
Breaking Patriarchal Barriers: A Study of Agency and Oppression in Fakir Mohan Senapati's "Rebati"

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Abstract

Rebati (1898) by Fakir Mohan Senapati is a seminal work and it stands as a seminal work in Odia literature and it is widely recognized for its pioneering contribution to social realism. The story mostly interpreted through the lens of fatalism but this research analyses the story primarily through the scathing critique of the rigid patriarchal structures governing 19th-century Odisha. In this paper it has been argued that the aspiration of the protagonist for education shows a subversive act of intellectual agency that challenges the established domestic order. By analyzing the grandmother—not merely as an antagonist, but as an embodiment of internalized patriarchy—this research explores how the systematic suppression of female education was essential to maintaining societal control. Through a close reading of the text, this study demonstrates that the tragic conclusion of the novella is not an inevitability of "fate," but a direct consequence of a socio-cultural environment that punished women for transcending traditional boundaries. By contextualizing Rebati within the broader framework of colonial-era social tensions, this paper highlights Senapati's acuity in utilizing fiction to expose the brutal, often fatal, costs of challenging entrenched patriarchal norms.

Keywords: Fakir Mohan Senapati, Rebati, Odia Literature, Social Realism, Internalized Patriarchy, Female Education, Subversion.

Introduction

The 1898 work of Odia literature by Fakir Mohan Senapati titled "Rebati" serves as the cornerstone, as it changed the focus of Odia literature from myths to real-life issues. The story was written during the period of transition in colonial Odisha; it shows the conflict between the push for Western-style education and the strong traditional opposition in rural areas in the 19th century. "Rebati" is frequently seen as a tragedy of fate, a story, about a girl

whose life is ruined by cholera and misfortune. However, the story reveals a more deliberate structural critique of social power if is examined closely.

The story is set in the time when act of getting education for women as wasn't seen as a personal development rather it was seen as an existential threat to the domestic status quo. Society, and by extension the domestic sphere, erected metaphorical and literal "fences" to sequester female agency, equating traditional femininity with silence and ignorance. Senapati's story shows us how this happened. The home was not a place, for women. It was a place where women had to fight for what they wanted. The woman seeking literacy had to fight for her right to learn.

This paper argues that "Rebati" is a profound indictment of patriarchal anxiety in colonial India. Senapati shows how patriarchal control is often internalized and enforced by the oppressed themselves like the grandmother help to enforce the rules that men make. When we look at the interplay between education, gendered expectations, and societal reaction, this study demonstrates that the tragedy of Rebati is not an accidental confluence of fate, but the inevitable collision between an awakening female intellect and an unyielding patriarchal order that demands her erasure.

2. Context and Condition

To really understand Rebati it needs a dual-focus approach that places the text within the social and historical context of colonial Odisha while also applying and employing critical frameworks or critical thinking to examine its gender politics and dynamics. The late nineteenth century in Odisha was marked by a sharp tension and conflict between the intellectual awakening brought about by colonial modernity and the rigid orthodoxy of rural society and communities. Even though there were efforts by reformers to encourage female literacy and modern education but many in the rural communities viewed these initiatives as dangers to caste purity, male authority, and the stability of marriages. In this context, the story reflects widespread anxieties regarding the introduction of English education, frequently linked in rural thought to societal chaos and the breakdown of the conventional family unit. Academic debates of the period further reveal how Fakir Mohan Senapati negotiated the complex space between reformist progressivism and conservative social values. Unlike many of his contemporaries who idealized the domestic sphere, Senapati used the rural setting of the narrative to expose the violence, exclusion, and patriarchal oppression embedded within notions of social and cultural "purity."

Theoretical Frameworks

To critically evaluate Rebati, this paper utilizes three key theoretical frameworks: internalized patriarchy, the spatial politics of the domestic sphere, and social realism in relation to subaltern studies. The concept of internalized clarifies the grandmother's role, as she operates not just as a victim of patriarchal oppression but also as its engaged guardian within the home. Instead of male authority directly suppressing Rebati, the grandmother enforces the limits of appropriate female behavior and acts as the protector of the social structure that hinders her granddaughter's intellectual development and individual liberty.

Moreover, the domestic sphere in the story operates as a site of confinement, where the “fence” or “boundary” represents the constricting frameworks placed on women. Indian feminist criticism often views the home as a site of both safety and confinement, and in *Rebati*, it distinctly appears as the latter, suffocating the main character's longing for knowledge and self-identity. Additionally, Fakir Mohan Senapati is recognized as a pioneer of social realism in Odia literature, moving away from ornate Sanskritized literary traditions toward the language and experiences of ordinary people. His focus on lower-middle-class rural families situated at the margins of colonial influence allows the narrative to foreground subaltern voices and expose the harsh material realities of *Rebati*'s life, preventing the reader from merely romanticizing her tragic fate.

