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## The Representation of Famine and Human Life in Narayan Gangopadhyay's Short Stories

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### ABSTRACT

*Narayan Gangopadhyay's literary works were profoundly influenced by the socio-political upheavals of the 1940s, particularly the Quit India Movement and the Bengal Famine of 1943. His stories depict the grim reality of famine-stricken Bengal, highlighting the exploitation and suffering of the common people. Gangopadhyay's storytelling, rich in descriptive skill and humanistic values, brings to life the struggles and resilience of his characters. His first story, "Pashapashi," contrasts the lives of a wealthy family and a poor family, reflecting societal disparities. His collection "Bitangsha" features the story of Sundarlal, a cunning broker posing as a saint, showcasing his bold romantic imagination and environmental composition. Some of his stories depicting the famine are "Nakrocharit", "Dusshashon", "Haar", and "Dinner". These stories depict the harsh realities of the famine and the transformation of society during that time. Overall, Gangopadhyay's work offers a poignant commentary on the human condition during a tumultuous era in Bengal's history.*

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## 1 Introduction

In the year 1350 of the Bengali calendar, 1943 AD, the event that is most prominently known and discussed in the history and literature of Bengal is the 'Manantar.' The literal meaning of the word 'Manantar' is famine or widespread scarcity. In Bengali short stories, many writers have depicted scenes of famine or scarcity, known as 'Manantar' in their narratives. When we speak or write about Bengali short stories, the first name that comes to mind is Rabindranath Tagore, who referred to short stories as 'Chhotopran'. Rabindranath Tagore defined short stories in his poem 'Barsha Japon' from the collection "Sonar Tori" in the following manner.

Small life, small pain, small sorrows  
Are so simple and plain. Thousands of memories  
Are fading away each day. Her few tears  
Cannot be described in words.  
There is no climax to the story,

No philosophy, no advice. There is a lingering  
dissatisfaction in the heart,

It seems that even though it is over,

It is not yet the end.....

According to the world-famous American short story writer Edgar Allan Poe, a story that can be read in one sitting in half to one or two hours is a "short story". Edgar Allan Poe is considered the father of the English short story. Rabindranath Tagore is considered the father of the Bengali short story. It was under Tagore's guidance that the Bengali short story reached its true potential. He began writing short stories in 1928 in the magazine "Sadhana". Compared to other countries, Bengali short stories are more poetic and allusive. This is perhaps due to Tagore's unique perspective and creative diversity.

All short story writers in Bengali literature, both before and after Rabindranath Tagore, have depicted the essence of large lives within small lives and illustrated scenes from social life. Narayan Gangopadhyay is one

of the prominent short story writers of the 1940s. In his short stories, he has shown remarkable skill in depicting the famine and scenes from human life. As a storyteller or short story writer, this essay will attempt to explore how successfully he has portrayed the real pictures of famine and human life in his narratives.

## **2 Portraying the writing of Narayan Gangopadhyay:**

Narayan Gangopadhyay was born on February 4, 1918, in Balliadangi Upazila, Thakurgaon District which was known as Thakurgaon Mohokuma in Dinajpur district then. His father's name was Prothomnath Gangopadhyay. He was studied at Dinajpur Zilla School, Faridpur Rajendra College, Barisal Brajmohan College, and the University of Calcutta. In 1941, he stood first in his class with a first division in M.A. from the University of Calcutta, and in 1960 he received his Ph.D. in Bengali short story. Narayan Gangopadhyay is mainly the stage name of the writer. His real name is Tarknath Gangopadhyay. Although Narayan Gangopadhyay gained fame in stories and novels, his entry into the literary world was through poetry. His first poem, 'Daak', was published in 1929. After that many more of his poems were published. A poem called 'Namashkar' was published in the "Desh" newspaper in 1934. In his career, he studied at Jalpaiguri College, City College and the University of Calcutta. Narayan Gangopadhyay started writing from his childhood and student life. His first written work was published in the children's magazine 'Mash Poyla'. He gained fame by writing 'Sundar Journal' in the weekly "Desh" newspaper. His regular writings on the life, culture, daily problems and politics of Bengalis were very popular with Bengali readers. At this time he wrote for adults in Ananda Bazar, Bichitra, Shanibarar Chithi and Chaturanga. Narayan Gangopadhyay's immortal fame is for his stories and novels for adults in Bichitra.

