

**Chandrabati's Ramayan. Chandrabati. Translated by Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Zubaan, New Delhi, 2020, 120 pages, Hardback, ₹395.**

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*Chandrabati's Ramayan*, or *The Ramayan of Chandrabati*, is a translated work by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, a woman writer and thinker from Bengal. She completed the manuscript of *Chandrabati's Ramayan* just a year before her passing away, and it was published posthumously in 2020. This review of one of her major translated works is a way of paying respect to the distinct literary-academic tradition that she created within the Bengali intelligentsia.

Chandrabati<sup>1</sup>, the first woman poet in Bengali, was born in 1550 CE in the village Patuyari in Kishoreganj, presently located in Dhaka in Bangladesh. Her father was Dwij-Banshidas Bhattacharya, who was also known as one of the contributors to *Manasamangal*. He also composed the *palagaan*<sup>2</sup>, which is a kind of ballad, *Manasar Bhasan*. Chandrabati inherited this intellectual legacy from her father in her recreation of the Ramayana. She is also known as the first woman poet who rewrote the story of *Ramayan* in Bengali and represented the narrative of *Ramayan* from the perspective of Sita. She wrote it as early as the sixteenth century in rural East Bengal when it was hard to imagine a woman writing and rethinking religious narratives. Though it was published in 1923 in Dinesh Chandra Sen's edited collection, *Maimansingha Geetika* (The Ballads of Maimansingh), it was left in darkness. It was not thought to be a part of 'traditional literary historiography' (Sen viii), as it does not fit into the conventional framework of an epic poem. Nabaneeta's attempt to re-discover and translate it creates a space for *Chandrabati's Ramayan* to be included within the mainstream literary discourse. Through her translation, she shows how *Chandrabati's Ramayan* intersects various disciplines such as "Orality, Bengal Studies, Bengali Literature, Comparative Literature and Gender studies," which marks the "triumphal march of Chandrabati across academic trends and disciplines" (Sen ix).

Being rewritten from the perspective of women, *Chandrabati's Ramayan* remains one of the early women's texts that set the very foundation of feminist literary aesthetics in Bengal. In going beyond the conventional mode of epic writing, Chandrabati rewrites the epic narrative in her own literary construct. She chooses the literary craft of *palagaan*, *leela*,<sup>3</sup> *baromas*<sup>4</sup> styles along with an intensely lyrical language to represent Sita from a feminist perspective. She specifically employs the "simple rhythmic language of village Bengal" (Sen viii) to express Sita's emotions, experiences, pain, and suffering in ordinary, everyday contexts of a woman's life in rural areas. Chandrabati's literary construct through her *Ramayan* shows how the Bengali oral culture is translated, written, and recreated in women's writings; this actually propels the intellectual tradition of feminist literary writings.

In tracing the birth story of Sita, Chandrabati brings forth an alternative portrayal of Sita that goes against the portrayal of Sita in the epical retelling of *Ramayana* by Valmiki and Krittibas. Her representation of Sita critiques Valmiki's depiction of Sita as a "model of marital obedience and chastity" (Sen vii). Unlike the birth story of Sita found in Valmiki or Krittibasi *Ramayan*, *Chandrabati's Ramayan* presents a different narrative of Sita's birth. It is Mandodari, Ravan's wife, who gives birth to an egg from which Sita was born. Due to the prophecy, Ravan throws the egg into the ocean as it is destined that Sita will be the cause of destruction for both him and the entire race of demons. *Chandrabati's Ramayan* revolves around the divine presence of Sita as Lakshmi, and Ravan's ignorance and insult of this Lakshmi causes his downfall. In the "Afterword" to this translated work, Ipsita Chanda writes that:

In Chandrabati's narration, the divine form that facilitates the destruction of Ravan is not Ram as an avatar, but Sita in her incarnation as Lakshmi. Ravan meets his end

because he insults and exiles the auspicious feminine power. Ram is the instrument, almost off-stage, as there is no 'epic' battle to display his valour. (100)

