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HEROES FROM THE MARGINS IN CONTEMPORARY BENGALI FICTION

1. Introduction

The contemporary Bengali literary scene, traditionally left-leaning, has been influenced by larger background shifts, such as the post-colonial critique of the Indian state and society, the search for a subaltern subject in modern Indian history, as well as the fall of a more orthodox narrative of progress in the early 1990's. On the one hand, those shifts gave birth to literature which gives a larger voice and agency to heroes and heroines who embody the subjectivity of what political theorist Partha Chatterjee (1993) called fragments of the nation, namely women, Adivasi communities, and Dalits, as well as minorities, including sexual minorities, and also other fragments like the Bengali and Bangladeshi Diaspora. On the other hand, some authors turned to existentialism, magical realism, the Kafkaesque and the carnivalesque, to craft antiheroes from the margins of society; extreme and insane at times, but able to resist in their own powerful ways and to reflect back their marginality onto the mainstream. Such antiheroes can be fearful or vitriolic rather than brave, cynical about all possible ideals, and often immoral, especially from the middleclass perspective.

This paper focuses on two examples of contemporary Bengali fiction, the novel *Hārbārṭ* by Nabarun Bhattacharya (1948-2014) and the short story *Paṭuẏā Nibāraṇ* by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay (1935-), and looks at how the external literary

influences coalesce with the search for authentic subjectivity in the fringe niches of the folk as well as urban life.

The *margin* here is understood on several planes: First, sociologically in terms of power relations as the dwelling-place of the subaltern. Second, psychologically as the mental space of an alienated individual and his extreme practice – that of a failed medium in the case of *Hārbārṭ* and the art of eating creatures alive in *Paṭuẏā Nibāraṇ* (the latter in comparison with Kafka's *Hunger Artist*). Third, it is understood as "the margin of hybridity, where cultural differences 'contingently' and conflictually touch," the margin that "becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience" (Bhabha 1994: 207). While Bhabha speaks primarily of the coloniser and the colonised, it is relevant for our discussion as our anti-heroes act out from niches within the hybrid postcoloniality and drag the readers to the margin which is "the impossible boundary marking off the wholly other" (Spivak 1999:173). This is the other who rests not outside but within.

2. Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Hārbārṭ*

Nabarun Bhattacharya is one of the most original and inventive Bengali writers of past decades. He was born into an artistic family associated with the leftist Indian People's Theatre Association movement. His father Bijon Bhattacharya was a leading personality of Bengali theatre and his mother the acclaimed writer Mahasweta Devi. His parents divorced early in his teens and it was his father who brought him up and remained an intellectual inspiration throughout his life, as was another famous relative, the film maker Ritvik Ghatak. Nabarun's relationship with his mother was rather cold throughout his lifetime. Bhattacharya even publicly denounced his mother's opportunism and claimed that he had not found his mother's writing inspiring (Bag 2013).

Introduced by his father into the world of politics he was shifting his sympathies within the Left spectrum. He was involved in the Naxalite uprising in his young days.

Nevertheless, he later resented rigid Marxism and remained a rebel against any established political structure (the communists, CPI-M, in West Bengal for most of the time and the All India Trinamool Congress in the last years of his life) in the name of the ideal of democratic socialism. Although he first made his mark as a poet and short story writer it was his first novel *Hārbārṭ* (1994)[1] that catapulted him among the stars of Bengali literature and won him many prestigious awards including that of the Sahitya Academy in 1997.

Nabarun is credited with introducing magical realism to Bengali literature and he acknowledged the influence of Mikhail Bulgakov on his work (Lahiri 2013). He uses it as a new tool of anarchist and anti-establishment revolt in line with his own political convictions, as it allows him to address the post-colonial predicament of Bengal and pinpoint the tensions between the elite and the subaltern with crude playfulness. He invented a class of special human beings who can fly and cause at their will mayhem and anarchy to unsettle the corrupt structures of power. Those beings called *fyatarus* (*fyat* is the sound of flying kite) are at their best in Nabarun's novel *Kāṅāl mālsāṭ* (War Cry of Beggars, 2003). They are "social outcastes or mysterious members of the urban underbelly who resort to macabre mechanisms of subversion and sabotage to undo the matrix of power and legitimacy" (Purakayastha 2014: 7). Nabarun's writing does the same to the discursive hegemony of those powers and both his novels and the films based on them ran into trouble with the Censor Board.

