

and for its ruin. When an outsider tries to create an insider perspective, it gives him different kinds of insight as non-native speakers can bring to language and to stories. Nadeem Aslam has presented both the insider and outsider perspective in the novel and brings forth a realistic picture of Afghanistan. *The Wasted Vigil* as narrative nonfiction projects the widespread experience of terror and trauma, distrust and dread, cynicism and hatred and ultimately the human tragedies of the war. Aslam's rage at the insensitive complicity of men and nations in the devastation of Afghanistan is visible throughout the book.

### Endnotes :

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- ii. As stated by Adam Richardser in his speech delivered at a Students Against War teach-in in Duluth, Minnesota ,USA.
- iii. Burgess, R. *In the field: an introduction to field research* .London,1984.
- iv. Burgess, R. *In the field: an introduction to field research* .London, 1984.
- v. see Merton, R. *Insiders and outsiders: a chapter in the sociology of knowledge*, American Journal of Sociology, 1972.78, 947
- vi. See Adam Richardser's speech delivered at a Students Against War teach-in in Duluth, Minnesota ,USA.
- vii. Rose, P. *Writing on women: Essays in a renaissance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.1985.
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## ***Laudable Regionality: The Oeuvre of Neoti Ray***

**- Pinaki Roy**

**Abstract:** Regionality in literature has come to be regarded as an important literary aspect since the popularisation of the feature by the Irish dramatist John Millington Synge (1871-1909). At least twenty-four English writers have been identified by literary historians as 'regional novelists', among them being Phyllis Bentley and H. E. Bates. An inhabitant of northern Bengal, Neoti Ray has achieved critical recognition as a regional litterateur with her narratives dealing especially with the hardships of the impoverished people of northern Bengal. The present essay attempts to offer a very brief review of Ray's oeuvre until 2012, and introduce the fineries of her publications to general readers.

**Keywords:** Regionality, north Bengal fiction, poverty, immigration, hardship.

One of the more important features of postcolonial literature is its assertion of its own specific identity vis-à-vis the sense of self gained through interaction with and influence of the colonisers. If the twenty-first century literature – especially that produced in India – is characterised by a concern with a specific identity, Neoti Ray's oeuvre (comprising six short-story collections and one novel) is postcolonial in its identity-building as well as other various aspects. Ray (originally born in Cooch Behar and presently a Siliguri-resident) who completed her doctoral studies in 1993 on the *Rajbanshi* folktales and female life of northern Bengal, has gradually carved a literary niche for herself over the years, by writing especially about northern Bengal and its life in her short-story-collections and novel, more critically acclaimed of which are *Badhubaran* ('Bride-welcoming') (1996), *Buri-Balasoner Upakatha* ('Tales from the Banks of Buri Balasone') (2000), *Mahendra O Tar Alik Swapno* ('Mahendra and his Fantasies') (2011), and *Karna-Kunti Cycle Workshop* (2012). In Bengal's literary milieu – consisting principally of publications in both Bengali and English – which has steadily (though censurably) remained Kolkata-centric even one-hundred-and-four-years after the city ceased to be the Indian capital, it is hardly surprising that the aesthetic regionality of Ray's narratives would be alternately overlooked and criticised. But it is an incontrovertible fact that her symbolic strategic-essentialism concerning registering of a non-southern-Bengali identity has actually savoured her oeuvre from dwindling into the level of forgettable writings routinely churned out as despicable sentimental stories or potboilers. Though not lacking in

sensibility or emotions, Ray's writings often demonstrate a controlled élan as could be expected from people whose habitation-al distance from the so-called 'centre' or metropolis have habituated them to negligence and debilitating patronisation from the so-called 'urbane litterateurs'.

