

Ecological Predicaments in Niaz Zaman's *The Baromashi Tapes*

Chitra Sankaran

Associate Professor of English Language and Literature
National University of Singapore.

Abstract

I examine the text *The Baromashi Tapes* by Niaz Zaman to demonstrate the ways in which she uses the oral literary traditions and the folk genre to excavate and showcase a regional eco-consciousness. The text contrasts the trials and tribulations of a worker, who is consumed and exploited by a global capitalist system with the trials faced by of a member of a subsistence-based rural economy. Khokon who has left his family in Bangladesh to work in a palm-oil estate in Malaysia exchanges tapes with his wife routinely. They both tape their voices and converse about their respective lives. I explore ways in which the text, which begins with a dominant male voice and patriarchal interests, gradually evolves to centre the bride and domestic interests that revolve around embroidery, cooking and women-centred communal activities. I discuss the link between women, text and textualities.

Keywords: Ecology, capitalism, subsistence-economy, feminism, textuality.

The Baromashi Tapes (2011) is an unusual, novel-length narrative by Niaz Zaman, a writer, editor, translator, and an academic from the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh. A writer of stature in her country, Zaman was educational attaché in the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington from 1981-83. She has won the Asia Week Short Story Award for the titular story of her short story collection, *The Dance and Other Stories*. The story was also anthologized in *Prizewinning Asian Fiction: Didima's Necklace and Other Stories* (2005). Zaman's interests are varied. Her academic book entitled: *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* won her the *Asiatic Society of Bangladesh Award* as well as the *National Archives Award*. Zaman was also the first author to write a book-length study about the needlework genre, Kantha, which is a type of embroidery that is indigenous to the eastern part of South Asia. Kantha is found extensively in the Indian states of West Bengal and Odisha, and also in Bangladesh. References to this art form also abound in the text, *The Baromashi Tapes*. Zaman has also edited a number of anthologies.

The Baromashi Tapes takes its title from the well-known folk genre of the baromashi, the twelve-month song, excerpts from which are provided as epigraphs to each chapter. Moreover, the text takes its form too from the folk-genre. Thus, each chapter is named after a month, both

from the Gregorian calendar and the Bangla calendar: July is juxtaposed with Sravan; May with Jyaistha, and so on. There are twelve chapters to represent the full year. In this way, seasons on which the Bangla months are based become actants in the book, demanding and receiving priority in our understanding of the unfolding narrative. Each chapter is sub-divided into three segments. The first segment always begins with a recipe for a rice dish. This is followed by two narratives, which tell the contemporary story of Sakina and Khokon respectively, a young Bangla couple. Themed around the idea of pining or separation that is central to the baromashi folk-songs, thus revealing its textual affiliations, the chapters narrate the story of Khokon, the husband, leaving his young bride, Sakina, and the rest of his family behind in the Bangla village to travel to Malaysia to work as a laborer.

The epigraphs, namely the excerpts from the baromashi folk songs, are central to the readings that the text as a whole encourages. It projects a mindset in which the beauty and complexity of nature are continuous within us.

In the month of Sravan [July], the farmer cuts the paddy.
The kora-bird calls, sitting on the rice stalk.
Dak calls, damphala calls, bora calls, sitting there.
The call of the cruel kokil makes my heart ache (Komolar Baromashi, 43)

The allusion to the natural world in the epigraph becomes an intentional act of excavating a regional eco-consciousness through a deliberate recourse to folk tradition. These epigraphs are also pivotal to the establishment of a subtext that interestingly contradicts, even contests, the ostensible sentiments expressed in the surface text, thus initiating a textual movement that is precariously balanced between conformity and subversion. There is a license and female sexual agency identifiable in the folk songs that elide the patriarchal strictures that attend to the young wife, Sakina. For instance, the singer remarks:

In this month of Magh [January], coldness is like poison.
Komola lies in bed, the lep kantha spread over her.
Why does the room feel so cold?
The lep kantha spread over her, the pillow on her breast
Cannot keep the cold away.
When you were here I did not need a lep kantha
Spread over me, nor a cotton pillow clutched to my breast.
(Komolar Baromashi; 103)

The above passage that states the sexual desire felt by Komola is very different in tone to the young bride's chaste registrations of her husband's absence.

