



Free Will And Destiny In Bina Barua's Along The High Road

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Abstract

This write-up reads free will and destiny in Bina Barua's classic novel titled *Along the High Road* (1944). Free will implies a person's individual freedom in taking decisions in his/her life. Destiny refers to a kind of power which is beyond the individual's control and supposedly controls a person's deeds. Therefore, both Free will and destiny work as two opposing forces in how the future of a person pans out. While sometimes it seems that everything in this world is predestined, often people have a hand in their own destinies. Barua's *Along the High Road* is a realistic portrayal of the conflict between these two forces. For Barua, destiny has a bigger role to play in the fate of individuals. My paper is a sincere endeavour to trace how these two forces are represented in Barua's novel.

Keywords: Free will, Destiny, Existentialism, Translation, Love, Patriarchy

Introduction

Birinchi Kumar Barua's (pen-name Bina Barua) *Jivanar Batat* (trans. *Along the High Road*) was published way back in 1944, and narrates the lived lives of a society that was the witness to the reformist culture of Indian Freedom Movement. The myriad of social and cultural experience of living at that point in time and the expectation of a progressive society that was supposedly being given shape has been captured by the narrative universe in a manner that moves the reader even today. It is perhaps understood that all narratives intend to give expression to the complexities involved in the process of living and the manner in which the society of the times too, is moulded.

The novel is largely seen to incorporate many themes such as love, suffering, jealousy, crime, patriarchy, superstition and so forth. But the most visible and poignant theme that this paper is going to deal with is free will and destiny. Both free will and destiny are in conflict throughout Barua's novel. Before entering into the nuances of free will and destiny, let us have a look at the storyline of the novel first.

The novel opens with a marriage ceremony of Aaideu, the eldest daughter of Bhagadatta, Mauzadar of Morongi. The occasion eventually brings Kamalakanta, a young man known to the bride's elder brother. They come to attend the ceremony from a college at Guwahati. As a friend of Krishnadatta, Kamalakanta is well received by everyone present at the wedding. As soon as they come to Mauzadar's home, Kamalakanta comes in contact with Tagar, the beautiful daughter of Bapuram Bora who is the closest neighbour of the Mauzadar. Having seen the charming attitude and cute face of Tagar, Kamalakanta instantly falls in love with her. Tagar also reciprocates his feelings for her and gives her consent in an impulsive moment. Kamalakanta, a day before his departure, in an impulsive moment, puts his golden ring on her finger declaring his resolve to marry her.

Kamalakanta's father Mahikanta, a clerk in the Collectorate, aims high for his brilliant son and finally succeeds in cornering the prized post of a Sub-Deputy Collector by dint of the assistance from Manik Hazarika, a Rai Bahadur, obviously influential with the colonial Commissioner. But for this prestigious position, a price has to be paid. Rai Bahadur offers his eligible and accomplished daughter Suprova in marriage to Kamalakanta. His father Mahikanta writes a letter to Tagar's father breaking off the engagement which was previously done with the consent of both the families. The sudden arrival of the letter of denial from Kamalakanta's father appears to Bapuram Bora as a shock making him momentarily distraught but he hardly gets sympathetic support from any quarter. To be rescued from public gossip and scandal Tagar's father marries her off to Dharani, a weaving instructor from Roha, a faraway village.

From the day she is made to marry Dharani her life turns upside-down. Tagar, a woman from the lower strata of the social hierarchy is taunted, ridiculed and jibed not just by her mother-in-law but also by the other women of that locality. She is in fact left with nothing in her life except some soothing words from Dharani. She is wanted to behave and act as per her mother-in-law's accord, and for the slightest deviation from this Tagar has to a lot.

Eventually the Freedom Movement emerges and it spreads to every nook and corner of the countryside. Dharani also joined the Movement and thus he is looked down upon by then current government officials. Dharani too leads a group of village folk going against the foreign policies of the government and inspires them to do something for the cause of motherland.

When Dharani is away from home, police looks for him and not finding him in the village take his wife Tagar along with Kamali, her only daughter to the police station. The police officer humiliates her in every possible way; but she stands the test with dignity. Having come to know of Tagar's detention in the police station, Dharani rushes to the police station and surrenders himself. Dharani is put behind bars like thousands of others who are participating in the Freedom Movement.

Dharani is sentenced to two years of imprisonment. But during his stay there he develops tuberculosis and it resulted in his early release from jail. On the way back home Tagar remembers how the police inspector's greedy look swallowed her from head to feet and how he threatened to crush her under his feet for all her defiance. She had almost fainted and, holding her daughter's hand, slumped to the ground.

With Dharani in jail, Tagar leads a forlorn existence and as old memories crowd in, she lives both in her conscious and unconscious mind with the happenings of the past. She sometimes recalls how her father cruelly treated in judging her harshly and without reason. She sheds tears and tries to forget her early life or runs away from the golden moment in her life which now appears to be grand and alluring like the dome of a temple seen from a distance.

Ever since Dharani returns from jail, Tagar starts to take special care of him as he is suffering from tuberculosis. She does her best to rescue her husband from this fatal health disorder. Although Tagar with the help of a physician named Dr. Golap Barua nurses him back to recovery for some time, it doesn't really last and Dharani finally succumbs to his illness and passes away leaving Tagar to carry all the burdens alone.

