



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Kathamanabi's Autobiography: A Brief History Of The Construction Of Womanhood

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Abstract

Mallika Sengupta is a formidable name in the world of Bengali literature. Through the stroke of her pen, she repeatedly tore apart the heavy veils that have long suppressed women's consciousness. In her essays and poetry, she critiqued the hollow rituals and conventions of society. Sengupta believed that in our society, "womanhood" is artificially constructed—through applying cosmetics, playing with dolls, and assigning domestic chores. From religion to literature, from law to economics, women are confined as men's assistants, sources of inspiration, and bearers of children. Through her works, she boldly challenged this enforced passivity of women across all layers of society.

This philosopher of society, in her writings, transforms women's love, humiliation, neglect, and resistance into expressive forms. We have been gifted numerous poetry and essay collections such as *Ami Sindhur Meye*, *Ardhek Prithibi*, *Purushke Lekha Chithi*, *Purusher Jonno Eksho Kobita*, and *Sitayan*.

In modern Bengali literature, Sengupta's *Kathamanabi* stands as unique, like her other works. Beneath the grandeur of male deeds lies smoldering ashes, and the voice of women rises as *Kathamanabi*—a historical epic of 1,200 lines. In this context, my discussion focuses on the autobiography "The Neglected Woman in Poetry." The author addresses women as fire and honors the history of that fire. Across ages, the history of humiliation, insult, and failure has instilled anger in successive generations of women. This anger has given birth to determination, and this determination knows no boundaries. It unites figures from Kunti to Kalpana Chawla, Madhavi to Medha, Rajia to Ras Sundari Devi.

The first edition of *Kathamanabi* was published in 1999. Paying homage to India's soil, water, air, fire, and people, Sengupta composed this historical narrative. From the Rigveda to the twenty-first century, *Kathamanabi* spans a wide temporal canvas. She strongly rejects any attempt to reduce feminism to a "marketable" concept or trivialize it. According to her, those who treat feminism as a trend are ignorant and misguided. The aim of feminism is not to centralize women's power but to decentralize all forms of patriarchal

authority. Thus, Kathamanabi urges: “Love, yet fight”—and emphasizes that in resistance, care and affection cannot always guide actions. For years, men have oppressed and loved, but society has not reflected upon it.

The history of Kathamanabi begins with Ganga Janma, introducing women characters such as Khana, Draupadi, Rajia, Malati, Medha, and Shahbanu, all speaking in their own voices. The Ganga is both nature and mother, revered at times, yet attacked at others, even by a mischievous lover’s acid. Indian women, unable to be rulers or subjects fully, were forever trapped as queens or subjects’ wives. Only once did a woman rise as the sovereign—Sultana Rajia—whose narrative is recorded in Kathamanabi. Medha Patekar grasped the court and the cremation ground to save women; Malati Mudi of Purulia or Princess Madhavi faced oppression that transcended class. Shahbanu’s struggle for Muslim women’s rights resonates with fiery intensity. Other historical and mythical figures—Gargi, Maitreyi, Surya, the ascetic Akka, Meera Bai, Mahasweta Devi—also populate Sengupta’s consciousness. Kathamanabi pays homage to all these women. This extraordinary work honors the history of self-sacrifice, once again affirming women’s indispensable contribution to Bengali literature.

At the end of the book, Kathamanabi pledges to return, inspiring courage. She commits herself to revolution. Even if we do not directly reap the rewards, the history of our resistance will inspire our daughters, who will one day attain full human dignity. In the analysis of women’s place in modern Bengali literature, Kathamanabi remains profoundly relevant.

Keywords: Kathamanabi, Mallika Sengupta, modern Bengali literature, feminism, history, self-sacrifice

Mallika Sengupta is a powerful name in the world of Bengali literature. In her writings, the wounds and struggles of women’s existence have been vividly portrayed again and again. As a conscious and bold interpreter of feminist thought, she has expressed her views through her poems with deep conviction and artistic finesse. Mallika Sengupta believed that our society is built upon the framework of “male ideology,” shaped by masculine principles, male-defined games, and patriarchal institutions. According to her, women’s identity has always been constructed by men, and within that construction, women’s subordination has been justified and reinforced. From religion to literature, law to economics, women have been portrayed only as companions or assistants to men, never as independent individuals. Even the language of culture and civilization has been created through a masculine perspective, which we must recognize and challenge.

The issues of gender are complex and multifaceted, and cannot be understood merely through a male-centered lens. This problem extends beyond the personal and affects all spheres—economics, politics, history, philosophy, ethics, and literature. Every branch of knowledge and every aspect of daily life is influenced by this patriarchal structure. For women to claim their rightful place in society, they have had to struggle and fight continuously—and literature, too, is no exception.

In modern Bengali literature, women’s place has evolved from the position of absence and subordination to one of self-awareness and creative assertion. In the history of Bengali poetry, Mallika Sengupta’s voice echoes this journey of women’s awakening. She once said, “I don’t write poetry to be called a poet; I write poetry because I feel compelled to speak.”

