

Sharatchandra's Caste and Gender Consciousness: A Reassessment

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Abstract

Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's attitude to the prevalent caste system and social ethos, especially concerning sex, love, and marriage and chastity of married as well as widowed women, shows a marked ambivalence. On one hand, his work demonstrates his progressive and liberal ideas emanating from Western contact and impact on late colonial India, and on Bengal in particular. On the other hand, and by the same token, his attitude to love, marriage, and sex shows marked affinity with the Victorian morality emanating from the society of colonial India's metropolitan masters. The upshot of this historical and social context is that Sharatchandra was basically a caste conscious Hindu Brahmin and a firm believer in the patriarchal ethos of his contemporary society, his reputation as a compassionate (*daradī* or *maramī*) writer exposing the ills of his society notwithstanding.

Keywords

Asia, area studies, humanities, modern, periods, history, literature, cultural anthropology, anthropology, social sciences, arts & humanities, curriculum, education

Introduction

The popular Bengali novelist and short story writer Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's (1876-1938) reputation as a *daradī* [sympathetic] and *maramī* [compassionate] novelist and short story writer has been firmly established in the readers' psyche ever since Achintyakumar Sengupta (1903-1976), one of the literary stalwarts of the *Kallol* era (1930s-1940s), sang his paean to Sharatchandra in 1928: "*Baṅger mātir mata suśītal citta taba, tabu anirbān/Jvalē sethā duhkha-śikhā se-āgunē nijerē karecha rūpabān*" [Your heart is as refreshingly serene as the soil of Bengal, and yet within it burns the flame of pain and suffering, rendering you beautiful] (cited in Sil, 2012, pp. 102-103). This image of Chattopadhyay as a literary luminary cum grand humanist was further reinforced when 8 years later the poet laureate of the world, *Bīśvakabi* Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), proclaimed, "*Kabir āsan theke āmi biśeśbhābē sei sraṣṭā Śarat-Candrakē mālyadān karī*" [As a poet I offer my garland (of honor) to that creative genius Sharatchandra] (cited in S. Mukhopadhyay, 1991, p. 171).

The above arguably legitimate accolades notwithstanding, a careful and sober perusal and reappraisal of Chattopadhyay's life and works reveals some dross in the golden image of this Invincible Wordsmith (*aparājeya kathāśilpī*) of Bengal. As this article seeks to show, Sharatchandra in real life (as in his writings) was a die-hard upholder of traditional patriarchal prescriptions of a Brahmin-dominated caste society. For him, the low-caste folks and the Muslims were subjects of pity and sympathy rather than

equal to caste Hindus. His reputed empathy with the whores is never deep, sincere, or helpful. He, in fact, considered them as venomous Venuses (*biśakanyā*; R. Debi, 1982, p. 45). His concept of an ideal male is someone who is a lovable parasite at best or an insufferably cantankerous and indecent bully at worst. Nevertheless, his depiction of human behavior, both in speech and action, is so vivid and dramatic, thanks to his lucid prose, that it endeared him to millions of his readers.

Historical Context

Sharatchandra's worldviews were grounded in the history and culture of 19th-century Bengal, his *floruit* encompassing two centuries (1876-1938) notwithstanding. Hence, a quick digression into a brief survey of the socio-cultural condition of late colonial Bengal seems to be in order. The 19th century witnessed the completion of the process of British domination of India. The consolidation of the East India Company's rule was accompanied by Western efforts to educate the natives with a view to awaken them to their own cultural heritage as well as transform them into useful, faithful, and pliable subjects. The modernizing enterprise of the Christian missionaries and colonial masters, leading to the founding of

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the Hindu College in 1816 (later renamed as the Presidency College) and one of India's first libraries in 1818 (later renamed as the National Library), evoked a cultural response from the Western educated youths of Bengal, which is known as the so-called Bengal Renaissance or the New Awakening of Bengal (*Bāmlār Nabajāgaran*).

The dawn of colonial enlightenment, that is, modernity, touched the women of the middle and upper classes who had hitherto (the beginning of the 19th century) been deprived of education by their society that firmly believed that an educated female eventually becomes either a widow or a whore. As early as 1819, Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), the future leader of the Brāhmo movement, objected to the prevailing belief that the women were usually nitwit by pointing out the unfairness of making such a judgment without allowing them to prove themselves in education. In the same year, the Christian missionaries exerted themselves in starting the first public school for girls, followed by the publication of Gaurmohan Vidyālañkāṛ's (1822) *Strīśikṣāvidhāyak* [Prescriptions for Women's Education], arguing for female education, and the founding of 24 girls' schools in 1824 and of the Native Society for Native Female Education in 1826 by Mary Ann Wilson (née Cooke, 1784-1868). Thereafter, with the founding of the first girls' school in 1849 by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, Law Member of the Governor-General's Council (r. 1848-1851), about 288 such institutions with a total of 6,869 girls were functioning in Bengal by 1854 (B. Bandyopadhyay, 1408 BE, Vol. I, pp. 408-409; T. Ghosh, 2003, pp. 200-201). On his own initiative and with his personal funds, the great Sanskrit scholar and social reformer Ishwarchandra Vidyāsāgar (1820-1891) founded 35 girls' schools in the districts of Hugli, Bardhaman, Medinipur, and Nadiya (see B. Bandyopadhyay, 1375 BE, pp. 60-68).

Although modernity as the harbinger of individual freedom brought multiple opportunities for the advancement of women, it created, ironically, a context for their fresh fetters. The very definition of womanhood was somewhat adjusted and articulated from the lofty *cathedra* of the *bhadralok* whose dictates constructed a new snare for the educated *bhadramahilā*. Admittedly, there had been a sea change in the outlook of female education since the days of the Report of the State of Education in Bengal in 1836 broadcasting the popular conviction that education of a woman leads to the death of her husband (Forbes, 1996, p. 33).¹ Therefore, education for a woman turned out to be her grooming as *the* ideal woman, that is, a *sahadharminī*, ideal partner in her spouse's life and beliefs (see Chakrabarti, 1998, Chapter 2).

