

Suffering and Sacrifice: The Representation of Women in Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's Novels and the Gender Politics of Early Twentieth–Century Bengal

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doi.org/10.64643/IJIRTV13I1-204249-459

Abstract- This paper focuses on the themes of suffering and sacrifice in the novels of Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) and how these themes help create female identity in the social and moral context of early twentieth century Bengal. The present study takes its cue from the close readings of *Devdas* (1917), *Charitraheen* (1917), *Srikanta* (1917-33) and *Pather Dabi* (1926) to trace the negotiation of intersecting pressures of caste, class, conjugal duty and patriarchal morality. The paper suggests that Sharatchandra reflects and challenges dominant notions of the male gender of that colonial era Bengal through feminist literary criticism and historical contextualization. Many of his female characters are embodying endurance and self-negation – values awarded by a society that praised the suffering of women as moral strength – but some of them represent a kind of moral resistance and emotional independence that makes an easy interpretation of victimhood impossible. The paper places these literary images in the context of the overall cultural politics of the nationalist period when women were both celebrated as representatives of tradition and excluded from personal and public independence. This paper can add to the current debate concerning the aspects of gender, morality and literary modernity in the literature of South Asia by reclaiming the paradoxes in Sharatchandra's female characters.

Keywords: Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, suffering, sacrifice, Bengali women, feminist literary criticism, colonial Bengal, gender and morality

I. INTRODUCTION

It is not just that Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) was a prolific writer of Bengali literature, but that he could capture the inner thoughts and feelings of women, who had few formal opportunities in a society that did not take them seriously. The Bengal

Renaissance was making way for mass nationalist politics and discussions on widow remarriage, women's education, and conjugal reform were influencing public discourse, so Sharatchandra put women's plight in the spotlight of literature during an intense period of social change. But his fiction isn't a simple lit of victims, instead, it's a literature of contradiction, a literature in which the cultural scripts of feminine sacrifice inhabit and are made visible.

The four novels examined in this paper occupy about a decade of Sharatchandra's writing career and cover a variety of social settings: the zamindari home, the margins of the widowed women in the caste society, the traveling universe of the male nomad, and the subterranean world of anti-colonial resistance. A recurring theme in all these places is their concern with the economy of sacrifice and the gendering of suffering. In these texts the women renounce love (*Paro*), respectability (*Savitri*), emotional commitment (*Rajlakshmi*), and personal security (*Bharati*), whereas the men are too indulgent and ambiguous in their moral behaviour, often exonerated by the woman they betray.

The subject has been the focus of much academic research into this phenomenon. Jasodhara Bagchi (1997) contends that Sharatchandra always makes his women characters morally superior to the male characters that are supposed to be the backbone of the stories: which is precisely what they do through their ability to suffer. Meenakshi Mukherjee (1998) interprets the story of the tragedy of *Paro* in *Devdas* as a structural analysis of the class stratification which circumscribes conjugal possibility in Bengali Hindu society. As Shampa Roy (2002) points out, the very title *Charitraheen* seems to have a double meaning – a

moral one which is far more serious in the case of women whose misdeeds are less serious than those of the men who condemn them. The situation becomes complicated again when Sisir Kumar Das (1991) demonstrates how a courtesan, an extra marginalized by her profession, becomes a woman of emotional intelligence by Sharatchandra's gift, which in its implied way holds the respectable society accountable for its exclusionary policies.

The consequences of these readings and the analysis that follows in this paper leads to a two-part model of Sharatchandra's portrayal of women. He recreates the dominant cultural logic that values the virtues of women through enduring, forgoing, staying faithful to others who do not do the same: on one hand, his tales are about women who prove themselves worthy by enduring, by not wanting, by remaining faithful to men and institutions that do not reciprocate. Then again, Sharatchandra's portrayal of this endurance is so intense that he refuses to get sentimental or to have a character off the moral hook. But then, the sheer intensity in which Sharatchandra portrays this endurance makes suffering a form of critique. His women are not just burdened with social expectation, they reveal the injustice.