Dr. Golap Barua, a kind and honest widower of the locality, eventually gets deeply attached to Tagar's little daughter Kamali. But the villagers view his closeness with Tagar's home as adulterous and Tagar harshly punishes Kamali for going to meet the doctor.

As an ironic twist at this point in time, Kamalakanta appears yet again as a newly appointed local revenue official. His wife, Suprova, not knowing who Tagar is, calls the latter to teach her a few weaving designs as Tagar already knew the skill of the same quite well and joined a weavers' guild headed by Dr. Golap Barua. Meanwhile, there is a theft in Kamalakanta's house. The needle of suspicion points to Tagar for none else apparently had much access to his house. The police raid the house of Dharani and find a ring of Kamalakanta's in the syringe box previously given by the doctor to Tagar's daughter. When the police inspector brings the ring in front of Kamalakanta, He instantly remembers that it is the same ring that he gave to Tagar years ago at the wedding of Mauzadar's daughter. Having come to know about the innocence of Tagar he stares at the ring complacently for a long time.

Free Will and Destiny in *Along the High Road* :

Free will is a person's ability to choose how to act in a certain situation which is beyond the control of destiny or God. Destiny, on the other hand, is a kind of power which is believed to control what is going happen in future. The conflict between free will and destiny as a theme is transparent in Barua's novel as it is seen to serve the purpose of a connecting link between these two opposite forces.

Bina Barua in this novel not only considers the fates of a few characters but also he is making his characters to be the representatives of thousand other real characters of conservative early and mid-twentieth century rural setting in Assam. Just like Tagar, many village girls of that time were never allowed to say anything with regard to their marriage. In a serious concern like marriage a girl had to choose someone who had already been chosen by her parents; although it went against her will. She was supposed to be submissive. Since women education and empowerment were not the society's priority at that time, they were just made to learn how to cook and manage household chores, so that their parents didn't have to worry about their daughter when she would be given to someone's hand in marriage.

Bapuram Bora, Tagar's father, too did the same when Kamalakanta's father, Mahikanta wrote a letter to him breaking off his engagement with Tagar. It was just a sudden call of destiny in which Bapuram Bora could do nothing about it.

Then out of his sense of insecurity about his daughter, Bora hurriedly married Tagar off to Dharani without thinking of her psychological readiness. It was Tagar's destiny solely which brought her to Dharani's house.

Although Kamalakanta married someone else named Suprova, the eligible daughter of Manik Hazarika, a Rai Bahadur, it was not part of his Free will. Suprova's father assisted Kamalakanta in getting a prestigious job under Assam Civil Service (ACS).

When the aspect of Free will and destiny is taken into account, it is often discussed under the domain of Existentialism. Existentialism is a late 19th century, and more aptly 20th century philosophy which reflects some of the most prominent features of the cultural, social and political environment that determines the destiny of the people who have undergone the traumas, uncertainties and enigmas of the two World Wars.

Existentialism is not a philosophical school like rationalism or empiricism. It is hard to isolate common doctrines from the writings of various existentialist thinkers, who subscribe to diverse views. Nevertheless, we may identify some common themes and concerns. Most of the existentialist thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Karl Jaspers, Jean Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, Martin Heidegger, etc., emphasize the importance of an individual man living his own life, rather than just being a member in the crowd. They all consider existential questions like death, meaning of human existence, man and God, values in life, nature of relationship etc., as important.

As cited above, free will refers to the freedom of an individual, so we can deduce that the novel under discussion has an existential appeal so far as its subject matter and time period are concerned. At the start of the novel itself both Tagar and Kamalakanta reveal their free will to be united by tying the knot one day. But at the same time the opposite force called destiny runs parallelly, dismissing everything they wished for.

During Kamalakanta's stay at Mauzadar's home he encounters Tagar and instantly falls in love with her as already mentioned above. After Aaideu's wedding is over, Kamalakanta is told by Mauzadar's wife about Tagar while she says: "Her father wanted to teach her English. We prevented it" (Barua 24). This statement made by the lady shows how the free will of Bapuram Bora, father of Tagar gets shattered while trying to educate his daughter. It was, in fact, a very commonplace situation for the then Assamese society to provide formal education to the women. They were rather psychologically trained to practice how to cook and manage household activities religiously. Although a few well-to-do families could dare to admit their girls in schools and colleges, it was negligible. Bapuram Bora and Tagar had nothing much to do with it, except surrendering to the situation.

Free will as a theme in the novel can be said as a driving force that eventually leads the characters to face the predestined harsh realities of life. For example, when it comes to the wedding of Kamalakanta with Suprova, daughter of Rai Bahadur, Manik Hazarika who assisted him get a prestigious post of Sub-Deputy Collector, Mahikanta spoke to his wife:

"It is for nothing that God has made you a female? Don't you understand why Rai Bahadur wants the horoscope of our eldest son to be examined by the astrologer? He wants to see if the horoscope of his daughter matches with that of our son" (Barua 54-55).

