

# Exploring the Depiction of Women in Bengal in the Novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee: Patriarchy in Bengali Society

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## Abstract

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee has portrayed female characters from southern Bengal who struggle in a conservative patriarchal society. His female characters are in the interposed stage of decomposing feudalism and initial industrialization. He delineates boldly the pain and torment of lower-middle class women. Sarat demonstrates many widows as “fallen women” in *Srikant* and *Charitrahin* which projects their space as a reinforcement of purity amidst a grovelling atmosphere of general dirt. The women must have purity, virtue and integrity otherwise they become victimized by the conservative patriarchal society. Most of his women characters share an extraneous relationship with society. Sarat demonstrates the complex conundrums of widows’ sufferings, child-marriage, disease, poverty, public bias and fallen women’s victimization which focused his perception of social realism. He also satirically represents the prevalent system of child-marriage and dowry which has infested the so-called modern society asserts to bring the estimation of women at par with that of men.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal Society, Realism, Widow Remarriage, Child-Marriage, Victimized

## 1. Introduction

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee is the realistic novelist who delineates his female characters with a deep psychological analysis. He draws the women of his time and their phenomenological relationships with others. In his novels, Sarat describes retrogressive caste-division, child marriage, feudal exploitation, *Zamindars’* autocracy, child marriage, vetoing of widow’s right for remarriage, decomposing extended families and losing inter personal relationship of the traditional Bengal and regional manners of cultural geography. The modern society started the waves of widow remarriage, modernization, and equal rights to women and aristocratic ideas. It involves the scuffle between the old and the new, decadent traditional and modern, rural and urban, caste rigidity and generous social customs, religious fanaticism, and rationalism. Sarat’s realism allows an individual to realize the cultural perspectives of contemporary society. This research is to analyze the representation of women in the context of Sarat’s society and culture from the feministic point of view. This study has obviously opened a new domain that would be helpful in creating, adopting and improving the concept of representation of women who can take the challenge over patriarchal society. Sarat shows the inner agony of women and the domination of patriarchy over the fallen women of the patriarchal society. He also critically analyses the psychology of women and how they revolt against the patriarchal society.

Sarat has been influenced by the writings of Bankimchandra, Raja Rammohan, Derozio, Rabindranath Tagore, Keshabchandra, Ramkrishna and Vivekananda. Saratchandra’s realism is an offspring of the Renaissance of Bengal. His novels are visibly identical to the writings of Tagore and Bankimchandra. He draws the readers’ concentration of his realistic writings.

Saratchandra's earlier novels divulge a profound effect of Tagore, which focuses on Tagore's *Gora* Saratchandra writes *Grihadaha* (Home Burnt Down, 1919), *Dena Paona* (Debts and Demands, 1923), *Bipradas* (1935), and *Pather Dabi* (The Demand of the Road, 1926). *Grihadaha* presents the triangle love relationship between a woman and two men. This novel has a similar plot construction to Tagore's *Chokher Bali*. *Grihadaha* also explores the idea of social reformation and the changing attitudes towards women. K. R. S. Iyengar comments, "...he was the complete novelist who used his art simultaneously as a camera, as a camera, as a surgeon's knife and also as a chalice of hope." (Iyengar, 1998, p.319)

Sarat's own life tragedy does not impact his writings literary masterpieces. The ending of the plot of the novels or short stories is always palatable. He has empathy for victimized women and his narrative style gives new motion to his novels. In Sarat's writings, Bankimchandra has a profound influence in the novels *Devdas* in 1901 (published in 1917), *Parinita* (The Married Girl, 1914), *Biraj Bau* (Mrs Biraj, 1914) and *Palli Samaj*. Sarat has sympathy for women who become sufferers at home and outside. Sukumar Sen says, "Through his fiction he offered consolation to those who suffered the unmerited reproach or displeasure of the family and community." (Sukumar, 2002, p.313-314)

Sarat critically analyses contemporary society's attitudes towards women and he also presents his own ideas about the morality of the Hindu society. He sketches his personal experiences in *Devdas*, *Srikant* (in four parts- 1917, 1918, 1927, 1933), *Charitrahin* (1917), *Biraj Bou* (1914), *Palli Samaj* (The Village Commune, 1916) and *Mandir* (1904). Sukumar Sen comments how his last complete novel *Ses Prashna* (The Final Question, 1931) is a strive at the cognitive novel where the restricted theme which inflated by highbrow dialogues relating to the individual and the society, regarding, specifically to marriage and love. (Sukumar, 2002, p.313-314) Sarat raises his voice for the first time in Bengali novels against the staunchness to the ancient conventions. He rebuffs to follow constancy as the only standard for womanhood. He focuses on the significance of caring and love. Women are motherly, bold, sacrificing and coherent strength amidst all submissive proclivities in the family. Dipti K. Biswas comments on that a woman is initially justified by her beauty but Sarat draws her pitiful and he realistically delineated the riches reserved in her mind. (Biswas, 1974, p.63-64)

## 2. Methodology

This study uses the content analysis method to analyse the contents of Sarat's works and the secondary materials ongoing. The research work is mainly based on content analysis. A detailed analysis extracted from the primary and secondary sources has been the process of reaching to a conclusion. Different techniques of historical methods have been applied to essential contexts sociological, anthropological and cultural analyses have been brought under observation. The data has been studied in three phases: preparation, organisation and reporting. In the first phase, the primary sources have been carefully pursued to understand the texts in detail. In the second phase, data has been categorised and organised in detail. In the last phase, the research report is prepared on the basis of the data assembled from both sources.

