

## A Study on the Quest of Space and Identity in Bani Basu's Gandharvi: Life of a Musician

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### Abstract

Culture means 'Sanskriti' or 'savyata' of an individual society and cultural studies explore what the societal structure of a society is and how it influences human life and the world: "...the 'theory of culture' is defined as 'the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life' (Hall, Stuart. *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, vol.1, p. 51). Culture is a way of life, and it is one's culture that denotes the impact of society on someone: "A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings which are offered and tested" (Williams, Raymond. *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. p. 4). Foregrounding the above-mentioned tropes of culture and the concomitant formations of identity, this paper will explore the conflict between a woman's creative impulse and her domestic obligations vividly seen in Bani Basu's novel *Gandharvi* (which was originally translated from Bengali novel *Gandharvi* by Jayita Sengupta in 2017). It is significant to note that the entire novel revolves around the cultural practice of Hindustani classical music, and it is interesting to see the novel itself as a musical one and the entire movement of music ends at the end of the novel with the end of its protagonist's (Apala) life. Literally, 'Gandharvi' is someone who comes from Gandharva-lok and is an artiste from top to bottom. This endeavour will explore the cultural practices of contemporary society by taking into consideration the fact that the novel is also a celebration of the indomitable spirit of music. At the same time, it will also highlight how Indian art and culture has always been influenced by music and has found its roots in thousands of years old mystery, where spirituality, science and myths go hand-in-hand.

(keywords: culture, society, classical music, artist, tradition)

According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that incorporates different aspects of culture and cultural production: "Cultural studies is a flourishing interdisciplinary mode of studying aspects of culture, usually defined as 'popular' culture, and cultural production in the modern period" (Macey 2000). Cultural studies were considered as to view the whole process of social change from cultural perspective "to make intelligible the real movement of culture as it registered in social life, in group and class relations, in politics and institutions, in values and ideas" (Macey 2000). Stuart Hall, one of the major influential figures in the field of cultural studies, has made a great contribution to political and cultural thought and his findings has an ever-lasting influence both in the realm of social sciences and humanities. He believed in the intellectual and collaborative endeavour of the individuals and the worldwide fame of Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University obligates much acclaim to his intellectual leadership. In the second volume of *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies* Stuart Hall raises the questions of ethnicity, race, identity and diaspora from a post-colonial perspective. The book opens with the essay Gramsci's *Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity* which can be considered as an exposition of his approach to the view of simplistic Marxism that highlights the class-centric approach to society.

In his influential essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall argues that identity is not as transparent or clear as it is assumed to be, rather it is a troublesome issue:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process,

and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Hall 1990).

According to him, cultural identity is not as clear and transparent as it appears to be, rather it is a problematic one and in post post-colonial context the identity can be seen as an ever-changing phenomenon that is constantly shifting and always is in a continuous process. So cultural identity is always moulding its form and space and there is a strong interconnection between cultural identity and the quest for space and identity in a typical environment. One's pursuit of the individual self and identical space is most of the time subordinated by marginalisation of society and the construction of the social system. A place becomes a space when it is given a certain meaning of existence by its operators and the symbolism of the cultural creation of space inherently grants permission to exclude women and any non-conventional gender identification from positions of authority: "The cultural construction of space has inherent in its symbolism the legitimacy to exclude women and any non-normative gender identity from power and position" (Roy 11). Edward Soja was one of the most important figures in questioning the identity of space over time and he is in the opinion that the 'present' is the period of space, juxtaposition and simultaneity and it is the echo of near and far and of disseminated. The 'space' in relation, has an interacting relation to one of the most important categories of human identity and that is 'gender'. 'sex' may be referred to as 'gender' when it is performed in a particular way and as concepts have been started to be reconceptualised and definitions have begun to be redefined, there started a trend for re-making the concept of urban public space that subverts the concepts of control and domination. Art, in its own terms, is the mirror of reality and it represents life according to its own terms, sometimes to express in a way what should have happened in life and in other times it prompts us what could have happened in actual reality.

