference from each other.

The Nature of Truth:

If scientific or experimented truths are kept aside, it becomes really difficult to determine what is true regarding statements and beliefs. Therefore, truth might get individualized, but what remains stable is fact, regarding which Bertrand Russell remarks, "whatever we are acquainted with must be something; we may draw wrong inferences from our acquaintance, but the acquaintance itself cannot be deceptive" (Russell 17). However, fact can only exist if human participation in it is ensured that in the view of Heidegger becomes "possible" not because of "the inherent structure of a divinely created world but human comportment" (Heidegger 290). From the above references, it gets clear that facts objectively survive and human perception and thought make it a matter of truth. Such truths, however, are not stable or static which correspondence and coherence theory of truth recommends; rather, these truths are individualistic in nature that in the alethic pluralist theory of truth is believed, "what property serves as truth may vary from discourse to discourse" and "this potential pluralism in itself in opposition to the more traditional positions, in so far as they claim to uncover the universal nature of truth, something common to all truth-apt discourse" (Wright 752). Therefore, it can be concluded that truth is plural in nature. If the two novels are naturally expected to say truth differently. Yet, when the same story unpacks two versions of truth, it becomes intriguing and relevant to inquire about the real cause behind such difference. *Na Hanyate* and *La Nuit Bengali* illustrate two different narratives of the same story, articulated by writers from two different cultures as well as genders – therefore, although the plurality of truth is a normalcy there, it is important to investigate the underlying cause of it.

Ego as a cross-cultural phenomenon:

In psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud develops a model of human psychology comprising three parts – ego, id and superego that consecutively suggest the consciousness, the unconsciousness and the

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conscience (Barry 97). Sigmund Freud asserts that the ego represents “reason and sanity” and it is “modified by the direct influence of the external world” (8). Therefore, the ego comes under the influence of the outside world and acts in accordance with the rules of it. The ego that reflects the conscious thoughts of human beings ultimately results in the development of self-repression and self-censorship which eventually produces a refined, superior representation of the self. Self-censorship or self-consciousness is sure to produce the best version of the self which aims at realizing an individual self in a superior sense. In the novels here on discussion, the ego of both writers, the study argues, takes into account their cultural (the Eastern and Western consciousness) and biological (the masculine and feminine) differences and act accordingly. To be more precise, a racial-consciousness is at work here in the novels *Na Hanyate* and *La Nuit Bengali*. At the same time, the narratives of the novels also portray what femininity in the oriental culture takes pride in and how a western male voice, on the contrary, unveils his superiority while treating oriental femininity. In the novels, selected above, the contrastive perspectives between the East and West as well as Masculine and Feminine get a clear representation as Devi and Eliade belong to two different geographies and genders regarding which in *Orientalism*, Edward Said asserts: “being a white man was therefore an idea and a reality. It involved a reasoned position towards both the white and non-white worlds” (Said 228). Said’s idea supports the fact that white and non-white worlds share distinct cultural standards and, therefore, approach from one culture to another can be evaluated from egoistic stands as the white world perceives the non-white orientalism as an inferior entity while orientalism takes pride in mystically westernizing themselves. In order to narrow the discussion, the idea of Amartya Sen, in this regard, can be taken help of which reflects on this matter identifying three categories that create a picture of India in western imagination and that, at the same time, implicitly discover western cultural identity. Sen discovers “exoticist,” “magisterial” and “curatorial” approaches if India is observed from outside that respectively deal with “the wondrous aspect,” “India as a subject territory” and “diverse aspects of Indian culture” (A. Sen 142). These three categories, therefore, suggest an Indian culture which has richness in diversity of culture and tradition, and which has a long colonial history of being dominated. While discussing such traits of Indian culture, the West becomes a symbol of domination. The language of domination, therefore, in traditional perception, always resembles some sort of masculinity. In oriental culture, on the other hand, the gap between masculinity and femininity gets a visible description as orientalism “viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders... women are usually the creatures of a male-power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing” (Said 208). The construction of womanhood in oriental culture depends largely on the imagination of man – the concept of femininity, according to the oriental tradition, therefore, equally gets translated in the western perception of it integrating cultural and gender biases.

