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Women Characters in the Works of Sarat Chandra

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Abstract

The paper aims to discuss the women characters in the works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, one of the major Bengali novelists who pioneered the Bengali novel. Sarat Chandra was interested in social sciences and he was well-conversant with Western literature and philosophy. But the roots of his literature are struck deep into the soil of his country. He owed the primeval images of his characters to Indian literature, philosophy and the Puranas. The paper talks about the kind of realism revealed in his works which determines the novelist's characterizing the characters, particularly women characters, in his novels and short stories.

Keywords: Literature, philosophy, primeval images, Puranas, realism, roots.

In order to discuss the women characters in the works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, let us peep deep into his literary domain. And before peeping deep into his literary domain, I should like to say that all the sentences and passages quoted are given in my English translation.

No good number of books have been written and published since the death of Sarat Chandra to deal with literary and historical perspectives of his life, literature and art. The writers, more or less conversant with Western literature have attempted to discern the influence of Western literature and philosophy in the works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and quoted Dickens, Herbert, Galsworthy, Spencer and other Western writers to show Sarat literature as realistic as theirs. Sarat literature is certainly realistic; there is no denying this fact. But the realism in it greatly differs from the realism in Western literature. Perhaps the realism characteristic of Sarat literature may have eluded the grasp of majority of the writers having written treatises on different aspects of Sarat literature.

But the question is: what kind of realism is revealed in the work of Sarat Chandra? If we cannot grasp that kind of realism, it is not possible to get through to the heart of his work. It can be interpreted in its proper perspective.

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Realism is possessed of different meanings and they are apt to overlap with one another. The first meaning of realism consists in creating in the reader's mind a perception of characters and situations and in this sense folktales are, too, realistic. The second meaning is enlivening of characters and incidents through meticulous description. The third meaning is vivid portrayal of the contemporary life and society. The fourth meaning consists in making action and reaction of characters consistent with psychology. There are many other meanings of realism that could be mentioned here, but the four meanings of realism will do at this moment to interpret the kind of realism, Sarat Chandra took into consideration in delineating his characters, particularly female characters. Many critics are of the opinion that all realistic works hinge on the flow of consciousness. Sarat literature mirrors life, as it is lived and thus, is realistic in his portrayal of characters and his works abound in contemporary problems- social, economic and political.

In dealing with the works of Sarat Chandra we find ourselves confronted with two pertinent questions, one posed by Rabindranath Tagore himself and the other by a young novelist belonging to the 'Kollol' group.

In a letter addressed to Sarat Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore said, "You may rest content with exacting prices out of the present time; what will you leave behind for other times that follow?" Still today the popularity of Sarat literature is unparalleled, but popularity can never vouchsafe literary worth. The problems and the questions that deeply stirred the consciousness of Sarat Chandra and impregnated his work with richness - racial antagonism, casteism, cruel social canon, social humiliation of widows and fallen women, the hauteur of the British rules and the pangs of dependence, are losing their intensity to cope with the changing of time and are being replaced by other problems and questions to face up to the changing of social and political and social milieu. The rural life portrayed so dexterously in his work has considerably changed and the concept of joint family which is the mainspring of his work is rapidly dwindling away. Now economic problems monopolize man's attention and thought and overshadow social problems. Human values are being drowned in the whirlpool of poverty, ignominy, misrule, class struggles and other social evils. Though his work hints at this social decadence, the problems are now threatened with a possibility of receding into history.

The second question was thrown into the gauntlet, as I have said a bit earlier, by a young novelist belonging to the 'Kollol' group. He said, 'If any mess in Kolkata had had a maid servant like Savitri we would have stayed on in that mess forever, forgetting our families.' We cannot put this comment down to the young novelist's intrepidity, for in this comment there is a suspicion of truth. This comment stands on the question: Are all the characters Sarat Chandra has portrayed in his novels and short stories real or true to life? Is undaunted love of a step- mother for her step-son, of a sister-in-law for her husband's brother real or psychologically proven? Jadav Mukerjee of the short story 'Bindur Chhele (Son of Bindu), is the record-keeper of the zamindar and has doubled the ten thousand rupees of Bindu by laying it out on interest, but he is indifferent to worldly affairs. Girish Chatujje of the short story Nishkriti (Deliverance) is a just-

