

Feeding the Narrative: The Politics of Food in Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Bipiner Sangsar

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted role of food in the novel *Bipiner Sangsar* by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay. The term food doesn't only mean any nutritious substance that people eat or drink to be alive, but incorporates a lot of other culinary practices and cuisines. It examines how food functions on multiple layers, like a message of love or as a marker of social hierarchy. Through a close reading of characters like Bipin, Monorama, Shanti, Mani, and Mati, the study reveals how food not only works as a means of sustenance but also as a narrative device that conveys emotional, social, and cultural meanings. The study also focuses on how female characters, especially the ones belonging from a rural background, utilise food as their primary language to express themselves. Due to the rigid social rules and norms, women had very little scope for expression. Furthermore, it investigates how the portrayal of common dietary habits and restrictions reveals the deeply rooted social hierarchies, especially concerning caste. Again, the study takes a closer look at how food becomes a focal point in moments of both profound emotional connection and stark human needs. It emphasizes the importance of different culinary practices in navigating daily life and overcoming existential challenges. Finally, by examining the diverse ways in which food is portrayed, this research illuminates Bandyopadhyay's nuanced understanding of human relationships, social dynamics, and the fundamental role of sustenance in shaping individual and collective experience.

Keywords: Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, Food Studies, Indian Literature

Introduction

Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay was a prominent Bengali writer. He is renowned for his deep connection with rural Bengal and nature. His works reflect deep humanism and evocative descriptions of nature. He is best known for *Pather Panchali* and its sequel *Aparajito*. These novels depict the coming-of-age journey of Apu, a young boy growing up in a village. Satyajit Ray adapted these novels into the acclaimed Apu Trilogy films, ushering in international recognition. Beyond the Apu Trilogy, Bibhutibhusan's literary repertoire includes *Aranyak*, a semi-autobiographical novel that captures the conflict between wilderness and civilization. There are also some major novels like *Ichamati* and *Bipiner Sangsar*. His writing style has a deep philosophical undertone and keen insight into human nature. It is also marked by realism and lyricism. Themes of nostalgia, existential dilemmas, and human resilience are often explored in his works, making him one of the most influential voices of Bengali literature.

The novel *Bipiner Sangsar*, which translates to Bipin's household or Bipin's family life, is another significant novel by Bibhutibhusan, first published in 1941. Similar to many other works, *Bipiner Sangsar* is also set in the rural landscape of Bengal. It captures the nuances of village life, its people, and the surrounding nature. The novel centres around Bipin, a common man from a rural background. Though he was born and raised in a wealthy family, the sudden death of his father rendered the family directionless. Subsequently, Bipin's character flaws, like drinking and gambling, led the family to be impoverished. There were four members in their family. The plot progresses rapidly after they become very poor. When he attempts to navigate the responsibilities and emotional trials of family life in a dire economic condition. The story unfolds in a subtle, naturalistic tone, portraying everyday events and minor conflicts. It often engages in moments of introspection with great emotional depth.

Bibhutibhusan was a master of portraying the everyday life of rural Bengal. He captures the struggles, hopes, and interactions of his characters with striking realism. In many of his works, food occupies a place of central importance. It functions not merely as a means of sustenance but as a complex cultural symbol and emotional language. Bibhutibhusan often depicted characters from diverse social and economic backgrounds. While some of his characters live in relative comfort, many of them struggle with poverty and hunger daily. The majority of them did not have the luxury of eating well or even having a proper meal. This socioeconomic diversity is reflected in the way food is consumed, prepared, and shared. Access to food, eating practices, and even the rituals surrounding everyday meals are determined by class, caste, and gender. The detailed description includes what the people eat, how they eat, when they eat, and with whom they eat. These things are never incidental. All are an integral part of their everyday lives. All these are frequently used deliberately to convey emotional state to power structures existing within the society. As Arjun Appadurai aptly refers, "food is highly condensed social fact". This observation echoes significantly in Bibhutibhusan's fiction, where food is never just a meal. It is a carrier of emotional, social, and cultural meaning.

The female characters in the novel are seen using food to express emotions that they may not otherwise be able to articulate. Description of various food items and the cooking process of different dishes is also very noticeable in the text. The preparation of food is often portrayed as an act of love and even resistance. These women aren't that literate or socially empowered. They find their voice in food as a powerful language to say the unsaid.