The protagonist of his novel *Hārbārṭ*, Harbart Sarkar, is a perfectly subaltern character. Harbart's father did make a fortune from the war economy but lost it all soon afterwards by speculating in the film industry and spending on dubious would-be actresses. In any case he died in a road accident when Harbart was just one year old. Harbart's mother took refuge in her parental house, but after less than a year she got electrocuted

[1] The novel, originally published in Bengali in 1994, was translated into English by Jyoti Panjwani (2004) and Arunava Sinha (2011) and into German by Hans Harder (2014). In 2005 it was made into a feature film *Harbart* by Suman Mukhopadhyay.

while hanging clothes on the rooftop. Little Harbart was transferred to the family of his paternal uncle and suffered a childhood of neglect and bullying in an unassuming Calcutta neighbourhood. He did not show much talent for anything either, dropped out of school soon and the closest he got to an affair was observing a neighbour's daughter from the rooftop while playing kites in his teens. A flop on all counts, whose only source of comfort were his loving but powerless aunt, a sympathetic elder communist cousin Krishna who occasionally visited the household, and later in the story Krishna's Naxalite son and Harbart's nephew Binu.

Harbart clearly lacks access to any privilege ensuing from participation in postcolonial hegemony. At the same time he embodies in a strange way "the ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white'" in the words of Bhabha (1994: 92) who refers by this expression to mimicry of colonial hegemony by its subjects. Harbart is "Five feet six. Fair. Lean, Caucasian build." He resembles a "Hollywood prototype a la Leslie Howard. So he was given a Western name – Harbart." He "had always had the demeanour of a good-looking matinee hero. He looked even more of a Westerner because he used to be afraid most of the time. The paleness of fear enhanced his fair complexion" (Bhattacharya 2011: 25-26; onwards cited as H). Harbart does not know English but at times keeps on repeating, almost as a ritual iteration, a string of English words: cat, bat, water, dog, fish. Nabarun thus successfully carves out that ambivalent "area between mimicry and mockery" (Bhabha ibid: 86) which serves in his prose not to mark the hybrid space between the colonised and coloniser but rather the in-betweenness of the subaltern character who, vis-à-vis the postcolonial situation, mimics those who mimic.

On one occasion, Harbart discovered an old trunk with extraordinary content: a human skull, bones, and several incomplete books on ghosts and the afterlife. This obscure find contributed to his death drive, as did the suicide of one of his teenage friends. At the outset of the 1970's, when the Naxal uprising was at its peak, his nephew Binu moved into the house. Binu and his comrades did not despise Harbart. They could not

agree with his thoughts about the afterlife but they were happy to talk to him over a cup of tea and still more happy to include the innocent man in their revolutionary plots. This rather contented period in Harbart's life was brief. Binu is shot by the police and chained to a hospital bed in critical condition. Harbart visits him there and overhears the last words of Binu about a diary hidden behind the Kali image at the family altar, only to push those words into his unconscious as he is shocked by Binu's demise.

Some fifteen years later, during Krishna's occasional visit, Harbart has a dream: "A sprawling endless curtain of glass. [...] He walked on, he walked on. [...] He had a long way to go back. Go back where. As soon as he was struck by this fear a cloud of thousands of crows flew up to the glass sheet on the other side. They pecked on the glass. Beat their wings against it. But there was no sound. The crows' blood, the crows' shit, were smeared on the glass, making it filthy. Harbart spotted Binu among the numerous crows. [...] Binu smiled. Harbart smiled too. Waved. His words, Binu's words, echoed on this side of the glass like music wafting in from a loudspeaker far away..." (H: 57).