established legal practitioner. But he cannot distinguish between the broking in straw and the broking in jute and is indifferent to property and money, to boot. Human mind and body is controlled by biological needs. But majority of Sarat Chandra's main characters, both male and female, have transcended the biological barrier. Though the side-characters and social backgrounds are starkly true, it is well-night difficult to analyse his major characters on the same scale. The truth to tell, we should not analyse the works of Sarat Chandra on the same scale as we analyse other works. We should not search for the likes of the characters in our real life and in the society we are living in. On his mind's background there remained painted the primeval images of ethereal love and affection and the idols that symbolize unworldly indifference such as Maheshwari, Uma, Jasoda Gopal, Radhika. These idolsculled from the epics, the Puranas, Sakta literature, Vaishnav literature, and Indian philosophy got entangled with his mental set-up. Different philosophical thoughts and their contradictions did not cast shadows over his imagination. Sarat Chandra has embodied these images in his characters by synchronizing natural and supernatural entities and placed them in contemporary social milieu. His characterization aims to bridge the gap between heaven and earth.

Sarat Chandra was interested in social sciences and he was well-conversant with Western literature and philosophy. But the roots of his literature are struck deep into the soil of his country. As I have said earlier, Sarat Chandra owed the primeval images of his characters to Indian literature, philosophy and the Puranas. To bring home this point, I shall mention two characters here. They are Savitri of *Charitrahin* (Characterless) and Saraju of *Chandranath*. The character of Savitri gave rise to a controversy much before the novel was published. Even the editors of *Bharatbarsha* did not dare publish the story around Savitri, the maid-servant of the mess. In reaction to this controversy, Sarat Chandra wrote from Rengun to his friend Pramathnath Bhattacharya: "You have seen Savitri as the maid servant of the mess, Pramath, but you have mistaken the diamond for a glass-piece." In his letter dated 13 May 1913 to Upendranath Gangopadhyay he compares the character of Savitri to diamond, as in: "You have seen Savitri as the maid servant of the mess. If you had that eye…if they had understood which priceless diamond comes up from which coal mine, they would not let slip that diamond."

Many years later in a letter written from Samataber to Radharani Devi, Sarat Chandra compares true love to diamond. "True love does not come in the life of all men. If this rare thing comes in one's life and if one can recognize it, then his life achieves success. You know many ignorant people throw a rare diamond, mistaking it for a glass piece. True love is tasted in sacrifice."

In our eyes, Savitri is a maid servant of a mess and a fallen woman. But is the eyes of Sarat Chandra she is an embodiment of ethereal love and affection, never profaned and polluted by human craving. He had recourse to a folktale in delineating the character of Savitri in the following passages:

> Behari was devoted to Savitri and addressed her as Maa. He regarded her as a cursed goddess (*Charitrahin*, Chapter 28).

> Behari was saying, "It is written in the scripture that Mother Laxmi (Goddess of Fortune) once worked as a maid-servant, cursed by Narayana for a certain fault. My mother (Savitri) too, for a certain fault, had come over here to work as a maid-servant and went away, subjected to much suffering" (*Charitrahin*, Chapter 38).

Sarat Chandra mentioned this legend in a letter to Dilip Kumar Ray:

> Buddhadev Basu wrote if we had had a maid-servant like Savitri in our mess we would stay on in the mess….The boy…doesn't understand that Savitri doesn't belong to the maid-servant class. The legend has it that even Laxmi had but to work at the house ofa Brahmin.

The primeval images of the goddesses Laxmi and Annapurna and the unchaste Radhika have got juxtaposed in the character of Savitri, Wrote Radharani Devi in her *Sarat Chandra: Manush o Shilpi*, "The character of Savitri resembles that of a girl of Bankura. Her brother-in-law brought her over to Calcutta on the pleas of marrying her. She was a very spirited girl and a girl of a rural well-to-do -family." Sarat Chandra mixed freely with prostitutes. He might have seen in a prostitute an inkling of the character of Savitri. He has synchronized his real experience and the primeval images in creating his women characters and they remain ever-fresh. This synchronization is vividly exemplified in the story of Chandranath. Chandranath abandoned Saraju for fear of public scandal; Ramchandra, too, sent Sita into exile for fear of public scandal.

