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Women Subalterns in Saratchandra's Short Stories

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of women as subalterns in the short stories of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, one of the most influential voices of early twentieth-century Bengali literature. Through a close reading of selected stories, the study explores how women—positioned at the margins of patriarchal, caste-bound and socio-economic structures—negotiate their identities within restrictive social frameworks. Saratchandra's female characters often inhabit spaces of silence, sacrifice and moral scrutiny, yet they also exhibit moments of resistance, emotional strength and ethical clarity. By engaging with subaltern theory, particularly the ideas advanced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the article analyses how these women articulate agency even when denied formal platforms of expression. Saratchandra's nuanced storytelling exposes the contradictions of a society that simultaneously venerates and suppresses womanhood, revealing how cultural norms, familial obligations and gendered expectations shape women's lived experiences. The article argues that Saratchandra not only portrays women as victims of social constraints but also foregrounds their inner resilience and moral autonomy. Ultimately, this study positioned Saratchandra's short fiction as a critical site for understanding the complexities of gendered subalternity in colonial Bengal and contributes to broader discussions on women's voices in South Asian literary narratives.

Keywords: Subalternity, Gender, Patriarchy, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Bengali Literature, Women's Agency, Colonial Bengal

Introduction

Those who have given their all to this world, and got nothing in return—the deprived, the weak, the oppressed—though they are human beings, their tears have never counted in the eyes of other people; who could never imagine that in their sad, unfortunate lives, they could lay claim to anything that was spread out before them to these human beings my debt is also very high. Their pain has unlocked my lips; they have sent me to the people to carry their plaint. I have even seen objective justice meted out to them—which is intolerable... (SSS)

Bengal's prolific writer Saratchandra Chattopadhyay observed the society very closely and expressed his wise thoughts through his novels and short stories. This popular novelist of Bengal was born on September 15, 1876 in Hooghly. He was the child of Motilal Chattopadhyay and Bhuvanmohini Devi. He started writing at a very tender age. His stories, novels are widely read even today. Saratchandra inherited his propensity of writing and his undaunted spirit from his father. This is the proven truth that Saratchandra is the most popular writer ever. There are reasons innumerable for such popularity. His novels generally deal with various societal issues. The conflict between the individual with the society, the agony of the human mind because of the societal norms are seen in the novels of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. Saratchandra portrays through his writings the close picture of rural Bengal, the minute details of the family life and the domestic life as well. Women are the central force of love, affection, kindness in the family life as it is sketched by Saratchandra in his literary works. He portrays the known life of common men and women. Most of his characters are guided by their emotion. It is said that the literary works of Saratchandra are the reflection of women's psyche. His novels and short stories are mainly lead by female characters rather than the male. Most of his male characters are indifferent, inactive and thoughtful by nature. How the tyrant landlord exploited his subjects in the contemporary society, the helpless situation of the poverty-stricken people and the worst consequence of class-distinction is obvious from the fact that how the so-called marginalized people are ignored are all evident in the literary works of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. The voices and faces of the oppressed class became heard and visible through his writings.

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"My home is in a Bengal village; I do not think even my greatest enemy would accuse me of not having any knowledge of rural Bengal. I have gone to each and every home..." (SSS, Vol.2, p. 1955) As he was very well acquainted with the rural communities in the villages – the well-off, the rich, the poor and the marginalized groups are drawn in his stories from his own personal experience with them. The characters sketched by him are usually seen to adopt the social injustice primarily but towards the end of the story their opinion changes from their previous ones about the social codes and behaviour. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay powerfully portrays the human, economic and social distress. His portrayals of colonialism, middle-class lives and the rural world are widely read and have been adapted into films even today.

Within his stories, there is a social context of power and domination even in a family which is a social reality. Saratchandra considered child as the marginalized member of the family. His short stories such as 'Laalu'; 'A Day's Tale From Some Fifty Years Ago' ('Bochor Ponchaash Purer Ekta Diner Kahini'); 'The Child Snatchers' ('Chheley-dhora') Part-I of 'Srikanta' and so on depict a regimented world of children. Through these stories Saratchandra presented the picture of joint families and there were a large number of children both young and old. Within these families, there were collective memories of oppression and injustice. The younger children were dominated by the older ones within the household. Again the younger children were supervised by the tyrannical seniors of the family.

One thing is noticeable through all these stories that girlhood is totally absent there. Not a single event of adventure of a girl child is found in the short stories of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. This is because, in those days girls are only found within the household and the girl child is no exception of this practice. They remained confined by and largely within the domestic sphere of households. Then again, girls of a very tender age were not allowed to roam around alone without any adult supervision. This fact is evident in the novels and stories of Saratchandra. In case of social restriction of the girl child, there was not much difference between the urban and the rural communities.

One of the doyens of Bengali Literature, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay is well-known for his novels. But the attraction of his short-stories is no less. He wrote twenty-three short-stories. Chronologically they are, 'The Temple' ('Mondir'); 'Kashinath'; 'The Good Sense of Ram' ('Ramer Sumoti'); 'Burden' ('Bojha'); 'The Son of Bindu' ('Bindur Chhele'); 'Guidance' ('Pothnirdesh'); 'Light and Shadow' ('Alo O Chhaya'); 'The Love of Anupama' ('Anupomar Prem'); 'Haricharan'; 'Light in Darkness' ('Andhare Alo'); 'Mejodidi'; 'Break the Pride' ('Dorpochnurno'); 'Husband' ('Swami'); 'Ekadoshi Boiragi'; 'Bilasi'; 'Outcome of the Case' ('Mamlar Fol'); 'Picture' ('Chhobi'); 'Mohesh'; 'Abhagi's Heaven' ('Ovagir Sworgo'); 'Poresh'; 'Horilokkhi'; 'Virtuous' ('Sati') and 'Anuradha'. The women of Bengal had been humiliated and exploited for the ages. The noble, generous and magnanimous persons such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda and others tried hard to bring back the lost dignity of women in Bengal.