Harbart recollected Binu's last words as if those fragments of speech came from the dream. He rose up shaken and told his aunt and cousins that he had a message from the ghost of Binu to tell. To everybody's astonishment Binu's diary was found, hidden in cobwebs behind the old Kali image. Harbart was ecstatic. It was his time now to bring about a revolution. Harbart started a business in the Dialogue with the Dead in Binu's old room. This dream and the knowledge about the afterworld imparted from several obscure and incomplete volumes, made him believe that he had a special calling and could become a medium. In Nabarun's magical realist narrative Harbart asserts himself as a political subject out of hybridity which is ontological rather than cultural. As a medium, he becomes quite literally "neither the one nor the other" and he "properly alienates our political expectations, and changes [...] the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics" (Bhabha 1994: 25). That allows him, in a way, to hold up the torch of Binu's struggle.

The word about the diary incident spread around the neighbourhood in a flash and his business started to thrive. Harbart developed a series of techniques concerning how to persuade his clients about his special powers and gradually he baecame greedy for money too. Clients desiring to get in touch with their deceased relatives were coming from near and far. Harbart made a small fortune and, for the first time in his life, gained some public respect. A coterie of local young men keen to enjoy free booze, snacks and cigarettes gathered in his office every evening and gave Harbart company as well as the air of a local celebrity.

Emboldened by his success Harbart started making strolls into the posh centre of colonial Calcutta, had visions of a nymph coming to him from an antique shop and of a naked woman he was trying to escape with from a portico of a hospital filled with formaldehyde bottles containing embryos and deformed human bodies. Harbart's recollections from the past, dialogues with the dead, states of drunkenness and hangovers, his new experiences and visions, all fused together into one delirious cocktail peppered with glimpses of contemporary history: "May Day, 1992. Boris Yeltsin has arranged a spectacular concert of ghosts in Russia. Millions of Communists saw the ghosts of capitalism. Rasputin was back, disguised as Solzhenitsyn. Yugoslavia was breaking up" (H: 107).

Such glimpses throughout the text fuse the story of Harbart with leftist imagination about communist modernity as a possible alternative to the version imposed by colonial powers, and also with the failure of that imagination. Harbart's deliria unsettle the 'homogeneous, empty, time' of modern historical narrative where "gods, spirits, and other 'supernatural' forces can claim no agency" (Chakrabarty 2000: 73). By means of magical realism Nabarun re-enchants the world, and its history, with multiple agencies.

Harbart's rising star, however, did not escape the attention of the Rationalist's Association, an agent of Cartesian modernity par-excellence, whose world-wide mission was to expose occultists of all kinds as frauds. They sent him a challenge and once turned up in his office with a photo camera and a tape

recorder, two quintessentially modern devices set to immortalise cornered Harbart's deceitfulness. Indeed, some of Harbart's former clients had been posing on behalf of the Association and had recorded their dialogues with false ghosts. Those recordings could prove Harbart a fraud. The bunch of rationalists included a woman who wore jeans and blouse and who unabashedly smoked in public. They would often switch from Bengali to English among themselves and threatened Harbart with the police. "When the white-skins gave up these people came" (H: 11) grumbled exasperated Harbart who could not understand why this was happening to him. The ghosts do exist after all…

That very night after the last wild boozing session Harbart committed suicide. A sad blue nymph was trying to get close to his body but failed to pass through the glass window. He was declared dead in the morning and his body along with his mattress and wooden bed were sent to the crematorium. Large crowds from the neighbourhood accompanied him on his last voyage. Soon after the gate of the furnace shut, small explosions could be heard, then growing louder and louder till the whole furnace burst out in flames and fumes smelling of explosives. The whole crematorium sunk into chaos and the police were on their way. A bomb attack! Harbart has become a dead human bomb. It was his Naxalite nephew Binu and his associates who had stuffed Harbart's mattress with stolen dynamite. The agency which caused the 'terrorist attack' on the crematorium is indeed hybrid too. Was it Harbart? Was it Binu who took revenge decades after his death? Or was it a ghost of the past for whom Harbart was a medium, "neither the one nor the other," a new subject of history who inadvertently stepped out of the margin?