However, personal interactions with the litterateur reveal that she is suitably complacent with her own (symbolically) marginalised position. Even as northern Bengal, in contrast with the industrialised and socio-economically developed south, still remains largely a 'neglected' realm in the foothills of the picturesque Himalayas – dependent on tea, timber, and tourism for sustenance – Ray feels that the region has its own vibrant culture and lifestyle. Understandably, what characterise the seventeen short-stories of the 1996 *Bride-welcoming* – (I.S.B.N. 81-7572-013-1) named after the last narrative in the publication – are Ray's conscious rusticity, her exploration of the lifestyles of northern Bengali people, and her usage of northern Bengali dialect, which is sometimes referred to as the 'Rangpuri' tongue. All these three features, other than indicating the deliberate 'centre-less-ness' of her existentialist narratives, posit her characters and stories vis-à-vis those of the popular Bengali novelists like Suneel Gangopadhyay (1934-2012), Prafulla Roy (b. 1934), Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay (b. 1935), and Navneeta Deb Sen (b. 1938) whose narratives usually deal with complex familial problems of either the Kolkata-residents or the non-resident Bengalis. Samaresh Majumdar (b. 1942) often sets his narratives in northern Bengal locales, but his being an inhabitant of the metropolis seems to have bereft his publications of their regionality. Debesh Ray (b. 1936) and Tilottoma Majumdar (b. 1966) are other critically-acclaimed writers from northern Bengal who are now permanently settled in Kolkata.

Most of the Northern Bengalis, about whom Neoti Ray writes in her critically-acclaimed collection – like Majumdar's – are immigrants from Bangladesh evicted from their ancestral home after 1947: a fact which has often led to their socio-cultural dislocation if not a palpable identity-crisis. However, such people seldom indulged in spontaneous communal disharmony till politics problematised the peaceful cohabitation of the Hindus and Muslims – the two religious sects which dominate the northern Bengal populace. In "Haar" ('Defeat'), the maiden narrative of *Bride-welcoming*, Ray demonstrates how the intervention of the leftist parties in northern Bengal during the sixties and seventies – especially the initiation of the *Bargadari*-system of farming – played havoc, just as demonstrated in Debesh Ray's *Tales from the Banks of the Teesta* ('Teesta Parer Brittanto') (1988), with the uncomplicated lives and relationships of the region's inhabitants. Neoti Ray's narrator is an adolescent and affluent Hindu Bengali female who gradually comprehends that her Muslim childhood-playmate, Nizam, the son of her impoverished

peasant-neighbour Azimuddin and his wife Tarala, is actually in love with her, but maintains a respectful distance from her because of the perceptible differences in their faith and financial-statuses. In a scene reminiscent of Nekhlyudov's early passion for and closeness with the maid-servant Maslova in Leo Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (1899), Nizam presents the unnamed narrator with a local flower as she prepares for admission to an urban-area school. As she returns to her native village prior to her marriage and having had completed higher education, she finds an ailing Azimuddin ruined by intricacies of the *Bargadari* system, and Nizam missing from his parents – as if defeated by the insurmountable difficulties poised by his unfulfilled though reciprocated adolescent amour. The Indian Partition had unalterably complicated the relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims throughout India – including in northern Bengal – which was actually exploited by the political parties, and the narrator's attraction for Nizam becomes one of the incalculable victims of this situation, which translates into her symbolic 'defeat'.

Existentialist angst – such as natural in the financially-underprivileged northern Bengali settlers and vagabonds – permeates the character of 'Kurani' or the 'foundling', the principal character of the second narrative of *Bride-welcoming*, which is named after her. Abandoned by her biological parents, she is reared up by her beggar 'Nani' into a beautiful woman who assists 'Nipuchi Pishi' in ferrying paddy and vegetables from Cooch Behar to Siliguri, and back. As her 'Nani' dies, she is befriended by a local hooligan, Nema Das, who finally wins her trust and love after saving her from a near-fatal train-accident. Portraying the essential goodness of the northern Bengalis, and thus consciously challenging the complexities of metropolis-based characters of – for example – Suneel Gangopadhyay's or Navneeta Deb Sen's stories – Neoti Ray presents a new and happy life to the foundling and her lover as they walk together towards the latter's residence deep into night. Kaliprashanna Das, the proprietor of "Kaliprashanna Enterprise", an affluent urban shop, and the narrator of "Khun" ('Murder'), is also submersed in existentialist crises, having had unwittingly killed Sudhamay, his exploitative employer and village-neighbour. Just like Meursault of Albert Camus's *The Outsider*, the un-implicated Das is always anxious lest he should be arrested, though simultaneously he feels pangs of guilt having had abandoned his village-dwelling mother. Das's uninformed fiancée, Nirupama, tries to bolster his confidence, and at last he secures mental peace by reconsidering the perceptible defects of the country's legal system.

