

**Critiques of Nation and Gender in South Asia:****Akhtaruzzaman Elias' *Khwabnama* and Savitri Roy's *Trisrota* and *Swaralipi***Soma Marik<sup>1</sup>***Abstract:***

This paper argues that Savitri Roy (*Trisrota* --1950 and *Swaralipi* --1952), and Akhtaruzzaman Elias *Khwabnama* (1996), presented quite distinct critiques of nationalism. Roy has a sensitivity about gender and the intermeshing of gender and class. Consistently, there is a significant mapping of how gender leads to divergences in political activism and social standing.

However, like much of the bhadralok Progressive cultural camp, there is an inadequate conceptualization/representation of Muslims, and they appear mostly as minor characters in Roy. In *Khwabnama*, the Muslim majority of Bengal are brought to life, and fissures, class and gender relations, are examined within them.

Elias confronted the question of the project of national liberation for Pakistan, suggesting like Fanon that a national-liberation struggle is nothing if it does not become a struggle for social emancipation. And in historicising myth, Elias questions the paradigmatic view of modernity. While Roy's project ultimately foregrounds a hegemony of the caste Hindu educated middle class, in the case of Elias, one finds the coming together of a critique of form with critique of elite (including left-elite) centred writing.

***Keywords:*** Class, Gender, Nationalism, Community, Caste

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This paper looks at how Savitri Roy and Akhtaruzzaman Elias, authors of two different generations and national/religious identities but with shared communist ideological orientation and a partly common internal chronotope present nation, class and gender. Roy's nation is mostly the post-1947 nation, almost taking the partition as a given without examining the trajectory of Muslims and the complexities of rural class formations and struggles. Elias would look at the coming together and growing apart, of class and nation in peasant aspirations, and the foundations for the making and the unmaking of Pakistan in Bengal.

Roy would make gender a much more central aspect of her narrative, while in Elias it would be much less stated. Finally, while Roy and Elias would both look at left politics, Roy would attempt a view of left politics, especially the politics of the CPI, where constant positive and negative engagements of the lower ranks with the leadership have been portrayed. Elias would look at the politics of the left as it entered the popular consciousness through dreams (*Khawab*) reflecting the narratives (*Namah*) of the past and present among peasants, but where that also intersected Muslim community identity.

### **Savitri Roy's Bengal Politics: Communism, Class and Gender in *Trisrota***

*Trisrota*, a semi-autobiographical novel, comes as both an early narrative and one where the image comes to readers, chiefly through the eyes of secondary participants of the political movements. The novel begins with Rupasi village in East Bengal, sometime in the 1930s, and ends in Calcutta, during the Left Line<sup>1</sup> under B T Ranadive<sup>2</sup>. *Swaralipi* is set in the Left Line and its Maoism influenced alternative Left politics over 1948-1951. Roy had joined a students' strike called by the All India Students' Federation<sup>3</sup> way back in 1938 (Nag, Nivedita, personal interview, 3 March, 2001). But her family had a Gandhian tradition, and she was also close to family members following the politics of armed nationalism. She married a communist<sup>4</sup>. So while her novels show much sympathy, especially for the struggles led by the communists and for the causes they espoused, they also contained political sympathy for people on other parts of the spectrum. Also, Roy joined the CPI for only one year, and was sceptical about its politics of tight discipline. (Chakravartty, Gargi, personal

interview, 1 September, 2009) She had spiritual and aesthetic needs which her comrades would denounce, particularly in the “Left Line” period, as products of bourgeois individualism. She celebrated ritual performances that are often important for (caste Hindu) women. (e.g., Roy 2005: 178, 188, 191) She liked the literature that came from dominant classes. But she was also capable of recognising that the same world of rituals could impose great cruelties on many women, for example on widows. Savitri Roy was also capable of acknowledging the oppressive dimensions of upper class aesthetics, and the cost at which the aesthetics came. The lives of widows were noted with careful attention in her novels, especially in *Trisrota*, but also in *Swaralipi*, where Sheeta has to confront the dictates of the rigid life of a widow that her mother-in-law insists upon. (Roy 1992: 43-44, 285)

Often ill, Roy could not be publicly politically active at all times. This also impacted her relationship with communist activists. In the substantially autobiographical *Trisrota*, this comes out:

