



Dramatic Aspects in the Ballad of Women Poet Chandrabati in the 17th Century

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ABSTRACT

About five centuries after the composition of *Srikrishnakirtan*, regarded as the earliest specimen of medieval Bengali literature, folk poets began composing ballads that spread orally among the people. At that stage, Bengali drama had not yet developed into an independent literary form, but early signs of dramatic expression were already present within the ballads. Although the structure of a ballad is distinct from that of a full-fledged play, and thus cannot fully embody the dramatic genre, the ballads reveal a richness of dramatic elements in both form and spirit.

For instance, *Sundari Malua Pala* concludes on a note of sorrow, carrying within it the seed of tragedy. Similarly, *Dasyu Kenaramer Pala* reveals both the external and internal conflicts of its characters. The advancement of the narrative often takes place through dialogues, lending a theatrical dimension to the ballads. Elements of suspense and tension, essential to drama, are vividly portrayed in both *Sundari Malua* and *Dasyu Kenaramer Pala*.

While ballads cannot be equated with drama in their entirety, the Palas of Chandrabati's ballads demonstrate a remarkable degree of dramatic quality. This makes them unique and significant in the broader history of Bengali drama. Thus, before the full emergence of drama as a distinct literary form in Bengali literature, its signs and seeds were already visible in Chandrabati's works.

The main finding of this essay is that Chandrabati's ballads, especially those by medieval women poets, contain early dramatic elements. Using content analysis and comparative methods, the study emphasizes their role in the development of Bengali drama.

Keywords: Bengali Literature, Mediaeval Period, Ballad, Drama, Women Poet.

Introduction:

In defining drama, Allardyce Nicoll (1894–1976 A.D.) stated that “Drama is the art of expressing ideas about life in such a manner as to render that expression capable of interpretation by actors and likely to interest an audience assembled to hear and witness the actions.”¹ In general terms, drama may be described as a conflicting story presented through dialogue, divided into acts or scenes, and written and performed on stage. Within Indian literature, drama has also been referred to as *scenography*.

In Bengali literature, the modern form of drama emerged in the nineteenth century. It was Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824–1873 A.D.) who perfected and shaped Bengali drama in its true artistic form. Nevertheless, evidence of dramatic qualities can also be observed in the pre-modern era of Bengali literature. Notably, the celebrated scholar Sukumar Sen (1900–1992 A.D.) pointed out the presence of dramatic characteristics in the poetry of *Srikrishnakirtan*, which he termed *Natpalagit*.

Roughly five hundred years after *Srikrishnakirtan*, folk poets composed *Gitikas*—ballads that were orally transmitted and widely circulated. Many of these early East Bengal ballads contain discernible signs of drama in their verses. The present study investigates the extent to which dramatic elements appear in *Prachin Purbabanga Gitika*, focusing specifically on *Sundari Malua* and *Dasyu Kenaramer Pala* by the seventeenth-century woman poet Chandrabati. For this reason, the discussion is entitled “Dramatic Aspects in the Ballads of Women Poet Chandrabati in the 17th Century.”

As the principal source, this research relies on *Prachin Purbabanga Gitika*, a collection of seven volumes compiled and edited by Kshitishchandra Moulik, which serves as the foundation for examining the dramatic qualities embedded in Chandrabati's ballads.

The Brief Biography of Chandrabati:

Chandrabati Devi, born in the 17th century in the Kishoreganj district of present-day Bangladesh, is recognized as the first known female poet of Bengali literature. She was the daughter of Dwija Banshidas, a poet by vocation, and Anjana Devi. Raised in a culturally literate household, Chandrabati received formal education, an uncommon privilege for women of her time, and demonstrated early literary promise.

During her childhood, she formed a close companionship with Jayanand, a Brahmin boy and her classmate. Their daily ritual of flower-picking gradually evolved into a romantic relationship, reminiscent of the poetic figures Layli and Majnu as portrayed in Bahram Khan's verse. However, unlike Layli, Chandrabati maintained a deep reverence for her spiritual teacher, which shaped her moral and emotional decisions.