Narayan Gangopadhyay was born at the end of the 1930s. The world, devastated by the Second World War, witnessed significant upheaval. In India, Gandhi's Quit India Movement and the Bengal Famine of the 1940s brought immense disruption to Bengali life and literature. The boundaries of literature expanded, focusing on common people, the lower-class individuals affected by the famine, and the selfishness of individuals. Literature of the 1940s broke free from its previous imitative tendencies. The new trends or

dynamics that Tarashankar Banerjee, Manik Banerjee, and Bibhutibhushan Banerjee attempted to introduce in Bengali literature gained momentum with Narayan Gangopadhyay's magical touch.

The "Quit India Movement" of 1942, also known as the August Movement, was a civil disobedience movement. It began on August 9, 1942, and was led by Mahatma Gandhi as part of the Indian independence struggle. According to the Indian National Congress, this movement was primarily a mass protest which Gandhi referred to as a demand for the British to leave India.

At that time, the Second World War was ongoing. As a result of the war, India's internal complexities continued to increase. In March 1942, the Japanese army captured Rangoon, the capital of Burma. Both the British government and the Congress were terrified of a possible Japanese invasion of India. In this situation, the Congress did not want India to turn into a battlefield. Considering this, Gandhi urged the British to leave India in a proposal sent to the conference held in Elahabad. Thus, the Congress's "Quit India" movement began.

As a result of the 1942 movement, a severe famine descended upon Bengal in 1943, known in Bengali history as the Bengal Famine of 1943. This devastating period of the 1940s is depicted in Bengali literature through the novels and stories of writers, commonly referred to as the "Manantar". During the famine period, Narayan Gangopadhyay's various novels, such as "Timir Tirtha" (1944), "Mandramukhar" (1945), and "Baitalik" (1948), reflect the political awareness of the time through their characters. Similarly, in his short stories, he portrays the lives of famine-stricken and oppressed people.

Narayan Gangopadhyay's first story is titled "Pashapashi". The subject matter revolves around two neighboring houses—one occupied by a wealthy family and the other by a poor family. One rainy evening, while a tea party is taking place at the rich family's house, the poor family's child dies without receiving any medical treatment. Narayan Gangopadhyay's first published story is titled "Nishither Maya." Regarding this story, Narayan wrote that he had created a fantasy by immersing himself in the dreamlike, nostalgic past filled with youthful romanticism. This stream of thought continued to flow powerfully through many of his subsequent stories.

Narayan Gangopadhyay's first story collection is named "Bitangsha." "Bitangsha" is considered one of his finest