The Grandmother as the Gatekeeper of Patriarchy

A critical reading of *Rebati* requires a nuanced understanding of the grandmother's character, who cannot be dismissed as a mere antagonist but must instead be viewed as the principal enforcer of patriarchal orthodoxy within the household. Having been shaped by a social system that equates female silence, obedience, and domesticity with virtue, she perceives the world through a rigid binary in which adherence to tradition guarantees safety while any deviation invites disaster. Her opposition to *Rebati*'s education emerges from what feminist criticism identifies as “internalized patriarchy,” where women themselves become agents of patriarchal control. Resistance of the grandmother is therefore not motivated by personal cruelty but by a deeply ingrained and fearful belief that social disruption—symbolized by female literacy and modern education—provokes divine punishment, represented in the narrative through the cholera epidemic. In this sense, she functions as the “fence” or border guard of the domestic sphere, imposing restrictions on *Rebati* in an attempt to preserve the fragile stability of rural life. Her role ultimately reveals the tragic mechanics of patriarchy, wherein women are compelled to police and oppress other women, thereby sustaining the social order while absolving men from directly enforcing that oppression.

Education as a Subversive Act

In *Rebati*, education functions not as a neutral instrument of learning but as a powerful catalyst for social transgression that destabilizes the rigid boundaries of patriarchal society. As *Rebati* begins to acquire literacy, the carefully controlled limits of her domestic existence gradually begin to dissolve, challenging the restrictive “gyno-space” assigned to women within the traditional household. By entering the world of reading and intellectual engagement—a sphere historically reserved for men—*Rebati* symbolically moves beyond the private domestic realm into the public sphere of knowledge and articulation. This transition generates intense anxiety within the community, whose hostile reactions reflect a deep-seated fear of female cognitive independence and self-expression. Her education is perceived not merely as personal growth but as a disruption of the established social order, suggesting that in nineteenth-century Odisha, a woman's pursuit of intellectual autonomy was interpreted as a threat to familial honor, cultural stability, and moral discipline. Through this portrayal, Fakir Mohan Senapati exposes the patriarchal belief that a woman's empowerment through education constitutes a dangerous challenge to traditional authority.

The Tragic Ending: Determinism versus Social Reality

The climax of *Rebati*, marked by the deaths of Rebati's father and her teacher Basudev during the cholera outbreak and her resulting destitution, is often interpreted as an affirmation of fate or *daiva*, yet a critical reading challenge this deterministic interpretation. Rather than presenting tragedy as divine punishment, Fakir Mohan Senapati uses the cholera epidemic as a narrative device that coincidentally validates the grandmother's superstitious fears regarding female education. By attributing the catastrophe to "fate," society absolves itself of responsibility and avoids confronting the oppressive structures that marginalize women like Rebati. The tragic ending therefore operates as a deliberate social critique rather than a moral endorsement of orthodoxy. Senapati suggests that within a society governed by rigid patriarchal norms, there exists no viable social space for an intellectually awakened girl to survive with dignity. Rebati's downfall is not the result of a supernatural curse but the inevitable outcome of a social system that refuses to accommodate female agency, education, and selfhood. As a consequence, she is symbolically and socially erased because she embodies a form of femininity that patriarchal society is unable and unwilling to accept or protect.

Conclusion

Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Rebati* transcends its categorization as a mere tragic tale to function as a profound indictment of the patriarchal mechanisms that defined 19th-century Odisha. By tracing the narrative arc from Rebati's intellectual awakening to her systematic erasure, this study has illustrated that her tragedy is not an act of divine or fatalistic intervention, but a calculated consequence of a social apparatus that views female agency as an existential threat.

The grandmother emerges not as a villain, but as a tragic embodiment of internalized patriarchy—a figure whose protective instincts are weaponized by the very system that subjugates her. Through the metaphor of the "fence," Senapati delineates the claustrophobic boundaries of the domestic sphere, where the pursuit of literacy is equated with moral transgression and the invitation of catastrophe. The novella's refusal to provide a redemptive or "happy" ending is its most powerful literary device; it forces the reader to confront the reality that for women in this era, survival often necessitated the abandonment of the intellect.

Ultimately, *Rebati* remains a landmark text because it does not attempt to romanticize the life of the rural woman. Instead, it exposes the fractures within the familial and societal structures of the colonial period, highlighting the brutal costs of seeking autonomy in an unyielding order. By re-reading *Rebati* through the lens of social realism and gendered oppression, this research reaffirms Senapati's genius in utilizing the vernacular to dismantle the illusions of a "harmonious" traditional past, leaving us with a haunting, essential critique that resonates long after the final page.

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