As the demographics of northern Bengal is concerned, a considerable number of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes inhabit the region vis-à-

vis the 'Rarh Banga' or 'southern Bengal', which houses a considerable number of Brahmins and other 'higher-caste' individuals. The empowerment of downtrodden – the symbolic northern Bengali subaltern – is another recurrent theme of Ray's narratives. The fourth, fifth, and sixth short-stories of *Bride-welcoming* – “Nishadh” ('The Low-caste Hunter'), “Behula”, and “Manush” ('Human-being') – focus on not only the humiliation routinely meted out to the so-called 'low-caste' northern Bengalis but also their uniting themselves to directly or implicitly protest against such mistreatment. In “Nishadh”, the son of the cobbler-couple Ganju and Nili experiences, like other people of his community, the ire and unjustified virulence of the co-called 'higher-caste' villagers, but he does not succumb to the pressures of a brute and exploitative society which 'accepts' – and even encourages – the domination and extermination of the *dalits*. Rather Nishadh abandons his own Hindu faith – a religion which 'endorses' his humiliation – and embraces Christianity (to become a clergyman) as a mark of protestation. The unnamed narrator of the story registers her support of the ultimate revolution unleashed by the *dalits* on the 'upper-caste' people, and accepts Nishadh's epistemic prowess by seeking to get her daughter taught by the resisting subaltern. In “Behula”, the beautiful daughter of the maid-servant Rupbala – who works at the house of the unnamed, male, bachelor narrator – 'earns' her acceptability and acceptance with the narrator through her self-respect and sensibility. Though Rupbala decides to marry her Class-IX-studied daughter off to an insurance-agent, whom the narrator discovers to be lecherous, she fails to do so because of her untimely, fatal illness, and Behula further impresses the narrator by her repertoire of names of eminent Bengali litterateurs whose novels she has had read. In a scene reminiscent of Maria's securing of an 'elevated' social position through her marriage to Toby Belch in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (c. 1602), Behula transcends her 'limitation' of being born in a 'low-class' family by intellectually attracting the narrator, a state-government-office-clerk, who decides to marry her. Ray seems to not only question but also dismiss the boundaries caused among human-beings by such issues as caste, creed, and religion. But she also seems to lament that individuals, even in northern Bengal, are prone to judge people on basis of such arbitrary 'standards'. Benu, the so-called 'lower-caste' office-clerk-narrator of “Manush”, abandons his own surname and affidavits his name to 'Benimadhab Majumdar', in a desperate attempt to gain respectability and acceptability among 'general caste' people. He also falls in love with Rubi, a Brahmin-girl, who apparently loves him, but ceases to reciprocate his feelings as soon as she is informed of his scheduled-caste ancestry. In a stern critique of actions such as

Majumdar's, Ray demonstrates that any attempt to conceal one's true identity is a despicable practice. This concealment of true motives and identities continues in "Uchchhed" or 'Eviction', which pits the proletarian and homeless characters like the maidservant Brinda, the beggars Ghentu and Boltu, the rickshaw-puller Badar, and the betel-leaf-seller Bachchu against the so-called bourgeoisie comprising the rich Notunbabu, the lecherous private-college teacher, and the beautiful Miss Tuhina, who conceal not only their greed, lust, and dismissive attitude towards the impoverished but also their despicable personal lives. Dependent on the slum-dwellers for menial labours, unable to tolerate their presence in their locality, and 'adhering' to the characteristic features of capitalistic bourgeoisie as defined by Marx and Engels, the three rich characters, who have already earned the trust of the poor through their various philanthropic and charitable activities, befool the proletariat into vacating their habitation by luring them with hopes for permanent residential addresses. As Ray demonstrates, these slum-dwellers, much like Bakha of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, would never find acceptability from the very persons they serve. It is an unpalatable truth which Patiram, a Christian government-office-clerk and the narrator-protagonist of "Nabojanmo" or 'Rebirth', knows well and is comfortable with. Though in love with his colleague Sushmita, Patiram feels both 'safe' and duty-bound to marry the maidservant Malati, a 'charua' or 'inhabitant of Northern Bengal river-banks', because unlike various prejudiced individuals of the so-called 'upper-castes', she would not discriminate him on basis of his 'underprivileged' *Harijan* birth and identity. The lifestyle and daily sufferings of the *charua*-s find focus in Ray's next story, "Charua" or 'The River-bankers', where the homeless Mayna finally finds acceptability and acceptance as 'wife' with and of the Muslim youth, Karim, who has to face stiff opposition from his Teesta-bank-settled family members.

