

Goon's Glorification of 21st February through Reinterpretation of History

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Abstract

This paper argues that Nirmalendu Goon in his poetry *Ekusher Ekush Kabita (Twenty One Poems on 21st February)* expands the advocacy Michael Madhusudan Dutt advanced in "Bangabhasa" long back in 1865. This collection is an orchestration of his love for his mother tongue Bangla, a tribute to the martyrs of the movement. In capturing the colors and contours of the movement, he has tried to explore the spirit of it and portray it from different angles resulting in a comprehensive literary picture of history of this juncture. This study stresses that the poet ventures to reinterpret the impacts of the day and links it to the core issues and elements of our life and the society. He also places the martyrs as idols and ideals and their way of sacrifice for the nation as the cherished way of life to get to the destination for a man striving to lead a meaningfully dignified life. Through a close reading of the poems in the collection, the paper shows that Goon has brought out the potencies and potentials of the day in relation to our history, struggle and emancipation.

Keywords: 21st February, reinterpret, impacts, importance, ideals, struggle and emancipation

Introduction

Ekusher Ekush Kabita (Twenty One Poems on 21st February), arguably the only collection of poems on 21st February by a single poet (one poem is, however, taken from Michael Madhusudan Dutt titled "Bangabhasa" which might have been included, according to the poet, following Dutt's wish), is written by Nirmalendu Goon, a preeminent poet of Bangladesh. He believes himself to be a confessional poet who "has tried to articulate the truths earned by experiences in various branches of literature" (Goon, 2013, p. 8). He was born in 1945 in Netrokona district and published the first poem titled "Notun Kandari" ("New Pioneer") in a magazine named *Uttor Akash* before his matriculation. His first book of poetry titled *Premanghshur Rokto Chai* was published in 1970. That time he got to have a strong conviction regarding his fate and responsibility as a poet. As he shares, just after publishing this book,

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It seemed to me, I am blessed by God with an unsurpassed life. I am a poet, poet and poet. I believed I was born in this Bangla because of some inexplicable mystery of nature. I believed this society; this time needed a neelkantha poet like me" (Goon, 2013, p. 8).

Since then he continues writing on diverse genres successfully and has written quite a number of books along with three autobiographical pieces - *Amar Chhelebel*, *Amar Konthoshor* and *Atma Kotha* 1971. An avowed Marxist, Goon has keen interest in class struggle, uncelebrated potentials of the marginalized, historical events of Bangladesh, protests and sacrifices of the people, and above all, love for women. He actively participated in the socialist politics in the pre-independence era and took part in the Liberation War in 1971. He is equally adept at writing poems and prose. He got all the major literary awards of Bangladesh as acknowledgement of his creations. He was awarded Bangla Academy Literary Award for poetry in 1982, Ekushey Padak in 2001 and Independence Day Award in 2016.

It was in 1962 when the poet completed his school education and entered into college days, and for the first time he participated in the morning procession barefooted and paid tribute by placing floral wreaths on the small Shaheed Minar built on a roadside to the eastern periphery of the Mymensingh Pourasava. He recounts the impacts in *Ekusher Ekush Kabita (Twenty One Poems on 21st February)* thus, "Then an intensely violent emotional wave emerged in my mind revolving around 21st February and Shaheed Minar" (Goon, 2009, p. 7), and he started writing poems on the historical event and continued writing every year. The poems in this collection have been written in a long span of time with equally intense zeal.