Nabarun's style too operates on multiple planes of reality and defies lineal story telling. *Hārbārṭ* opens with a graphic description of the protagonist's dead body, cockroaches feasting on leftovers, a lizard ready to feast on the cockroaches, a nymph crying behind the windowpane, red ants lining up on the way to Harbart's nostrils. The story than shifts back and forth, culminating in the crematorium explosion. It is often broken by further digressions from the timeline, by quotations from books on the afterworld, by hints of real historical events. In *Hārbārṭ*,

Kāṅāl mālsāṭ and other prose Nabarun uses crude and often vulgar language and imagery to deliver to his readers' living rooms the radical aesthetics of the subaltern.[2] The other from the margins attacks the stability of the divide between the normal and the abnormal on all planes and does so with deadly consequences but without the modernist belief in social progress.[3]

3. Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *Paṭuẏā Nibāraṇ*

Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay has a very different artistic trajectory when compared to Nabarun Bhattacharya. Born in East Bengal he grew up in the family of a railway employee and worked as a school teacher during his early career. He is a prolific writer with well over fifty books of fiction to his credit both for adults and children and, like Nabarun, is a recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award. He is one of the most widely read Bengali authors and one with a large number of film adaptations. Unlike rebellious, anti-establishment Nabarun, Shirshendu has been associated with the Bengali private cultural powerhouse Ananda Publishers and its flagship literary magazine Desh, a platform which launched him into fame in the late 1950's. He lacks any overt ideological zeal and does not shy away from his religious leaning.

Paṭuẏā Nibāraṇ[4] is arguably one of the crudest and most unusual short-stories by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay. It revolves around the reunion of two eccentric village characters – a scroll painter (patua) Nibaran and a circus artist Kusum aka Lady K. Nandi. Nibaran's art stems from one of the trademark folk art

[2] Editors of a recent Supplement issue on Nabarun Bhattacharya of the literary magazine *Sanglap* assert that "In their hyper-realist commune, the flying Fyatarus speak in relentless expletives and cuss words as their use of biological excrement parallels their verbal ejaculations" (Bhattacharya – Chattopadhyay 2015: 10).

[3] For extensive discussion on the conception of the other in Nabarun Bhattacharya's prose and on its development see Ray (2015) in the above-mentioned Supplement issue to *Sanglap*.

[4] The short story has never been translated into a European language. In 2002 it was made into a film *Colours of Hunger* (*Śilpāntar*) by Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay.

forms of Bengal. Accompanied by songs those narrative scrolls traditionally depict, frame by frame, stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata, medieval Bengali Mangalkavyas, exploits of Muslim saints, tribal narratives or secular themes.[5] A particular genre of scrolls, the *Yamapata*, describes very graphically the torment of sinners in the realm of the god of death.

Nibaran's paintings looked like traditional *Yamapata*s and did deal with punishment of sinners, but the crudity of their themes surpassed those of the torments in Yama's realm and left everybody flabbergasted. Consider this: a tiger with transparent abdomen had swallowed a lady, her head was laid on its intestines and her feet stretched towards his heart, her own translucent pregnant belly swelled up to his spine and held a visible little foetus. And others: a monkey raping a virgin; a bunch of headless children playing with each other's skulls; an ogress devouring with the utmost pleasure her newborn offspring. His images even proved to be deadly to the viewer on one occasion and Nibaran's art gradually started challenging him too. As if the characters he had painted were about to jump out of their frames.