Originally hailing from the district of Cooch Behar, Ray manages to realistically and truthfully present the limitations and hardships of underprivileged northern Bengal life in almost all the narratives of *Bride-welcoming* – even in the last eight stories: "The Bud from Tea-garden" (*Cha Bagichar Kaliti*), "Waiting" (*Aapeksha*), "The Wedding Flute" (*Sehnai*), "The Blue Sky" (*Neel Ashman*), "Lock-out", "The Bird Unknown" (*Achena Pakhi*), "The Self-sufficient Woman" (*Swayamsiddha*), and "Bride-welcoming" (*Badhubaran*). In both "The Bud from Tea-garden" and "Lock-out", Ray focuses on the challenges faced by the impoverished and neglected tea-garden-workers who continually face indescribable miseries in spite of tea-trade contributing significantly to the northern Bengal economy. "The Bud from Tea-garden" is actually a confessional narrative in first person by the

dismissed tea-plantation-worker Maganlal, whose violence and resentment against the tea-garden-manager and his son, Neeloy, in order to achieve recognition for the co-proletarians is not at all compensated by the very people he seeks to represent and champion. The unnamed and immature narrator of “Lock-out” is the son of a murdered leader of tea-plantation-labourers, and his widowed mother has resolved to make him a successful individual. What further adds to the misery of the narrator is the cessation of work at the tea-garden – a period during which the narrator's father is murdered by the garden-owners' thugs – which drains his parents of their little savings. If extended periods of work-less-ness are brute realities for tea-plantation-workers of northern Bengal, smuggling Euro-American and Japanese goods across Nepal into India through the Panitanki-border is one of the 'processes' through which the ill-fated workers try to sustain themselves. Pratima, a female-smuggler, is a similarly impoverished and virtually-orphaned northern Bengal-inhabitant who is dragged into the nefarious trade by the apparently-lecherous Sahadeb, whom she ultimately consents to marry towards the end of “Waiting”. “Sehnai” deals with another poor northern Bengali couple – Batashi and Girija – the former a rumoured-bastard maidservant and the latter a philosopher-thief – who decide to marry in order to escape not only from the hardships of daily life but also from the prejudiced lambasting of societal acquaintances. In “The Blue Sky”, the prospective female-labourer Kalpana befriends the mason-aiding Lukman, who boasts of helping to build parts of the University of North Bengal, which, ironically, would be used to educate especially pupils from affluent sections of societies. Ray's writings indicate the limitations of choice of vocation for the socio-politico-culturally neglected and underdeveloped northern Bengalis who must continue on with their life in spite of impediments. Whenever the northern Bengalis find mentionable and substantive employment, they are confused by the complexities of urban and sophisticated life. The narrator of “The Bird Unknown” is faced with a similar crisis, but he is redeemed by the love of Achena Bose, an unmarried and beautiful colleague, who prefers his simplicity and philanthropy to the censurable self-consciousness of the staff-members like Mihir and Subhas. “Sayamsiddha” is Shavian in its essence and deals with the infinite potentialities maidservants like Ina, employed by the unnamed and rich female narrator of the story and married to the rectified rickshaw-puller Kankan, nurse within them. A prototype Louka (of Shaw's *Arms and the Man*) in her resilience and vigour, Ina is also a feminist who manages to change both her own name (from 'Annakalee') and her husband's (from 'Kenaram') while rectifying the drunkenness of her husband. In the final story of her 1996 short-story-collection, Ray unites the former couple