Following Jayanand's rejection, Chandrabati resolved to remain unmarried and devote her life to literary composition and spiritual practice. At her father's behest, she undertook the task of composing a Bengali Ramayana, distinguished by its feminine perspective and critical stance toward patriarchal narratives. Her version foregrounds the suffering and agency of Sita, offering a unique counterpoint to traditional epic retellings.

Jayanand, later remorseful, returned to seek forgiveness. Chandrabati, steadfast in her renunciation, refused to respond. In despair, Jayanand left a farewell message at the temple and drowned himself in the Phuleshwari River. Chandrabati, upon witnessing his lifeless body while fetching water, was overcome with grief and reportedly lost her mental stability. Her final days were spent in intense worship of Lord Shiva, and it is said that she died during one such act of devotion.

Chandrabati's life embodies a confluence of literary innovation, spiritual discipline, and emotional resilience. Her Ramayana remains a pioneering feminist text in Bengali literature, and her biography continues to inspire critical reflection on gender, devotion, and authorship in South Asian literary history.

Brief Discussion About the Character of Drama:

Drama constitutes a distinct category within Bengali literary genres, differentiated from other forms such as poetry, novels, short stories, and essays by its unique structural and performative elements. The genre is characterized by its emphasis on enactment, immediacy, and audience engagement, which collectively shape its aesthetic and communicative function.

In his critical work *Natyatattva* Bichar, Durgashankar Mukhopadhyay identifies several foundational characteristics that distinguish drama from other literary forms:

(i) Action (Kriya): Drama is fundamentally driven by action. The narrative unfolds through physical and verbal gestures performed by characters, rather than through descriptive exposition. This kinetic dimension is central to the genre's theatricality.

(ii) Conflict (Sangharsha): A core structural element of drama is conflict, which may manifest as internal (psychological) tension, external (physical) confrontation, or a combination of both. The resolution or intensification of conflict propels the dramatic arc and deepens character development.

(iii) Suspense (Utsukata): Drama cultivates suspense among spectators, maintaining their emotional and intellectual engagement through uncertainty, anticipation, and delayed revelation. This element is crucial for sustaining dramatic tension.

(iv) Surprise and Dramatic Irony (Aashcharya o Natyabhangirony): The genre frequently employs surprise, unexpected turns of events, and dramatic irony, wherein the audience possesses knowledge that the characters do not. These devices enhance emotional resonance and thematic complexity.

(v) Music, Emotion, and Wonder (Sangeet, Bhava, o Bishmay): Drama integrates musical elements, emotional expression, and moments of wonder or astonishment to heighten its sensory and affective impact. These features contribute to the immersive experience of theatrical performance.

Together, these characteristics underscore the genre's performative essence and its capacity to evoke layered responses from its audience. Bengali drama, as theorized by Mukhopadhyay, is thus a composite art form that synthesizes narrative, spectacle, and emotional depth, distinguishing it from other literary traditions.

Discussion:

In English, the term *Gitika* is equivalent to *Ballad*. Dineshchandra Sen (1866–1939 A.D.) referred to the ballad as *Gitika*, a designation also adopted by folk literature scholar Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1909–1984 A.D.). Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyaya likewise supported this nomenclature. Alternatively, Kshitishchandra Moulik referred to ballads as *Palagan*, while Sukumar Sen used the term *Gatha*. Mazharul Islam (1929–2003 A.D.) categorized ballads as folktales, highlighting their narrative and oral tradition.² While Bengali *Gitika* shares notable similarities with Western ballads, particularly in its narrative structure and thematic focus, there are also significant contrasts that distinguish the two traditions. One of the most compelling points of convergence lies in their dramatic qualities. Western ballads often incorporate dialogue and conflict,

elements that are also central to Gitika. From this perspective, the dramatic intensity of Gitika may be seen as having been enriched or accelerated through its interaction with Western ballad conventions.