In the post-Mutiny and imperial India, the Bengali *bābus* who had been a prop of the Company Raj and thus enjoyed some measure of distinction, however meager, faced humiliating indifference, even discrimination. The Indian Civil Service examination system after 1854 had enabled the sons of the *bhadralok* to compete for high offices in the government, but by the same token infuriated them at the prevalence of racial discrimination. Thus, after 1857, the British

gradually alienated their erstwhile loyal and friendly supporters, whose friendly gestures were slowly but surely giving way to a defiant attitude tinged with the rising temper of nationalism. The notorious controversy surrounding the Ilbert Bill of 1883 demonstrated to the Indian nationalists the efficacy of a united struggle. Thus was formed the Indian National Congress in Bombay on December 8, 1885. Its mentor was Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912) and its first president the Calcutta barrister Woomesh C. Bonnerjee (Umeshchandra Bandyopadhyay, 1844-1906; see Sil, 2007, pp. 1630-1633).

The rising nationalist temper of the colonial elites induced the government to edge, "gradually," toward a representative government in India: the Indian Councils Act of 1861 establishing limited self-government in Bengal, Madras, and Bombay, while extending to the northwestern provinces in 1886 and to Punjab by the Local Self-Government Act of 1882, the Ilbert Bill of 1883-1884, the Act of 1892 (increasing the number of nominated members in provincial Legislative Councils), the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, and the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 (S. Bandyopadhyay, 2004, p. 280).²

Status of Women in Colonial Bengal

In the last quarter of the 19th century, patriotic Bengali literature—both of the educated middle class (*śikṣita madhyabitta*) and of the Grub Street (*Baṭṭalā*)³ varieties—highlighted the figure of the woman, married as well as widowed. The Brāhmo journal *Bāmābodhinī* [Women's Enlightenment] coined the term *strīsvādhīnatā* [freedom of women] in 1863 and began publishing articles on the predicament of women and suggesting ways and means to eradicate their handicaps in society (see Basu, 2003). The *sadhabā* [married woman] was conceptualized as the *deśamātā* or motherland and personified as the Mother Goddess such as Kali and Durga. The Goddess was to arouse her sons, the *santāns*—a select band of ascetic warriors—who would engage in the final battle for liberation. If the duty of the Mother Goddess was to prepare her sons for the battlefield, the mother at home was to cultivate morality and discipline with a view to restoring and maintaining orderliness. By the same token, the *bidhabā* [widow] was aestheticized as the symbol of purity, patience, and sacrifice and, with her signature white outfit, apotheosized as the Great White Goddess—Mahāśvetā, another appellation of the Goddess of learning, Sarasvatī. As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004) observes, "the widow thus became the most authentic symbol of the essence of Hinduism, situated at the sanctum sanctorum of the nationalist shrine of sacred icons" (p. 134). The mother of the household was the new patriotic woman, whose duties ended when her sons grew up to join the host of the moral-patriotic army. She was not to be militant herself, but she had to be the mother of militants and heroes. Following the ancient Hindu tradition, Indian nationalistic history of the 19th century thus

constructed an idealized womanhood by and for the patriarchal society.⁴

This nationalist ideal simply glorified the traditional role of the woman as the begetter and nurturer of heroic sons (see an excellent analysis of this theme in Chowdhury, 2001, Chapters 3 and 4). Thus, although she was apotheosized and celebrated for her maternal power and, since the sixth century, she had been accorded a “supremely important role,” as is evident in eloquent doxologies and hymnologies, womanhood was in practice diluted “into the more self-sacrificial and digestible holiness of motherhood” (Auerbach, 1982, p. 219). Even a progressive woman, who had been to the West, Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919), while writing spiritedly on women’s problems and prospects in Bengali society, never detached her enlightened views totally from the traditional Hindu social and cultural ethos that apotheosized female chastity, domesticity, and maternity (see Murshed, 2002, pp. 154-169, here at p. 167). In fact, the hegemony of the *bhadralok* forced the *bhadramahilā* to write about women’s advancement and progress in life in conformity with the tastes and injunctions of the males. Even Kailasbasini Debi (b. 1837), wife of Kishorichand Mitra (1822-1873) of Young Bengal fame, observed in her essay on the predicament of the Hindu women, *Hindu Mahilāganer Hinābasthā* [The Degraded Condition of Hindu Women],

From the particular nature and capacities with which God had endowed women, it is quite clear that the subservience of women is God’s will. By becoming strong, therefore, women can never become independent . . . It does not become a woman to be without protection. An unprotected woman will not be respected anywhere . . . (Kailasbasini Debi, 1863)

Going a step further, Hemangini Chaudhury advised her readers in the *Antahpur*, a contemporary popular women’s magazine, that “even if the husband uses abusive language out of blind anger and behaves rudely, the wife’s duty is to accept it in silence” (cited in Banerjee, 1990, p. 165).

Yet, the urban women of colonial Bengal did exert themselves to be a true *sahadharminī* [co-upholders of *dharma*] in the contemporary sense of the term. A recent study of advice manuals for women in the 19th century highlights a proactive response on the part of Bengali women to the patriarchal dominance of their husbands, who in turn had to cope with the domination of colonial masters. As Girijaprasanna Raychaudhury’s (1862-1899) two treatises of this genre—*Ramanir Kartavya* [Woman’s Duties, 1884] and *Gṛhalakṣmī* [Domestic Goddess, 1890]—reveal, women were exhorted to be educated and to rise above romantic and erotic fantasies. Judith Walsh (1995) concludes the following:

[I]t is clear from these two “Advice for Women” texts that changed conditions of study led the Western educated to want adaptations in their home relationships. In *Griha Lakshmi* and *Ramanir Kartavya* we see two aspects of this effort at adaptation; in both books women’s lives, their relationships and even the

worlds they inhabited are being re-conceptualized; they are being re-imagined so that they complement the demands of study and employment that their husbands face in the outside world of British ruled India. (p. 357)

Raychaudhury’s paradigm of womanhood found its clearest articulation a generation later in Panchanan Bhattacharya’s prosopography published in 1921 extolling the positive feminine virtues of purity, benevolence, constancy, fidelity, self-abnegation, self-respect, duty, and honor, as well as the modern virtues of patriotism, piety, saintliness, public spirit, and service to fellow humans (see Sil, 2003, pp. 32-33).