Plurality of truth in *Na Hanyate* and *La Nuit Bengali*:

Na Hanyate and *La Nuit Bengali* both bring the plural nature of truth to the light as narrative of Eliade does not match that of Devi’s. Beginning from the first encounter to the last stage of their relationship the way Devi reveals a number of significant details which do not correspond to how Eliade shows his relation with Devi. For instance, there exists a fatal mismatch regarding the place where they meet for the first time – Devi mentions her house to be the first meeting place while to Eliade, Oxford Book and Stationary is the place of their first encounter (Devi 20; Eliade 11). Here the significance of their meeting gets an articulate treatment, but the information

regarding it loses unity. Another striking example in this regard would be the description of Devi's father who Eliade claims to be Narendra Sen, a prominent engineer and a renowned person in Calcutta while Devi introduces his father as a learned person as well as a professor who has good command of language, culture and literature (Eliade 12; Devi 15). In another case, Eliade informs that Devi's father along with his daughter invites him to stay at their Bhabanipur residence; on the other hand, Devi, in her description, makes it clear that she has found it irritating as a foreigner is going to stay with them (Eliade 23; Devi 20). Such distortion of truth continues throughout the novels that gets another dimension in the event revolving around a ring. Devi's mother, at one point of their relationship, asks her daughter if she ever has been committed to him in exchange of a ring or a garland that she strongly rejects; but Eliade describes a much passionate incident where Devi with ring surrenders herself completely to him (Devi 67; Eliade 67). In the narratives of Devi and Eliade, Khoka is a man of much dispute; in the language of Devi: "Khoka is nobody to us. But he is like our brother...Khoka and her sister are sheltered by us" (Devi 12, translation mine). On the contrary, Eliade introduces Khoka as Devi's uncle both of who in the conception of Eliade illicitly enjoy each other's company (Eliade 50). All these evidences, stated above, prove sufficiently that Devi's version of truth goes in exact contrast with Eliade's truth. In most cases, Eliade's description of Devi is much instigating as, in the language of his, she provokes him to get involved in an intimate relationship. Representation of Devi's father in Eliade's language also does not express much reverence that, Devi claims, his father deserves. Such passive treatment of Eliade to Devi, her family and collectively her nation, divulges a sort of white as well as masculine superiority. Devi, on the other hand, maintains a controlled attitude in her narrative that culturally orientalism cultivates. Cultivation of feminine as well as oriental practices in narrative enormously reflect the distortion of truth. However, these two narratives potentially bring the plurality of truth that this study is particularly focused on.

Relation between plurality of truth and egoism:

The most remarkable feature about these novels is that both novels represent the opposite sides of the same coin. Protagonists of *La Nuit Bengali* and *Na Hanyate* are characters of the same love story; on the contrary, Devi of *Na Hanyate* represents the East as well as womanhood while Eliade, narrator of *La Nuit Bengali*, depicts the western as well as masculine perceptions. Therefore, the distortions of truths, the narratives unfold in the course of the storylines, justify the narrators' standpoints and also try to establish them as more correct as well as more truthful than the other. Such self-justification, therefore, reflects their inner egoistic superiority that unconsciously gets a clear presentation here in the novels. This paper, however, is interested in the discovery of such egoistic superiority, demonstrated by two novelists, from two perspectives – racial and gender-centered. Why truth gets divided – this question, the paper thinks, can be well answered if Devi's and Eliade's points of views are properly analyzed.

Discussion

Devi's Eastern and Feminine Ego:

Devi belongs to a renowned family in India. Her father, according to her narrative in *Na Hanyate*, has an influence among the elite society of Calcutta. Her mother's beauty also equals the intellectual stand of her father. At the age of mere thirteen, Devi starts visiting the timeless prodigy of India, Rabindranath Tagore (Devi 17). Devi clearly states at one point in *Na Hanyate* that her father wants her to be someone great such as Sorojini Naidu (Devi 19). Such a distinguished upbringing of Devi, therefore, definitely leaves a mark on her knowledge, morality, above all personality. Eliade, however, hurts this particular ego of Devi as she has known:

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“The young people in our time would not communicate often, but we were not in support of veil...however, an invisible veil would not let us do anything we wanted” (Devi 17, translation mine). At this point Devi's narrative takes another route. As the Eastern society is not that much liberal same as the Western one is, Devi unveils her part of truth rooted in the Eastern culture and society. Devi finds her pride demolished in Eliade's narrative often. This pride represents her Eastern as well as female existence regarding which Devi says: “I can bear the responsibility of truth, but how can I bear the weight of falsehood? I have a future and fame to walk on; I have children to accompany – I am an Indian woman after all. Defamation for me weighs more than death” (Devi 25, translation mine). Eliade's uncensored description of Devi ultimately compels her to reveal her part of truth. It is, although, quite difficult to ascertain whose of truth is true, the reasons behind the multiplicity of truth are easily recognizable. In many cases, Eliade claims that Devi has a provoking contribution to the development of their relationship. According to Eliade's narrative, it is Devi who wants to teach Bangla to Eliade (Eliade 33). And it is Devi's father who arranges a proper sitting for them so that they can continue learning each other's language without disturbance. In another case Eliade says: “I was the first man who Maitreyi met so closely and left no stone unturned to get attention” (Eliade 35, translation mine). The way Eliade depicts a seductive character of Devi is a real attack on the Eastern femininity that she takes pride in. Eliade even gives much bold description about Devi when he says: “She undressed herself in front of me. Absorbing a little light showering on my room, her body lightened my entire room” (Eliade 68, translation mine). In response to such defaming descriptions on the part of Eliade, Devi tells her truth to the reader. Devi describes how she gets a little upset at the presence of a foreigner in their house (Devi 20), how she feels bit uncomfortable to enter Eliade's room at the beginning (Devi 22), how her father advises her to learn French from Eliade (Devi 29). All these examples given above clearly portray why Devi's truth takes a turn from that of Eliade's.

Eliade's Western and Masculine Ego:

As *La Nuit Bengali* has been written earlier than *Na Hanyate*, Eliade has the liberty to present the whole scenario after his imagination and thoughts. However, in doing so, Eliade also does not fall back to uphold his Western as well as masculine values. His experience in India finds a description that constantly gives support to his sense of superiority. What Eliade continuously emphasizes is his honest portrayal of an important chapter of his life. Avoiding mystery and illusion, Eliade narrates in *La Nuit Bengali* all those emotions and perceptions that have crossed his mind. In their first meeting, Eliade admits unconditionally that he gets fascinated to Bengali version of beauty that Devi represents (Eliade 11). Instead of exchanging words or trying to get acquainted with her, Eliade's perception of Devi as a Bengal beauty certainly undermines her humane existence. This, however, reveals Eliade's Western as well as Masculine ego that does not consider the East as something soulful and at the same time imprisons female in the cage of femininity. In another case, Eliade refers to another incident: “one day she asked me, your country is surely a much cold one! And that's why you people are such white. She uttered the word “white” looking at my naked arm lying on tea-table. It seems, she was bit envious. Such envy of her starkly surprised me” (Eliade 25, translation mine). Eliade's imagination of his race to be a matter of envy definitely expresses his Western ego. On the other hand, in Indian subcontinent where girls are expected to be born white in order to be married off smoothly, portraying Devi as an envious girl definitely degrades her learned self. This defeat of Devi, therefore, makes Eliade's masculine ego victorious. In another context, Eliade remarks: “it seems, Maitreyi doesn't even have any little idea about the depth of love. She got infatuated with the liberty of playful unrestricted intimacy” (Eliade 42, translation mine). Such lightness of Devi's character, in the language of Eliade, therefore, gives a much depthless impression of Devi as a person. Eliade,

moreover, in different contexts, makes it clear that it is Devi who does not hesitate much to get physically and spiritually intimate. Degrading Devi continuously reflects how Eliade perceives the East and its inhabitants. Therefore, the question hangs on why Eliade's perception is not free of superstitions and stereotypes – in answer, only it can be said that because Eliade is imbued with a false conception of the Western and masculine superiority, his version of truth is also contaminated.

Conclusion:

Maitreyi Devi and Mircea Eliade belong to different continents and genders, and what makes them united is the grip of passionate love. As human emotion varies considerably from person to person, so does the description of it. However, there are certain determiners that control human emotion as well. Based on *La Nuit Bengali* and *Na Hanayate*, this paper has made attempts to identify the influence of ego to determine what Devi and Eliade reveal about their love life. It is true that fiction enjoys the liberty to describe anything combining imagination and fact. However, when it comes to describing one's involvement in another individual's life, the narrative should be much more cautious. In the instance of these particular novels, the presence of two different narratives about the life of two different individuals complicate everything and make it impossible to find out the real truth. Yet the narratives open up a potential gateway to investigate why telling the same story can be different. Therefore, the concept of ego significantly contributes to the understanding of plurality of truth. Although the analysis of these novels from the perspective of ego is not new, it retains newness to interpret the ego from the cultural-biological consideration. The ego which not only represents an individual, but also gets influenced by different external determiners acts as the key to make one narrative different from the other.

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