To understand the dramatic potential embedded within Gitika, it is instructive to examine the essential features that Bengali drama must possess when drawing upon the dramatic elements of this genre. These features include:

1. Dramatic Action: The narrative must be propelled by action—physical, emotional, or moral—that drives the plot forward and reveals character development.
2. Conflict as Fictional Tension: The plot should contain discernible fictional tension, which may be categorized as either internal (psychological) or external (social or physical). This duality of conflict is central to dramatic structure.
3. Dialogue: The presence of dialogue is crucial, as it not only animates the characters but also facilitates the unfolding of conflict and resolution.
4. Five-Part Episodic Structure: The dramatic narrative should progress through five distinct episodes:
 - a. Introduction: Establishes setting, characters, and initial situation.
 - b. Rising Action: Introduces complications and intensifies conflict.
 - c. Climax: The peak of tension and turning point of the narrative.
 - d. Falling Action: Consequences of the climax begin to unfold.
 - e. Catastrophe or Final Episode: Resolution or tragic conclusion.
5. Atmosphere of Drama: An overarching dramatic ambiance must be cultivated to enhance emotional engagement and thematic depth.

Dramatic action is considered the soul of drama. The plot evolves in response to events and character decisions, creating a dynamic interplay between narrative and performance.

This dramatic framework is vividly exemplified in Chandrabati's *Dasyu Kenaram's Pala*. The story begins with Kenaram seeking refuge with his uncle after the death of his mother. Following the death of his father three years later, his impoverished uncle is compelled to sell him to a dacoit. This moment marks the beginning of Kenaram's transformation. Raised among the seven sons of the dacoit Halua, Kenaram becomes a ruthless bandit, living in the forest and preying on travellers.

The turning point arrives when Kenaram encounters Dwija Banshidas on a forest path. Their humane conversations, culminating in Kenaram hearing the bhasan music of Mansamangal Behula sung by Banshidas, awaken a sense of remorse and human consciousness within him. In a moment of repentance, Kenaram casts all his ill-gotten wealth into the river and chooses a life of asceticism, spending his remaining days as a beggar. This narrative arc, marked by conflict, transformation, and resolution, embodies the essence of dramatic storytelling.

Similarly, in the *Sundari Malua Pala*, the initial romantic encounter between Chand Binod and Malua at the river ghats, followed by their arranged marriage, introduces the emotional core of the story. The subsequent episodes, Dewan's cruelty, Malua's strategic resistance, and her eventual escape, mirror the structural and thematic elements of drama, reinforcing the genre's capacity for portraying human struggle and resilience.

These examples illustrate how Gitika, though rooted in folk tradition, possesses inherent dramatic qualities that align with classical dramatic theory. When adapted into Bengali drama, these elements offer a rich foundation for theatrical expression, narrative complexity, and cultural resonance.

Conflict brings vitality to drama. It may take various forms, such as interpersonal conflict between characters or situational conflict arising from external circumstances. In *Sundari Malua*, internal conflict is evident during Malua's first meeting and conversation with Chand Binod at the river ghat in Araliya village. Similarly, internal conflict is clearly portrayed in *Dasyu Kenaramer Pala*, where Kenaram experiences psychological turmoil following his encounter with Bangshi Das.

Situational conflict in *Sundari Malua* is exemplified when the Kazi captures Chand Binod with the intent to kill him, and Malua voluntarily imprisons herself in the Dewan's haveli to save her husband. In a display of strategic intelligence, Malua tactfully requests three months from the Dewan, an act that underscores her agency and deepens the dramatic tension of the narrative.

“Shuna shuna deoyansab koi je tomare
Partigga koriba tumi amar gochore.
Ei tin mas tumi na aiba andare.”³

*(“Listen, listen, all the gods bear witness, You must make a promise in my presence.
For these three months, you shall not come inside.”)*

In *Sundari Malua*, Chandrabati constructs a narrative rich in emotional tension and dramatic structure, particularly using character-driven conflict and purposeful dialogue. One such moment arises when Binod departs for a foreign land in pursuit of a livelihood. During his absence, Malua's five brothers urge her to return to their household. Malua, though emotionally conflicted and hesitant, ultimately chooses to remain in her husband's home, affirming her marital commitment and personal agency. This episode reflects an internal conflict that deepens the psychological realism of the character and reinforces the dramatic arc of the narrative.