This paper follows three analytical steps that are mutually related. The first explores how the sense of suffering shapes female experience within the novels selected. In the second analyses, sacrifice is a multiple register act that is performed through Srikanta's reading of Rajlakshmi and Pather Dabi's reading of Bharati. The third places these themes in the historical context of early 20th century Bengal, out of which it is argued that Sharatchandra's fiction is involved, ambivalently, in the culture politics of nationalist gender ideology. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ongoing significance of Sharatchandra's performances of woman in feminist literary scholarship.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There have been several decades of scholarly, and multi-disciplinary, work on Sharatchandra's portrayal of women, from sociological and historical works on the subject of Bengali womanhood to very close readings of individual texts. This overview traces the main lines of this scholarship, and points out its

accomplishments and the gaps that this current scholarship aims to fill. In the existing literature, a fundamental thread is interwoven which places Sharatchandra's female characters in the broader ideological framework of Bengali nationalism. In the colonial period, nationalist discourses in India redefined women as reservoirs of cultural purity who had to display the virtues – chastity, self-sacrifice, domestic devotion - which enabled the Indians to set themselves apart from the contaminating forces of colonial modernity, writes Anupama Roy (2000). Roy's framework is essential for an understanding of the moral freight that suffocation gives to the suffering of women, not just in Sharatchandra's fiction, but in all of his work. Nivedita Menon (2004) builds on this by studying the way in which romanticization of women's

sacrifice by nationalist discourses served to deny women agency in the movement's purportedly extended political sphere. These arguments help to elucidate the ideology of writing in which Sharatchandra was operating, even though his fiction sometimes went beyond and challenged that ideology.

III. THE QUESTION OF VIRTUE, THE MORAL ECONOMY

The most detailed description of the moral structure of Sharatchandra's women is by Jasodhara Bagchi (1997). The women in Bagchi's work, he says, are generally "in an ethical position of superiority over the male characters they love or serve: a superiority that is based just on the capacity for suffering and renunciation. It's a formulation that's capturing something very special about the likes of Devdas, where Paro's quiet dignity stands in stark contrast to the dissolving, self-pity of the eponymous hero. Meenakshi Mukherjee (1998) situates Paro's tragedy in the context of the class-based marriage market in the zamindari Bengal, revealing that Paro's plight is not only emotional but material, and that it is socially acceptable for a woman of her class to be forced into marriage – not because she is morally at fault, but because there is simply no other way she could be socially. Shampa Roy (2002) offers a distinctly deconstructive interpretation, highlighting the deliberate undermining of the moral hierarchy of character, virtue, respectability that are the bases of the

condemnation it nominally asserts in Savitri.

IV. WOMEN'S LIVES AND THE BOUNDARIES OF RESPECTABILITY

The image of the courtesan has received special critical scrutiny, partly because it is the most salient critique of the moral economy of female respectability which otherwise dominates Sharatchandra's fictional universe. In Bengali writings, the courtesan has a literary history as well, as traced by Sisir Kumar Das (1991), who suggests that Sharatchandra's *Rajlakshmi* is a move away from the melodramatic and moralizing depictions of courtesans in earlier Bangla works and introduces a courtesan of emotional and moral depth, one whose capacity for love exceeds that of the socially respectable characters who surround her. Rukmini Bhattacharya (2015) interprets the courtesan characters in Sharatchandra's fiction as structurally subversive, both in their ability to reveal the hypocrisies of the conjugal economy of virtue and in their experience of the social price of their freedom. Suchitra Bhattacharya (2010) elaborates on this, arguing that when Sharatchandra portrayed such figures with dignity and dignity alone, he was, in fact, providing a subtle critique of society, raising the question of what value a woman is if not for her sexual propriety.

V. PASSIVE SUFFERING TO POLITICAL AGENCY

A third dimension of the scholarship can be seen as a developmental stream in Sharatchandra's work: the passive sufferer of the mundane with the passive helper is also replaced by the active participant in social and political change. Suchitra Bhattacharya (2010) reads *Pathar Dabi's Bharati* as the pivotal moment in this path: whereas the sacrifice of *Paro* and *Savitri* is personal, that of *Bharati* is political, in the name of a revolutionary cause. Poonam Jain (2011) places this evolution within the larger framework of the nationalist struggle and posits that as the number of women involved in public political movements against the colonial rule increased, women characters with agency and a role beyond their own endurance began to be represented in literature. This is qualified by Kalyan Chakravarty in 2017 who points out that even the more activist women in Sharatchandra's

fiction are still circumscribed by the structures of patriarchy, which restrict their agency and its recognition.