Interestingly and ironically, the enlightened and liberal-minded middle-class men developed a new conservatism that was elitist, discriminatory, and extremely narrow in outlook. These modern *bhadralok bābus* remained contemptuous of the *Vaiṣṇava* sect with its freewheeling love relationships between man and woman and their communal lifestyle on the periphery of nascent Calcutta. Similarly, the educated middle-class men and women sneered at those sex workers who dared to publish their autobiography that highlighted their despair at their own odyssey and their desire to lead the life of a modern, moral, and married woman. The red light district of metropolitan Calcutta nurtured some bold literary talents such as Nabinkumari N. Debi (*Kāminī Kalaiṅka* [Stigma for a Woman], 1870), Sukumari S. Datta (*Apurva Sati* [A Wonderful Chaste Woman], 1875), Tinkāḍī (untitled collection of stories, 1894), Binodini Dasi (*Kanak O Nalinī* [Kanak and Nalinī], 1905; *Āmār Kathā* [My Story], 1912; Banerjee, 1990, pp. 154-163). One of the most outstanding and outrageously brave women pouring unalloyed scorn for her parasitical spouse is that anonymous whore who composed a thunderous doggerel about herself and her man:

Beriyé elem, beśyā halem kul karlem kṣay

Tobuo kinā bhātār śālā dhamke kathā kay,

[I went out [of home] to become a whore thus ruining my family.

Yet even now this bastard of a husband yells at me]. (cited in Chatterjee, 1993, p. 159, with her own translation)

The *kaulīnya* system begun by *Rājā* Ballal Sen (r. 1159-1179) invested elite status on the *Brāhmaṇs* that also entailed unspeakable marital misfortune for the young girls. For the sake of maintaining the *kulīn* status, young girls of indigent Brahmin families were married to decrepit old grooms of the same caste, some even virtual beggars, by bribing them with cash. As for the lower caste folks, life was precarious at best and hellish at worst (see Singha, 2007, pp. 24-30). Yet, palpable signs of change of the *status quo* in postwar India were in the air (see Kopf, 1975, pp. 43-81). As a perceptive contemporary observer wrote in respect of his family, this was a period of transition from the old to a new generation

displaying a new attitude and taste. While the old folks still passed their time playing dice in the temple compound (*caṇḍīmaṇḍap*), their usual evening hangout, the young read and discussed the works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1899) and Rabindranath Tagore (U. Gangopadhyay, 1368 BE, Vol. IV, p. 21).⁵ Such was the situation when the literary horizon of colonial Bengal witnessed the birth of a new star, Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, at an obscure hamlet, some 36 miles north of Calcutta, then the capital city of British India (see Sil, 2012, Chapter 2).

Sharatchandra's Fictional Females

Sharatchandra's ideal woman is first and foremost a maternal figure—nurturant, benevolent, indulgent, and long-suffering. Her primordial motherhood is imbricated in a related concept, that of a loyal wife—a true *sahadharminī*, follower of her husband's *dharma*. Sharat's feminine ideal was in fact modeled on his beloved sister (unnamed), albeit not related directly, at Debanandapur. According to Girindranath Gangopadhyay, she was married to a man who had a strange hobby; he kept snakes as pets. She was often advised by her relatives and friends to leave her spouse with such a dangerous hobby. Once he tried to kiss his pet reptile in a drunken stupor and quickly ended his life in the process. She was totally devoted to her husband who she believed was "true in life and death." The child Sharat was particularly influenced by the life of this widow, whom he idolized through his fictional character of Annadadidi in *Śrīkānta* (1917-1933). On the contrary, he never modeled any fictional male character on Raju, the mischievous daredevil of Bhagalpur, who was somewhat of a missing link between a Peter Pan and a *potache* [mischievous schoolboy], except two minor characters: Indranath ("Śrīkānta" in Sen, 2002, Vol. I, pp. 268-324) and Rajendranath (*Śeṣ Praśna*, 1931; Ray Chaudhury, 1346 BE, p. 11, author's conversation with Girindranath).⁶ Generally speaking, his male stereotype was modeled on Debdas (*Debdās*, 1917), Surendranath (*Baḍadidi*, 1907), Shrikanta (*Śrīkānta*), or Mahim ("*Gṛhadāha*" in Sen, 2002, Vol. I, pp. 875-978)—the characters who mirrored their creator, Sharat himself.

Sharat's significant and popular female characters are generally young and pretty widows or frustrated and unloved married women mostly from high-caste families—whether from the genteel household or a menial maid or a fallen woman (*patitā*), an indigent housewife forced to sell her body due to the exigencies of circumstance. They display either maternal and filial piety or an erotic sentiment toward socially tabooed male characters. However, they harbor a phobic disdain for active sexuality—a reflection of Sharat's personal predilection somewhat reminiscent of the Puritans of early modern England (S. Sengupta, 1414 BE, p. 142). In spite of some of the more "progressive" and "aggressive" among them, all adhere scrupulously to the traditional social ethos in respect of love and marriage.

Narayan Chaudhury classifies Sharat's female characters into some special types—affectionate and maternal (*snehamayī janani*): Bindu (*Bindur Chelē*), Narayani (*Rāmer Sumati*), Madhabi (*Baḍadidi*), Hemangini (*Mejadidi*); nurturant (*pratipālikā*): Mrinal (*Gṛhadāha*), Rajlakshmi (*Śrīkānta*), Sabitri (*Caritrahīn*), Chandramukhi (*Debdās*); chaste and loyal to husband (*satī sadhvī*): Biraj (*Birāj Bou*), Annadadidi (*Śrīkānta*), Shubhada (*Śubhadā*), Surabala (*Caritrahīn*); rebellious (*bidrohinī*): Abhaya (*Śrīkānta*), Sunanda (*Śrīkānta*), Kiranmayi (*Caritrahīn*), Kamal (*Śeṣ Praśna*); and socially oppressed (*nipīḍitā lānchitā*): Sarayu (*Candranāth*), Roma (*Pallīsamāj*), Kusum (*Paṇḍit Maśāy*), Jnanada (*Arakṣaṇīyā*; Chaudhury, 1382 BE, p. 75). Even the most exceptional and adventurous *Brāhmo* girl Achala (*Gṛhadāha*), who surrenders herself to her husband's friend, and cohabits with him, is troubled by her primal and primary loyalty to her spouse, however stoically cold, drab, and dull (see K. Mukhopadhyay, 2002; S. Sengupta, 1414 BE). Basically, then, Sharat's fictional women—mother, mistress, wife, lover—are, to quote Buddhadeva Bose's elegant expression, "sweethearts," always affectionate but never passionate (Bose, 1948, pp. 32-33).