The next day too, Ira comes in search of Arunava. .... Padma pulls up the chair to let her sit. Ira does not sit. Standing beside the table she writes a note addressed to Arunava. Padma is reading with deep attention an old issue of *Forward Bloc* sitting by the window. Ira looks aslant at the journal in Padma’s hand. The yellowish bright pupils of her eyes show a brief shadow of doubt mixed with condescension. It does not escape Padma’s eyes either. Ira ... says, I must go now. There is a meeting in the afternoon in Shradhdhanada Park. Sympathisers can also go. You can come too. (Roy 2005: 218)

And yet, her novels displayed an acute commitment for the toiling people and to their struggle for social emancipation. What she could not accept was the claim that *the* party could have infallible understanding of the road to such emancipation.

In *Trisrota*, we note first the range of registers of the Bangla language. The narrator’s voice comes, somewhat surprisingly, in the *sadhubhasha*<sup>5</sup>, something that would change in *Swaralipi*. But the spoken language seeks to present a wider range.

*Trisrota* has a wide range of characters, but begins and ends with Padma, a young girl of a landed family in a village through whom we are introduced to two important elements of nation building. She admires the History teacher and the way he teaches the subject. And in the form of disciplinary mechanism present in schools in those days, a *truant* student is to be

punished by twisting the ears by the classmate. It appears more insulting, because it is a *girl* who is asked to punish the boy.

In the twentieth century, there was a significant rise in the number of politically active women (Southard). For them emancipation did not mean a liberation whose terms were set out by a modernised patriarchy (Banerjee). Yet they too had to operate within codes created by powerful forces, like nationalism (Forbes; Sinha). This was where the communist movement seemed to be moving way ahead. However, there were distinct elements of *bhadralok* culture embedded within the communist movement in Bengal and its attempts to build a women's movement. (Marik 79-118)

Roy's fiction highlights a wide range of women's voices. Kusumlata, Padma's aunt, is a Gandhian nationalist, and within that framework, has been one fighting for women's rights and rejecting the worst of casteist practices. (Roy 2005: 169-70, 175). But the gender and class codes are strongly present in that society. Padma's parents live elsewhere. When they come home for a few days, they find it objectionable that their teenage daughter should go out for community service along with girls and boys of the common sort (Roy, 2005 :177). Although Padma's stay at a hostel independently was seen as a far more reprehensible act by her other kin. (Roy 2005:181)

In her college days Padma learns about the communists. Her traditionalist uncle talks of the achievements of revolutionary Russia (Roy 2005: 189). Bipasha, a college friend, also plays a role, taking her to workers' quarters, meetings, talks of proletarian revolution, five-year plan, and Fascism. And along with that, she meets the elder brother of Bipasha, Arunava, a communist activist. (Roy, 2005: 191-193)

The CPI inspired many young women to ignore, the traditional sexist codes of conduct (Roy Chowdhury, Reba, personal interview, 30 June 2001), as brought to life in Roy's depiction of Padma's elder brother Prakash. When Padma turns down Prakash's decision of arranging a wedding for her, he accused Arunava of indecent relationship with Padma. (Roy 2005: 199) Yet after marrying Arunava, she was taken to his home in the remote countryside, left long ago after his mother's suicide. When he leaves, Padma had to remain as the '*boutharan*' [daughter in law of the house] who has to symbolically take over the keys to the stores. (Roy 2005: 209) Activism was seemingly not meant for married women.

Back in Kolkata, Padma watches political developments, but keeps herself a little aloof. As a result of the new CPI line of supporting England in its war efforts (imperialist war has become “People’s War” as the USSR is under attack by Hitler) the CPI is legalised in July 1942. Padma becomes increasingly aware of a patronising tone and condescending attitude. Party comrades, women no less than men, take the services a non-party member provides, (making regular cups of tea) for granted. Yet she turns down Arunava’s proposal to get an additional part-time job for himself, because she feels that politics for Arunava is like water for fish. But her deep anguish remains, as Arunava “does not seriously try to get her involved in the party’s work”. (Roy 2005: 219) The personal interviews given to the present writer by numerous communist women from the 1940s and 1950s show this tension in real life, the willingness, yet unhappiness in sharing the bulk of domestic work, because the husband’s political work is ‘more important’. (Nag, Nivedita, interview, 3 March 2001; Gupta, Manjari, interview, 25 May 2011; Chatterjee, Mira, interview, 12 November 2008)