A defining quality of Chandrabati's dramaturgy is her mastery of dialogue. In the eighth episode of *Sundari Malua*, the dramatic exchange between the hero and heroine at the water ghat is particularly noteworthy. This scene exemplifies Chandrabati's conscious and deliberate use of dialogue to reveal emotional depth,

character dynamics, and thematic tension. The interaction is not merely conversational but serves as a pivotal moment in the development of both plot and character.

Two exemplary lines from this episode, spoken by the hero and heroine, are frequently cited for their lyrical poignancy and dramatic resonance. These dialogues encapsulate the emotional intensity and cultural texture of the narrative, offering insight into the characters' inner worlds and the socio-romantic tensions they navigate.

Through such scenes, Chandrabati demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of dramatic technique, blending folk narrative with theatrical structure. Her use of dialogue not only animates the characters but also elevates the Gitika form into a performative literary mode, bridging oral tradition and dramatic literature. In this connection, Malua's expression to Chand Binod has been exemplified here as follows:

"kail dekhlam joler ghat shuiya nidra zao.

Tomar nidra deikhya amar dare kape gao.."4

("Yesterday I saw you asleep by the water ghat, lying in slumber.

Seeing you sleep, my body trembled with fear.")

This dialogue, rich in emotional nuance and dramatic tension, beautifully captures the heroine's vulnerability and the depth of her concern.

In such a situation, Chand Binod reacted as follows:

"Tomar pane chaiya kanya ami zaibam fire.

Ar na aibam ami tomar panther dhare."5

("Looking toward you, beloved, I shall turn away.

Never again shall I walk the path that leads to you.")

Dialogue serves as a vital structural and expressive element in Chandrabati's Sundari Malua, contributing significantly to character development, narrative progression, and dramatic tension. The initial encounter between Chand Binod and Malua at the riverbed in the village of Araliya exemplifies this dialogic function. Their conversation is not merely introductory but foundational to the unfolding of the plot. Through this exchange, Chand Binod reveals his identity, familial background, and financial status, while Malua reciprocates by sharing details about her parents, lineage, and household. This mutual disclosure establishes the emotional and social framework of their relationship and sets the stage for subsequent developments.

Beyond this pivotal scene, dialogue continues to play a crucial role in advancing the narrative. Following Malua's marriage to Chand Binod, her beauty attracts the attention of the lustful Kazi, who seeks to possess her. To fulfil his desire, the Kazi enlists Netai Kutni, a cunning intermediary, offering her financial incentive to manipulate Malua. Netai Kutni approaches Malua with various enticements, urging her to divorce Binod and marry the Kazi. However, Malua, discerning the malicious intent behind these overtures, responds with sharp and assertive rebukes. The verbal confrontation between Malua and Netai Kutni is rich in dramatic intensity and moral clarity, showcasing Malua's resilience and ethical resolve.

This strategic use of dialogue is not confined to Sundari Malua alone. In Dasyu Kenaramer Pala, Chandrabati similarly employs dialogue to deepen character psychology and thematic resonance. The conversation between Kenaram and Dwija Banshidas is particularly noteworthy. It marks a turning point in the narrative, where Kenaram, once a ruthless dacoit, encounters the spiritual and moral influence of Banshidas. Their exchange, imbued with philosophical reflection and emotional depth, catalyzes Kenaram's transformation and repentance. The dialogic structure here functions not only as a narrative device but also as a medium for ethical introspection and dramatic catharsis.