VI. EMOTIONAL COMPLEXITY AND THE PROBLEM OF VICTIMHOOD

More recent scholarship has challenged such readings, which make the women in Sharatchandra's work uninteresting pawns or victims, and pointed to the emotional complexity and psychological depth of the way they are drawn. Sangeeta Ray (2008) claims that the power of Sharatchandra's female characters is precisely that they do not get the social roles they are expected to play, but they are given to feel and desire what they are not expected to do, which leaves an element of the unrealized in them, an element of the suppressed, which keeps them alive. In response to the issues of identity, Anita Myles (2019) builds on this, stating that the plight of Sharatchandra's women isn't just a measure of oppression, but an area of negotiation between personal desire, social duty, and moral fidelity. Perhaps Chaitali Mukherjee (2022) provides the most nuanced treatment of this doubleness, seeing women's suffering as both a symptom of society and a strategy of narration, and calling it Sharatchandra's fiction.

VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers have adopted a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on literary reading and historical contextualization. The texts selected for the research were purposively chosen as they represent the thematic and chronological range of Sharatchandra's writings, particularly his engagement with female experience across different social settings. The analytical method is grounded in feminist literary criticism to examine characterization, narrative perspective, and the moral frameworks through which female suffering and sacrifice are portrayed within each text. Through layered approach, the paper moves from textual evidence to broader cultural argument, tracing how Sharatchandra's narrative choices participate in and occasionally contest the patriarchal structures his fiction inhabits.

VIII. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine how the themes of suffering and sacrifice shape female identity and moral agency in Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas*, *Charitraheen*, *Srikanta*, and *Pather Dabi* within the patriarchal and colonial social order of early twentieth-century Bengal.
- To analyze the extent to which Sharatchandra's literary representations of women simultaneously reflect and subvert the dominant gender ideology of the nationalist period, moving from passive endurance toward forms of moral and political resistance.

IX. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper applies three theories to primary texts, using each in ways which are specific to the needs of literary-historical analysis.

The main approach is a feminist literary criticism but in a historically oriented, not ahistorical, form. This takes into consideration the production, reproduction, and contestation of gender ideologies in literary texts, linking literary character, plot, and narrative perspective to sites for articulating and challenging gender ideology. The analysis does not follow a feminists template, instead it selectively draws on the research of other scholars who are sensitive to the cultural formations of colonial Bengal, like Bagchi (1997), Roy (2002) and Menon (2004).

Historical contextualization is the second of the frameworks. Literary texts are not just a reflection of social conditions, but are created in particular ideological conjunctures that determine what can be said, what cannot be said and what can be made to mean. The study thus places the Sharatchandras in the cultural politics of early-twentieth century Bengal, in the debates and discourses surrounding social change, nationalism of the Swadeshi movement and the changing discourse on women. Historical scholarship and the context of production and reception are thus used to illuminate the context of the texts.

The third one is narrative analysis, focusing specifically on characterization, point of view and handling of moral sympathy in the narrative. Notable

about Sharatchandra is the ability to narrate in a way that arouses the sympathy of his women characters while simultaneously condemning them, a space between interpretative sympathy and condemnation that plays a crucial role in his work. The analysis focuses on the manner in which the narrative technique contributes to the complexities and/or reinforcement of the moral frameworks within the text that formally belong to it.

X. ANALYSIS

It is suffering that is the Constitution of Female Identity: Paro and Savitri.

In *Devdas*, it is not a result of her suffering but it is her suffering. Since the prospect of marriage to Devdas seems too far out of her reach due to his family's interference, which is an acknowledgment of her class standing, Paro's emotional condition becomes a balancing act between wanting and forgoing it. She is married to a widower of a higher status, assumes the obligations of a large family and stepchildren and carries out her conjugal duties competently. She does not stop loving Devdas, and the novel is unabashedly unmoralising it: Paro is the most morally laudable character in a book dominated by other, more worldly and less laudable characters.