> They must go down to the station before dusk, to catch the train. The old sarkar (accountant) wrapped a few cloths in a napkin and sat beside the coachman. He found himself thinking of the plight of Sita and his eyes were sopping wet with tears". (*Chandranath*, Chapter 10)

The primeval images are clearly and vividly perceptible on the background of the characters of Savitri and Saraju, but they did not dominate the portrayal of the characters in other novels and short stories, though we can discern a suspicion of their presence in them.

> You are talking about my scandal. No. I have no scandal. If people calumniate me for mymeeting you clandestinely, this calumny won't touch me. (*Devdas,* Chapter VI)

> Then I could not understand the plights of Sita and Damyanti, nor did I believe in Jagai-Madhai. (*Devdas*, Chapter 13)

> We did never see the wish-yielding tree of Heaven. The people in Brajbabu's family have got a wish-yielding tree. They stretched their hands out beneath it and returned, smiling. (*Baradidi-Eldest Sister*, Chapter 3)

I could give so many examples in my translation to show how unworldliness and worldliness mingled in the characters, particularly women characters, I did not, because they would not add much and would burden this article

It is much easier to draw pictures of sin, ugliness and poverty, inasmuch as we are gaining the first-hand experience of these things day by day in our society. What

unworldly Sarat Chandra painted in his characters is not reduced to mere puppetry; it is rather imbued with striving of human lifeafter spiritual consciousness. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, "the body and mind is full of joy". Human beings have enslaved themselves to passions and incarcerated themselves in the prison of selfishness, self-centredness and narrowness. Other contemporary novelists drew upon these wonted pictures in writing their novels and short stories. In the midst of these wonted pictures Sarat Chandra embodied his idols.

Annapurna, the best ower of all happiness and bliss, is a well-known divine image manifested in women characters. Unworldly is Annapurna's love and it cannot be daunted and profaned by selfishness. Sarat Chandra presented a good number of mother-images to the readers of his novels and short stories, such as: Shubhada (Baradidi), Abhaghi (Abhagir Swarga – Abhagi's Heaven), Haima (Dena-Paona – Assets and Liabilities), Bhubaneshwari (Parinita) and so on. But his portrayal of these characters was not tainted by unbridled imagination. In our country motherly love is given a unique place. Sarat Chandra got knowledge of social sciences from his intimate. He learnt that love and affection are vulnerable to physical attachment and dominated by narrowness and selfishness. Sarat Chandra gave expression to this physical attachment in a few stories. To bring home this physical expression he had recourse to jest and cruel ignorance displayed by his woman characters.

> Elokeshi said, 'There would have been no delay, Chhotobou (Youngest daughter-in-law), there would have been no delay. By this time he could have passed four examinations. He could not pass them because of that wicked master….Out of jealousy he kept him in the same class'
> (*Bindur Chhele*, Chapter 4)

> Kadambini was saying in anger, 'Khuri (aunty) is our own woman. Panchugopal is very Fond of the head of a rui fish, didn't she know it? Not giving it to him she cast the pearl into wilderness.' (*Mejdidi,* Chapter 3).

I think these two examples will suffice to drive home how Sarat Chandra revealed the narrowness and ignorance spearheaded by physical attachment.

But Annapurna stands at the opposite pole. Her unparalleled nature is not confined within biological bounds. Sarat Chandra searched for her place in those relationships which transcended the narrowness and selfishness. She is presented as an image of love and affection. The love of step-mothers for her step-sons is vividly revealedas in Devdas, Baikunther Will, Panditmashai, Shrikanta. The earthliness of Annapurna is manifested in the undaunted love for brother-in-laws and bother-in-laws' sons, as in Ramer Sumati, Mamlar Phal, Nishkriti, Shrikanta (Vol. 3). They appear unnatural and unbelievable to us. The following instances serve to beguile the readers into thinking of the characters portrayed as unnatural and unbelievable.