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay was the descendants of those great persons. He always sympathises with women's condition in society through his writings. A vivid picture of

the miserable condition of women in contemporary Bengal is found in his stories. The opinion of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay is similar to that of Rabindranath Tagore in this regard. Through their works they tried their utmost to empower the women in Bengal. In the then Bengal especially in rural Bengal, women are considered merely as maid-servant as and not more than that. If a widow fell in love with someone, it was against the norms of the society and that very widow was strictly prohibited in the society. This is evident in the short-story 'The Temple' ('Mondir') by Saratchandra. In this short-story there is a small village where two potter families live. They collect mud from the nearby river and used to make doll out of it and sell them in the market. In this way they earn their livelihood. A young priest regularly comes to them and learns how to make doll out of mud from them. His name is Saktinath. It is not his profession but passion to learn the art. Aparna is the daughter of that village's landlord who gets married and within few days her husband died. After this disaster Aparna, the young widow in a regular way comes to the village temple to pray to God. There the young priest Saktinath and the young widow Aparna gets attracted to each other. They have feelings for each other but meet for very short time because of the prohibition of the society. Only because of the cruel social norms Aparna misbehaves with the young priest Saktinath who becomes ill. In a dejected and rejected mental condition Saktinath leaves the world forever. After his death, Aparna accepts his love in the core of her heart as there is no fear of punishment by the society.

In his another short-story 'Burden' ('Bojha') Saratchandra sketches the character of Satyendra, a representative of the patriarchal society. At first he marries Sarala and after her death he marries for the second time Nalini although Sarala, his first wife is there always in his mind. Whenever Nalini wants to get closer to Satyendra, he remains indifferent to his second wife just because of Sarala and her thoughts. In spite of such humiliation Nalini tries her best to satisfy her husband and make him happy in any way. Satyendra becomes very much dependant as well as possessive on his second wife, Nalini. Not a single mistake of Nalini is allowed by Satyendra. As the story progresses, Satyendra becomes outrageous with Nalini for a trivial cause and send her to her mother's house for a long time. The grief and sorrow experienced by Nalini knows no bound although she conceals it in her heart. Such is the audacity of her husband Satyendra that, in spite of making a path of reconciliation between himself and Nalini, He marries another woman once again. Sorrow-stricken Nalini send her well-wish to the newly-married bride and died. Her husband Satyendra is the perfect example of the cruelty over women in the male-dominated society. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay makes it clear through this story how badly women were treated by men in the then society of Bengal.

'The Love of Anupama' ('Anupomar Prem') is a short-story of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay where we find the innocent girl Anupama who is secretly in love with Suresh, a boy in their village who lives near their house. But as her love is one-sided, Suresh denies marrying her ignoring the opinion of the elders of the two families. He escapes in the day of marriage. Under this circumstance, fearing that their family may be cornered by the inhuman rules of the society, Anupama's father insists her to marry another aged man and Anupama does accordingly against her will but

unfortunately within a few days she becomes widow. She strictly follows the protocols of widowed life. Her rich father tried hard to remarry her to another man thereby make her life safe and secure. But Anupama strongly protests that view of her parents. Anupama's father makes a will for his only daughter Anupama and died. After that Anupama spend her life under the guidance of her elder brother Chandrababu. Another village boy Lalit is getting attracted to Anupama and wants to spend her time with her. Totally ignorant about it Anupama helped her elder brother Chandrababu to give punishment to Lalit by sending him to jail. With the passage of time her elder brother Chandrababu and his wife makes Anupama the maid-servant in her own house. Though Anupama never protests about it, one day in an outrageous mood she revolts against them and declares the fact that it is her elder brother Chandrababu and not his father who makes her penniless. After that incident, Chandrababu very tactfully promotes the fact that widowed Anupama is in an affair with one of their servant and asks Anupama to get out of his house. By knowing this Anupama wants to commit suicide by drowning in the pond. But, at that crucial moment her admirer Lalit reaches the place and saves her life and makes her partner for the rest of his life.

'Light in Darkness' ('Andhare Alo') is a memorable short-story of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay. Here in this story for the first time Saratchandra portrays the character of a prostitute, Bijli. Saratchandra sketches the character very sympathetically. Bijli takes prostitution as her profession. One landlord from village named Satyendra is getting attracted by the charming, mysterious lady Bijli by the bank of the river Ganges. Initially Bijli is enjoying his activities but later when Satyendra comes to know about her profession he becomes highly displeased with her and goes to his village estate, then Bijli is greatly affected by his behaviour. Gradually she completely changes herself and leaves her profession also in the name of her love for Satyendra. Even after being ignored by her admirer she worships him as her god. It is, as if, by loving Satyendra her soul gets purified and she finds her true love. On the other hand, Satyendra leads a married life and after having a child he intentionally invites Bijli in the occasion of his child's christening. Though destiny does not permit Bijli to meet her love, her god Satyendra face to face anymore, the pure love between these two souls' remains forever. Once again Saratchandra proves that how the social wound affects the relation between Satyendra and Bijli. Socially Satyendra never accepts Bijli just because of her profession

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