Depressed, Nibaran was desperately looking for a companion to save him from the compulsions of his art. At that time he came to hear about performances of a village circus and about its principal draw – Lady K. Nandi, a caged female with a beastly air about her. Her show went as follows: Manager brought the cage with apathetic Lady K. Nandi dressed in bright pink to the stage and put inside a frightened chick. Shouting loudly her *nom de guerre* he provoked her with a long stick. To the great applause of the audience she slowly took on her beastly looks and the chick had to fight for its life. Lady K. Nandi grabbed it with two hands and tore its head off the body. Then, as if drinking fresh coconut water, she raised the torso and gobbled the blood from its open neck. She tore apart the wings, all set to bite and gulp the raw meat.

[5] This folk art form has drawn considerable scholarly interest (see, e.g., Sen Gupta 1973; McCutchion – Bhowmik 1999; Korom 2006).

When the chicken game was over the manager put a snake basket into the cage and opened the lid with his stick. Lady K. Nandi jumped away as the snake rose up. First playing fearful, then striking an offensive pose towards the snake, she stretched out her hand forward and moved it again as the snake bit her. Before it could bite her the second time she grabbed it by its throat. The snake coiled around her arm. Very slowly, Lady K. Nandi moved its head close to her blood stained mouth. Those viewers who could bear the sight witnessed in next moments a drooping headless body of the snake and Lady K. Nandi chewing on its head.

The circus, however, was slowly losing its appeal and crowds failed to turn up. Nibaran, infatuated with Lady K. Nandi and desperate for a mate, went to the manager, paid some money for her release and married her at once. His paintings changed thereafter. A new image of a nude couple, deep in congress, decorated the surface of the wall above his bed; from the corner a snake was opening its hood in an attempt to bite the man, the lady was watching it but remained herself calm and motionless. Nibaran wanted to give up painting altogether. His fingers, somehow, were developing a strange stiffness.

The couple, subject to many a gossip in the village, lives more and more secluded. Nibaran is eager to find out whether what his wife Kusum used to perform in the circus was a sort of trickery or a real art. Once he caught her staring reticently at a rooster who landed on their fence. He called her. She did not respond. Nibaran was growing increasingly confident that ordinary food did not satisfy Kusum. His heart desired to see her game. She refused at first but finally succumbed to Nibaran's pressure and ate in front of him a chicken alive. Nibaran's curiosity only intensified. Was it very different from his own art? Was his art trickery, habit, or insanity?

The fingers he used to paint with were getting stiffer and stiffer. 'Would Kusum be able to chew them up too?' he thought. His mental balance weakened day by day. He would roam around the village and tell everybody that his fingers were rotting away. A bunch of children saw him in fields trying his teeth on a wild bird. Sometimes he would bite live goats or

chase a dog with the same intention, only to be severely beaten by the villagers. Nibaran was focused on one thing – learning Kusum's game. Her game, he believed, would release him from the dark spell of his art which he somatised as stiffness of the fingers he painted with. Finally he succeeded but Kusum could not bear that sight and left him with a group of Gypsies. Her art started challenging her too. But Nibaran was healed. In the end he was able to understand and to accept the dark side of his existence and the inevitable dreadfulness of his art.

This story in many ways resembles Franz Kafka's celebrated short-story *A Hunger Artist* (1922) and Shirshendu himself admitted that among Western writers he had been influenced by Kafka, along with Feodor Dostoyevsky and T. S. Eliot (Abir 2008). It will be useful for the following discussion to examine the parallels between the two stories. The hunger artist too performs in a cage, initially as a single star of a dedicated company under a merciless impresario. Guarded by butchers he performs forty-day-long fasts, a time limit set by the impresario, after which he is publicly examined by two doctors and fed amid great fanfare a hospital meal. The manager (this expression is also used in the Bengali original) of Lady K. Nandi wears a European suit and despite the village setting uses occasionally English words (European dress and English utterances marked hegemonic oppression in *Hārbārṭ* as well). Both the doctors and the manager represent the cold hand of modern discipline in the Foucaultian sense. The hunger artist hates the fact that he has to stop fasting and deeply desires to stretch the capacity of his emaciated body to fast even further, a desire reflected in Nibaran. The hunger artist hates as equally offensive the suspicion of the viewers that his art is based on some kind of trickery.