Although it was not a crime when Tagar reciprocated Kamalakanta's feelings for her but still she had to pay much for it later on. When Mahikanta, Kamalakanta's father sent a letter to Tagar's father breaking off Kamalakanta's engagement with Tagar, the news appeared to Tagar and her father as no less than a thunder and without thinking for a second about the state of mind and psychological readiness of Tagar, her father Bapuram Bora married her off to a faraway village with a guy named Dharani, a weaving instructor from Roha. This is how Tagar's desire for being Kamalakanta's wife is dismissed and she is ultimately made to meet her real fate or destiny.

So far we have discussed how quite often a person's individual freedom or free will is hijacked by his or her destiny. Now, let us see how destiny as a theme works in the novel.

We have ample dialogues in the novel which epitomize the significance and inevitability of destiny. One such dialogue we encounter at the initiation itself: "Touching her head softly one of them was saying, "Why are you grieving my dear? Are you the one to give a daughter in marriage? This is the way of the world" (Spoken to Mauzadar's wife by one elderly lady, Barua 19). This very statement made by the lady is trying to soothe Mauzadar's wife while her daughter, Aaideu is being given to someone in marriage. When the lady says that "...this is the way of the world" she, in effect, is stating exactly what a daughter is really going to confront in future regardless of all other circumstances.

Besides this, we also find many a times in the novel where the aspect of fate or destiny is governing the narrative of the plot, thereby overcoming the concept of free will of a person. The very letter sent by Kamalakanta's father to Tagar's father breaking off his son's earlier engagement with Tagar bears the note of destiny vividly. This letter is a sudden call of destiny hinting what is really going to happen in near future. This may be called a turning point in the novel which, in effect, shatters all the aspirations of the leading characters, especially of Tagar, her father, and Kamalakanta, and also makes them see the reality with open eyes. After this, the life of Tagar turns upside down.

Having read the letter of disapproval from Mahikanta, Bapuram Bora sank into the chair like an epilepsy patient. He was totally shocked at the news and could not react to it properly. By the time the Mauzadar came to him and having learnt the conditioning of Since we know that destiny is something which is believed to be a kind of power whether transcendental or otherwise, it has no necessary connection with human efforts. Through the above quotation, we can see how the Mauzadar is trying to make Bapuram Bora realize that what has been done cannot be undone. This is all about destiny and Bora has nothing really to do with it.

This very message also gets reflected in Bora's dialogue to Dharani: "Whatever you have done so long, well you cannot change now. Now you have to marry Tagar. It's sheer luck for you to have someone like Tagar as your wife" (Barua 71).

This dialogue is uttered after the dismissal of Tagar's engagement with Kamalakanta. It was quite a pleasant surprise for Dharani, as he was going to get a girl like her as wife. It was also something brought to him by his destiny only.

A similar tone is also evident in the narrator's words, where destiny is playing a major role again: "After her mother-in-law had died, the burden of running the entire household fell on Tagar" (Barua 139). When Tagar was at her father's home before her wedding, she had not thought what turn her life was going to take in the days to come. Although Tagar had to face a lot of insults and admonitions after coming to Dharani's house from almost every quarter, especially from her mother-in-law even for the slightest pretext, still she did not think of giving up and continued to be loyal and utmost submissive. But ever since her mother-in-law passed away all those household accountabilities started falling on Tagar's shoulders, and in no time she had to manage all those singlehandedly. Her destiny led her to confront that kind of situation which had totally been out of her anticipation or will, so to say.

Tagar, Kamalakanta, and Bapuram Bora were not the only ones who fell into the clutches of destiny in the novel as we cannot simply undermine the predicament of Tagar's husband, Dharani who eventually had been jailed for a noble cause—"Dharani was sentenced to two years of imprisonment." (Barua 169).

Police raid his home and not finding Dharani they took his wife and their only daughter, Kamali to the police station. This way everything in Dharani's life started to become topsy-turvy as a part of his destiny. He never thought that his fight for his own country would make him suffer like that. However, before the completion of his two years of stay in the prison, he was released due to his illness (Tuberculosis) and, finally, within a few days, he succumbed to this disorder and passed away leaving Tagar to carry all the burden throughout her life.

Towards the end of the novel or at the climax, so to say, we can observe an epiphanic moment on the part of Kamalakanta while he discovered the ring with his name embossed on it, found in Tagar's custody. It was again a matter of destiny that brought them together after a long and considerable amount of time.

Therefore, it may be said that free will and destiny are two of the major themes in the novel that sway the lives of Tagar, Dharani and Kamalakanta immensely.

Conclusion:

On the basis of what has been observed so far, we may certainly deduce that free will and destiny are forever in conflict in human life. This leads to a kind of world where to exist, one has to adapt — and often this leads to compromising with one's free will.

Free will and destiny go parallelly at any given point in time but work as two opposing forces. As a matter of fact, free will or individual liberty of a person is challenged every time by his or her destiny. So, it would not be completely wrong to say that everything pertaining to a person's life is predestined.

It can be asserted that the novel under discussion has aptly incorporated the theme of free will and destiny and it shows how the clash between the two takes the plot to culmination.

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