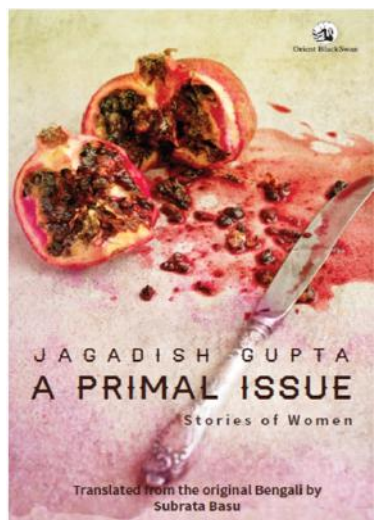


Book Review: A Primal Issue: Stories of Women by Subrata Basu



Number of Pages: 144

Publication Year: 2020

Publisher: Orient Blackswan

ISBN: 9789352879045

Price: Rs. 295.00/-

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The book, “A Primal Issue: Stories of Women”, is a gripping, enthralling anthology of analytical stories, translated by Subrata Basu, and written originally in Bengali by Jagdish Gupta, a “trailblazer” (p. xv) of modernist movement in India. With its epicentric plunge on the word “primal”, the book very meticulously exhibits a valorous investigation of interdiction and anathemas existing in the splendid post-Tagore chapter of Bengali literature. This revelatory compendium stresses on Jagdish Gupta’s seven translated stories, all originally published between 1927 and 1959, with females as chief characters, scrutinizing the intense connotations of life at personal as well as societal levels. Every chapter is dedicated to one story so as to undrape the aggregation of the dilemmas, quandaries, and predicaments of Bengalis in general and women in particular for whom the repugnance of conservatism continues to exist. The stories unsparingly

underscore the barbarous realities of the society, such as polygamy, child-marriage, widow-remarriage, women's oppression and marginalization.

The aim of the book is to encapsulate the distinctiveness of Jagdish's stories along with "his individual tone, including even his mannerisms, occasional archaisms, rhetorical flourishes and verbal extravagance." (p. xx) As a modernist writer, Jagdish's eminence in acing the style of his content makes him "a singularly difficult author to translate". (p. xix) Although, Subrata has authorized herself to combine and break paragraphs, amend and reorient punctuations, and even dissect a plotline "into more sections than there may have been in the original" (p. xix), yet, no major upliftments or simplifications have been done during the translation process so as to preserve the originality of the content.

The Introduction of the book begins with an exhaustive biography of Jagdish Gupta, and a conscientious compilation of his major works. It also highlights how he is, with one accord, eulogized by the critical bodies as "one of the towering figures" (p. xv) of Bengali literature for his pragmatic, anti-utopian disposition, his obstinately headstrong analytical approaches, his courageous investigation of sexuality, stereotypical notions and taboos, and his merciless portrayal of the "sordid undercurrents of family and social life" (p. xv). Additionally, a 'Note on Pronunciation' is also provided by Subrata so that her committed readers do not feel "inflicted with diacritics" (p. xxiii) while going through the text.

In the first chapter, 'A Primal Issue', originally published as '*Adi Kathar Ekti*', the author makes a triumphant attempt at underscoring the two unembellished brutalities of Hindu society, i.e. child-marriage, and taboos and stereotypes on widow-remarriage, that, although stand in disagreement with the fundamentalities of humanity, are still found in the present-day non-utopic Hindu civilization. The narrative revolves around a widow, Kanchan, who, in an urgent yearning for a male-safeguarding, puts "her five-year-old" (p. xvii) girl, Khushi, in a petrifying "cataclysmic doom" (p. 6) by marrying her to "twice-married" (p. 3) man, Subal, who is also nineteen years elder to her. The repercussions and reverberations of the lethal amalgamation of aforementioned subject-matters ultimately result in the physical as well as psychological traumatization and degradation of both Kanchan and her daughter.

In chapter two, 'A Bond Defiled', published originally as '*Kalankita Samparka*', the author spectacularly accentuates upon a concern not customarily discussed by contemporary modernist writers, that is, unethical obligations of a woman towards her husband. This concept is brought out through the quintessential character portrayal of Makhanbala, "entangled" (p. 23) and sandwiched between her sexual responsibilities towards Satkari, who is returning "home after serving a prison term for rape" (p. xvii), and ethical commitments towards herself. Eventually, all her dreams shatter, as if thrown a "massive monolith" (p. 25) upon them, when she is commanded by her mother-in-law to sleep with him. It is how Makhanbala confronts "her moment of truth" (p. xvii) that gives a necessary denouement to the story.