The collection starts with "Bangabhasa", a famous sonnet by Michael Madhusudan Dutt who, in Azfar Hussain's words, "exemplarily enacts the dialectics of tensions and transactions between colonial modernity and indigeneity". While collecting the dispersedly written poems on 21st February, Goon counted them twenty and one fell short. All on a sudden, he came across this poem and it seemed to him, "the best poem on 21st February is surely this one" and recounting his thwarted attempt at adolescent to steal this poem for publishing in a magazine in his name, he wishes to add Dutta "to the bloodstream emanating from the movement of the Bangalees to protect the Bangla language" (Goon, 2009, p. 8). The first sonnet composer Dutta is lauded for "the creation of new ideas and forms in Bengali literature" (Sadiq, 2020, n.p). Dutta who once dismissed Bangla as "a language of the fishermen" (quoted in Nag, 2007, p.429) for not having the ability to produce great literature ironically was "convinced about creating a modern identity for the Bengali language and literature" and is considered as "one of the foremost architects of

Bengali nationality" (Nag, 2007, p.429). In his famous sonnet "Bangabhasa" he attempted to explore the unexplored bounties of the country and the language. With his harshest realization of failure for literary fame in Europe, he wrote the poem and came convincingly to a conclusion that Bangla and the land of Bangla are full of gems and jewels of varied nature, the creative minds should not be oblivious of that fact. Following that call Goon has engaged himself in exploring the potentials of 21st February in this collection of poems.

Revisiting 21st February through Goon's Poems

Goon from the beginning of his poetic career sets himself apart "in terms of the map of his own country and own nation, and dreams for and desires of the future" (Kudrat-E-Huda, no p/n). In that pursuit, he has chosen the Language Movement of 1952 as a pivotal point to rewrite and reinterpret the historical juncture in relation to its inevitable associatedness with our life and society as his poems are "considered as the true document of the history of Bangladesh" and he always "has taken it a mission to set to search for free life" (Zaman, 2019, n.p.).

The poet has identified language as a site which is energizing and empowering on its own merit in this poetry. This geographical imagery permeates the poems in this collection to give an insight to the potentials of language conscience that is closely knit to patriotic feelings, emotions and activism, and the poet thoroughly in his career "simply followed his conscience" (Choudhury, A. 2016, n.p.). In the poem "Ki Malyo Debe Dao" ("Give me what wreath you wish to give"), he wishes to be immortal under the feet of the martyrs and eagerly wants to be ornamented by the proud garland to be attributed by those sacrificing souls. He lays all his possessions without any condition at the feet of those idealized heroes and takes an oath to accomplish the impossible in exchange for blessings from them. Oneness that the poet expresses with the martyrs goes to that extent that he can be self-effacing, is ready to accept a small space like the graves of the martyrs and is always ready to be another martyr beside them because this self-internalized location has empowered him to visualize transformative impacts among the people across the nations,

As if my finger turns into thousands of minarets of the martyrs
Has spread from hands to hands of the people
What reasons can there be for me to be frightened? (p.17)

And the path trodden by the martyrs are so well grounded and well pronounced that it brings out the bravery to fight against the oppressive state apparatus as they did and makes the poet prepared for any sacrifices for the country in times of need, and that too will be an act of defiance and dignified pride as he pronounces thus,

Look, my soul is enriched with the pride of such death

...

I will be immortal under your feet

Give me what wreath you wish to give (p.17)

The empowering dimension of the sacrifices of the martyrs and the energizing imaginary emanating from the discourses based on the Language Movement are captured as a sure ground to be best seated in the desired destination after death. By elevating the positionality of the martyrs as immortals, he defiantly articulates his determination to be immortal not beside them, rather in the small negligible space under their feet.