In both Sundari Malua and Dasyu Kenaramer Pala, Chandrabati demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of dramatic technique. Her use of dialogue transcends mere conversation, serving instead as a vehicle for character revelation, thematic exploration, and narrative propulsion. These dialogic moments affirm her literary craftsmanship and her ability to adapt the Gitika form into a performative and emotionally resonant mode of storytelling.

"Thakura kaila "ami draridra brāhmaṇa.

Amar namete tomara kiba prayojana.."

Kena kaya, sighra kaira nam tomar bala.

Samay kariya naṣṭa haiba kiba phala".

Ṭhakura kaila "amara dbijabansi nama.

Suinya ta camkiya uṭhe dasyu kenarama."6

(The Brahmin said, "I am a poor Brahmin.

What need have you for my name?"

"Speak quickly, tell me your name," said the other,

"Why waste time? What good will delay bring?"

The Brahmin replied, "I am of the lineage of the twice born."

Hearing this, the bandit Kenaram rose in astonishment.)

In Dasyu Kenaramer Pala, Chandrabati employs extended dialogue as a central narrative device, particularly in the sustained exchange between Dwija Banshidas and the dacoit Kenaram. These two characters serve as the pivotal figures around whom the entire dramatic arc revolves. The poet advances the story primarily through their conversation, which is both lengthy and thematically rich. This dialogic structure not only facilitates character development but also deepens the moral and emotional dimensions of the narrative.

From this perspective, the Pala exhibits a strong dramatic character, rooted in its reliance on dialogue as a vehicle for progression and transformation.

A similar use of dramatic dialogue is evident in Sundari Malua, where exchanges between characters, such as Malua and Chand Binod, and later Malua and Netai Kutni, serve to propel the plot and reveal internal and external conflicts. In both Palas, dialogue functions not merely as a narrative tool but as a dramatic instrument that animates the story and engages the audience.

One of the most striking dramatic elements in Dasyu Kenaramer Pala is the use of suspense, particularly in the psychological transformation of Kenaram. This suspense emerges following his conversation with Dwija Banshidas, whose moral reasoning and spiritual insight awaken a sense of humanity in the dacoit's mind. Through this dialogue, Kenaram comes to understand the consequences of his violent and criminal actions. The poet captures this moment of realization with emotionally charged lines that reflect Kenaram's internal turmoil and remorse.

The dramatic suspense lies not only in the unfolding of events but in the gradual revelation of Kenaram's conscience. His shift from a ruthless bandit to a repentant ascetic is catalyzed by dialogue, underscoring the genre's capacity to portray ethical awakening and emotional depth. This transformation is emblematic of Chandrabati's dramaturgical skill, wherein dialogue becomes the medium through which psychological conflict and moral resolution are enacted.

In sum, both Dasyu Kenaramer Pala and Sundari Malua exemplify the dramatic potential of Bengali Gitika when adapted into performative narrative. Chandrabati's use of extended dialogue and suspenseful revelation affirms her literary craftsmanship and her ability to infuse folk narrative with theatrical vitality. In this context, the following dialogue may be exemplified here:

“Raktajaba ankhi tar pagaler pray.
Apon deher mangs aponi kamrah..
Kot pap koiryachi ami lekhajukha nai.
Amar matan papi tirbhubane nai..
Kot lok mairiyachi ami ei khanda diya.
Aij aponi marbam re guru, tumi dekh dandaiya..”⁷

*(“Her eyes, red as hibiscus, seemed mad with grief.
She tore the flesh of her own body with her own hands.
How many sins I've committed, I cannot even count.
There is no sinner in the three worlds as wretched as I.
How many lives I've taken with this very blade?
Today I shall kill myself, O Guru, watch and deliver judgment.”)*

Suspense and emotional expression are two defining features of dramatic literature, and Chandrabati's Dasyu Kenaramer Pala and Sundari Malua exemplify their effective deployment within the Gitika tradition. In Dasyu Kenaramer Pala, dramatic suspense arises from the psychological transformation of the protagonist, Kenaram. Following his encounter with Dwija Banshidas, Kenaram experiences profound anxiety regarding the moral consequences of his life as a dacoit. He becomes acutely aware of the sins he has accumulated since childhood through acts of robbery and violence. This realization leads to existential dread, as he fears that death may arrive before he has the opportunity for atonement. The suspense here is not merely narrative but ethical, rooted in the tension between guilt and redemption.