The third chapter entitled, 'So Long as the Sun and Moon', originally published as '*Chandra-Surya Jatadin*', belabours about the embittered truth of polygamy, whose roots are still ineradicably embedded in the society. It becomes even more disgruntled when co-wives are sisters, as delineated in the story. The narrative pirouettes around Kshanaprabha as to how she endures through her forbidding reality when her in-laws re-marry their son, Dinataran, to Kshanaprabha's younger sister, Prafulla, for her father's "property" (p. 41). The circumstances become more inappropriately strenuous when both "wives are thrown together - one of them a young woman of beauty and charm, and the other, the mother of a child" (p. 45). It is only after the second marriage that Dina's mother realizes the blunder she has committed. In a venture to

make necessary amendments, "she brings about the horrific ending of the story" (p. xviii), ultimately turning Kshanaprabha "stark mad" (p. 56).

The fourth chapter, 'Son and Son's Wife', published originally as '*Putra Ebang Putrabadhu*', calls attention to the inconstant comportment of a perfidious man who does not exhibit any gesticulations of loyalty even towards his own wife. In this narrative, it is Amrita who is nothing but a "social nuisance" (p. xviii), mortifying his family and peers to the very best. To entice him "over to the straight and narrow" (p. 58), Akshay, Amrita's father, marries him to Maya, "the splendor of [whose] figure is boundless like the moon's" (p. 58). However, Amrita continues with his crummy *modus operandi* when he eyes on Maya's "best friend" (p. 62), Indira, throwing his atrocious cruelties upon his wife. Eventually, it is only when a feeble and impotent lady, yet another victim of Amrita, arrives and undrapes all of his wrongdoings and felonies, that Maya, who "has always longed for a certain respect in return" (p. 72), confronts her wayward husband and snaps off all ties with him, ultimately preserving her "individuality" (p. 72).

The next story, 'Krishna's Consummation', originally published as '*Aruper Ras*', can be contemplated as one of the first stories of modern literature in India to deconstruct the stereotypical epigraphs of sexuality or "sexual orientation" (p. xviii), and acknowledge the abstraction of lesbianism. This conceptualization is materialized through the quintessence of Ranu's character. As a child she is charmed by Kanu, a neighboring boy displaying his "typical male obtuseness" (p. xviii) by rejecting her, but later, as she fathoms her sexual inclinations and penchants, falls for Indira's "blazing beauty and rampant maturity" (p. 89). In an attempt to take this "friendship" to another level, Ranu invites Indira, Kanu's wife, to spend a night with her, and the story, unfurling deeper connotations of love-making, culminates with the two consummating "as if husband and wife" (p. 95).

The entitlement of the next narrative, 'Mrs Havoc', published originally as '*Pralayankari Shashthi*', jogs our memory of the stereotypical hypotheses stigmatizing women as "havoc-causing" (p. xviii), as well as deifying them as manifestations of the fundamental "cosmic" (p. xviii) forces. The story becomes an epitomic adumbration of how this power, when troubled and exploited, just as women relentlessly are in this cataclysmic world, brings about a dismantling havoc. In the plotline, Sodu Khan ransacks a poor Muslim, Jasim "of his young wife" (p. xix), who, as revenge, rallies against Sodu with his brother and twenty-two lower-class Hindus. It is only when "she herself refused to come" (p. 105), that brings about a calamitous doom in Jasim's life. Here, the readers are made to recollect Ram's narrative in which he, although first rescues Sita from her abduction, eventually banishes her for the sake of his family's honourableness. Hence, Jasim's wife absconds from such a catastrophe by willingly refusing to go back.

The last chapter, entitled 'The Eighteenth Art', originally published as '*Atharo Kalar Ekti*', introduces the readers to Benekar, an uncomplicated husband of an astoundingly ingenious wife, Janaki. Benekar desires to resuscitate the "zest, fun and playfulness" (p. xix) which have evanesced after four-years of their marriage, and so he solicits his dedicated wife to display the "arts" (p. 110) he surmises she, being a lady, ought to possess. It is how Janaki unveils her "eighteen arts" (p. 118) by planting a "*magur* fish" (p. 113) in Benekar's plough-land that takes the story to its chucklesome culmination. This captivatingly congenial take on a very familiar male-fantasy gives a humorous flavour to the book.

From the readers' and researchers' frame of reference, this assortment of translated stories is requisite to aggrandize scholarship besides serving as a consequential secondary material to be utilized in the formulation of any doctoral thesis and dissertation on Bengali quintessence of Jagdish Gupta's stories from the modernist viewpoint. This book contemplates in aggregation the

corrupted spirit of the society in which Indian modernity becomes a veritable Aunt Sally by the agency of stereotypical taboos as well as economic and sexual exploitations. The politics of class and gender turns out to be the eventual challenge which demands confrontation.

Reference:

Basu, Subrata. (2020). *A Primal Issue: Stories of Women*. Hyderabad, India: Orient BlackSwan.

Author's bio-note

Ms. Adishree Vats is an Assistant Professor at Department of English Studies, Akal University, Talwandi Sabo, Punjab, India. Her area of expertise includes African American literature, Marginal literature, and Standpoint literature. She has authored several publications in peer-reviewed journals, and reviewed many books including *Gloria Naylor's Fiction: Contemporary Exploration of Class and Capitalism* (2018), *Ghosts of African Diaspora* (2019), and many more.