In modern Bengali literature, the question of women’s identity has become an important subject. Writers like Taslima Nasrin have brought this discussion to the forefront through their bold and realistic portrayals of women’s lives. The idea that women who write lead carefree or privileged lives is entirely wrong. Their writings often emerge from deep experiences of pain, struggle, and resistance—not from any extraordinary event, but from the everyday wounds and realities of their existence.^[1]

In modern Bengali literature, Mallika Sengupta's *Kothamanobi* stands out as an exceptional creation, much like her other poems. Beneath the glorified image of masculine fame and pride, she uncovered the buried voice of women's fiery consciousness in this historical epic of 120 sections.

In this work, which I will discuss in my presentation titled "The Neglected Woman in Poetry," the author has reinterpreted history through a woman's fiery perspective and with equal dignity. The first edition of *Kothamanobi* was published in 1999.

She composes the language of feminism to salute the soil, climate, and people of India. The period of the discourse of feminism ranges from the Vedic age to the twenty-first century.

This professor of social philosophy is an exceptional person. Love, insult, neglect, and protest have taken form in the author's writings. We have been gifted countless poems, essays, and plays like 'Ami Sindhur Meye' (I am the daughter of Sindhu), 'Ardhek Prithibi' (Half the Earth), 'Purusher Chithi' (Letter to a Man), 'Purusher Jonye Ekosho Kobita' (A Hundred Poems for Men), and 'Sitaayan' (The Saga of Sita). She is completely displeased to confine the issue of feminism to being merely 'fashionable' or solely to the domain of 'feminist' discussions. She pities the ignorance of those who consider the issue of 'feminism' to be 'pointless' or 'fashionable'. The goal of feminism is not the centralization of female power. Rather, it attempts to decentralize all forms of patriarchal power.

Therefore, regarding the role of feminism, she says: "Love and be logical." If you want to protest, does it mean you can't love anyone? Can't you love someone? For all these thousands of years, the man has oppressed and loved. But the people didn't think about it. Feminism smears charcoal on the cheek of this prejudiced, ignorant society.

Although the most encouraging aspect is that her contribution to today's Bengali literature is not simply as a female writer but as a true literary figure, this long journey of achievement was not possible for the countless women writers we see today simply because of a lack of acquaintance with that number in the past, yet her self-expression has emerged from that challenging, stifling atmosphere. Although the rebellious female writers among the litterateurs of the past are derived from the enlightened class of our society.

What about the standards of literature? That parameter is stained with soot in many cases. When Taslima Nasrin sought the opinion of a fellow writer regarding her own skill, he replied, "Your writing is good for a woman's writing."^[2] That is, the standard of good writing is determined among women writers, as if women are another species. Thus, her struggle is as a woman, not as a human being. This discussion of ours is a small effort to pay tribute to that symbolic woman writer.

The historical materialism of Karl Marx is essentially the history of all of us. History is not bound by a specific evolution or production. Therefore, it is a witness to the evolution of women's history, consciousness, thought, and ideas. The age-old history of neglect, insult, and failure is now transforming into rage stored within women. This rage requires no organization; it has no specific structure. It has already happened. From the Krittibas [Ramayan] to Kadambari, from Madhabi to Rajiya, the beautiful goddess Suro Sundari Devi [are all part of it].

The history of *Kothamanobi* (The Woman of Stories) begins with the. Female characters like Ganga. Khana, Draupadi, Razia, Malati, Medha, and Shahabanu have appeared simultaneously in the testimony of *Kothamanobi*. The nature of the Ganges is that of an ordinary woman; at times, she is worshipped as a mother, and at other times, she is attacked with a knife by a 'wicked' lover. The women of India, who could never be either a king or a subject, have forever remained the wife of a king or the wife of a subject. Only once did the glory belong to Delhi. The testimony of that Sultan Razia has been recorded in the writing of *Kothamanobi*. Medha Patekar (a character or a writer/activist) has held the hand of a woman, leading her from the royal court to the crematorium to save her.

Purulia's Malti Mudi, or the Princess of Madhavi, is a metaphor for the depth of struggle where class boundaries are shattered. Shahabanu's struggle for the rights of Muslim girls is a fiery chapter in her life. Additionally, many other characters have crowded her consciousness in this work. In this book, Ganga, Maitreyi, the nun Akka, Mirabai, and Mahasweta Devi, Kathamanobi pay respects to everybody them. This extraordinary work salutes the wounded history, and 'Kothamanobi' proves once again that the contribution of women to Bengali literature is undeniable."

"At the beginning of the book, the poet introduces Nadinmukh. Nandinmukh is a ritual, and in the modern sense, it is an auspicious ceremony or a memorial function performed for the ancestors. It is here that the poet's extraordinary lines make us shiver:

"I am Draupadi, ring the bell, we are here.