> You're fondling your brother-in-law, but your own son is loitering hither and thither. (*Ramer Sumati*, Chapter 2).

> As mother is, so is her son. I have seen so many boys, but have never seen such anungrateful boy as he is. (*Bindur Chhele*, Chapter 7).

> Hearing the description his smiling pace paled. Have you got mad, Barothakurum?
>
> I thought you would say something else. They have taken their son, what will you do? (*Nishkriti,* Chapter 8)

There is some similarity between 'Ramer Sumati' and 'MamlarPhal' in the treatment of theme. On the background of these two stories is the manifestation of Govinda-Jasoda, eternal love. But in the character of Narayani in "Ramer Sumati" the Jasoda-image of Annapurna vividly reveals itself. In "MamlarPhal", Shibu and Shambu are own brothers; but in "Ramer Sumati" Shyamlala and Ramlala are step-brothers.

Devotion to one's husband harmonizes with the unworldly love of Annapurna. The pictures of all-renouncing Shiv and Annapurna proud of her husband scattered over Sarat Chandra's novels and short stories. But Sarat Chandra thought that love and chastity are not the same thing; full-fledged humanness is by far greater than chastity. Devotion to one's husband is glorified in many short-stories and novels of his. Annapurna in "Bindur Chhele" said, bubbling over with anger, 'Sati committed suicide. I swear I would rather eke out my own living by cooking in other house than eat your rice! What did you do? You humiliated him!' Deserving of mention here are Annadadi (Shrikanta), Shubhada (Baradidid), Kangali's Mother (Abhagir Swarga), Bimala (*Darpa Churna*), Sati (*Bipradas*), Surabala (*Charitrahin*), Siddheshwari (*Nishkriti*) and so on. Women like Siddheswari and Annapurna are blessed with the presence and love of their husbands who endear themselves to their wives. Annadadi, Mohini (Birajbau) and their likes are deprived of this blessedness, but they do not deviate an inch from their devotion to their husbands and their devotion touches deeply the heart of the readers. The woman who glorifies and idealizes the chastity amidst trials and tribulations is Annadadi in *Shrikanta.*

> I turned round and saw Indra's elder sister (Annadadi). She appeared to me as if she were an ash-covered fire, as if she had spent many years in meditation and had just risen up from the meditation. (*Shrikanta, First Part*, Chapter 4).

In the eyes of the society, Annadadi forsook her family with a man. But she eloped with her own husband. This is an example of undeviating love. According to the Vaishnavsect Krishna is the real husband of Radha. Rup Goswami has shown Shrikrishan in one of his plays as having been married to Radha. But on the earth and in the eyes of the society she is the forsaker of the family. Rup Goswami and Jib Goswami have not supported the extramarital love between Shriikrishna and Radha; they have referred to it as marital love. But the Vaishnavsect and literature has given a prominent importance to extra-marital love. Sarat Chandra had a deep attachment to the Vaishnavsect and literature.

The aim of the Vaishnav-sahajiya sect is to delve deep into the nature of the love between Radha and Krishna. Sarat Chandra did not enter into this complex theory, but was mesmerized by natural and preternatural love and romance and this love and romance reverberates in his novels and short stories.

Sarat Chandra collected histories of many forsakers of families and behind his search for the histories were the inquisitiveness of social sciences and his compassion for the fallen women. He saw the extreme ugliness of the prostitutes, but their greatness and steadfastness in love did not evade his notice. In delineating the characters of Tagar Bostabi (*Shrikanta*, Part 2), Kamini Bariuli (*Charitrahin*), Mokshoda (*Charitrahin*) and so on, Sarat Chandra pinpointed the ugliness and dirtiness of the society. Still today the influence of Sarat literature has not diminished with general readers, as is evident in selling like a hot cake of his novels and short stories. The influence is greater, so to say, with women readers, inasmuch as they love to consider themselves like the women characters aggrandized by the image of Annapurna.