Sumit and the school-teacher Sumita after they meet each other again through their common-friend Barin at a wedding of Sumita's relative. Though Ray's novel, *Buri-Balashoner Upakatha* (I.S.B.N. 81-7572-065-4) chronologically precedes her second collection of short-stories, *Mahendra O Tar Alik Swapno*, published by the Kolkata-based *Patralekha*, the 2011-publication consisting of nineteen short-stories has undoubtedly served to solidify Ray's reputation as a regional litterateur and earned international accolades. The compilation opens with "Udhbastu" ('Refugee') – a sensation and identity common to most of the Northern Bengalis who were evicted from Bangladesh especially during the 1960s and 1970s and forced to migrate to India through the international borders at, for example, Changrabandha, Hili, and Mahadipur. However, in her short-story focussing on the Teesta-bank-residing 'charua' and private tutor, Basanta, the tea-stall-owning Rajbanshi youth Nityananda, his teen-age-sister Subhadra, and the Siliguri-residing P.W.D. tractor-driver Yuranpada, Ray gives a new meaning to the definition of 'refugee': she deals with the theme of double-migration, demonstrating the virtues and attractions of 'home' (in spite of hardships and humiliations) and the vices of the 'outer world' (here represented by the city of Siliguri). Ray's conscious usages of such words and terms as the 'Teesta' (*Mahendra* 8), 'Rajbanshi' (*ibid.* 8), the popular northern Bengali daily *The Uttarbanga Sambad* (*ibid.* 7), 'Siliguri' (*ibid.* 10), and 'Lepcha' (*ibid.* 10) gives a distinct northern Bengali identity to her narrative. In the second, title story, Ray weaves a tale of simple though sexually-charged love between Mahendra, the owner of *Prince Laundry*, and Malati, the confidante of Fulu with whom – and her husband Nemai – Mahendra resides but who together have also rented sections of their residence to a sickly old man and a bank-employee: Mahendra's imagined rival in his love for Malati. Ray shows that for the underprivileged northern Bengalis, finding acceptance from the woman of attraction (here, Malati) is the most luxurious and ambitious dream a resident of this region could nurse. In contrast, in the third narrative "Hariye Jaowa" ('Getting Lost'), the impoverished migrants Rupu, her two sisters, one brother, and their parents cannot even dream but are pitifully faced with the daily struggle for existence – a struggle which ends in one of Rupu's sister's sexual-ravishment and resultant death and in another's voluntarily marrying a man many years senior. In such an atmosphere of oppression, poverty, and negligence, the northern Bengalis – Roy implies – can only survive through self-respect and self-assertion. This is what ultimately saves the blistered Nripen Das, a goods-carrying-vehicle-cleaner and the protagonist of "Nam-mahima" ('What's not in a Name?'), from losing himself in a medley of humiliating sobriquets. In "Malik" ('Owner'), Sudhir Burman, the son of a dead maidservant, returns to his native village – the same village where he was humiliated and once beaten as a thief – from the city of Siliguri after

purchasing a new green-coloured pick-up van. In direct contrast to the general, modern Bengali stories published by the Kolkata-based writers on the financially-privileged Bengalis and non-resident Indians, Ray's stories truthfully demonstrates that for the poor northern Bengalis, owning a pick-up van could be one of the greater marks of entrepreneurship. Moreover, the presence of the Rajbanshis – who form a significant portion of northern Bengali population – further imparts regional colour to Ray's stories. Her “Dudh Maa” (‘The Milk-feeder’) is another northern Bengali narrative describing how the momentarily-married Monica ultimately finds a husband in a widower and renter whose three children she used to tend. However, far from the madding crowd, cruelty is omnipresent in northern Bengal too. In this impoverished region, the brother-in-law Atin, husband to Radha in the story “Hari”, repeatedly attempts to either banish or kill Radha's orphaned brother, Hari. If Hari's world is Nietzschean with the divinity being ‘dead’, Sadananda – the protagonist of “Sadananda-r Ishwar Darshan” (‘A Glimpse of God for Sadananda’) – has an experience of ‘meeting God’ when, even after returning to his village unsuccessful and jobless from Siliguri, he is married off to a single child of a rich villager at his grandmother's insistence. Giridhari, the high-flying protagonist of “Giridhari-r Satya Darshan” (‘Giridhari vis-à-vis the Truth’) is also reminded of his humble birth and impoverished nature when he attempts to marry his office-colleague Neelanjana Sen who marries her superior-officer instead. The return to the native village from the metropolis (Siliguri) is the central theme of “Firey Jaowa” (‘The Return’), and the city-settled Nupur feels asphyxiated in “Mukti” (‘The Emancipation’). The same urban centre which exploits the impoverished also forces them to indulge themselves into prostitution – a fact which the slum-dwelling Parul discovers in “Mando Meye-r Upakshan” (‘The Saga of the Fallen Girl’) and “Mando Meye-r Golpo” (‘The Narrative of the accidental Call-girl’) and Neelima in “Nach-ghar” (‘The Dancing-room’). Sreepada, the protagonist of “Sreepada” is the male counterpart of Parul who loses five thousand rupees to a thug before unsuccessfully appearing at an interview, while the couple Maheshwar and Kamala – a day-labourer and a maidservant – of “Vitey” (‘The Habitat’) lose their temporary residence and decide to live at a northern Bengali railway-station-platform. The postgraduate-level village-dwelling student Beli in “Shimulguri-r Beli” (‘Beli from Shimulguri’), however, decides to protest against the humiliation routinely meted out to the poor northern Bengali villagers by inhabitants of the metropolis, and also self-improvement through education is noticeable in “Sesh Joy” (‘The Final Victory’) which deals with the ill-fated love-triangle between the university-researchers Sucharita, Sabuj, and Srijana. Kansai, the hapless and mute female protagonist of the story of the same name, escapes from a life of negligence and humiliation by committing suicide.