Bani Basu's one of the most influential novels *Gandharvi* plays an important role in negotiating the changing characteristics of gender identity and the novel deals with the interconnections between space and 'spatial independence'. Considering the theoretical presuppositions the paper intends to explore the negotiation between the issues like women's empowerment and female independence along with their journey from traditional hierarchy to clinching modernity. Significantly, the struggle of the protagonist Apala to find a space (either in searching space at home or at the stage in a public place) is the main theme of the novel. Apala in this novel is also considered as 'Gandharvi', the mythical musical goddess who resides in heaven and has lost her way to heaven and thus has fallen in this earth to find her way. Her struggle to search for her actual way of life, and her 'space' is reflected throughout her life. The gendered representation of the characters in the text interacts with the author's intention to represent the central character with more human attributes. Apala's struggle to acquire 'space' is identified from the beginning of the novel where she is found of claiming a 'single room' for her to practice her morning session. The actual challenge in Apala's life came when she got the opportunity to train herself with the great classical singer of Lucknow, Nazneen Begum. She was not definitely allowed to go to Lucknow by the elders of her family rather she had to marry in the middle of her career sacrificing her musical career abruptly. Here the Hindustani Classical gharana, in which Nazneen Begum was acquainted was represented as an emblem of 'individual space' and the author intended to acquire that individuality by the central character in a male-dominated society. However, that acquiring individuality was interrupted by the so-called interference of society's tendency of subjugation and subordination of the females. At the same time, the paper investigates the binaries when it hits the middle-class hypocritical tendency to consider music as cultural ethnicity when it is practiced in stages at public performances and identifies the same as disrespectful when it is practiced within the four walls of the house of the great singer Nazneen Begum. But the opportunity that Apala had to refuse to negotiate her marriage, the same became respectful for Soham as he emerged as a great Hindustani Classical singer after getting further training from Lucknow. Here, the discrepancy of a society of treating the same opportunity both for a male and a female strikes the attention of the readers and the exploration hinges on the rational faculty to encounter the issues with much proper balanced way of rationality and argumentative faculty. Apala's struggles to find 'space' continued even to her in-law's house where she was vehemently criticised for practicing and continuing her musical career.

Literature always reflects life, and it mirrors the happenings of reality as well as it reminds us of what could have happened in actual life. *Gandharvi* reminds us of the vital issues that what could have happened to the life of Apala and what has happened to her in reality. It is not a matter of 'fate' or 'destiny' but the matter of subverting the effect of 'destiny' in its own ways, following the terms and conditions of society's actual intention. The novel questions the traditional values and culture of a male-dominated society which not only subjugates the female identity and individuality but also hypocritically tries to put an end to the scope of flourishing its fulfilment in a better way. Through the novel, the author intends to focus on society's male prejudice to discriminate the binary opposition of gendered identity to reflect hierarchical status. Apala's dilemma between choosing her personal life and professional life is dramatically represented in the novel and her mental agony and pain finally put an end to her life. But the novel, in its own way is much ahead of time and the novelist has tried to make win Apala's individuality by losing her power of singing over rejuvenating her extraordinary power of painting. Thus, the text has been able to make an interconnection between 'space' and 'gender' in its own way, expanding the

dimension of space of individual identity. Finally, Apala gets the recognition of her individual self with properly identified acclamation even after her death as her paintings were to be exhibited publicly and all the family members of her household including her elder daughter who was always against her practice of singing, consciously took part within it. Here the author has been able to represent the fact that Apala's identity has transcended from being a mother or wife of someone individually to a universal artist whose category can be differently identified. The novelist is seen critically handling the issue of freedom and independence of the central female figure, and the novel is represented as an alternative probability of gendered identity. Sarani Roy makes an indelible impression by critically interlinking the concept of freedom and independence with that of home: "*Gandharvi* reminds us that what we call home is always predicated upon the exclusion of all those things that seem not so homely to us" (Roy 14). The text is much prior to the time when it was actually written, and it represents a woman figure who envisions the future generation with much clarity and prominence. Apala was successful in reclaiming her individual self in a male-dominated society and acquiring the gendered space that she desired to establish.