Similarly, Sundari Malua contains multiple instances of dramatic suspense. The sudden death of the hero, Chand Binod, after being bitten by a snake while hunting a whip bird, introduces a moment of shock and emotional rupture. Another suspenseful episode occurs when Malua is captured and confined in the Dewan's haveli, intensifying the narrative's tension and highlighting her vulnerability. These moments contribute to the dramatic rhythm of the Pala, sustaining audience engagement through uncertainty and emotional stakes. Beyond suspense, Sundari Malua is distinguished by its flow of pathetic expression, achieved through its tragic structure. Malua, the only beloved daughter of her parents, is raised with affection and care. However, following her marriage to Chand Binod, she is unable to enjoy the comfort and happiness of her natal home. Despite enduring various hardships, she remains committed to her husband's household and refuses to return to her father's home.

The tragedy deepens when Malua's in-laws fabricate false allegations against her, leading to Chand Binod's second marriage. This act of betrayal renders Malua socially and emotionally displaced. Unable to reclaim her place in the family, she ultimately drowns herself in the river, marking the sorrowful conclusion of her life. The Pala ends with this tragic denouement, encapsulating the emotional devastation of a woman caught between familial loyalty and societal injustice.

Through these narratives, Chandrabati demonstrates the expressive capacity of drama to portray psychological depth, moral conflict, and emotional suffering. Her use of suspense and tragedy not only enriches the Gitika form but also affirms its potential as a vehicle for social critique and human empathy.

Conclusion:

Although the structural and generic nature of the Bengali Gitika or ballad differs fundamentally from that of classical drama, Chandrabati's ballads exhibit a rich infusion of dramatic elements that merit close literary and performative analysis. The ballad form, traditionally rooted in oral narrative and lyrical storytelling, does not fully align with the conventions of dramatic composition, such as episodic structure, stage direction, or theatrical staging. Nevertheless, certain Palas within the Gitika tradition demonstrate a pronounced dramatic character through their use of dialogue, conflict, suspense, and tragic resolution.

Among Bengali ballads, Baidya Kanya Mahua by Dwija Kanai stands out for its heightened dramatic intensity. The narrative unfolds through sustained dialogue and culminates in the tragic deaths of Nader Chand and Mahua, thereby generating a powerful dramatic atmosphere. In contrast, Chandrabati's Sundari Malua and Dasyu Kenaramer *Pala*, while not composed in the formal style of drama, are nonetheless imbued with dramatic vitality.

In Sundari Malua, dramatic tension arises through situational and interpersonal conflict. Malua's decision to enter the Dewan's haveli to save her husband and her confrontation with her five brothers who attempt to take her back to their home exemplify the dramatic use of character conflict. The narrative concludes with Malua's suicide, a tragic resolution that evokes pathos and reinforces the emotional gravity of the tale.

Similarly, Dasyu Kenaramer *Pala* derives its dramatic momentum from the extended dialogue between Kenaram and Dwija Banshidas. This exchange not only propels the narrative but also facilitates Kenaram's moral transformation, underscoring the ethical and psychological depth of the story. The use of dialogue in this *Pala* is particularly significant, as it serves as the lifeblood of dramatic expression and character development.

Taken together, these ballads reflect Chandrabati's nuanced engagement with dramatic technique within the constraints of the Gitika form. While her compositions do not conform to the structural norms of drama, they are rich in dramatic elements, dialogue, conflict, suspense, and tragedy that animate the narrative and deepen its emotional resonance. Thus, Sundari Malua and Dasyu Kenaramer *Pala* exemplify how the ballad form can serve as a vessel for dramatic storytelling, especially when shaped by the literary vision of a poet like Chandrabati.

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