It is important to note that Sharatchandra does not romanticize the suffering of Paro (there is a hint of that anyway), but that he does not try to resolve it. Paro is not the peaceful life of renunciation that one might expect the stridharma of a typical Hindu to offer her, nor is she the happy life of her socially sanctioned marriage. Her pain is shown as a continuous pain, the constant pain of a woman who has nowhere to go to express her emotions. Mukherjee (1998) interprets this as an implicit recognition by Sharatchandra that the social configuration for conjugal possibility is not just an inconvenience but actively harmful to human flourishing. In this reading, the tragedy of *Devdas* isn't so much Devdas' dissolution as the structural foreclosing of the possibility of Paro's possibilities at the moment she is old enough to have possibilities at all.

The logic of *Charitraheen*'s representation of Savitri is different but related. While the gap between Paro's

love and the class structures that make it unfeasible produce her suffering, the social judgment attached to women who venture outside the acceptable range of conjugal fidelity produce Savitri's suffering. This relationship is described as morally pure and emotionally sincere, and it is that love which is why she is charitraheen — characterless — in the eyes of the story, which is an adoration of her. It is this love that earns her the description of being charitraheen — characterless — in the eyes of the story, which is an adoration of her. The pain endured from social rejection is therefore not a just punishment for a real fault but a result of a moral lexicon which uses different criteria for women than for men.

This treatment is seen as a basic critique of ideology, which underpins the novel's social world, in the respectability discourse of which the novel is part, as argued by Shampa Roy (2002). Through their sustained sympathy for a character who isn't supposed to have any, Sharatchandra makes the reader doubt the moral categories his society uses. Sharatchandra makes the reader doubt the moral categories his society uses by developing sympathy for a character who is not supposed to have any. The very title of the novel is an ironic citation: charitraheen is called out and then questioned, not confirmed. Savitri's agony, like Paro's, is not a subject of redemption or resolution but of an ever-present state of exclusion, the injustice of which is constantly provoked.

XI. THE STORY OF SACRIFICE AND ITS REGISTERS: RAJLAKSHMI AND BHARATI

The theme of sacrifice is manifested in Sharatchandra's fiction on different registers—personal, social and explicitly political—and the difference between these registers is important. The sacrifice of Rajlakshmi is personal, emotional: she gives her love and care to Srikanta with a generosity that goes beyond what he can give back; and it's hers in a social context – that of a courtesan – that makes her sacrifice lack any of the moral credit that a respectable woman would have for such acts of devotion.

Das (1991) contends that Sharatchandra's portrayal of Rajlakshmi is an intentional inversion of the conventional moral order which gives conjugal virtue precedence over all other female values. Rajlakshmi

can love more fully, more unselfishly, more morally than the women who are respectable in Srikanta's company. Sharatchandra challenges the notion of virtue as social propriety by showing that in Rajlakshmi's case it is possible to love more fully, more unselfishly, and morally. It is precisely because she is not part of the respectable moral economy that the sacrifices she makes are not legible; it is because of their presence in the narrative that they are legible to the reader, and that this legibility is readable. Rukmini Bhattacharya (2015) extends this reading, observing that Rajlakshmi's lack of recognition and reciprocity is actually her freedom to love, as it is not for the more socially situated characters, who have to navigate strategic considerations of their emotional life.

Pather Dabi's representation of sacrifice takes on a distinctly political hue, a shift showcasing Sharatchandra's handling of the agency of females. Bharati's devotion to Sabyasachi is not just a devotion reimagined in political terms; it is also a sense of agency that goes beyond the conjugal and domestic contexts in which female virtue is grounded. Her readiness to make sacrifices in order to further the cause, and her willingness to sacrifice her personal safety and comfort to the needs of the movement is a form of sacrifice that, for the first time in Sharatchandra's fiction, is recognisably political.