A subordinate storyline looks at women and men of poorer classes. Double standards of sexuality are exposed, as when Madan, a wartime-contractor, has extra-marital affairs, but poor peasants like Surya and Jamuna (Madan’s wife) cannot express their love for each other. Emplotting the Quit India and the Bengal Famine are weaker, possibly because writing in 1950, the CPI line of opposing the Quit India Movement could not be glossed over, while the obvious hesitations of the author made presenting communist work against the Quit India Movement in a fully positive light difficult. So in this phase, other dimensions were taken up like the growth of trade unions and the strategies to smash unions. At the same time, Roy consistently presents the developments through the eyes of women – Padma, Bipasha, Jamuna, and others. The narrative picks up with the post-war political upsurge which ended in partition of India. (Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. 2004; Chatterjee, J. 2002) Roy however mostly ignores complexities and the different language registers among Muslims. The confrontations between nation and gender therefore end up being limited to an assumption about the political nation being divided between the Gandhians, the national revolutionaries/Forward Bloc, and the Communists. Partition is seen almost solely from the perspective of Hindu, bhadralok/mahila. It appears as though Muslim desire for partition was based just on the well to do Muslim’s wish for the land of the Hindu landlords.

### **The Politics of the CPI: Class, Party and Gender in *Swaralipi***

A much more powerful novel, *Swaralipi* looks more sharply at the class struggle and covers the coming of independence, the partition, the beginnings of the refugee problems, the twists and turns in CPI politics, the language issue in East Pakistan (Umar) leading to the process whereby the concept of a Muslim nation begins to be unravelled, as well as international events of great significance, like the ending of World War II, the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan, the Chinese Revolution, etc.

It begins with a mass meeting in Calcutta, where the speaker announces that the path of Telangana<sup>6</sup> [i.e., armed struggle] is the true path. And there follows a denunciation of Shohanlal and the glorification of Shukul, who seem transparent covers for P.C. Joshi and B. T. Ranadive respectively. (Roy 1992: 1-5) The nation that has emerged is split between the official standard bearers, now in power, and the masses of toiling people, as she sees them.

But Roy highlights contradictions. The Ranadive line, adopted by the Second Party Congress of the CPI called for a rapid transition to insurrectionary struggles. The party declared India's independence a fake and condemned Gandhi and Congress politics. The simple equation of the nationalist leaders with bourgeois exploiters was not easily acceptable even to all rank and file communists such as Prithvi, a journalist, and Sumitra, a dedicated party whole-timer. Sumitra wonders how to characterise Gandhi.

Yet, it was not only an ultra-left departure on the part of the CPI that caused a gulf. As Bipan Chandra has demonstrated, the ideology of Indian nationalism had assured, from very early times, that colonial exploitation and the drain of wealth was what kept the masses starving (Chandra). Now, the coming of independence meant there was a tremendous popular expectation. Popular movements did break out, even if the CPI strategy of turning them quickly into a revolution to overthrow the newly created nation-state was chimerical. (Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. 2008:11-32) It is the reality of such struggles that Roy seeks to capture.

For some historians, the second phase of the *Tebhaga* movement (1948-49), was often ultraleft (Bose; Basu). However, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay suggests that the Ranadive Line was an inchoate response to CPI's possibility of being reduced to the margins. This too is only

partially true in the context of the world wide shift brought about by the Communist Information Bureau around this time (London). But had there been no real peasant militancy the CPI tactics would not have produced a huge peasant rally (November 1947) in Calcutta organised by the Kisan Sabha. Agrarian violence broke out from early 1948 under mainly CPI leadership in several districts (Lahiri).

The demands of this communist upsurge were much broader than the pre-independence *Tebhaga*, and included demands like abolition of the *zamindari* system without compensation and land to the tillers, which appealed to a large section of poor peasants and landless labourers. The movement became especially popular in parts of 24 Parganas, like Kadwip; as well as in five or six other districts.

While the more theoretical disputes (Ranadive Line vs. Andhra Line etc) were not targeting the mass of peasants, and while it is true that the initial mobilisation came from *bhadralok* leaders from outside, in every area a local leadership also emerged. The other interesting aspect of this rural insurgency was the active participation of women, well beyond what the CPI envisaged (Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. 2008). This went all the way to armed confrontation with the police. (Chattopadhyay, K.1997:101-115; Chattopadhyay, K. 2001)

Roy's deft handling shows that just as class cuts through the homogenising claims of nation, so gender and class are to question universalist claims of each other. The calculations of the middle class Sagari are challenged by the peasant-woman Radha.