As times change and the demand for hunger artists wanes, the protagonist of Kafka's story performs on his own on the sidelines of a circus menagerie. He can now fulfil his dream and fast indefinitely as nobody cares about his survival anymore. Crowds of spectators, rushing to see the animals, just pass him by. He is barely remembered. Eventually a supervisor wanders about a useful empty cage. An attendant pushes around straw

inside the cage and finds the dying hunger artist. In his last words the hunger artist tells the supervisor and the staff that they should not admire his art as he could not do anything else than fast because he could not find food which tasted good enough to him. The hunger artist is buried and his cage becomes, to the great delight of visitors, a home for a young panther. Guards brought it "the food it liked". The panther appeared to be free even inside the cage; it "seemed to carry freedom around with it" (Kafka 1993: 277).

A Hunger Artist, as well as the rest of Kafka's oeuvre and unlike that of Shirshendu, has been the subject of innumerable and often contradictory interpretations and analyses from various perspectives. In the following I shall take the liberty of picking up some which provide useful leads when we want to look at how the Kafkaesque has been transposed to the Bengali countryside.

First, just as Nibaran's artistic quest stems from the actual tradition of scroll-painting, so also the hunger artist has real-life prototypes in actual hunger artists whose popularity peaked in the last decade of the 19th century and waned with WWI (Ellmann 1993: 66). Second, there is the image of the cage. Like the hunger artist, Lady K. Nandi performs in a cage and Nibaran in the quest to fulfil his artistic hunger gets increasingly confined to his house on the outskirts of the village. Both stories thus feature alienated individuals, whose alienation is emphasised by the symbolism of the cage,[6] who strive for self-respect and artistic recognition.

Third, Shirshendu's story is narrated as a recollection of a village doctor. The narrator of *A Hunger Artist* has been often identified with Kafka himself, although this view is disputed. Sheppard (1973) argues that the narrator is a separate character who speaks in the cold voice of an administrator or a bureaucrat and who reports meticulously on a number of rather insignificant details but fails to engage with the hunger artist on the human level. The village doctor, on the other hand, is

[6] A whole volume has been dedicated to the interpretation of Kafka's cages (see Kordela – Vardoulakis 2011).

sympathetic to Nibaran in spite of all the eccentricities surrounding him.

Fourth, from yet another angle *A Hunger Artist* as well as *Paṭuẏā Nibāraṇ* can be understood as "a puzzling self-reflection of art on art" (Theisen 2002: 172). All three protagonists live by the gaze of others. As Ellmann in her study on the art of hungering across cultures and literary traditions reminds us, "the moral seems to be that it is not by food that we survive but by the gaze of others; and it is impossible to live by hunger unless we can be seen or represented doing so" (Ellmann 1993: 17). If the "presence of spectators dignifies the fast into an art" and "their absence reduces it to a pathology" (Ibid: 67), the same is true about the art of Lady K. Nandi.

Indeed hunger is the central primal drive which animates both stories.[7] The hunger artist fasts while Lady K. Nandi eats raw meat, that is, she performs the structural opposite of a fast. However, in Ellmann's view a hunger artist is like an anorexic who "turns her anger into hunger, and eats *herself* up" (Ibid: 2). Hungering thus is a quest for individual autonomy in the extreme form of autophagy – autonomy based on the control of the orifice at which "the other, in the form of food, is assumed into the body" (Ibid: 105). The art of Lady K. Nandi, which Nibaran is so keen to learn, represents on the other hand an extreme case of heterophagy and lack of individual autonomy. But what is to be done with Nibaran who somehow stands in between, poised to take on his fingers?