Sarat Chandra is a magician in delineating of characters. But he is not immune from adverse criticism levelled against his works by the critics who interpret the characters portrayed in his wok from the viewpoints of their own experience; their criticism is more or less moulded by western literary criticism. But they could not deny the popularity of the works of Sarat Chandra. Here I reproduce a comment (in English) by Buddhadev Basu, quoted by Himabanta Bandyopadhyay in his book, Galpa Niye Upanyas Niye published in 2005 by Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, Kolkata on page 39, which testifies to the popularity of the novels and short stories of Sarat Chandra: "No other authors, not Rabindranath himself had Saratchandra's measure of immediate success. Like Dickens he was the idol of the public."

Side by side with the never-diminishing popularity of his works, there have erupted some adverse questions centring on the delineating of characters divorced from the reality we often find ourselves confronted with. Readers and critics are divided into two groups. One group lavishes unreserved praise on Sarat Chandra's novels and short stories and the other group subjects them to their knife-sharp criticism. They opine that Sarat Chandra wrote novels and short stories just to cater to the transient needs of ordinary people who love spending their time in poring over them. Some of them have gone to the extent of calling Sarat Chandra a script writer. But they seem to be not literarily or rather, critically tutored enough to be able to judge Sarat Chandra's works. Even Buddhadev Basy did not do proper justice to his work by merely saying 'immediate success.' Again he belittled Sarat Chandra as in the following passage quoted by Himabanta Bandyopadhyay on page 40 and I reproduce it:

> This, however, is worth mentioning that the early Rabindranath and Sharat Chandra do not represent two different schools of fiction…Sharat Chandra defiantly lacks the predecessor's poetry. He has been lucky in so lacking, for it had made him a Rabindranath Made Easy, and won him a spectacular success through those heart-wringing and tear-bringing qualities in which he has had many imitators, but nota competitor.

It is certainly wrong in calling Sarat Chandra 'a Rabindranath Made Easy.' By any stretch of imagination we cannot call him 'a Rabindranath Made Easy', for Sarat Chandra never suffered himself to be influenced by Rabindranath's short stories and novels. As we have seen Sarat Chandra drew upon the epics, Puranas in delineating his characters. The critics have been so mesmerized by the uniqueness of

Rabindranath's creativity, they seem to be seeing the ghost of Rabindranath in the works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Rabindranath and Sarat Chandra ascended two different flights and, thus, different are the modes of their expression and their uses of language. There is no denying the fact that Rabindranath's subtle philosophical thought is completely absent from Sarat Chandra, but Sarat Chandra had the power of giving vivid expression to human appeals which made his works so popular with the readers and their popularity stubbornly persists. His novels and short stories were translated into many Indian languages. He is perhaps only Bengali novelist to have almost all his works translated into major Indian language, which proves the undiminishing popularity of his works.

Though I have set out at the initial stage to write on his women characters and how they influence his readers, particularly women readers, I could not resistthe temptation of dealing with the nature of his novels and short stories.

It should be noted in this connexion that the genius of Sarat Chandra manifests itself in his novels. Though he has written no mean number of short stories, they are more or less imbued with the characteristics of the novel. Though 'Parinita', 'Arakshaniya','Baikunther Will' were written in the form of short story, many critics object, considering them short stories. The editors of the centenary edition of *Sarat Works* placed them in the short story section, but did not place 'Birajbau' in the short story section, even though Shrikumar Bandyopadhyay considered it one of the best short stories. Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, on the other hand, regarded *Darpachurna* and *Kashinath* as novelettes, but many won't agree with him in regarding them as novelettes. It is really well-nigh difficult to distinguish in case of Sarat Chandra's works between short stories, long stories and novelettes. There is no denying the fact that no writers contemporary with Rabindranath could succeed in writing short stories, conforming to the characteristics of the short story. Perhaps no writer can create anything worth while by doggedly adhering to the standards foisted on them. We should not bother about which are short stories, which are long stories, or which are novelettes. We should leave this distinction up to the critics who bother about it and write treatises, classifying them.

Now a days computer and TV adorn every house and dominate social and literary spheres. The romantic films of the sixties and seventies telecast over TV still appeal to middle-aged middle-class Bengali people. Sarat Chandra's love stories likewise attract them; no theory can explain this attraction.