Sagari: Before taking any decision every member of the Fighting Council must reflect carefully whether by breaking the silo of *jotedars* like Gopinath Mondal, we are not merely increasing the numbers of our enemies.

Radha: We have not seen only in this one birth, but we have reflected over many births – urban women reared in milk and cream cannot be expected to know the tales of sweat and blood drenched woe, tears, of our fathers and grandfathers. (Roy 1992:170)

On the other hand, Sagari herself is the victim of the intrigues and the sexual overtures of the party-bureaucrat Nandalal. The confrontation between Nandalal and his agents and Sagari on one hand, and that between Sagari and Radha on the other, show that for Savitri Roy, no less

than nation, gender and class are also fractured identities where unity is never an automatic process.<sup>7</sup>

But while there was a rationale for the agrarian struggles, even if the party leadership was in gross error in pushing them to adventurist directions, the playing at revolution in the urban areas was utterly meaningless. While in jail, Prithvi hears comrade Manish, newly arrested, talking about how hundreds of thousands of toiling people are responding to the call of the party, how workers are taking over factories, *jotedars* are fleeing the countryside and Calcutta is witnessing a floodtide of revolution. Prithvi catches hold of Rathin (comrade who changed his position in favour of adventurist strategies) later and asks why these falsehoods are being circulated. Rathin explains that the prison too is a front, and members have to be kept inspired and also primed to die. (Roy 1992: 267-268)

Secularism and religious nationalism/communalism were in contestation at this time. In the late 1940s it was not yet certain that secularism would be adopted firmly, and the incoming refugees from East Pakistan were a major testing ground for all three discourses – secular nationalism from above, Hindu nationalism, and left nationalism (periodically intertwined with internationalism). In West Bengal, unlike in East Punjab, there was an utter governmental failure in settling refugees (Chakraborti). In that sense, there was a failure of secular nationalism from above. The refugee issue would be a major weakness of the ruling Congress. (Chatterjee J. 2007)

Roy shows, with an honesty that was remarkable, that the Hindu Right no less than the Communist Left tried to propose paths of resolution. For the right, the path was to reject partition and create a Hindu nation, undivided. (Roy 1992: 193-195) The politics of the right is drawn in a much briefer span, as the Left is the author's main focus. Yet Madhu Mukherjee, a former detainee, a revolutionary nationalist who has now turned Hindu nationalist, is deftly sketched.

This is the age of politics. So, in order to draw in educated boys, serious political education is needed. The explanation of Hindu dharma, of its specificity, its liberalism – from the essence of Aryanism, Gita, Upanishad, the Vedas and on to the regeneration of Hinduism. (Roy 1992: 195)

But Mukherjee is also linked to petty and medium capital, to contractors and builders. He assists those who want land from refugee-settlements, for profit. In a scene towards the end, Mukherjee's voice reminds the reader that rape as a community/national vengeance was not invented only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when he invokes rapes in East Pakistan to organise rapes of Muslims in West Bengal. (Roy 1992: 303) The consequence is the gang rape and subsequent death of Hasiya, a young Muslim woman. (Roy 1992: 304-307)

All this does not turn Roy's work simply into a political document or a history. It is through *Swaralipi* that the meaning of nation can come out in personal terms. The relationship between Sheeta and Prithvi does not lead to a union. The internal logic that the author provides is that Sheeta, a widow who cannot overcome social conditioning, despite being an active communist and free in her relationship with men. Prithvi blames 'feudal' values for her refusal to marry him. (Parenthetically speaking, the term feudal implies the absence of concepts like patriarchy, or sexism.) But trust and love exist, with Sheeta refusing to turn away from Prithvi when he was expelled for his supposed reformism. She also felt relieved to let Prithvi take her daughter Mithu's custody in India when she is arrested in Pakistan during the second round of riots. All these subtle emotions and political nuances are worked out with plausible artistic and linguistic skills. And in doing this, Roy brings into view a subtle gender dimension. Sheeta herself is a firm activist by the time she is arrested, and even under arrest, carries herself with dignity and firmness. But to Prithvi, the news of her arrest brings the imagery of Sita abducted by Ravana. This suggests that revolutionary men too had internalised sexism, since the Sheeta of the present is a militant communist, who is devalued when she is seen as a helpless woman. (Roy 1992: 332, 330)