stories. The protagonist of the story is Sundarlal, a broker who collects tea leaves from Assam's tea gardens. For this reason, he dresses like a sannyasi, a mendicant with a shaven head, in the remote village of Saotal in the Sylhet district. Although he dresses like a sannyasi, he is not an ascetic. Like a sannyasi, he possesses remarkable skills in various matters. He can read palms, cure severe diseases using herbal remedies, exorcise spirits, and recite the Ramayana of Tulsidas to dispel evil spirits. Consequently, within two months, Sundarlal, introduced himself as a great man, to the simple-minded people of Saotal. Exploiting the villagers' naive faith, Sundarlal instills fear in them, claiming to protect them, and then leaves for a completely unknown place inside the tea gardens of Assam. Only Budhni, a Saotal girl, whom he does not want to work in the tea garden. Because Sundarlal is repelled by romantic weakness towards the girl. The events of this story are strange and tragic. The depth of the story is far from the light of civilization. The mystery and romance of this story reveal Narayan's bold romantic imagination. There is a poetic tendency in the environmental composition. In this regard, Narayan Gangopadhyay resembles Tarashankar. Both authors infuse numerous extraordinary events into their imaginative worlds. Narayan Gangopadhyay's story collections are diverse, including "Kolaboti," "Kalabdal," "Gondharaj," "Bhanga Bandar," "Galpo Songroho," "Shreshtho Golpo," "Char Murti," "Dush Sashon," "Shetokomol," "Bitangsh," "Exhibition," "Urboshi," "Shilaboti," "Bhatiali," "Janmantar," "Bon jyotsna," "Bhogobati," "Rater Mukul," "Lakkhirr Paa," "Shubhokshan," "Saper Mathar Moni," and many more. In this diverse canvas, a multitude of extraordinary characters have emerged at the hands of Narayan Gangopadhyay. Sundarlal, a saintly collector of tea leaves in the tea gardens of Assam, depicts a picture of life's struggles in the post-partition era. Ray Bahadur of Pond Park, the prominent figure of Golapora market, and the tiger of Tulsibon are representatives of all the oppressions of this era. In the business of cloth, there is Debi Das; in the historical tyranny of the Terai, there is the tiger-hunting political disaster of the Ray ganga Estate's Rajbahadur N.R. Chowdhury; and in the politically charged atmosphere, there is the dreamy scholar Harini Shukumari awaiting her father's return.

In the introduction to Narayan Gangopadhyay's masterpiece, Jagadish Bhattacharya accurately describes how from the primeval forest of the wilderness

of Terai-Arakan to the low-lying banks of the river emerging from the core of the sea. The vision has expanded to include new human settlements on the islands of the newly risen soil of salt. Sometimes life's waves have surged on the shores of Padma, Meghna, Kalabadal, and Arial Khan, sometimes life consciousness has remained in the struggle of emperors and elites on the banks of the Atrai, Mahananda, and Kanchan rivers. The wave of Life has been subdued in the catastrophic upheaval of the Mahasthan-Kotibarsha-Pundra expansion, sometimes the history of the new era's heroes is being written in ancient copper inscriptions. The fragrance of Mahuwa has blown from the western border to the unparalleled forest of the Saotal Pargana surrounded by the blue mountains, while the echoes of Singhbhad and the red soil of Barindra are seen at the foothills in the north. Literature may sometimes transcend society and time. Like a socially conscious artist, Narayan Gangopadhyay has depicted the real situation of contemporary society in his short stories.

In the year 1350, a devastating famine gripped the entire Bengal. To alleviate the hunger, countless middle-class and lower-class people took to the streets in search of a handful of rice, driven by the hope of a handful of rice, and the aspiration of a plate of rice. The grim reality of which we see in the short stories collection (Bitangsha) of Narayan Gangopadhyay, which established him as a literary figure in 1942, through stories like "Nakrocharit", "Dusshashon", "Haar", "Dinnder" etc.

The central character of the story "Dushashon" is Debidas, who is now a wealthy man engaged in the cloth business in Manantor's market. In the story, Debidas' brother-in-law, Gouridas, is somewhat enlightened about humanity. The author portrays characters like Constable Kanai Da and police inspector Shachikant to depict the real situation of society. In the story, police inspector Shachikant organizes a procession with the money from his exploitation in the village. The procession was named "Bloodletting of Oppression". Debidas was invited to this procession by giving a donation of 50 rupees during the famine. On the way back home after the procession, he and his brother-in-law Gouridas see the impoverished village of Bengal, deeply affected by famine.