In a country like India women are always subjugated and subverted, the scope of 'western feminism' is in question. Here, the question is not about the improvement of the quality of women, but the matter is related to the whole issue of socio-political affairs of human rights and protection. But feminist ideas are not new in the history of the Indian socio-political atmosphere and the revolt against the patriarchal structure of society prevailed much earlier to the beginning of the feminist movement in Western countries. Md. Eftekhari Uddin corroborates the fact by making this comment:

Thoughts of women emancipation, revolt against the patriarchal structures have prevailed in the country, long before the western world was alive to the feminist movement. The history of women's movement and 'resistant literature by women' in India has been meticulously traced from the sixth century B.C. by Tharu and Lalita (1995) in their two volumes on Women in India (103).

With the rise of nationalist ideas in the nineteenth century, the question of 'women's issues' emerged largely, and the educated modern women of the country were deeply concerned with issue of the women's empowerment and emancipation. The consciousness regarding women's education and empowerment was greatly influenced by the so-called reformists of the nineteenth century and with the rising effort of the society women's identity began to take a new turn to be explored differently as observed by Geraldine Forbes in her book *The New Cambridge History of India: Women in Modern India*. Forbes writes that: "At any rate, a new gender ideology and modification of the actual treatment of women would be the necessary prelude to any positive change" (Forbes 14). The regional literature began to flourish with the materialistic development of their subject matter in handling the traditionality of theme. With that motto in mind, the Indian English writers with their effort to develop a new cultural ethnicity started to begin a new era of writing by leaving behind the typical narrowness of subject matter and theme. The textual representation of women's issues has begun to start in a new vista where the themes can be experimented with and examined. Bani Basu advocated for the women who will have the prerogative over education. But her female characters are not allowed to acquire space in the outside world and self-identification just because of their educational qualification. But the female characters of her novels are not ready to restrict themselves to the 'inside space' of their domestic issues that were more acceptable in the world of middle-class families of the late 90s. These 'new' types of women belong to the category of new generation that forecasts the beginning of a new society, constructed only for women in the early decade of the twentieth century. These women characters find the justification of their actions from every corner of society in the light of the new identity created by themselves as Md. Eftekhari Uddin in his article rightly asserts: "There is a need for the Indian women to make an effort to recover their sense of identity" (108).

Since Bani Basu realised the need for a drastic change in the lives of the women in the late 90s and desired to find a solution to that serious problem, it would be evident that her concern would be reflected in her creative works. Her novels assert the fact that women are also capable of owning identity and self-sufficiency for a better existence and *Gandharvi*, as we can explore from the textual representation, projects a constructive vision of balancing 'space' and 'identity' standing on the verge of a decaying culture. The characterisation of the central female figure Apala is not something new as the author's earlier novels advocate the truth of her inner vision and apprehension. The newness lies in the concern of the novelist for rejuvenating the old traditional values and ideas and presenting them with the touch of envisioned modernity. In this novel, the author dismantles the power structure of an orthodox society and tries to break down the tendency to objectify masculine/feminine hierarchy. She feminises the character of Apala and gives her a hero-like identity that characterises her humorous approach of presenting the central female figure. The novel questions the cultural paradigm of oppressor and oppressed through the gendered representation of individual selves. It interrogates the literary artifacts of exile from the actual sense of 'presentness' with the developments and progress of the different layers of the characters. The consciousness of every character is evoked at the end of the novel while keeping in mind the sense of identity

alive in a better way. Bani Basu tries to explore the oppression of the female characters with a view of female reformists, being respectful of the traditional image of the female characters. She is of the opinion that women are suppressed in every corner of the society to find their subjectivity and her protest is also against the sexual repression of women in society. Through the character of Apala, she analyses how the classification of women is restricted by the power structure of society that always seek the way of emancipation of women. The novel also questions the dimensions of male consciousness of Indian society which is typically based on a patriarchal foundation and upbringing. Through the metaphorical representation of the central figure Apala, Bani Basu raises a strong voice of protest against the oppression of women in society and her representation portrays the limitations of Indian society in its own way, thereby enthroning women in the central space of the society.