Roy is able to bring together a profound sympathy for the struggles of the downtrodden, alongside a critique of nationalism as an ideology of new states in the making, with their own violence, along with a rare sensitivity to the complex situations of women. Women of the middle class with all the attendant social markers, the uncertainties of the 1940s and 1950s emerge with clarity and a sensitivity no male leftist writer of that time had achieved. But so do peasant women, in *Swaralipi* and the urban poor. Padma in *Trisrota* shows it is possible for a woman to acknowledge more than one love. It was also not possible for a male writer to hold up a figure like Nandalal, abusing his bureaucratic power to try and get access to Sagari after almost forcing her to become party whole-timer and telling this

young dynamic member to divorce her husband. Yet, the “ban” on the book and on Roy, (and the suspension from the party of Santimoy Roy)<sup>8</sup> suggests that it went beyond one bureaucrat. It suggests that the CPI saw any criticism as enemy action, and refused to accept the negative portrayal of Nandalal or any challenges thrown to sexism that did not permit equal comradeship.

### ***Khwabnama*: Class Struggle, Peasant Aspirations, Alternate Histories**

Akhtaruzzaman Elias was the son of a Muslim League leader. Born just a few years before independence, he grew up in Gaibandha district and Dhaka. Elias also developed a Marxist commitment, and confronted the question of how progressive the project of national liberation. For him, anti-colonialism was a distinct articulation of protest against socio-economic and political exploitation before it was a demand for a nation state. And in historicising myth, Elias questions the paradigmatic view of modernity.

A tremendous amount of scholarship went into the making of *Khwabnama*. In giving the novel this title, Elias was relating it to very different genres. The *namah* is historically a biographic or an autobiographic prose form, originating in pre-Islamic Persia, intersecting with the rise of Islam, and then carried to various parts of the Islamic and Islamicate world (Chanda) But the *namah*, turns in Elias’s hand into a historically situated prose fiction.

A second tradition that Elias draws upon is the dream. Looking for new “*sholoks*” (verses) Keramat, goes in search of Cherag Ali’s old, tattered book of verses. Written on its cover in Bangla is a title – *Khabnama Palnama* and *Tabir*. As he looks inside, he finds descriptions of various *khwabs*; what can happen if one sees such and such *khwab*, and so on (Elias 1998: 205) It has been argued by Sarkar (Sarkar, J) that a dense inter-textuality can take the readers back to dreams and their interpretations in Islamic thinking, and bring them forward, again, to the dream/s of a Muslim homeland called Pakistan, *Tebhaga* or the peasants’ aspiration for land, the relationship – real and assumed, between *Tebhaga* and Pakistan – and the different forms and contents of different nationalisms.

In part, the very generic form suggests the need for a different reading than the way we have read Roy. Roy’s texts, as articulations of a dissident communist, can be considered as a variant of socialist realism. It is perfectly possible to read Elias also within the

framework of nation, community, and gender, and a critique of the hegemonic voices. But Chanda's, Sarkar's, or Bandyopadhyay's (Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji 2012) readings indicate the possibilities that emerge when comparatists read *Elias*. Above all, it is necessary to see in *Khwabnamah* three time frames in constant dialogues (Chanda:26): remembering the past through popular memory, dreams and songs; the present of the text reflected in the intersection of *tebhaga* movement with the struggle for Pakistan; and finally the present of the author and the reader, a present in which authoritarianism and communalism increasingly take over the state. This also makes the chronotope of the dream distinct from that of Roy. The socialist realist novel suffers from the problem of an insistence on transparency, a demand that the individual 'hero' has to be a positive hero and the life of the collective must move in certain directions. In *Elias*, the use of dreams and the reliance on a tradition according to which dreams can foretell and legitimise political programmes enables the novel to provide a multilayered narrative. If Pakistan is a central dimension of *Khwabnama*, a running sub-text is *Tebhaga*. It is a tussle between the victorious idea of the religious nation and the defeated class struggle of *Tebhaga* that is worked out by the author.