"A sixteen-year-old girl was coming from the riverbank carrying water, mingling with people as she went. Suddenly, Debidas and Gouridas noticed her, and their eyes widened in shock as blood oozed out. The girl completely naked. There was not a single piece of cloth

anywhere, no way to cover her." (Source: Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanabali, Volume Two, p. 444, 445). Debidas and Shachikant are responsible for this nakedness in the village of Bengal. The author portrays individuals like them with exceptional skill in the story. The story 'Haar' depicts the life of the city of Kolkata. On one side, there are the cries of the famine-stricken people of Kolkata, and on the other side, the uncivilized indulgence of civilized society. While on one hand, people in Kolkata are dying without getting food to eat. On the other hand, the allure of Raybahadur's lavish lifestyle on Tahiti Island has created an unforgettable tale of indulgence, depicted with irony and humor. Raybahadur's sleep is disturbed by the cries of the starving in the park. He cannot sleep at night due to the burning hunger of these destitute souls.

It is understood that they have found food, so they cry; if they get food, they will still cry. This is the perception of the affluent society of contemporary times regarding the destitute people of Kolkata during the famine. The author portrays the harsh reality of famine-stricken Kolkata in the story."

"In front, there's a dustbin. A small circle of light falls upon it from the nearby dim lamp post. Three or four inhuman figures are searching through it for food. A skeletal dog's shadow, like a scarecrow, fails to intimidate the new competitors. A small boy, with stick-like limbs and a balloon-like belly, holds something in his hands with utmost devotion. Is it a bone? Yes, indeed, it's a bone (Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanaboli, Volume 1, page 573).

Through the story 'Dinner,' we find an example of how the influence of circumstances can shape a person's life. The narrator, Ranjan, is the storyteller, but the main character of the story, 'Ramapati,' is advised by the storyteller to enter the cinema business under the name 'Ramapati.' Bringing girls from all the prohibited neighborhoods of Kolkata into the cinema as supporting characters becomes his business. He exploits the opportunity of circumstances to thrive in this business. He even sacrifices his own sister, Champa who is barely sixteen years old of age, to fulfill his ambitions."

"In the changing times of 1350, the concepts of honesty and femininity transformed. In that description, Narayan Gangopadhyay has demonstrated his mastery. He said "Before we knew it, the country was engulfed in the illusion of beauty. Crows turned into Vitamin-B,

standard cloth turned into Benarasi, people's lives became the garbage of the streets, and the dignity of women turned into the scraps of torn cloth. The signature of blood was written in the sky of Bengal with the ink of war smoke – the year 1350 turned into 1957 (Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanaboli, Volume Three, Page 433)

The story 'Nakracharit' is an unparalleled short story written by Narayan Gangopadhyay during the transition of the 1350s. The central character of the story is Nishikanta, a representative of the oppressed rural class. Not only in the year 1350 but even in the present 21st century. We witness the presence of this character in our society. In the story 'Nakracharit', Nishikanta is compelled to bribe Ibrahim, the police officer, in the black market of famine for his dishonesty. Although he has stored eight hundred maund of rice in the dark market of famine, Nishikanta appears extremely devout with a Gauriya Baishnav appearance and serves as the president of the Union Board. However, when he goes to hear the proceedings in the assembly, the gatekeeper tells him about the tragic news of Motipal and his wife's suicide due to starvation in the village. Those who died of starvation, are ghosts. Those who died without eating were suffered due to their activities. But due to being the president of the Union Board, Matipal has to be relieved from his duty, and he also has to arrange the last rites for his wife's dead body.

Narayan Gangopadhyay has depicted the image of the famine-stricken character Nishikanta in his own house in the story. Matilal Baranda is lying with the fire in his stomach, it seems he has eaten the earth. Both sides of his cheek are protruding, perhaps a boundless joke of the demonic laughter had taken place before he died. His stomach is attached to his back. The unnaturally long feet are showing like ghost's feet. And above all, his inhuman eyes seem to have a fierce fire burning inside and coming out. Half of one eye is eaten, surely eaten by an insect.'

### **3 Conclusion:**

The main characteristics of Narayan Gangopadhyay's story writing are his descriptive skill and religiosity. His stories have become lively due to his skillful description. The potratization of the cries of the people of the 1350s is one of the rare humanistic values that have emerged in Bengali literature. The adeptness in describing the imagery of the author reflects his real-life experience and his literary and life consciousness.

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