Goon takes to pen for addressing the pressing issues of the society as he saw the wounds in the society and felt the responsibility at the beginning of his career. So he writes, "I was compelled to take up pen against the oppressors. Thus the struggle of my poetry turns into the poetry of struggle" (quotes in Khan, R.U. 2014, n.p.). In the poem "Rajdondo" ("Scepter"), the poet picks the mission of rewriting the history of Bangladesh which after independence has been tarnished through corrupt politicians, hypocrites, bigots and through acts of murder, assassination, communism, hatred and darkness as Saiduzzaman points out, "He has properly contained the current time". He recapitulates the history of Bangladesh focusing on the major dents he identifies like the defeat of Kazi Nazrul Islam in election in 1927, the ultimate loss of the inner strength and heroic power through the atrocious assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. He questions the election conducted afterwards and pinpoints some emerging problems that are rotting the society inside like communism, hatred and exploitation. In that background, he marks Bangladesh as a ground where he cannot be sure whether the adolescent whom he met once in a train and got a promise that he would cast a vote for him is still alive and fine or not, "Are you well, khoka? Are you alive, my brother" (p.18). He reminds us through these articulations of a site where Nirmal Sen once wrote emphasizing "the guarantee of death in safety" (2009). But the poet denies to be left as victimized rather he comes up with the conviction he nourishes in regard to our culture and language. So he puts forward a proposal, a short manifesto to make all people happy, "You will surely be happy if you receive me with love" and this love relation with the common people is epitomized in the iconic song on the language movement by Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, "My Brother's Blood Spattered 21 February" (Translation by Kabir Chowdhury).

He identifies the spirit of the song with the oneness of the leaders and the led in weal and woe saying if voted, "I'll be your sorrow, will be your solvency and

will be secularism" (p.19). Here he interprets language as the source of happiness by uniting all people in one level with emphasis on the philosophy expressed in the iconic song internalized by the people.

The writer has advanced arguments in favor of language that the relation between the Bangla and its speakers is so embedded internally that there is no question of assessment of exchange and both are one interchangeably connected and thus he has articulated, according to Abul Kashem Fazlul Haque, his "indebtedness to his mother tongue". 21st February is such a day that accommodates inside us easily and the poet expresses it in the poem "Ekusher Chorha" ("The Rhyme on 21 February") saying, "You are my inner house" and the presence of linguistic implications are so pervasive that Bangla can be identified in cooking materials, food items, idolized political characters, floral wreaths and even the sari for the bridal chamber. Thus the poet has extended the imaginary of the 21 February to daily life and its associative issues and factors.

21st February is placed against all other things and beings associated in our life, history, kings-queens, historical places, valuable possessions, beloved, sacred books in the poem titled "Ekushey February 1999", and defines the position of language and its history above all and everything. He has placed it against forgetfulness. In the process, we forget many of the inevitable things and figures in some stages of our life. Even the oath we take touching the sacred books goes into oblivion in the course of our practical life, but February and the martyrs never get cornered in our memory lane for the weight and significance they carry for our life. The sway of Bangla and its associative history remains till the last moment of life,

When death reaches
the doorstep,
When we spread wings
in the air;
When the eyes gets closed
for exhaustion-,
Even then me as a Bnagalee
Call your name. (p.28)

Bangla is an inseparable element of our life and it equates with all of our feelings and emotions. In the poem "Bhasar Gaan" ("The Song of Language"), the poet regards our love and affection, dreams and hopes, peace and happiness, weal and woe as identical to the Bangla language. The language is traced in the graceful beauty of our mother's face. All these equations of love are not confined to any location; rather the people from all walks of life give expression to their existence in the language often through the creations of the poet,

In my stories and my tunes
In the remote places and in towns
All working people sing in a voice
Bangla language, Bangla language. (p.26)

Goon looks into the events of 21st February as a converging ground and an empowering site for the people that assure them of the ownership they desire for dreaming a brighter future. In the poem titled "Ekusher Alpona", he considers the day as an agent to give voice to the voiceless and "the citizen who previously led life like the cavemen turn articulating in celebration of the Shaheed" (p.22). With boost from the event, they get transformed and exert a transformative impact on the society through a missionary engagement.