So, *Chandrabati's Ramayan* centres around the conflict between two powerful heroic personae, i.e., Ravan and Sita, rather than focusing on *Ram-Raboner Juddha* (Battle between Ram and Ravan). It begins with the description of Lanka and portrays Ravan as a powerful ruler across the three worlds, followed by Sita's birth story. The power of Ravan as a hero across the three worlds is well translated by Dev Sen: "Heaven shuddered with the roar of *rakshasas*/Ravan Raja is almost like death himself/There is no other hero like him in all the three worlds" (15). Book I specifically focuses on how Ravan defiles the egg of Sita and sets the very ground for his destruction. Book II covers Sita's life and experiences, which she describes in her own words to her girlfriends. Here, Chandrabati uses women's *baromasi* style to narrate Sita's emotions, experiences, pain, and suffering. In analysing *baromasi* style, Nabaneeta Dev Sen writes that "*baromasi* texts are composed by women poets and sung for a predominantly female audience," and it describes "the emotions and experiences of women, associating them with different seasons of the year" (44). In *baromasi* style, Sita shares the narrative from her girlhood to her exile along with her husband, her captive life in Lanka, and the famous recovery by her husband. It focuses more on Sita as an ordinary wife living her everyday conjugal life in the forest rather than the queen of Ayodhya. She is more situated in the midst of nature and finds herself in a close relationship with nature, like Kalidasa's Shakuntala. Book III focuses on the role of Kukulya, the daughter of Kaikeyi, in framing Ram's decision to exile Sita from Ayodhya and his life forever. In translating the last section, which is found in K.C. Moulik's collected edition, Nabaneeta says that:

In this section, however, the epic's basic nature changes, and it becomes more male-oriented and warlike. This is probably because it was re-created by male epic singers in the marketplace. (72)

This section covers Sita's journey to her exile with her brother-in-law, Laxman. In Valmiki's hermitage, she gives birth to her two sons, Lav and Kush, and again returns to Ayodhya following her husband's request, only to prove her chastity. It ends with Sita's final trial by fire and her disappearance with Mother Earth as a form of protest against all the trials and insults in her life.

The text, *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, is written by a woman from the viewpoint of a woman and primarily for the female audience or womenfolk of rural Bengal. It is again translated by a woman with a specific literary-epical and cultural understanding of Bengal. The text, through its process of rewriting, retelling and recreating through translation, creates a community of women readers and writers across spatiotemporal boundaries. The translator, as a successor of Chandrabati, engages with exploring the other unheard and multifaceted voices of *Ramayan*, which results in literary works like *Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla* (1997) and *Sita Thekey Shuru* (Beginning from Sita, 1996). She also acknowledges *Chandrabati's Ramayan* as the "foundation of her research work on the oral Ramayan songs of village women in India" (Sen x). In the case of translation, Nabaneeta closely follows the literary spirit of Chandrabati and is careful and conscious enough to remain authentic to the lyrical spirit of *Chandrabati's Ramayan*. In the "Concept Note on the Translation," she writes, "I have tried to closely follow the rhythm of the original Bangla while constantly trying to make it as readable as possible for the English reader" (ix). Thus, she chooses the literary form of blank verse for translation instead of a prosaic-thematic English translation of Chandrabati's text. In order to keep the essence of the orality of *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, Sen uses very lucid language and keeps some of the terms in Bengali along with their translation. It is reflected in each line of her translation. For instance, Chandrabati's writing of the rituals and happiness in Ayodhya before the birth of Ram is translated by Dev Sen as:

One, two, three months, five months passed  
The signs of pregnancy were visible on the queens

All the aunts, the old and the young, gave them *Saadh*,<sup>5</sup>  
Their wish fulfilment child-shower  
All were happy. (37)

Through Dev Sen's continuous exploration, translation, and rewriting of the multifaceted voices of *Ramayan*, she carries forward the women's reading and intellectual legacy across the century.

Chandrabati's retelling of Sita's narrative reframes Sita's figure in various dynamic moulds. On the one hand, Sita is represented as a female heroic persona and on the other hand, she represents every woman through her everyday experiences. Though she was born to be a sufferer and spent her life in uncertainty and pain, it is her power of endurance and to maintain her dignity amidst all the crises of her life that makes her a dignified and heroic persona rather than a model of chastity. In writing the "Afterword," Ipsita Chanda notes that in Chandrabati's voice, the greatness of Sita is not a pre-given quality "but results from her endurance and dignity in the face of whatever life offers her," and "the ability to endure untold pain and grief gives the persona of Sita, as a hero in literature, a great power over time" (108). It is her attainment of the heroic qualities that makes her face her final trial and disappearance in a more resistive and heroic way. On the other hand, Sita also represents the everydayness of women's lives, where women chant her *baromasi* and find a "common threshold of experience through her name, whether it is of pain, acceptance, longing or pleasure" (Chanda 108). The chanting of Sita's *baromasi* becomes an outlet for their everyday experiences as wives in their own domesticity.