Ma was peeling a mango for Baba and said that you loved mangoes. She said that during the mango season, even as a small boy, all you wanted to eat were mangoes....I was just going to strip the skin off with my teeth, but, when I heard that, I just could not eat. I put the mango away. (28)

The contrast between the sweet acquiescence and sacrificial passivity of the bride and the bold declarations of the folk singer are remarkable and help to shift the discursive circle beyond the parochial world of the young, rustic, wife. Though the folk singer is bound to the gender binary – “In the month of Poush, the nights are dark;/Father and brother are here to protect me and/My father-in-law, the merchant. (Komolar Baromashi; 93), she also regularly exceeds it. Hence, the carefully defined restrictions of the Muslim home open up to a multicultural space initially through the baromashi. “In the month of Aswin is the Durga festival; /the Brahmin wives offer flowers to the goddess./Let them offer flowers, let them take the offerings home./When my dear merchant comes home, I will offer him flowers. (Komolar Baromashi; 65); and later, also in the space of the multi-cultural community when the young bride is taken to a Hindu festival. More interestingly, the resentment about her abandonment by her husband, that cannot be expressed by the bride within the narrow confines of the patriarchal home is vocalised by the folk singer. While her conduct is regulated by patriarchy, the folk singer's emotions and words exceed patriarchy's parameters.

In the month of Phalgun (February), householders sow seeds,
The girl has a cup full of poison.
I shall eat poison. I shall eat venom. I shall die.
But shall never again marry a boatman.
The boatman is a great scoundrel, a slave of his business.
He married me, but went away. He cares nothing about me.
(Komolar Baromashi, 113)

The epigraphs therefore challenge and complicate the subservience expressed in the wife, Sakina's narratives.

Each chapter is balanced between Khokon and Sakina's narratives. The former recount the problems he faces in a remote estate in Malaysia and cumulatively paint a picture of an

industrialized world where laborers fight desperately for their meagre rights while indifferent, corrupt, politicians make gestures of appeasement concerning their welfare. Both narratives quite literally correspond to ‘oral narratives’ since they both record their messages and send it through a messenger, calling up romantic visions of lovers exchanging messages through messenger-pigeons that abound in classic Indian texts.¹ But here the exchanges are firmly embedded in technologies of modernity. Khokon clarifies:

I went with Sharif Bhai to a big mall where there were so many shops that my head went round and round. There I bought two tape recorders and some tapes. I recorded all this [i.e. his first narrative] on one tape and I am going to send it to you with Mama [uncle] when he comes. I will also send one tape recorder and a few tapes with him. Bappy [Khokon’s younger brother] will show you how to listen to my tape and how to reord a tape for me. I want you to record one tape every month and send it to me when you can. I will also try to send one tape to you every month. (11)

Khokon’s narrative begins from the moment of his insertion into the global, late capital, workforce as a coolie and marks his shift from being a quasi-member of an agricultural economy to being a subaltern member of a global economic imperialist structure. His narratives describe his first plane trip from Dhaka to Kuala Lumpur and thence to a palm tree plantation in Johor Bahru in Malaysia. The narratives present his violent confrontation with late modernity, revealing his gradual transformation from a wide-eyed naïve villager nursing an uncomplicated hope for a better future into, at first, a belligerent, and then, a disillusioned but stoic member of the global workforce. His narratives reveal the dark underside of globalization where the subtext of class and race inhere in labor interactions.

I work as a sprayer on the plantation....the bosses are not good. They promised us 600 ringgit but are deducting 200 for food and board. We are packed in our camps. The bosses took away our passports. They say it is for safekeeping, but it is so that we cannot run away. (42)

Contrasted to these are Sakina’s narratives that are placed after Khokon’s, and register a life more deeply attuned to the elements and where one’s humanity is valued despite poverty. Compared to the almost formulaic phrases Khokon uses in every one of his ‘recordings’: “I am well. I hope you are well too....Please give my salams to Ma and Baba” (35, 42, 52,64 etc.), Sakina’s are filled with events and emotions that are in touch with the native landscape, its food,

its art form, festivities and seasons, all of which are described with love and care. Her narratives record everyday occurrences of her life, and occasionally, the gossip in the neighborhood, imparting the essence of a communal life, lived holistically.

Sakina's narratives complement Khokon's in that they bear witness to vicissitudes that affect not only the landscape but also the minds of the people, the gradually shifting customs and traditions; the erosion of the centrality of agricultural economy; the gradual alienation of the younger generation from farming and cogitations about whether capitalist infusions are necessary for a subsistence economy to thrive. Her impoverishment, but arguably also her viable vision for financial autonomy is countered by Khokon's embedment as a subaltern labourer in a mass production cash crop plantation. Even so innocuous a statement as Khokon's description of the palm tree as one that "looks like coconut tree but their fruits are different"(42) hints at the history of violent displacement that he and his friends have been subjected to. His apprehension of what Heidegger would call a certain kind of "being in the world" (Heidegger, 2008) is shown to have been severely threatened by his embedment in a modernity that devalues him. Therefore, we could say that the two narratives are rhetorically co-dependent. Ironically, the modernity that confronts Khokon, though he is working in a plantation, is shown as 'post natural'. Despite working in plantations, he and his fellow-coolies are distanced from nature. This is reflected not only in the content of Khokon's recordings but even in the mechanistic tone he increasingly adopts.