What had made his short stories and novels attract readers is his compassion and respect for woman. Sarat Chandra developed a compassionate mind for woman and this compassionate mind appears sort of backdated. In his novels the questioning and protesting women characters could not stick to the zeal and sort of pale to insignificance towards the end. Achala of 'Grihadaha' or Rama of 'Pallisamaj' is not different from the intellectual Kamal of 'Shesh Prashna'; they speechified on the value of woman, but could not become free women. Perhaps it was not historically possible for them to turn into free women. In a feudatory state governed by foreigners it was not possible for any woman to achieve rights. In the male-dominated society female rights

were suppressed and the socio-economic aspects of the society chained them to male and familial needs. Sarat Chandra could not completely go beyond the social strictures on women, yet, through the delineation of women characters, he fuelled their inherent desire to slide out of the Slough of Despond. Standing on the ground reality they could find in him a saviour of their down-trodden self. Intellectuals tend to brand his love for women fake, but they can't bring themselves to deny the fact that he brought into the lime light those women who were socially and economically oppressed by society and he very subtly paved the way for women liberation movement. Sarat Chandra tried to vivify the plights of young widows and prostitutes who forsook their families. The plights were not of their own willing, but foisted off on them by the male-dominated societies. Though Vidyasagar had a law enacted in favour of widow marriage, the law has not still been executed. The traditional customs and the greed of male people scattered thorns along the path for women to tread on. Rama of 'Pallisamaj' and Aparna of *Mandir* were torn to pieces by the sword of the conservative society. More wretched was the fate of Savitri of *Charitrahin* and that of the family forsaking Gauri of *Ekadashi Bairagi*. Their premature widowhood drove them into taking to a wrong path. In fact the short stories and novels of Sarat Chandra abound in the characters of prostitutes like Chandramukhi of *Devdas*. Though they did not claim respect in the society, Sarat Chandra gave them the respect that they deserve in his short stories and novels. We cannot put it down to a 'heart-bringing, tear-bringing' quality.

It is not possible to deal with all the short stories and novels of Sarat Chandra, we would rather touch upon a short story entitled 'Sati' Sarat Chandra wrote towards the end of his life. In our culture and tradition there is no male equivalent for the term 'Sati'. The word 'sati' cannot be taken to connote 'chaste' or 'virgin'; it is unique in itself. Sarat Chandra himself pondered over this term, while writing on *Narir Mulya*, that is, value of woman. He thought that there is some hidden aspect associated with the term 'Sati'. 'Sati' does not merely imply chastity, something else, as well. To stress that 'something else' he wrote 'Sati'.

'To remain sexually chaste is regarded here as a criterion for judging human character. But everyone knows, it is next to impossible to adhere to chastity throughout one's life. This concept passed down through generation after generation has bound men and women to the cruel social strictures and tugs at them. Harish, in the story 'Sati', is a flourishing pleader and belongs to a well-to-do family. He was now close on forty. When he was young he had fallen in love with a girl named Labanyaprabha. Their love did not culminate in marriage. Though Labanyaprabha was equal in respect of education to him, his guardians married him to a certain girl, Nirmala. But their marriage did not turn out to be a happy one. Nirmala suspected her husband and this suspicion made his life hellish.

One day Harish was afflicted with small pox. When everyone was busy nursing him, Nirmala came out of the room and announced to the world, 'If I am sati (chaste), my mother's chaste daughter, no one can wipe the vermilion mark off my forehead.' Saying this she lay down before the image of the Goddess Sitala at Her temple. No one blamed her for her irresponsible and blind behaviour, but rather congratulated her,

because coincidentally Harish completely recovered from the small pox. Then her chastity stood asserted to the village people.

Nirmala increased mental torture of Harish and on every opportunity she used harsh and ugly words on him. Harish gradually grew fed up of the humiliation and the harsh and cruel words. He started seeking an outlet from this torture and humiliation.

He did not wait long for the outlet. The outlet appeared before him of its own accord. Labanya came back as amistress of the Girls school. She was widow. He refreshed his love for her in order to get relieved from his humdrum and humiliating married life. His visits to her got spread through the village. When this news reached the ears of Nirmala, she stood as if transfixed and her pride of chastity left her.

Here, in this story, Sarat Chandra mocked at the concept of chastity that the society imposed upon woman and how it shattered conjugal life.

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