The reframing of Sita's narrative not only reconstructs the figure of Sita as a woman but also shapes Chandrabati's life and her identity as an intellectual woman. In retelling Sita's emotions, experiences, pain and suffering, Chandrabati also engraves her own emotions, pain and suffering in her own lyrical voice. She has written it after her separation from her own beloved. Sita's *baromasi* reflects her personal agony due to the bitter separation from her lover. Her *Ramayan* tells the tale of her self-making in diverse ways and shows how the personal crisis sparks her imagination to rewrite a political reinterpretation of *Ramayan*. Her personal and political understanding gets enmeshed to create something new. Though Chandrabati remains neglected through the decades, the translation of her *Ramayan* brings forth her intellectual contribution as a woman writer. Her use of literary craft to retell an epic brings to light a more enriched understanding of the epic as a literary genre and also proves her literary worth and contribution to the field of 'traditional literary historiography'. If Krittibas's rewriting of *Ramayana* in the form of a *panchali*<sup>6</sup> makes an indigenised form of the epic, Chandrabati's retelling of the same narrative in the form of a *palagaan* and women's *baromasi* teases out a feminised form out of the epic. Thus, where Krittibas's *Ram Panchali* revolves around the heroic persona of Ram as an avatar, *Chandrabati's Ramayan* brings Sita to the centre as the female heroic persona or the subject of her epic. The very shift in reorienting the narrative of *Ramayan* from *panchali* to *palagaan* marks the long journey of feminist literary aesthetics to be shaped and incorporated into mainstream literary discourses. The cover image of Nabaneeta's book of translation presents Mantu Chitrakar's portrayal of Chandrabati's storytelling method amidst a women's audience. A painting of two women, one of whom listens and supports the bereaved woman narrator, recreates Sita's narrative as she narrates her suffering to her fellow women.

The translation of Chandrabati's *Ramayan* by Nabaneeta Dev Sen not only remaps the intellectual tradition of women writers in ancient Bengal, it also reimagines the literary canon which marginalises the women writers by keeping them in the fringes. Writing the epic as a woman and shifting the narrative's focus from the male protagonist to the female protagonist and her act of resistance, Chandrabati marks the agential space of women who survived the onslaught of patriarchal oppression and asserted her intellectual prowess against the attempts of negation and marginalisation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chandrabati is a medieval Bengali woman poet and is considered the first female poet to rewrite the epic narrative of *Ramayan* from the perspective of Sita. Her other works are *Sundari Molua* (The Beautiful Molua) and *Dasyu Kenaram* (Kenaram, the Bandit). She also helped her father in writing *Padmapuran*. She was inspired by her father to rewrite the *Ramayan* to console her broken heart due to her separation from her lover. It remains an unfinished work.

<sup>2</sup> It is a folk ballad. It remains a part of oral literary culture. In this literary genre, a story is narrated in the form of a shloka and as a song before a large audience. It is presented in the form of dialogue. It is mainly used to narrate the stories of *Puranas* and folktales. It engages its audience through its musicality and lyrical appeal. Chandrabati uses this literary form in rewriting her *Ramayan* to make it more lively and appealing to the womenfolk of rural Bengal and to be sung by them in their everyday life.

<sup>3</sup> In Hindu philosophy, *leela* is the creative activity of the divine absolute. It is associated with the exploits of an avatar or a divine figure for a greater purpose. Here, Chandrabati uses the form of *leela* to narrate the birth story of Sita and Ram.

<sup>4</sup> It is alternatively named *baromasya*. It refers to the narrative poems transmitted orally and available in most North Indian languages — Bangla, Braj, Panjabi, Awadhi, etc. *Baromasi* texts are mainly composed by women poets and sung for a predominantly female audience. They describe the emotions and experiences of women, associating them with different seasons of the year. It expresses a woman's longing for her beloved, which changes with the changing seasons of the year. The dominant sentiment of the genre, however, remains that of pain and suffering.

<sup>5</sup> A ritual ceremony observed for an expecting mother by the elderly women of her family and the neighbourhood. This ritual is performed to fulfil the wish of the expecting mother before the birth of the child. A ritual ceremony is observed for an expecting mother by the elderly women of her family and the neighbourhood. This ritual is performed to fulfil the wish of the expecting mother before the birth of the child.

<sup>6</sup> It is an oral narrative form consisting of songs and stories. It is mainly used to narrate the tale of a divine figure in a rhythmic way. It is popular in the Bengali and Assamese cultures.

### Works Cited

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