This is viewed as a result of certain history by Suchitra Bhattacharya (2010): The strengthening of the independence struggle in the 1920s forged the historical social context and the possibility of women's political engagement, and Sharatchandra was one of the first Bengali novelists to create a sustained literary image of this reality. Even the political agency of the Jain, however, is restricted by the ongoing emphasis in the narrative on her relationship with Sabyasachi, indicating that the private sacrifice and the political sacrifice are not fully distinct and the personal and the political are intertwined in ways that limit her agency even as she is seen as a political being. This ambivalence is significant in itself because it marks the historical incompleteness of the transformation that it portrays – it is not a projection onto the past of a liberation that has yet to come.

XII. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

It is impossible to discuss the portrayal of women in Sharatchandra's fiction without considering the historical context in which it was created. In the early twentieth century, Bengal was a society in which the question of women's status was being vigorously debated and in which the rules governing who could debate it and how were heavily skewed toward the cultural and political project of the male reformers and nationalists who had vested interests in women's liberation and, often, in the maintenance of cultural continuity and male authority.

For Anupama Roy (2000), the nationalist project of this period created a unique ideology of femininity, which involved the valorization of women as mothers of the nation, guardians of cultural tradition, and bodies of spiritual virtue, and yet at the same time it involved the instrumentalization of women in terms of their value as participants in the project of national self-definition. This ideology imposed a heavy load on women and expected them to embody the idealized feminine image which would benefit the nation but at the same time limit women's capacity for fulfillment in their own lives. Menon (2004) sees this as a structural aspect of nationalist gender politics in the colonial South Asia: women's empowerment was always promoted within the logic of reproduction of the patriarchal structure that constrained women's power.

This ideological formation is reflected and challenged in Sharatchandra's fiction. The characters of his women often stand for those virtues the nationalist ideal calls for: patience, self-sacrifice, loyalty, emotional depth – but they are always presented as virtues that are not freely chosen but that must be lived, and that do not lead to genuine fulfillment. The anguish inherent in female virtue in his fiction is too regular, too structurally shaped, and too well detailed to be merely a laudation of sacrifice. When Ray (2008) writes about Sharatchandra's female characters, she illustrates how they live and are shaped by the social roles that are thrust upon them, but also how they suffer from the injustice of those roles, a representation not so easy to endorse, not so easy to criticize, but more complex and more historically accurate because it depicts women living within roles

that are imposed upon them, and that they cannot easily break out of.

XIII. CONCLUSION

This paper has called attention to the fact that the themes of suffering and sacrifice are not only a depiction of the gender ideology of early twentieth century Bengal, but are a critique of it as well. It has explored the experience of suffering as a means to the construction of female identity in four major novels – Devdas, Charitraheen, Srikanta, and Pather Dabi – and how sacrifice is enacted through it, and how it is enacted and interrogated.

Not only are the women in these novels victims, but all of them suffer from different forms of social power that limit their options and take from them emotional and material costs that are not borne by men. They are instead moral beings of moral complexity, the sufferings of which are made sufficiently clear and empathetic to be made legible as injustice, while the social structures which create it are too deeply entrenched to be easily torn down. It is not that Sharatchandra is offering his women an escape from the order of the patriarchy, but he is offering a way to recognize them as subjects in some ways; to recognize that their pains are real, that their wishes are valid, and that the social order that undermines their wishes is not natural, it is constructed, and it is contestable.

It's a minor but not insignificant literary politics. In a time when the role of women was still defined by the moralizing and cautionary tales of fiction, when characters like Sharatchandra's were assigned to embody a moral purpose at every turn, when there was a pervasive sympathy for characters who the social world of Sharatchandra's fiction condemned, Sharatchandra's sustained focus on the inner lives of women was a major intervention in the cultural politics of gender. Those shortcomings are genuine: the descriptions of female suffering in some of these works are sometimes romanticized; the protagonists are typically male, and narrative is still anchored in the male perspective; even those texts that are most politically advanced are still not truly autonomous in terms of female agency. They should however be read as an expression of what he was constrained to say by his own and the times' ideology, rather than as an easy

conservatism.

Sharatchandra's fiction is an important space to be analyzed precisely due to its contradictions as a source of contemporary feminist literary scholarship. It is a very rich resource for exploring the interlacing of the simultaneous production and critique of the patriarchal gender ideology, as well as the role of the representation of women's suffering as a style of documentation and a style of claim-making in a culture that does not otherwise recognize the claims of these women.

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