Why has the writer put so much effort into highlighting what the characters are eating, also how and when they are eating? The female characters are especially seen as strongly connected with the whole process. They are always so busy offering whatever they have at their disposal. While romantic relationships are not always the central focus in Bandyopadhyay's works, there are some instances where food plays a crucial role in expressing affection or signifying intimacy. In *Bipiner Sangsar*, the characters Mani and Shanti illustrate this vividly. Though both of them belonged to different backgrounds, they developed deep empathy for Bipin. And they choose the most conventional way to express their love. They are intuitively aware of Bipin's hunger and respond immediately by rushing to the kitchen. It can be tea or other food items, depending on the time of day. But social norms dictated that they couldn't come out in the open before Bipin, especially when other men were there. They would wait inside the room, well hidden from sight, and peek through the door occasionally to see how well Bipin is eating or not. Particularly in the case of Shanti, it is observed that she is just preparing and

serving the food to Bipin. As the story progresses, she starts to take care of more and more. Their actions are indicative of unconditional love and empathy. It also shows the instinctive nature and sincerity of them, reflecting a maternal and emotional attachment to Bipin. They would anticipate that Bipin is hungry even before he expresses. This shows an emotional sensitivity that goes beyond mere hospitality.

In contrast, Bipin's wife Monorama is primarily shown to be struggling with the harsh realities of life. Though deeply committed to the welfare of her family, her interaction with food is utilitarian rather than expressive. Whenever Bipin encounters her, the only thing that comes out of their conversation is the lack of necessary items in their household. She is always busy looking after the whole family, yet there is very little emotional manifestation on her behalf. Most of the time, she is seen borrowing grains and other food items from the neighbours. She is constantly worried about feeding the family. Their emotional bond is overshadowed by the struggle for survival. There is a noticeable absence of a detailed description of how she cooked and served. In a way, Monorama's relationship with food mirrors her emotional condition: strained, burdened, and denied luxury. Despite her sacrifices, her love and affection remain unnoticed. On the contrary, Mani and Shanti's food embodies luxury and emotional fulfillment. When Shanti or Mani prepares food for Bipin, the dishes are usually more than enough to quench his hunger. It reflects love and luxury. The love is necessary to sustain life, but not all of them have it. For most of them, love is a luxury that they can't afford or understand either. They keep questioning themselves and others.

Here, food also serves as a marker of danger. Bipin's brother's death due to uncontrolled eating habits presents food as a double-edged sword. While it can be symbolic of love and care, it also possesses the potential for harm. This dichotomy emphasizes the nuanced portrayal of food. It can nourish or destroy, connect or alienate, elevate or degrade.

Beyond the immediate family and romantic interests, offering food in Bandyopadhyay's work also expands to the expression of hospitality and fostering of social connection within the community. This also suggests the writer's fondness for good food. Traditionally, offering food as a gesture of hospitality plays a crucial cultural role in the society he depicted. The act of preparing and sharing a meal signifies warmth and a desire to forge personal connections. This cultural norm is reflected in the novel, further solidifying food's role as a language of connection.

Food acts as a medium, a constant part of the narrative, present everywhere. The protagonists are mostly Brahmin, and they follow strict rules and regulations regarding food. Their dietary restrictions and practices are portrayed with irony and critique. Brahmin characters are often shown avoiding food prepared by lower caste individuals. They are seen cooking for themselves at an exclusive place away from the kitchen area. Often, they eat sitting at a distance from others to uphold the ritual purity. They would take the raw ingredients only from the low caste people. But for them, it is a sin to eat cooked food or even drink water from lower castes. Cooking, serving, and even touching food become a terrain for negotiating caste boundaries. Here, food is acting as a status symbol. It also reveals the politics of food and the deeply embedded caste hierarchies of Hindu society. In a way, these practices reflect the religious orthodoxy and serve as a mechanism of exclusion.

Interestingly, these same boundaries are often challenged and transgressed. The challenge comes to the forefront, especially in moments of emotional crisis. There was a school teacher, Bisweshwar, who lost

his job for falling in love with a lower caste girl named Mati. Though Mati was from a lower caste, her family was not poor. Her father didn't accept their marriage, so they had to flee from the village to an unknown place. Mati, who belonged to the Bagdi community, used to collect leafy vegetables and catch fish to support the household. When her husband falls ill, Mati takes great care, tends to him, feeds him with her own hands, an act considered impure by orthodox Brahmin standards. For them, food serves as the breaker of the shackles of the rigid social laws. Both of them, Brahmin Bisweshwar and Bagdi Mati, sacrificed a lot to be together. Mati worked so hard to sustain the family that she had to die an untimely death. Their love is symbolic of the resistance against the rigidity of caste. Mati's eventual death underscores the cost of such transgression. Thus, her labor and love leave an indelible mark.