*Karna-Kunti Cycle Workshop* (I.S.B.N. 978-93-81858-18-9), named after the eighth narrative of the compilation of twenty-two short-stories, transcends the regionalism of Ray's previous two short-story-collections in such narratives as "Kanjeevaram" (the seventh story) and "Param Veer Chakra" (the eighteenth narrative). The Kanjeevaram silk saree in the former becomes a symbol of affection and attraction between Amal and the Shantipur-residing saree-seller Gauri Das, and, at the end of the narrative, a symbol of their unfulfilled amour as well. The latter narrative speaks of communal harmony, describing the momentary wartime-bonhomie between the Indian soldier Basudeb Roy and the Pakistani warrior Morarraf Hossain, who are both shelled to death at the time of embracing each other in a scene almost reminiscent of the First World War-time *Christmas Truce* (December 1914). "Kanta-tarer Oparey" ('Beyond the Barbed-wire'), the second narrative of the publication, resuscitates the theme of partition, and describes how Jatin's father is bulletted to death by the border-guards while attempting to cross the divisive fences. The first narrative, "Nibaran", is northern Bengali in flavour, focussing on the bus-conductor Nibaran's unreciprocated love for Malabika, a student of the University of North Bengal – located at Shibmandir. Other short-stories in the collection like "Marudwan" ('The Oasis'), "Tathapi" ('Nevertheless'), "Kunjo Netai o Jaya-r Golpo" ('The Narrative of Netai the Hunchback and Jaya'), "Bumper Lottery", "Utsarga" ('Dedication'), and the concluding "Aanarkali", deal with various daily-life experiences of the northern Bengalis.

The hardships of northern Bengali life and their endless sufferings are also the principal themes for Ray's only novel, *Buri Balashoner Upakatha* (I.S.B.N. 81-7572-065-4), in which the principal protagonists are Mahendra, Nemai, Malati, Shiddik, Chandra, Banamali, and so on, who are actually the homeless and impoverished inhabitants of the banks of the Buri Balasone, a river of the district of Darjeeling, which originates in the hills of Senchal and flows south into the plains of North Bengal, where it joins River Mahananda. There are several other rivers in the same district – for example, the Teesta, the Rangeet, the Mechi, the Mahananda, the Murti, and the Jaldhaka – but the ever under-represented Balasone becomes symbolic in Neoti Ray's oeuvre of the grossly neglected northern Bengalis. What characterises Ray's novel is its conscious lack of melodramatic situations which seems to indicate the boredom of the life of the poor inhabitants of this region. As the Teesta does in Debesh Ray's *Teesta Parer Brittanto*, the arterial Balasone in Neoti Ray's novel reminds general readers of the numerous complexities the comparatively-unsophisticated northern Bengali villagers have to encounter to make and earn their living. What brightens Ray's narratives is that most of her stories end in hope for a better future, her sardonic