An interesting fact is that when an exploration (either it is imaginative or real) encounters the author's creativity and aesthetic ideas, it is about to open new ways to transcend its power of manifesting experiences. Creativity takes a considerable amount of time to mingle with different aesthetic ideas to express the creator's imaginative power. An author is an artist who synthesises the true essence of aesthetic beauty with reality. This process of synthesising elements evokes an uncontrollable urge that paves way for a beautiful art of artistic creation. The creation of a text is associated with the artistic genius which transmute the external experience and the pure soul of the artist longs for this association while creating an artistic piece as Kashyap in her theses advocates: "The external association accounts to multiple influences, impressions and impulses in the form of stimuli that evoke author's interest in his creations otherwise the process is completely internalized" (Kashyap 71). The real and imaginative experiences of the author Bani Basu made them manifest in her novels through the marginalised and subverted female characters and she tries to transcend time over place and space with an overview of a psychological glimpse to create a new sphere of time and space for her characters. She personally owes her characters who allow her to express the actual reality of society with a deep sense of loss and pangs. The portrayal of the character Apala permits her to go beyond the limits and boundaries of patriarchal society and Apala herself throws away the burden of her own boundaries to associate her own individuality with her inner self. She thus actually crosses over the burden of actual time and space to create her own space and identity. Homi K Bhabha throws light on the privileging of special identity by making the following pertinent comment:

The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilised in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious (*The Location of Culture* 36).

The creation of the character Apala is deeply influenced by her own consciousness which is affected by her faith in Hindu religious system which stresses power over women in a dominating way. And the consciousness lies in the association of the existing soul and psychological insights of an existing soul that create the awareness to realise the emotion of an individual self. Bani Basu tries to find a voice to execute her task of denying and defying the existing social system that prevents the initiation of oneness in humanity. Her sense of aesthetic beauty lies in the creation of the central character Apala who unconsciously accepts her own self and tries to procure her individuality in her own way. Yet the misery lies in the tragic denouement of Apala's fate as she fails to be recognised by her God-gifted voice due to the sudden attack of an incurable disease. Nevertheless, she continues her practice by expressing herself through paintings, and her individuality is restored by her sudden shift from being an incredible singer to an outstanding painter. Basu's work reflects her own belief and faith to humanity as every human being is destined to reap his/her own effect of karmas, and thus virtue is always rewarded as it is destined to be. Apala's sensitivity was fathomed by her family members and she, along with her aesthetic sensibility, was successful in rejuvenating her individuality. Apala's consciousness is deeply submerged with Indian classical art and culture and by probing into the character the novelist vividly writes large to rejuvenate the Indian aestheticism that was once nurtured by the great Indian philosopher and forerunner of Indian art and culture Rabindranath Tagore. She quite realistically puts emphasis on human values and trusts the overall belief system of denying time and space. Her work paves the path of a new age for the beginning of a new start for the lives of women and her writings work as an inspiration for the later generation of writers. The appeal of her character is a universal one and her contemporaneity remains in her precisely structured work with relatable subject matter. In fact, the novelist worships the pure human soul that always believes on the ultimate theory of karma. Through a work of transcreation by Jayita Sengupta, the narrative spins the tale of human values, and the ingrained sense of cultural beliefs percolated throughout the generations: "No matter what science has to say, it's my belief that humans come to this earth from various spheres in the sky... After such honour from abroad, my mother received many posthumous awards for her music and her paintings..." (*Gandharvi* 258).