"It must be getting cold in Padmapukur. Here the weather is still the same. Perhaps it rains a little more. I am well. I hope you are well too. Please give my salams to Ma and Baba...Did Baba get the proper amount of paddy from the fields he has given on borga? You and Ma must have been very busy boiling and drying paddy. I miss the smell of harvested paddy and the taste of newly husked rice. The rice we get here has no taste. It is like bhushi. (92).

The impression of a joyless, automatous existence seeps through his recordings. As Adorno remarks, "alienation is the price human beings have paid for their increasing control and management of nature" (cited in Huggan and Tiffin, 2010: 202). Sakina's narratives are livelier and trace the gradual transformation of the countryside as it gets mechanized. She tells her husband:

The last few days the whole place has been smelling of newly harvested paddy and throbbing to the noise of the new threshing machines. Yes, people who have

bullocks, or a large amount of harvested paddy, still use bullocks for marai, but these new machines are slowly becoming popular. (14)

Sakina's narrative also incorporates a feud between neighbours over the chopping of a rare breed of mango tree, the munsifbabbar, and the sadness of the whole community in losing the tree. She recounts how, using its bark, an agricultural-scientist was able to resuscitate the tree and nurture a sapling, much to the wonder and joy of the community, thus highlighting the raised awareness of native communities to the urgencies of preserving ecosystems. Tensions between and within human communities, their respective relations to the natural world and the extra-discursive reality of nature that is constantly evolving, all find a place in her oral narratives. Equally, the family's anxiety that the younger son, Bappy, should study well and matriculate, Bappy's own indifference to farming; the younger sister, Shiuli's migration to the city as a factory worker with the attendant fears of being lured into the sex trade, are also part of Sakina's narrative, balanced between nature and culture.

Gradually, Khokon's narratives that at first initiated the entire plot, begin to shrink and to seem more like *intrusions*, while, Sakina's narratives, like the epigraph, incrementally but steadfastly gather around it, feminine themes and interests, to unfurl a predominantly woman's world. [Un]like Thomas Huxley's idea of "Man's place in nature" (1863), here it is the woman's place that is explored. Despite the fact that their social contexts are shown as indubitably embedded in patriarchy, what is admirable is the clear space for women that is carved out within its pages. Firstly, every chapter begins with a recipe, underscoring the primacy of *home* cooking (as opposed to gourmet or commercial). Progressively, with the failing health of Khokon's father, Sakina's mother-in-law takes over as the main bread-winner. She becomes the center of organization, constantly drawing on and contributing to the surroundings. Unlike her son's entry into a dependent economy, she generates an income through independent labor.

She is inducted by a local women's group leader to teach other women *kantha* embroidery. What emerges is an economy of interdependence with other women within and outside the community. She also takes Sakina to a play produced by a women's welfare organization, designed to raise consciousness about women's rights. As the narrative meanders through the twelve months, like the baromashi folksong on which it is based, the textuality, linguistically - that which constitutes the text in a particular way- pulls its semantics in the

direction of Sakina's world, attuned to the economies of nature, eschewing Khokon's. This has deep implications for the importance accorded to an organic, communal world as opposed to a mechanical, capital-driven one.

In this study, I have shown how Niaz Zaman, basing her novel on the folk genre of the Baromashi, the twelve-month song, contrasts the strong sense of community and connection to the land and seasons with the harsh realities of modern life that alienate subsistence communities from nature and women from their husbands. Her novel uses traditional folk legacies to explore human estrangement from nature.

References

- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.
- Huggan, Graham & Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London and New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Huxley, Thomas Henry. *Man's Place in Nature*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1863.
- Zaman, Niaz. *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999.
- . *Didima's Necklace and Other Stories*. Dhaka: Writer's Ink, 2005.
- . *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1993.
- . *The Baromashi Tapes*. Dhaka: Writer's Ink, 2011.

Note: ¹ See *Pigeon in Vedic Mythology and Ritual* by Hukam Chand Patyal in *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*; Vol. 71, No. 1/4 (1990), 310-317.