Sharatchandra's Concept of Woman: Progressive or Patriarchal?

Admittedly, Sharatchandra wrote a scholarly article on women, "*Nārīr Mūlya*" (1921), in which he appeared as a self-appointed advocate of Indian (especially Bengali) womanhood. In his moral economy, women's worth in society is diminished due to the plentitude of their supply, and he took the self-centered, cowardly, misogynistic patriarchy to task for failing to give the women their due (see Sen, 2002, Vol. II, pp. 1929-1951). Yet, beneath the veneer of his liberal and egalitarian attitude to women, Sharat found them lacking in the where-withal for claiming their place under the sun. Actually, his attitude toward women, especially widows, was quite in keeping with the prevailing concern displayed in the works of several prominent literary figures from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay to Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (1898-1971). Thus, although Sharat was genuinely concerned over the plight of the widows, he had little qualms making them conform to the prescriptions and injunctions of the Brahmanical patriarchal society (see S. Bandyopadhyay, 2004, pp. 108-190). In fact, he wrote in defense of his enterprise masking it as the publishers' preface to his anthology of articles (1923) 10 years after their first appearance in *Yamunā* in 1913 (as he explained, he wrote the preface "because the women of that time were yet unprepared to argue about their rights"; J. Mukhopadhyay, 2008, p. 24; see also Purkayastha, 2013).

His condescension toward women is explicit in his letter to Radharani Debi (1904-1989):

You ladies do not quite understand your own mind as much as you're able to fathom men's mind with remarkable alacrity

. . . Radhu, I fear you ignore your own heart and thus deceive yourself by being a good domesticated woman. Self-denial *eo ipso* is self-destruction. (Debi, 1982, p. 26)⁷

At the same time, in real life, Sharat had little qualms letting his wife Hiranmayi (possibly a model for *Grhadāha's* Mrinal) collect *pādodak* [water used in washing the feet of a revered person collected for consumption] in front of a visitor—Radharani. He even jestingly told Hiranmayi, “Why feel shy in front of others? Let Radhu see for herself. They are all modern urban women. You better teach her the real cunning of your devotion.” He explained this “cunning of devotion” to Radharani: “All this does not really imply devotion to husband—it actually is an anchor to tie the cow with” (meaning, Hiranmayi’s apparent devotion is to ensure her husband’s fidelity; Debi, 1982, pp. 166-167). Actually, Sharat never had any social contact with educated, cultivated, and financially well-off women, except Radharani Debi and Lilarani Gangopadhyay (ca. 1894-1938). His experiences were confined to the women of his maternal uncles’ families or with indigent child widows or the so-called fallen women, whose odyssey he depicted with marvelous skill.

However, in respect of uneducated women, he could not effectively conceive of strong female characters like Chandara of Tagore’s short story *Śāsti* (Punishment; in Tagore, 1961, Vol. VII). Chandara was hanged having been charged by her husband with a crime that was actually committed by his elder brother, and because he believed that a wife is replaceable, but the loss of a brother is irreparable. But while waiting in her cell prior to her execution, she was informed by the prison doctor of her husband’s wish to visit her, which she refused uttering contemptuously, “Go to hell!” (cited in Chakrabarti, 1998, p. 147). Probably Sharat was unaware of the autobiographies, diaries, and other writings of the women, especially the so-called “fallen” women, of the late 19th century in which they firmly and frankly asserted their personal odyssey (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 160; Banerjee, 1990). Yet, he was able to pen the veteran whore Kamini *bāḍiwālī’s* [homeowner] unabashed assertion of her vocation in *Caritrahīn*:

Āmrāo ār gerastar māṭhākrun nai go, ye ekjankeyi kāmḍé paḍé thākté habé . . . Āmrāo halum sukher pāyrā—bebuṣye! Yekhāné yār kāché sukh . . . pāba, sonā-dānā pāba, tār kācheyi yāba. Eté lajjāyi bā ki, ār ḍhākāḍhākiyi bā kiser janya! [We are no mistresses of the household obliged to stick to one man. We are doves of delight—whores. We turn to anyone promising pleasures and perks. What shame is in it and why fuss with “hush hush!”]. (Sen, 2002, Vol. I, p. 746)

Interestingly enough, educated women appeared to be a threat to him, especially when they also happened to aspire for a niche in the generally male-dominated literary world of

Bengal—women such as Anurupa Debi (1882-1958), Nirupama Debi (1853-1951), Ashalata Singha (1911-1983), or even beneath apparent bonhomie and geniality, Radharani Debi. He was of course extremely cautious in his exchanges with the Radharani Debi. But he had little qualms proclaiming his contempt for women writers in his letter to Haridas Chattopadhyay: “The last month’s issue of the *Bhāratbarṣa* (Kārtik, 1322 [October 1915]) was not so good. All the entries are authored by women [forty-two women contributors]. Admittedly it’s something new but, expectedly, worthless, as compared to other issues” (G. Ray, 2009, p. 72, letter of November 15, 1915).

Sharat’s attitude toward Nirupama Debi was frankly patronizing when he claimed that she was mentored by him to grow up as a mature writer and “not a mere woman” (G. Ray, 2009, p. 143, letter to Lilarani, July 29, 1919).⁸ Sharat was unconsciously moved to highlight precisely this quality in Kamal, the protagonist of his *ŚeṣPrašna*, whose epigrammatic outpourings in all her conversations are not only tiring but irritating—to quote Sharat’s own expression used in his critique of the writer Anurupa Debi, “*asahya jyāṭhāmo*” (insufferable pedantry; Sen, 2002, Vol. II, p. 2079).⁹ And yet, Sharat’s women do not possess the *élan* of their gender as expressed in Rabindranath’s elegant and eloquent woman’s exhortation to God:

Nārīké āpan bhāgya jai karibār

kena nāhi dibe adhikār hé bidhātā?