In *Gandharvi* the novelist has supported the courage of Apala to raise voice against the odds of society in her own way. The patriarchal society always turns back a women's journey in acquiring her own self-assertion and the manoeuvring of the narrative through a motif of journey tempers the question of validity of the existing

social system: "...But I won't most probably be able to perform other duties of the household. Singing takes up much of my time" (59). The text does not really assert the ethos of feminism, but it actually tempers the ways of feminism by creating a rebel while breaking away the traditions. The novelist highlights the issues like polygamy and social prejudices that effects the condition and status of the women characters in a society: "...It's not a question of liking or disliking... Apala broke in, blushing all over. Pragmatically, it's marriage I'm against. I want to learn music now and continue with my singing" (59). The injustice that a teenaged girl endures by marrying a man at the tender age when she is unable to comprehend the actual meaning of that particular social institution is deplorable, and quite appropriately, the novelist bluntly interrogates the social parochialism. The novel highlights the transformation of a pure soul from the domestic realm to the outer world and at the same time rediscovery is highlighted with an enlightenment of penetration: "Apala explained, 'I am not done yet! Once complete, you'll be able to understand better'" (254). Basu is concerned with the social changes that took place with the coming of the touch of modernity and her purpose is to focus on the issue of women's emancipation in society. Despite the effect of colonization after India gained independence the status of women does not change effectively and the need for social transformation through ameliorative measures is addressed through a plethora of narratives. The purpose of the writer is not to evoke that particular issue but through an archetypal demonstration of the binaries, and she actually intends to portray the lack of initiatives undertaken for women's development as Lahiri vividly critiqued in her paper: "The new identity they project for today's women is one feasible within" (Lahiri 6). The novelist also draws attention to the fact that women become victims of societal oppression either by the active agents of patriarchal dominations or by the impediments created by other women. Unfortunately, the females also accept and acquiesce the discrimination and social oppression generation after generation without raising a single question against it as Lahiri justifies the discrepancy inherent in the societal structure: "Indian feminists have repeatedly drawn attention to how the need for power leads women to oppress the weaker of their own sex" (Lahiri 8). The constant conflict and struggle of a women character for survival portrays the patriarchal hegemonic system that needs to be uprooted. The novel suggests that the hegemonic discrepancy is possible only by limiting the boundaries of colonised females while confining themselves in domestic world and refusing their education. But nevertheless, there also remains a ray for exposing status of the internalised women against the norms of patriarchal system and the novelist is actually indicating that possibility. Sharmita Lahiri elaborates the argument:

...when in a patriarchal society patriarchy's norms seem natural and moral to men and even women, a woman who challenges the patriarchal system by remaining within it, even though it may entail certain compromises, is likely to be a more viable voice in demanding gender equality than the one who breaks away from the system in protest, and thus in a way leads to the removal of the element of discord and the consequent smooth functioning of the hegemonic patriarchal machinery (14).

The above deliberation pertaining to the exploration of space and identity enunciated by Edward Soja and Homi K Bhabha through the embodiment of the character Apala in the translated work of Bani Basu's *Gandharvi* made the reader aware of the transformation of the central protagonist from her state of innocence to that of experience through different pitfalls. The study reveals the enthronement of the women in the central space of the society, though for an ephemeral period. It is not only a symbolic gesture on the part of the novelist but also a feisty demonstration of a courageous woman taking the cudgel to offset the binaries that prevented the overall ameliorative ventures of the women. Through the portrayal of the sufferings and struggles of Indian women in a patriarchal society the study attempts to vindicate a solution to that problem which has been embedded in Indian society since time immemorial. The universalist assumptions about the prototypical prejudices leading to the imbalance in the society is bluntly interrogated and put to rest all machineries that create stumbling block for the smooth passage of the society.

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