My striptease is happening in Hastinapur, in Howrah." [3]

Today, Kothamanobi (The Woman of Stories) is the conscience of the people. Kothamanobi is surprised, Kothamanobi is hurt, Kothamanobi is ashamed, when society finds it difficult to accept a protesting woman. The women who believe that a woman's protest destroys domestic happiness are not representatives of Kothamanobi. Women who protests are not the ones whose domestic life is happy. This belief is utterly baseless. Protest can be made in any era, even when her name was Krishna (Draupadi). The royal lineage of Hastinapur first posed a question to India: 'Who gave the husband the right to bet the wife?' [4]

Draupadi's dignified stance simplifies the public striptease, even making it a public spectacle. Her protest, however, did not take the side of any of the Kauravas or Pandavas present. When the trickster attempted to anoint her with the flower of dishonor (the act of disrobing her), Draupadi wanted a boon—neither for herself but for her husbands. This was her protest, directed at her silent husbands. The hands that laughed while allowing her to be dishonored, those hands that touched Draupadi that day, are still spread across the world....." [5]

Next comes the story of the Ganga, for India is a land of rivers. It goes without saying that the Ganga is boundless; for the narrator, it feels as if she has merged with the river itself. At times, she has taken pride in seeing herself as the snow-white waters of the Ganga, which even Lord Shiva embraced. Yet, the Ganga's pristine waters have now been sullied by offerings of decayed flowers, external urine, and waste from leather factories. Even so, the narrator becomes sentimental today when countless men and women bow to the river, when mischievous young lovers seek solitude, when the Ganga flows near Hastinapur, when memories of the brutal sati ritual resurface, and when the harsh lives of the roadside prostitutes along the riverbank move her heart.

"One evening, if a girl earns a hundred rupees, the police, brokers, goons, and landlords take forty; the remaining twenty barely covers her vegetables, rice, lentils, and medicine. Moreover, her weak elderly father and frail siblings are deprived by society of their rightful chance to survive, simply because of her sexual labour. And the gentlemen customers, they steal the youth of these girls, like washing tulsi leaves in vain," [6] she reflects.

Whenever the narrator grants herself freedom of choice, she becomes the 'villainess'—history sees everyone from Ganga to Nur Jahan through such a lens. Patriarchal history says that Nur Jahan took control of the administration by exploiting Jahangir's weaknesses. Yet, it does not speak of Jahangir's political incompetence or Nur Jahan's acumen and skill. As Rajia said:

"Where there is no emperor, whose signal will mark the dawn?

At night, whose cup will the harem fill?" [7]

No one could consider Rajia her master; instead, everyone wanted to make her theirs. The history of Rajia is a history of love, betrayal, and cruelty.

Men have never been able to love like women. Trusting this, the narrator tells the story of Medha. Medha's love for rivers has made her a figure of Monibeli village, where the destitute find shelter and survival through her. There, people learn to live anew, sacrificing for the country while nurturing their own bright future. She organizes not only women but also men, giving leadership to build the nation, protect the environment. A cluster of brilliance means a cluster of determination—those who live with the Narmada, the Ganga desires Medha as her companion. This green woman has the power to give birth to a new Ganga.

When Madhavi is born, we witness that historic figure: Madhavi, daughter of the mighty King Yayati, who is treated as her father's property. When the king treats his daughter as merchandise, to atone for his inability to give guru dakshina, the epic portrays the father as a great benefactor. Yet, Princess Madhavi becomes the same girl whose kin must still sell her in some dark alley to sustain the household. Madhavi's extraordinary story has been immortalized in verse. Time and again, one man after another, one child after another, must be left behind, with the white horse valued at a lakh, its one ear black—this is the price of accumulation. In the end, the criminal Galab's marriage proposal leaves Madhavi bloodied, an image of the heart's bleeding we, perhaps, still witness on the steps of women's lives.

The 1985 Shahbanu case also finds its place in the narrator's account. Challenging Muslim personal law before the Indian judiciary, she argued that the circumstances under which the Quran and Manusmriti were written no longer exist; the world has moved far ahead. Hence, change in the rules is essential. Even as opposition to triple talaq ignited flames across Muslim India, the narrator remained fearless.

Yet, society views fearless women with a suspicious eye, as it did Khanā, whose tongue was cut out as punishment. How can a woman become an astrologer, protect her household's honor? Barah and Mihir imprisoned Khana in a cage; she could not recover her tongue, and the damage was immense. Women must not surpass men in aptitude; Khana dies repeatedly in this society. The ability to protest has long been severed. One might even say, following Darwin's theory, that when a body part becomes less necessary, it eventually disappears—the woman's tongue is lost, her voice gone.

At the end of the book, the narrator's promise to return inspires courage. She pledges herself to revolution. Even if we do not personally reap its rewards, the history of our rebellion will inspire our daughters, who will one day claim full human dignity. Even if society scorns our unbridled spirit as "two cut ears," the truth of fierce winds, like Mallika Sen Gupta, is urgently needed today. In the analysis of women's place in modern Bengali literature, the narrator remains profoundly relevant.

References

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5. *ibid*, Draupadi Janma, *Kathamanabi*, p. 15
6. *ibid*, Ganga Janma, *Kathamanabi*, 1999, p. 19
7. *ibid*, Rajia Janma, *Kathamanabi*, 1999, p. 23