Kena sūnyē ceye raba?

Kena nīje nāhi laba ciné

sārthaker path?

. . . *Hé bidhāt āmar rekhonā bākyahīnā—*

Rakté mor jāgé rudrabīṇā.

[My God, why won’t you empower woman to conquer her own fate?

Why must I keep staring at a vacuum?

Why can’t I find by myself the path of my own liberation?

. . . Oh God, do not keep me silent.

My raging lyre is strumming in my blood.] (Tagore 2002, pp. 574-575)

Sharatchandra's Fictional Male and Masculine Concern

The role of male characters is relatively minor in Sharatchandra's works. In most stories, the males have been used as a foil to the females. It is not that they lack their own identity totally. However, it seems the narratives predicated on male perspective could not have brought out their author's creative talent. Yet, there are a few males in Sharat's stories who do display some redeeming features. They may not claim a high pedestal in society as rational and practical, but beneath their apparent mindlessness some characters do show some sparks of honesty and liberality. They are simpletons, blissfully devoid of practical commonsense (S. Sengupta, 1414 BE, pp. 68-69). They are like what Bengali culture has done to the Vedic Rudra, "the noumenon, the abstract and abiding principle in the concrete world of transitory phenomena," a Hindu Silenus—a drug addict and a denizen of the cremation ground, keeping low company and chasing *bāgdī* women—a *pāglā* (plowman) or *bholā* (absent minded) *Maheśvar* (J. C. Ghosh, 1948, p. 80; see also Chapters 2 and 3). Sharat's male characters are mostly passive and quiescent to the extent of being subjected to *tamas*, that is, omphaloskepsis, or, if they are not, a predator like Ananga and Dibakar of *Caritrahīn*, Jibananda of *Denā Pāonā*, or Bilasbihari of *Pallisamāj*. Some male characters such as Debdas of *Debdās*, Upendranath of *Caritrahīn*, Surendranath of *Baḍadidi*, Shrikanta and Gahar of *Śrīkānta*, or Mahim of *Gṛhadāha* are either enmeshed totally in *tamas*—indolent, indifferent, albeit occasionally intransigent—or are insanely self-righteous. They are perpetually subjected to what the Japanese call *amae*—some sort of ontological dependency (see Doi, 1981). In particular, Debdas, Surendra, and Upendra are forever moving in molasses only to be released from their utterly helpless mire by being killed off in the end by their creator. Even the lovesick but sexually naïve (like a pubertal adolescent) Suresh of *Gṛhadāha* exhibits no trace of mature love for an adult woman like his friend's fiancée and subsequently wife Achala. His physical relationship with her is no better than loveless rut that results not in *jouissance* but in a sense of guilt and shame (Sen, 2002, Vol. I, pp. 963-966).

Sharat's portrayal of the male character mirrors his own.¹⁰ He has no concept of an individual who is the architect of his own destiny, a man of *virtù*, that is, manliness. He reached his midlife as a dependent and a client. His childhood was spent in his maternal uncles' home as his father was unable to look after him. At the Hooghly Branch School in the town of Hooghly, some three miles north of his native village Debanandapur, his father had to send him to his uncles' home at the nearby town of Chinsurah for room and board. At the Tejnarin Jubilee School, Bhagalpur, he was helped by a teacher known to his maternal uncles. When later he became a mendicant, he was helped by a Brahmin youth, Pramathanath Bhattacharya, and later, through him, by the local landlord.

When he returned to Khañjarpallī upon his father's death, he relegated his siblings to various relatives' care and himself to a maternal uncle's home in Calcutta where he suffered humiliating duress. Even in Burma where he had traveled in search of a better life, he was sheltered by one of his maternal uncles. When the latter died suddenly, Sharat came under the care of strangers who took pity on the helpless and hapless young man in a strange land.

From his childhood to the onset of midlife, Sharatchandra was never his own man. He was always at the receiving end, always a client to patrons. In the end, it must be admitted that most of Sharatchandra's characters are adolescents rather than mature individuals. Thus, Sharat's alter ego, as it were, Narendra of *Dattā*, is an English educated physician but does not practice his craft (just like the homespun homeopath Sharat) and is thin and tall but athletic and given to fishing as a pastime (just like the lean and lanky Sharat), who appears as an unkempt bohemian (just like Sharat), a madman (*pāgal*; Sen, 2002, Vol. I, p. 788).¹¹ As Buddhadeva Bose astutely observes about Sharatchandra's male protagonists in his works,

hardly one of his characters is really adult; the grown-up men have typically adolescent minds, and, one is tempted to add, bodies too . . . They run away from the objects of their desire, they go on hurting whom they love best; and when in so doing they have hurt themselves too much, they come back for comfort where they are sure to get it; to the sweet protection of those *anchals*, or hems of saris, which they seemingly want to escape. (Bose, 1948, p. 32)

Sharatchandra's Feminine Sensibilities

In this connection, some observations on Sharat's use of physical infirmity and tears as a sentimental expression seem to be in order. He aestheticizes illness, especially consumption or tuberculosis, by treating physical pain and suffering as the crucible of redemption. All his stories and novels illustrate the blossoming of the man's moral character through his personal pathological experience and by the woman's nursing him to moral and physical health or to sublime death. The elegant phrase "*bhasmācchādita bahñhi*" [smoldering flame] describes the purity of the female character. Then, in almost every story, his male as well as female characters are capable of shedding tears profusely and often noisily (*huhu, haha, hāu hāu* [loud wailings], *ajhor dhāre* [incessantly], *Śrābaṇer dhārār mata* [like the July rains], *dui chakṣu plābīyā aśruprabāha* [tears overflowing from both eyes], etc.); they even delight in such cathartic hydrokinetics. Let me cite one of the most vivid examples from *Caritrahīn*. Reflecting on his object of obsession, Sabitri, the pretty chambermaid of the mess, the indomitable and intrepid Satish beholds in his mind's eye as if in a veritable experience of epiphany—symbolizing a bizarre spectacle of a lactating male mother:

The brightly blossoming visage of Sabitri, on which there is no stain of her wayward [*patitā*] life but flushed with pride, tranquil

in intelligence, affectionate, soberly young, and vivacious. Tears began to flow from his eyes. He could not control his emotion nor did he try to wipe his tears. He actually felt happy for the first time in his painful discovery of the plentitude of sweetness in his delectable tears and gratefully folded his hands in deference to the object of his supreme bliss. (Sen, 2002, Vol. I, p. 639)

The protagonist of *Pallīsamāj*, Ramesh, possessing “*sudīrgha ebamātyanta balaśālī deha*” [tall and robust physique], is so overwhelmed by gratitude, love, and respect for his majestic and magisterial aunt Bishveshvari, who comes to his home on the occasion of his father’s *postmortem* respectful *śrāddha*, that he begins to shed torrential tears (*dardar kariyā jal gaḍāitē lāgīla*). When his childhood love, the widow Roma, comes to bid farewell to him at the end of the novella, she weeps profusely (*jhar jhar kariyā*), and when Ramesh’s aunt pleads to him on Roma’s behalf saying how much she cares for his welfare, he responds by rushing out of the room “suppressing the indomitable surge of tears” (Sen, 2002, Vol. I, p. 154, 156, 184). Similarly, the meretricious and muscular Suresh of *Grhadāha*, possessing extraordinary physical strength (“*Sureśer . . . gāyē jor chila . . . asādhāraṇ*”), was a habitually lachrymose lad prone to shed tears for apparently the most trivial reasons (“*sāmānya kāraṇeyi Sureśer cokhē jal āsiā paḍa*”; Sen, 2002, Vol. I, pp. 856-858). In fact, Sharat himself was prone to lachrymose outburst at the slightest tickling of compassion, despair, or delight. The author and his fictional characters all engage in cathartic or even tantalizingly orgasmic overflow of this body fluid, thus rendering the story a piece of fluid literature and lending credence to the much-maligned Macaulayan observation that the Bengali “lives in a constant vapour bath” (Macaulay, 1841, cited in Strachey, 1911, p. 450).¹²

Sharatchandra’s Caste Consciousness

Sharat’s pre-Burma days were spent in the homes of his maternal uncles or some well-to-do Brahmin distant relatives of acquaintances. The spontaneous generosity of Sharat’s help from his patrons speaks volumes of the contemporary Bengali high-caste societies’ close-knit communal bonds of which Sharat was a fortunate beneficiary. Even in Burma, his patrons were mostly caste Brahmins like him, with the exception of two Kāyastha associates. In his professional life, he was helped by two Kāyastha publishers of Calcutta, although the majority of his benefactors were Gangopadhyays, Chattopadhyays, Bhattacharyas, and Mukhopadhyays. In fact, Sharat was a caste conscious *kulīn* Brāhmaṇ himself. Later in life, he was revered and adored by the low-caste and low-class folks as *dādāthākur* (literally meaning “grandfather” but implying a respectable elder form the Brāhmaṇ caste, used more widely for another popular litterateur Sharatchandra Pandit [1880-1968]).

Although, admittedly, Sharat inveighed against caste discrimination in stories such as “*Abhāgīr Svarga*” (in Sen,

2002, Vol. II, pp. 1733-1738) or “*Bāmuner Meyē*” (in Sen, 2000, Vol. I, pp. 979-1013), he could not help paying his obeisance to the Brāhmaṇs whom he respected as the upholders of Indian tradition. He told his neighbor at Panitras, Pulinbihari Datta, that although he did not believe in caste, he opposed anyone trying to masquerade as a Brāhmaṇ (B. Datta, 1383 BE, pp. 23-24). That is why he supported the orthodox Brāhmaṇ social leaders of Samta-Myellock village when they socially ostracized a weaver-Brāhmaṇ (*tānti-brāhmaṇ*) named Punya Mukhopadhyay who had performed the Durga *pūjā* in a caste Brahmin’s home (B. Datta, 1383 BE, pp. 24-25).¹³ Sharat also wrote to a correspondent with disarming candor that his sister had to bathe 5 or 6 times a day during the period she tended to a house guest, a low-caste *pod* (betel seller) who had taken ill (G. Ray, 2009, p. 134, letter to Mahendranath Karan, January 10, 1918). His innate Brāhmaṇ *mentalité* was often reflected in the fate of some of the upper-caste characters of his fiction. He also revealed his food fetish even when insisting on his lack of prejudice. He wrote to Lilarani that he “had never eaten anything from a woman’s hand” and that he could “eat only from the hands of those whose parents are of Brāhmaṇ caste and married to the same caste” (G. Ray, 2009, p. 119, letter of August 18, 1919).

Once Sharat’s admirer Kalidas Ray (1975) told him bluntly,

There’s a streak of weakness in you. You proclaim the message of emancipation from tradition, but you bend to the dictates of society. The quintessential message of your literature is that man is the ultimate measure—humanity is greater than religion—and yet you recognize casteism!

Sharatchandra responded,

Bengali society is like this. I’ve penned the real Bengali character. The Bengalis have intellectualized the message of emancipation, but haven’t realized it in life. This is the transition period of Bengali society. The literature of this period must reflect this incongruity. (p. 135)

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2004) observes that “the Bengali fiction of this period adequately reflected the dilemmas of a Bengali modernity, their new consciousness, which remained tormented by contradictory conventions of love and gender equality on the one hand, and caste and patriarchy on the other” (pp. 133-134). As a matter of fact, Sharat was never quite a citizen of the 20th century. He does not appear to have had a direct experience with the post-1905 Bengali social life. All his novels, novellas, and short stories depict the society of the first 30 years of his life (1876-1906). His worldview was deeply imbricated in the mindset of *fin de siècle* Bengal. He was, to quote Nirad Chaudhuri (1399 BE), “a Bengali young man of the late nineteenth century and never grew beyond this benchmark” (p. 141).¹⁴

Sharat appears to harbor an especial antipathy toward the *Brāhmos*. “That fellow says one thing but believes in

another—he must be a Brāhmo,” he quipped in a conversation with Kalidas Ray (1975, p. 30). He was particularly critical of the educated *Brāhmo* women. As he wrote to Lilarani Gangopadhyay,