The dream of a nation of all Muslims of India, where there would be no rich and poor, can be put down as "false consciousness". Yet it does not explain why there would be such false consciousness, nor its source. Tamij, poor peasant, reflects on *Tebhaga* at the moment of Pakistan's freedom. (Elias :244) We need to remember that the majority of the Bangla speaking rural population was Muslim, and the majority of zamindars were Hindus. In the *Tebhaga* movement, class and nation did not come together. Flip flops by the CPI meant it was not well positioned to take on the Muslim League and the Congress, and indeed Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, at the political level in 1946-7<sup>9</sup>. Subhoranjan Dasgupta quotes Sirajul Islam Chaudhury: "The real issue was the clash between the Hindu and Muslim middle class. The Hindu middle class hoped to enjoy all the fruits; the Muslims claimed we want our share.' (Dasgupta) *Elias* does not, *pace* Dasgupta, see this simply as a betrayal. He is presenting a story, where people, including those on opposite side of the political spectrum, are shown in a more convincing way. The complexities of politics and class and community aspirations among Muslims, with the Muslim League, the Krishak Praja Party<sup>10</sup>, and the CPI contending for peasant support, and the fact that a real acceptance of religion was what made the power of the League possible, come out in ways one would not find in many writings by writers of Hindu origin.

Prashanto, a compounder, refuses to take even tea or a banana in Kader's (a Muslim League member and a shop owner) house. Doctor Sisir Sen, also a Hindu, laughs at this and tells Kader not to get too upset, because Prasanto has an excessive fear of violating the rules of touching. "A son of Brahman, he does not even eat anything in my house, you see". To this Prasanto responds:

We are poor Brahmins, we have no power of money, no political prestige, if we lose caste what else do we have left?

Kader retorts:

Stay with your caste divisions. As we are a race apart we want to be separate. So why do you object so much to giving us a separate country? (Elias: 78)

Brahmanism forges a Hindu national identity that weakens the possibility of building a secular and united nation. Yet Elias does not see Muslim nationhood as a positive ideal. But it is still a potent idea. Unity based on religious identity and the idea of communal unity against common enemy/ies coexist and battle. The formation of Muslim League hegemony necessitates subduing all identities to an ostensible Muslim (united) identity. The marriage between Gafur, the oil presser, and Bulu Majhi's divorced wife causes tension, and he is ostracised by the fisherfolk who see the oil pressers as belonging to a lower caste. While criticising the new members of the League Altaf Mandal of Chandiharh:

What kind of Mosolmans are they? They regularly hobnob with the santhals....and under their leadership these guys are collecting grains to their own home. The santhal mosolman adhiyars [sharecroppers] are united, what Pakistan are you imagining? (Elias: 120)

The formal acceptance of Islam has not meant the disappearance of caste. This lived reality of India, poses a real problem for an ideology seeking to build a power base through unity of all adherents of one religion. So Kader meets the leaders of the fisherfolk and tells them that practising casteism will lead to their exclusion from the Muslim *quam* (nation/community). Sharafat or Kalam Majhi are as keen on using caste power as the Muslim League leaders are keen on using religious unity as an instrument for power.

Against both, there is also communal unity. The *Tebhaga* movement was launched by the AIKS and the CPI, among other reasons, to foster class unity and contest communalism

(Chattopadhyay, K. 1997: 25-26) But the historical reality is the eventual set back, in which communalism played an important role. But the tradition of communal unity, was seen explicitly in Neelphamari (Chattopadhyay, K. 1997: 47-48), was also remembered and articulated in popular memory and dreams. Cherag Ali's song is remembered by Tamijer *baap* [father], where Bhavani Pathak's war against the East India Company, was fought in alliance with Muslim *fakirs*:

Bhavani enters battle      the Pathan general alongside  
Thundering his order,      cut down the whites. (Elias: 41)

The Pathan general was Majnu Shah or one of his followers. Himself a *fakir* Cherag Ali followed *fakir* tradition in interpreting dreams. He sings songs that bring back historical memory, and also recites '*sholoks*' (*slokas*, verses, going back to Sanskrit roots, showing once again the interpenetration of communities, here in the very stuff of language) which interpret dreams. His *Khwabnamah*, much sought by the folk-singers Keramat and Baikuntha alike, is a dream of interpretation, trained in tradition.