Bipin and Bisweshwar tried their best to save her, but could not. As they returned home after performing the last rites of Mati, Bisweshwar is seen desperately arranging whatever he has at his disposal to cook. This moment is poignant and symbolic. Though overwhelmed by sorrow, his bodily hunger asserts itself. All he could arrange was two bitter gourds and some rice. He finished eating half of the hot steaming rice with the boiled gourd and then realised that Bipin was also there. He should have asked Bipin also for food. The urgency of hunger overrides even the conventions of mourning, showing how food anchors people in the material reality of life. The hunger in him overpowers his civic sense, also forcing him to forget all the grief over losing the love of his life momentarily. In this moment, food becomes not only a physical necessity but also a way of coping with loss. Here, food is seen as a great healing force, which has the ultimate power to heal.

The food of the common people was much different from the rich people. A detailed description of the food habits and the various food items is found relevant in those days. In addition to meals, Bibhutibhushan frequently refers to cultural practices surrounding food, such as the chewing of betel leaves and tobacco. Also, how much it has changed throughout the ages. Whenever they meet with each other. They must offer tobacco as a welcoming gesture. So many conversations took place while resting for a tobacco break. Tobacco breaks often facilitated intimate conversations and served as informal social gatherings. They used to cover a great distance on foot, especially the common people. For them, walking was the only means of transportation available at that time. They used to carry Betel leaves wrapped in a wet cloth to chew when they felt thirsty while walking. These small yet significant details offer a glimpse into the everyday life and culture of rural Bengal. It also evokes a sense of nostalgia. Specific dishes prepared on certain occasions serve as a powerful symbol of cultural identity and social cohesion. Consumption of particular foods contributes to the overall sense of community.

Food also reflects the different life conditions of various characters. In the case of Bipin and his wife Monorama, their main concern was a lack of food. Especially, it bothered Monorama so much, her motherly instinct always obliged her to think about the sustenance of life at her home. Most of the time, she complained about the lack of necessary things. Lack of food was the most prominent need. This deficiency never allowed them to explore the depth of emotions in domestic life. On the contrary, Monorama's constant struggle to arrange food symbolises her transcendental love, beyond the constraints of body and mind. She could be starving herself, but she does everything she can to arrange food for other family members. In contrast, Mani and Shanti belonged to rich families. They had more than enough means of sustenance for themselves, and arranging food was never a challenge. They never had to scavenge for food like Monorama or Mati. They could easily go beyond the basic human needs,

like food and shelter, to explore the other aspects of human life. For them, food is not a struggle but a medium to express something deeper. Their conversations with Bipin, always accompanied by the offering of tea or snacks, reflect emotional intimacy and intellectual companionship. A stable food source enables them to stay far ahead in the evolutionary chain. Monoroma never had such a deep conversation with Bipin, she is always busy looking after her family. In comparison, Mani had such long conversations whenever she got the chance. For Monoroma and Mati, food is the ultimate reality and necessity. And for Shanti and Mani, food has always been something more. This contrast highlights how access to food and stability shapes the emotional lives of women.

Gender and caste played a crucial role in shaping the food habits of Bengali women, as evident in the text. Male members of the family received preferential treatment in distribution of food within the household, while females faced numerous restrictions. Beyond caste and class, another significant concern was whether a female was a widow. Regardless of her age, a widow had to lead a life of austere wisdom, as seen in the case of Bipin's widowed sister. There were many things she was not allowed to do. When interpreting the nuances of food-related interactions, it is essential to understand these historical and social contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be fairly said that Bibhutibhushan's detailed attention to food is far from incidental. It is a very effective narrative strategy that enriches his storytelling, deepens character development, and critiques social hierarchies. His portrayal of food offers a nuanced understanding of love, sacrifice, and inequality in rural Bengal. Culinary practices' little and mundane details reveal how people live, relate, and survive. His work invites us to the intriguing world of the everyday lives of very ordinary people, where cooking and eating hold profound emotional and cultural significance. For the female characters, food becomes a language of affection that transcends their limited roles in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, for men, food can be a source of comfort, conflict, or even redemption. In general, for society at large, it becomes a mirror to its inequalities and its quiet, everyday revolutions.

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