With the exception of a few most of them are scared of me. They always think that I am subjecting their mind to minute examination. That is why they feel uncomfortable in my presence. They are full of pettiness and posturing. As a matter of fact you won't find any woman in Bengal narrower and pettier than they. (G. Ray, 2009, p. 149, letter of August 18, 1919)

He thus makes the Brāhmo Kedar of *Gṛhadāha* a crypto villain of the story and his daughter Achala the architect of the ruin of three lives including her own. By the same token, Sharat shows the liberal but dysfunctional Mahim a victim of cuckoldry, and makes the wayward seducer Suresh a sort of a martyr, the fanatic Rambabu a “*niṣṭhābān*” [devout] Hindu, and the rustic Mrinal who glories in patriarchal feminine fidelity the exemplar of the quintessential Hindu femininity, a *satī* [chaste woman]. Sarojmohan Mitra (2012) drives the point home with his astute observation: “Admittedly Sharat’s stories and novellas are replete with his remonstrations against obscurantism and superstitions and yet he failed to detach himself from Brahminical fetishes” (*Āsalé Śaratchandra tānṛ upanyāsē anek kusamkārē biruddhé balechen. Kintu brāhmaṇya ‘samkār-ké’ chāḍḍé pārenni*; p. 183).

His attitude toward the lower castes is quite explicit in his work. In “Rāmer Sumati,” the protagonist vents his caste prejudice when he quips in an angry exchange with the village medic Nilmani *dāktār*: “You’re from a low caste [*choṭ ajāt*] and thus you could utter this as you’re ignorant of a sense of decorum and respect for a Brahmin” (Sen, 2002, Vol. II, p. 1573). In his *Dattā*, a high-caste Brāhmaṇ Banamali Ray and a low-caste *kaibarta* (peasant) Rashbihari (Sharat does not provide his surname), both *Brāhmo* convert, married *Brāhmo* women. But Sharat assigned a very pretty girl Bijaya as Banamali’s daughter and a short, stocky, beady-eyed, foul-mouthed, coarse-voiced, and frankly vulgar (*borbor*) young man Bilasbihari as Rashbihari’s son. Banamali and Rashbihari’s common friend, the Brahmin Jagadish Mukhopadhyay, married the daughter of his *Brāhmaṇ* neighbor, Purna Gangopadhyay, and their son Narendra was a 6-foot tall, athletic, and fair-complexioned youth. The *Brāhmaṇs* are good looking, while the low-caste folks are ugly (cited in Chaudhuri, 1399 BE, p. 145).¹⁵

As Narayan Chaudhuri (1382 BE) explains,

The ambivalence and self contradiction in Sharat’s writings—sometimes counseling destructive revolution and sometimes upholding the traditional social structure—are rooted in his own birth and background. Born into a *rāhḍ* Brahmin family, he inherited numerous superstitions and customs of his caste: faith in the glory of the sacred thread [*upabūt*], propriety of untouchability, ritual prayers at dawn and dusk, eating of foods cooked personally or by someone of his own caste, faith in

casteism and brahmanical rites and rituals, and hesitant approval of inter-caste marriage . . . He could have been a great humanitarian but for his communalism and parochialism. Even though he traveled in several countries of Southeast Asia, he nevertheless remained strongly rooted into the rustic ethos of his little village of Debanandapur.” (pp. 37-38, 43)

Sharatchandra’s Attitude to the Poor and Downtrodden

Sharat does not seem to be aware of *Einfühlung* or empathy, “feeling into”; on the contrary, he betrays sympathy, which means “feeling with” (see Lipps, 1903, pp. 185-204). Thus, he claims,

I have mingled with the village folks, sympathized with their plights and collected information on their familial and social life. Thus I have acquired a comprehensive idea of village life. Moreover, most of the characters and events of my novels are based on my personal experience. (B. Mukhopadhyay, 1388 BE, p. 73, Sharat’s conversation with Charuchandra Bandyopadhyay)¹⁶

The above statement is undoubtedly true, but his depiction of the hurts and hassles of the lower classes and castes exposes their ills in a stylized manner and we must bear in mind that the author is a high-caste Brahmin himself with deep roots in and respect for the existing social order.

His sympathy and love for the poor such as Gaffur of *Maheś*, or the homely and hapless (albeit from a Brahmin family) Geni (Jnanada) of *Arakṣaṇīyā*, or his humanitarian attitude to servants such as Ratan of *Śrīkānta*, Behari of *Caritrahīn*, or Tewari of *Pather Dābī* are qualitatively the same as his love for his personal pets—the mongrel canine Bhelu or the pretty cockatoo Bāṭu. In fact, the relationship between Gaffur and his calf Mahesh and between Durga and her daughter Jnanada are fabricated from the same template, as it were. Sharat thus views the underdogs of his society from his outsider’s lens; his closeness to them is more an outcome of his own indigence and dependant status for one half of his life than his being actually one of them. Nonetheless, in the ultimate analysis, Sharatchandra reveals his deep and astute understanding of the human condition of his society. As he observed at a seminar in 1930,

It’s impossible to figure out what makes a human being unless one actually comes in close contact with him. I have found unimaginable reserve of humanity lurking amidst iniquities and ignominies. I remembered those experiences . . . I always look into the interiorities of men. (cited in Mitra, 2012, p. 9)

He was right on the mark.