Dream is not a mere metaphor in *Khwabnama*. Since Muhammad was the last Nabi, according to Islam, direct divine communications stop after him. The link between the material world and the world beyond the material is maintained by the *khwab*, which is 1/46<sup>th</sup> part of the Quran. And so, the novel too links times. Elias presents a response to not only the nation building exercise of the Muslim League, which the very emergence of Bangladesh had smashed, but also the nation building exercise of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. After all, the narrative of the *Sannyasi* revolt that the educated Bengali, and indeed a huge section of the educated Hindu Indian, had read, was Bankim's *Anandamath*. Tanika Sarkar has placed him, and the novel, at a foundational position of Hindu cultural nationalism in *Hindu Wife*, *Hindu Nation*. (Sarkar, T:163-190) In that sense, by the merger of two struggles from the beginning and the end of British rule in Bengal (the *Sannyasi-Fakir* Rebellion and the *Tebhaga* movement), Elias presents us with elements of a counter narrative.

The alternatives that Elias presents are not alternatives only because of the content. Form and content cannot be separated, and there he challenges the Western form of the novel no less than the rules of realism. (Das, S. K.) Purely sociological reading by Subhoranjan Dasgupta ruthlessly cut out of the way the *Khwabs*, Cherag Ali's book, and other elements of

the narrative, which in fact play an important role. But why this should be seen as “magic realism” is not clear. If Bankim Chandra invoking the unknown “*purush*” at the end of the *Anandamath*, or the dialogue between Satyananda and that unknown, does not rule his novel out of historical or “political” novels, there is no need to invoke the extra “magic” from a Latin American tradition that was hardly the inheritance of Elias.

It has been argued that Frantz Fanon’s assertion that a national-liberation struggle is nothing if it does not become a struggle for social emancipation can be seen equally as the stance taken by Elias (Ghosh) Anti-colonialism of the toiling masses is first of all a cry against exploitation, against the domination of capital, before it is a demand for political self-determination. In fact, the search for such self-determination is simultaneously political and socio-economic.

But imperialist rule is not just economic exploitation. It is simultaneously an attempt to deny rationality and national identity to the ‘others’... Asia, Africa, Latin America. It is by challenging the canons of the Western novel, by bringing together the *Khwab*, the *Nama*, and the novel, that Elias achieves his goal. In this novel he constructs an account of the Partition (east), which departs from every mainstream historical position—Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi. He shows that the Muslim League’s communal nationalism, which was reactionary to begin with, thrived only by drawing sustenance from the radical politics of the *Tebhaga* movement.

For Elias, national liberation is a dialectic of two moments — a moment of politically expressing social disaffection and class discontent; and a moment of institutionalization of nation, reification of national identity and the concomitant repression of the moment of social struggle. This dialectical understanding compels us to engage with it, and with similar identity struggles. The engagement has to be such that we are able to see how the form mediates the content.

The *khwab* enables him to examine this in ways a realist novel like *Swaralipi* cannot. Tamijer *baap*, a key character in the novel, encounters the fables in his dreams, thereby transforming those *fictions* into a reality of their own struggles. Within the dream, the events are real. The dream-world and the waking world are inflected by each other. As a result, the dream world is not simply an illusory world, but another world of possible reality. The distinction between ‘myth’ (fiction) and ‘reality’ (fact) is, as a result, blurred. This becomes

evident in the way the ghost of Munshi Barkatullah, shot by a British officer during the *Sannyasi-Fakir* revolt, resides in a *Pakur* (Peepal) tree near the Katlahar *Bil* (a large water body), and keeps irrupting into and transfiguring Tamijer *baap*'s existential reality.

And in the move from Cherag Ali to Keramati Ali, a crucial shift occurs. Keramat does not recite poetry handed down to him by a depersonalized mystic and mythic tradition. He is a singer of new, self-composed songs whose authorship he claims, even if he also seeks inspiration from the book of Cherag Ali. He sings of the peasants' struggles for *Tebhaga*, and then of their dreams for an 'egalitarian' Pakistan. At a meeting of the Muslim League supporters Kader forces him to get up on stage. Despite the pressure he sings:

The enemy of the peasant are zamindars and *jotedars* this is a legitimate word.

So shout for *Tebhaga*, shout loud and say victory to peasants. (Elias:170)

Thus Keramat is a revolutionary poet, not only a mystic. Through this shift, Elias tries to bring in the possibility of a break and the recreation of a new ontology. But as long as labour does not actually overthrow the rule of capital, "real" situations cannot be presented where labour triumphs. That would only replicate the Moscow brand of socialist realism, which demanded that positive proletarian heroes/cults, and party mindedness, alone mattered.

