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Bani Basu's *Gandharvi*: A Feminist novel

By

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*“As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking.”-Virginia Woolf, in **Orlando**.*

There sounds not an iota of exaggeration in the following words by John Green: “Some people have lives; some people have music.” A psychological drama of a singer mentally tagged by war between her artistic life and social life, *Gandharvi* (1993) is a modern Bengali classic written by the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novelist Bani Basu and translated in English as *Gandharvi: Life of a Musician* (2017) by Jayita Sengupta. A saga of culture, devotion, sacrifice, love and failure, the novel narrates the story of Apala, her life and her musical journey in the 1960's Calcutta. Though conspicuously musical in its form, the novel becomes a poignant commentary on the position of women, gender, politics, power equations, and the question of identity and also it addresses issues belonging to the canon of postcolonial socio-cultural criticism. The very notion of female independence or empowerment constitutes the crux of the narrative.

The protagonist of the novel, Apala is a gifted singer of Hindustani classical music. She devotes most of her time and concentration to music, which shows her tremendous love for it. She herself states, “Music is my life”. She owes her strong hold of music to her kindly elderly tutor, Rameshwar Thakur under whose guidance she, along with Soham, Mitul and Dipali, have been practising classical music. But having been born into an old, middle-class family of limited means in North Calcutta, she is made to bury her extraordinary gift under various familial expectations, demands and repressions. Brought up under the strict guardianship of her “Jethu ” after the death of her father, she lives in a family that has little appreciation for her talent and passion for classical music. To her family, her music meant little, as it did not fit their idea of “respectability”. But despite all these hindrances, however, she defends her case vehemently by identifying classical music as a vital and inseparable component of Indian identity and her sensibility, resulting in her occupying second position in a musical concert. But she pathetically finds that the captious world is biased against her music and is suspicious of a woman-singer's ability to make her own identity in the path of music.

The first seeds of conflict are shown when Apala, after winning a prestigious scholarship, wishes to go to Lucknow to study under the great Nazneen Begum, who is dismissed by her guardian as a “tawaiif”. In spite of Apala being reluctant, her family wants to marry her off to the first family that shows interest in her-ironically because they saw her perform at the same function and her husband, Shibnath “chose” her. Then follows the terrible accident: marriage. Although Apala thinks her husband will love and assist her for her musical journey to be a fruitful one, her marital life proves loveless. Her craving for emotional love and support is misinterpreted by her husband as physical desire and she is subjected to marital rape, much like Kamala Das’ s poem, “ An Introduction” in which the speaker going through same inhumane treatments by her husband, said-“When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask/ For, he drew a youth of sixteen, into the/Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me/But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.” Apala becomes the victim of her husband’ s ravenous lust.

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, said Simone de Beauvoir, and this excruciating process of Apala’s becoming a woman is narrated at length. Although Shibnath and his family seem to have no such issues regarding Apala’s singing for All India Radio and Doordarshan, they intervene to harness her, to make her fit in a particular model of femininity, to confine her to the domestic space as a “ model” housewife. In this respect, they parallel those “categorizers” in the poem “An Introduction”, who in order to infringe on the speaker’s freedom, give her a peremptory order- “Dress in sarees, be girl/Be wife. Be embroiderer, be cook, /Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,/Belong. ” This takes us directly to the central issue - the hegemonic patriarchy has kept women away from establishing their own identity in whatsoever career they want. Their individuality is ignored, and they are made to act according to the established norms. Apala’s children grow up learning to ignore their mother’s music. However, in a sincere effort to redefine herself and her world outside, she adopts music as a means to escape from this harsh reality. Through her songs, she expresses the crests and falls of her life, her inner-self and her own definition of “love”. Love for Apala is like a mellifluous vibrato in thumri, the yearning of ghazal and the jingle of sitar. She also adds that her love for music amounts to her love for any human being.

Music plays an important role of a healer in the novel when Soham has a nervous breakdown, caused by his delusive perception of Mitul’s betrayal of their relationship, and is nursed back to health by Apala’ s music. Through her divine ragas, Apala is able to imbibe the spirit of music in Soham by assuring him that “Love ends but music does not ”. She tells him not to sacrifice music for his love because music will never betray Soham if he does not betray it. These words of Apala help bring Soham’s inclination back in music, which results in his being a famous ghazal artiste. Although Soham and Mitul later achieve fame and fortune in singing contemporary songs and in dance, the world of the classical belongs to the specially endowed “Gandharvi” - Apala.

Later in the story, Soham is seen to come from London and he, along with Apala, performs Raga Darbari in a function. The two form a duet par excellence. It seems their pair had already been fixed by the goddess of music. When Soham and Apala sing together, they embody heavenly appearances like gandharva and apsara who seem to descend straight from heaven. As

Soham himself likens their pair to “Ardhanarishvara” and to the plucked strings of Tanpura. Music here bears witness to Soham and Apala’s mutual connection, albeit spiritual. But soon after, the situation turns out worse as Rana, Apala’s son tries to commit suicide, betrayed by Sumi. Rana, however, recovers and returns to a normal state of health but Apala loses her voice and ultimately her life. In the epilogue written by her Sohini, Apala’s daughter, she acknowledges her mother as a true artiste, who, when she lost her voice, turned to paintings to depict ragas in pictorial forms. Though avoiding to be labelled an overtly feminist text *Gandharvi*, manages to ensure the victory of Apala’s creative self by taking recourse to the alternative domain of painting. It is through this act of painting her identity transcends the normative categories of just being a mother, or a wife or just a woman.

Bani Basu eloquently portrays the tragedy of Apala’s life—where, like that of many women shackled by patriarchy, their inherent talents and qualities are learnt when it is too late. Apala is identified as a ‘Gandharvi’ in the text, the musical goddess who resides in Gandhorvolok, the heavenly world of music in Indian mythology. She must have lost her way and come to this world. Therefore, she has to struggle continually to find her way out. Apala’s life begins with music and also ends with the same.

To conclude, Bani Basu has succeeded in capturing the world of the arts succinctly. The world of music and Apala integrate as one. Basu’s concern about the construction of the female gender places her in the ring of twentieth century feminists who protest against the social intervention in the construction of the female self. *Gandharvi*, therefore, manifests the evolution of Apala’s artistic self, attributing to her the status of a rebel, asserting and celebrating her femininity and revolting against the oppressive anguish of life.

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