Julia Kristeva's notions of abject and abjection are helpful here in enabling us to look at both stories symmetrically. Abject is neither subject nor object but something in between, the in-betweenness of which unsettles the distinction between what is my embodied I and what is other. Such unsettling of the distinction, of identity and of order in general, leads to horror and rejection: "It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated;" it causes "a massive and sudden emergence of

[7] In her analysis of Kafka's writing from a gender perspective Benbow asserts with reference to the *Brief an den Vater* that "a voracious appetite for food is portrayed as an index of masculinity in the Kafka household" (Benbow 2006: 353). Kafka himself lacked that appetite as did Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis* and, most evidently, the hunger artist.

uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (Kristeva 1982: 1-2). Skin on the surface of milk, nail paring, vomit, faeces, scar, corpse, shameless crime, image of horror and pain, or index thereof, all that triggers abjection.

According to Anne Fuchs who studied abjection in modern German-Jewish literature, "the hunger artist is the very embodiment of abjection which puts him on the other side of the social order." In the second part of the story "the public's manifest disinterest in the hunger artist shows that the boundary between society and his art as its other has been effectively eroded," and *A Hunger Artist* is ultimately "a story about what happens when the sublimation of abjection fails" (Fuchs 1999: 74-75). While Kafka's story is left with no satisfying possibility open for the protagonist, Shirshendu's Nibaran sublimates the abject and comes out healed.

4. Conclusion

Both literary works under consideration, written by two authors of very different personal as well as political, in the broad sense of the term, backgrounds represent the merging streams of an anti-modernist critique. Nabarun Bhattacharya, personally loyal to the ideal of democratic socialism but deeply distrustful about any oppressive structure of power whatever its ideological legitimisation, mobilises *fyatarus*, ghosts, and nymphs and other means of magical realism in order to endow marginalised characters with potential to effect a revolution, at times almost inadvertently by way of their sudden impulsive revolt, which unsettles the basic notions and categories of any order. Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, a cultural conservative who in his prose often portrays an ahistorical and sometimes idealised view of traditional village life for middle class

consumption,[8] resorts to the Kafkaesque to express the painful process of abjection experienced by a marginalised protagonist in a village setting; a setting which, however, unlike the metropolis of the hunger artist, allows for sublimation.

The margins our heroes inhabit are those elusive interstitial spaces of in-betweenness, of not quite/not white, neither the one nor the other, neither subject nor object; spaces where hybrid identities fructuate. The bravery, or a pattern thereof if we may speak of one, of both Harbart and Nibaran lies precisely in the fact that they are capable, almost always on the verge of self-annihilation, of challenging the received notions of normalcy and order with all the categories and binarisms, to create that "moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience" (Bhabha 1994: 207), and to subvert those notions diligently both by breaking from the stifling discipline of post-colonial modernity and by creatively revaluating streams of indigenous authenticity, be it vested in the folk or in the subaltern.[9] Turning away from the anthropocentric worldview an anarchist revolutionary there meets a cultural conservative on a common ground, a paradox which may have the streams merge into the river of a whole new literary as well as intellectual synthesis.

[8] In a recent interview Shirshendu is quoted as saying: "Yes, I am conservative. I believe that women who have children should not work outside; working outside may hamper the children's growth. I don't believe in western concepts of living together. Yes, I am a follower of the spiritual leader Thakur Anukulchandra but that does not mean I am opposed to modernity. […] There is computer, internet, modern medicine and so many good aspects of modernity. But also there are so many vices like broken homes and relationships, abused children, drug addiction that I feel bound to look for some spiritual quest within myself" (Falguni 2015). However Niyogi argues with reference to Shirshendu's children's fiction that he presents a critique of urbanity and science and that "the elements of science fiction in the works of Mukhopadhyay seem to present a stiff resistance against this homogenising efforts of Western science" (Niyogi 2015).

[9] Cf. the notion of "subaltern responsibility" as opposed to the fight for rights in Gayatri Spivak's discussion of Mahasweta Devi's short story *Pterodactyl, Pirtha and Puran Sahay* (Spivak 1999: 140-146).

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