With the panacea of light at hand
Look, here comes the truth seeking people where darkness is.
With the symbol of flowers at hand
Look, here comes the people with artistic zeal, in and with dreams.
With the dreams of beauty
Look, here comes the progressive people, in spring. (p.22)

With these positive impacts of 21st February, the people come barefooted with befitting badges and the girls chained otherwise come out humming the tunes of the iconic song and they come close to the elevated and emancipated position that is close to "the dreams of the martyrs" (p.22). The day is so empowering that the poet can find himself in the rising sun of the morning, a symbol of bright beginning, in the dew-splashed red flowers. The day gives him the lifelong sense of ownership of a space, the dreamy home land and so he can articulate,

After so many days, oh, so many days, this town becomes mine. (p.22)

The poet has a strong sense of indebtedness to the event of the 21st February and so is always engaged in sincerest efforts possible in his capability to pay tribute to the day. In that effort, he as a poet can best do one thing and that is composing poetry of finest quality. The poem "Ekuser Kobita" is composed and dedicated with that intention. He picks up the best combination working in our life and nature and wishes this poem to be one such best tribute to the day. He considers the poem to the day as the petals are most suited to the branches of Shimul, the red shade in the cheek of an adolescent girl, water poured in a tree, a boatman in the boat with sail, a path under the feet of a pedestrian and birds in the blue sky. He explores desires and its satiety in the union of the rivers in the sea, and a woman after copulating

with a man, and this poem too is charged with feelings for being dedicated to the event. He finally takes the day as a site to protest against all forms of oppression and suppression as Anwar A Khan (2019) finds him, "writing poems potently protesting the very sad episode of our history" (n.p.) and so is this poem, and this aspect of his poem is manifested thus,

Thus this poem of mine
Is a protest as hard as concrete in the name of Ekushey. (p. 23)

The event of our Language Movement is not just a historical event like others; rather Goon finds the beginning of the Bangalees in this juncture. He considers this day and its conscience to be a rebirth of a nation that led them to independence in two decades of time. "Amar Jonmo" is a reworking on the mythological birth of Kush with a blessing mantra by Valmiki where the poet recounts the event when Luv is lost and the muni being worried about his encounter with Sita applied his spirituality and thus Luv came into being. The poet too finds an affinity with the event of Ekushey, and affirms the fact that the Bangalees have had a new birth on the day, a birth that gave them life full of emancipatory zeal to liberate from all forms of oppressions. He, however, differs with the mythological event in that our birth is not in the imagination of the poet, rather we were born in the harsh reality and so it has compatible practical value. He articulates thus,

No, I am not sculpted in the imaginary Kush of Balmiki-
I was born through the blood spattered immortal Ekushey. (p.24)

The poem thus reminds us of the sacrifices of the martyrs and the blood stained history of the nation with an implied prospect as well as responsibility that we must face the realities as was faced by the martyrs and thus we can be liberated. Goon's exploration of the potentials of the day expands to the Bangla letters in the poem titled "Gitiguccho" and declares that the wreaths made of the letters surpass any such wreaths made of flowers. This garland sewn together of the letters makes us optimistic and empowered to win over even death because the lives sacrificed are unheard of in human history. So the letters that compose the language have presented us a song and the poet wishes, "May this song be the harbinger of emancipation of the motherland" (p.27).

The discussion above makes it a point that Goon has successfully made an artistic presentation of a historical juncture and the portrayal intends to take the nation to light. Khan, R.U. (2014) rightly assesses his poetry thus, "The poetic world that he has concretized will show light to the Bangalee nation for a long time" (n.p.).

Conclusion

The poet has undertaken an incessant journey to explore the multidimensionality of 21st February that goes manifested or implied in all the poems. Goon is tireless in unveiling the beauty and power of the day in different spheres of our life and society. In doing so, he finds the day as the beginning of a new journey of a nation and initiation of a mission to emancipation. The day is seen as an inspiration for the people of all ages to venture for a future free from all forms of oppression, suppression, and exploitation. The martyrs of the day are idolized to such an extent that, according to the poet, a small negligible space under their feet can ensure immortality for the coming generations, and their means of struggle is deemed best suited for making a life meaningful. The day is romanticized too and has been compared to the first love and its associative feelings and emotion with assigned ascendancy to the day. The poet thus glorifies the achievement of the day and celebrates its potentials and potencies by rewriting history and reinterpreting the meanings. His manifested intention is to feel the day as the beacon and the beginning of the glorious journey of a glorious nation.

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