Ironically enough, Sharat was not a social revolutionary, despite being relentlessly critical of social prejudices. He never questioned the societal values and institutions. He never endorsed socially tabooed love but was respectful of socially approved marriage. There are no really rebellious

female characters in his stories. He was deferential to the prevailing social structure and its rules. As he argued in his *Samāj Dharmer Mūlya*, “the guiding principle of society . . . cannot be transgressed or challenged . . . Nor can it be claimed that it is a mark of cowardice to sacrifice one’s legitimate rights at the altar of society” (Sen, 2002, Vol. II, pp. 2087-2088). As Sukumar Sen (2009) has put it, “this timid mentality” (*sāhashīn dhāraṇā*) rendered his work popular but at the expense of its artistic excellence” (V, p. 218). Sen is echoed eloquently by a distinguished scholar who observed that no doubt Sharatchandra has raised some serious concerns about widows’ and married women’s rights to love another man and yet denied his fictional female characters any recognition in this regard and upheld the legitimacy of their *baidhaybyaniṣṭhā* [austere regimen of a widow] and *svāmīprīti* [love for husband], thereby catering to the cultural prejudices of his readers, and thus ensuring his popularity (Majumdar, 2000a, p. 279). The qualities that made his stories popular were those of his prose style: transparency, pathos, and simple elegance. His works never aimed to propose a new utopia, nor dispose traditions, customs, and the social norms but expose their shameless, heartless, and relentless abuse. He was a candid cameraman of his society, so to speak, exposing the inhumanities and iniquities of human character so that it could be purged and transformed. As he wrote to Pramatha, “The novelist has a deeper obligation than creating aesthetics. If he wishes to discover the hardships and humiliations [of society] he must work to that end” (G. Ray, 2009, p. 17, Sharat’s letter of May 12, 1913). Rabindranath summed up Sharat’s merits when he observed with his characteristic acuity that “Sharatchandra’s gaze penetrated the mysteries of the Bengali’s innermost heart” (cited in G. Ray, 2009, p. 385, Tagore’s felicitation for Sharatchandra organized by Rabibāsār at the Beliaghata [Calcutta] retreat of the editor of *Udayan*, Anilkumar Dey, on Āśvin 25, 1343 BE).

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Notes

1. By 1854, there were 288 girls’ schools in Bengal mostly established by the missionary societies. The Hunter Commission on Indian Education, 1882, underscored the need for higher education for women.
2. John Morley, 1st viscount Morley of Blackburn, was secretary of state for India (1905-1910) and Gilbert John Elliot-Murray-Kynynmound, 4th earl of Minto, was viceroy of India (1905-1910). Edwin S. Montagu was secretary of state for India (1917-1922) and Frederic Thesiger, 1st viscount Chelmsford, was viceroy of India (1916-1921).

3. *Baṭṭalā* (literally, “foot of the banyan tree,” probably a prominent landmark of the area) was the site of the Bengali printers of north Calcutta encompassing several streets and neighborhood and specializing in publishing cheap chapbooks, books on romance, myths and legends, folk religious rites, magic, astrology, witchcraft, and folklore, hagiography, pornography, and even folk medicine—somewhat comparable to the “Grub Street” of London. For an interesting analysis of the *Baṭṭalā* literature, see Śrīpāntha (1997), A. Ghosh (2006), and Bhadra (2011).
4. In addition to the critics directly referenced in my study, I have benefited from the works of other scholars too numerous to mention here but would like to point out especially S. Bandyopadhyay (2008), Ghosal (1998), A. Ghosh (2003), Majumdar (2000), K. Mukhopadhyay (2002), M. Gangopadhyay (2011), and, above all, A. Mukhopadhyay (2001).
5. For a persuasive *tour de force* in respect of the contested nature of modernism in the 19th century (see Basu, 2002, Introduction and Chapter 1).
6. Peter Pan is a fictional character of a mischievous boy, who never grew up, invented by the Scottish novelist James M. Barrie (1860-1937).
7. The text of this letter is significantly different in G. Ray (2009, p. 262).
8. Sen (2009, V, p. 234) notices a tinge of jealousy toward Nirupana in Sharat’s critical essay “Nārīr Lekhā” [Women’s Writings] in *Yamunā* (Phālgun, 1319 BE) printed *in extenso* in Sen (2002, Vol. II, pp. 2076-2081).
9. Sharat used the phrase cited here in his comments on Anurupa Debi’s *Poṣyaputra* [Adopted Son] (1317-1318 BE).
10. Nirad Chaudhuri writes that Sharat himself was a man of weak character (*dūrbalcitta*) and that no Bengali writer before Sharat had expressed so much sympathy with the Bengali male of feeble character (Chaudhuri, 1399 BE, p. 138).
11. The author does not bother to explain how Narendra could pursue his medical studies in England when his father Jagadish Mukhopadhyay, a lawyer, turned (for unknown reasons) alcoholic and indigent.
12. It should, however, be noted that Sharat himself was very much aware of his sentimental excesses of such popular stories as *Debdās* and *Candranāth*. With reference to the latter, he acknowledged his too frequent use of *ucchvās* (letter of September 30, 1913, to Pramatha) and of too much exaggeration (letter of May 3, 1913, to Phanindranath Pal). See G. Ray (2009, pp. 39, 61).
13. Punya was forced to leave Panitras and relocate elsewhere.
14. However, in fairness to Sharat, let us note that his attitude to gender equality or marriage is still to be noticed in post-colonial Bengal. Analyzing the popular feminist magazine *Sānandā*, Srimati Basu finds that beneath publishing some apparently progressive feminist opinion on marriage as well as on the growing practice of “living together” without marriage, a *pratibādī* [remonstrating] author of an article on marriage and living together in that magazine actually deploys a rational, materialistic argument to uphold the efficacy of marriage (see M. Sengupta, 1998 cited in Basu, 2004, pp. 146-161). Thus, Sharatchandra, with all his characteristic 19th-century *mentalité*, is not far removed from that of post-colonial Bengal.
15. The lower caste’s identification with ugliness was perhaps a part of the *bhadralok*’s contempt for the lowly and the

untouchables. Even Sharat's illustrious senior contemporary Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), reportedly a *sannyāsī* of cosmic compassion for all people irrespective of their castes, unwittingly revealed his bias when he jestingly teased a homely looking young girl from his neighborhood that her face resembled the figure of Bengali numeral five (*Bāmlār Pāñc*, a Bengali slang for ugly face) and warned her against visiting the *ḍoms*' [people of scavenger caste] quarters (*ḍompāḍā*) lest she should lose her identity in their midst having been mistaken for one of them (M. Datta, 1393-1395 BE, Vol. I, p. 8).

16. See also Sharat's profoundly moving short story of the persistence of humanity even amid dire degradation, "Maheś" in Sen (2002, Vol. II, pp. 1728-1733).

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- BE stands for Bengali era that follows the Gregorian calendar by 593 years 3 months 14 days.
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