### Subjects or Objects of Social Movements?

The weakness in Elias, if one can talk about weakness in a novelist who has been seen as one of the outstanding novelists of Bengal, is the weaker development of gender markers of communities/nations. Certainly, Elias brings in women no less than men of peasant background. Kulsum, Phuljan, are quite different from the women inhabiting the novels the mainstream left writers had written in the 1940s, or even of Savitri Roy's peasant women. A Radha is a militant woman. But she is found only at the moment of militancy, precisely because that is where the radicalised *bhadralok* and *bhadramahila* lives intersect with her life. Elias brings everyday life of the peasant woman, missing in Roy's novels. Phuljan performs hard work in her father's paddy field, but it goes mostly unrecognised. She is an abandoned woman, and the love between her and Tamij creates stresses in their communities of fisherfolk and peasants. Kulsum remains a substantially underdeveloped character, a mostly silent figure. At the same time, through her, the patriarchal domination of women is brought

out. She was secure only as long as Tamijer *baap*, her guardian, was alive. With his death, Keramat and Kalam Majhi both try to take advantage of her. All kind of conservatism keeps women like Kulsum immobile, dark and deaf. This immobility is shown as part of poor landless subaltern women's life. These women characters are mostly portrayed as lacking independent agency unlike Savitri Roy.

Yet, by highlighting their insecurity and oppression, he does create a contradiction. After all, it was in the *Tebhaga* movement that large numbers of subaltern women came out to fight, in course of which they challenged not merely class oppression but also gendered hierarchies (Custers).

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<sup>1</sup> An ultra-left politics, which denounced Indian independence as fake, and called for instant revolutionary adventurist struggles, mainly under the influence of the Communist Information Bureau, though some local leaders were left with the responsibility when the line changed. This is discussed at greater lengths in *Swaralipi*, and accordingly an explanation of the Left Line is left for the next section. For a contemporary critical Marxist assessment see Chaudhuri.

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<sup>2</sup>An important CPI leader and after the 1964 split, CPI(M) leader. Elected the General Secretary of the CPI in the Second Party Congress (February 1948), and the principal initiator of the Left Line.

<sup>3</sup>The first all India students organisation. Set up in the late 1930s, it was soon to come under CPI hegemony. Eventually, this would lead to a split in the 1940s, with the non-CPI leftists forming a rival AISF (Chattopadhyay, G).

<sup>4</sup> Professor Santimoy Roy. Later in life he would be deeply involved in propagating secularism. (Chakravarty, Gargi, personal interview, 1 September, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Sanskritised form of Bangla.

<sup>6</sup> An armed struggle had broken out in Telangana in 1946, then a part of the Nizam's state of Hyderabad, in which the CPI played an important role. Partly it was a movement against the Nizam's attempts to keep Hyderabad out of India. Simultaneously it was an anti-landlord struggle, a class war of the poor peasants. Once the Nizam's rule was ended and Hyderabad was incorporated in India, the further development of struggles was a matter of slow evolution. But a current developed in the CPI, suggesting that Telangana could become the starting point for a Chinese line in India (Sundarayya; Pavier).

<sup>7</sup>Several characters are loosely based on real people. So Nandalal could also be based on one or more actual party leaders. It is no wonder the party issued a notice against the book.

<sup>8</sup>Sudakshina Ghosh cites the Central Committee resolution as stating: "The Central Committee of the Communist Party of India directs that no book written by the authoress of SWARLIPI should be advertised by our party journals until she unconditionally express regret for writing the book". She further mentions that her husband was suspended. It is probable that the information came from their daughter, who is acknowledged in the Editor's Foreword (Roy 2005: 8, 5).

<sup>9</sup> Rather late in the day, the Bengal CPI supported the Sarat Bose-Suhrawarddy call for a United Bengal. Prior to this, it had given partial support to the call for rights of Muslim nationalities in the so-called Adhikari Thesis. In 1944, it called for a Gandhi-Jinnah unity as the basis for a united India. While leading the tebhaga movement the CPI's perception saw a disjunction between the urban and rural struggles. "Class struggle" was seen more in economic terms, and the political "national movement", where class struggle tended to take a back seat.

<sup>10</sup> Fazlul Huq established this Party at Dhaka (July 1936) with a broad based agrarian programme in a non-communal approach its appeal for abolition of the *zamindari* system and *mahajani* system, peasant proprietorship, reduction of rent rate, among others.