For source citation, the Notes-Bibliography style prescribed by APA has been followed. British English for spelling and simple transliteration rules for transliterating Bangla expressions are followed.

## 3. Review of Literature

Pramath Nath Pal's *Sarat Sathitye Nari* shows the literary creations of Sarat and his treatment of women. He also has shown but the tragic consequences of women's lives. Women become the victims of the social codes. Sarat portrays the real position of women in the society. He also delineates the sufferings of the fallen women as widows and prostitutes. They have no space in society and they are treated inhumanely by the male dominated society. However, freedom is very important for the emancipation of women which is not depicted in this writing.

Sumati Kshetramade's "Women Characters in Saratchandra" represents Sarat's women characters sufferings in contemporary society. Indian society exhibits the tendency to model female characters from real life with those from the *Kavyas* and *Puranas* who have been acknowledged as standards down the ages, like Sita, Gandhari, Damayanti and Radha. These women have set unprecedented examples in social codes and religious scriptures. The idea of chastity and purity is still the norm and any kind of deviation is generally deeply disturbing to the male dominated society's psyche. The double standard of the society is focused and Sarat has profound sympathy for the widows and prostitutes. His women are distinctive in participating the social, political and cultural activities.

## 4. Sarat's Treatment of Women

Sarat has not uplifted any woman to the status of a goddess illuminating heavenly light and he never holds her accountable for the suffering in the world. He reveals the reality and there is no imagination in his writings. His novels and short stories the reality and fabrications are superbly mingled. Women in his novels are depicted through pragmatic social forces, which present their genuine position in society. His women are dynamic and they reject the conventional roles of society. Simone de Beauvoir says,

And this is where the paradox of their situation comes in: they belong both to the male world and to a sphere in which this world is challenged; enclosed in this sphere, involved in the male world, they cannot peacefully establish themselves anywhere. (Beauvoir, 2011, p.653)

Sarat assigns women to significant positions in society. The male dominated society vanquishes women's sorrows and exploitation. Every woman belongs the family ties and enjoys motherhood. Sarat presents his male characters are weaker than women in his novels. In *Devdas* the hero drinks too much to die for the sake of his love. He has suffered in his life which Sunil Gangopadhyay criticizes by saying, "Sarat babu's men are not weak but indecisive. His women are pillars of strength men like to fall back on in crisis. They may seem anachronistic, but that is exactly what the writer wanted them to be." (<http://www.rediff.com/entertai/2002/jul/08dev.htm> 2007)

The man-woman relationship delineates Sarat in an instructive manner, which induces restrictions of the contemporary orthodox society. He emphasizes ethical values in interpersonal relationships. In every relationship, mutual understanding is very important. Women's purity is more significant than of men in the relationship. Sarat shows the double sexual standards of society. Women must be sexually pure, which is categorized into two sorts of perspectives. Firstly, the stoical acceptance is of women's misery, tolerance as well as refraining, such as, Parvati, Rama, Sabitri and Bindu. Secondly, the women have explored keen intellectual analytical power of perplexing troubles of life, for example, Kiranmayi, Bharati, Kamal, Sorasi and Sumitra. Sarat's women characters have similarities with Thomas Hardy's female characters. Sisir Kumar Das says, "These latter are manifestations of the life-force exemplified in women like Anne or Candida of Shaw, or Nora of Ibsen, or Eustacia Vye and Bathsheba Everdene of Thomas Hardy". (Das, 1991, p.43) However, Ibsen's, Hardy's and Sarat's women become the victim of the conservative society.

Sarat's women are perpetual optimists amid huge distress. Bengali novelist Samaresh Majumdar comments, "Women are the centrifugal force of attraction in Sarat Chandra's novels. It is their optimism and positivism that has kept the magic of Sarat Chandra alive even today." (<http://www.rediff.com/entertai/2002/jul/08dev.htm>,2007) Samaresh realizes Sarat Chandra's writings have an attraction which makes the readers' favourite. Sarat presents women with distinct majesty and integrity. The women characters have honesty and devotion which encourages women to move against their emotions. Kamal, Rajlakshmi, Kiranmay, Sorasi, Kamallata, Sabitri, Bharati and Bijaya are Sarat's great rebellious romantic heroine. Sisir Kumar Das says,

They combine in them beauty and intelligence and refuse to be defeated by the hostile forces of life. It is through such characters that Saratchandra presents an integrated vision of life that is primarily moral and spiritual and refutes the opinion of Albert Schweitzer (in this context) that the Indian view of life is life-negating. (Das, 1991, p.43)

In his novels, he represents fallen women in an artistic dimension and he finds copious cordiality and enchantment in their hearts. He is engaged in its exploration of it. He writes on the negative aspects of the stiff rules of contemporary Bengali society, especially the regulations dominating women and widows in the patriarchal society. J. C. Ghosh comments,

You had no disregard in your heart for fallen women; you had sympathy and compassion for them. You have seen the flash of divine power in them. Your voice of deliverance may serve as a torch of those who have gone astray. (Ghosh, 1948, p.160)

Sarat focuses on the distinctions of the psychoanalysis of contemporary Bengali women. The conservative society only gives respect to the sophisticated women and the educated Brahmo girls of Calcutta. Unfortunately, the fallen women or the prostitutes have no place in society, and they were treated inhumanely by the orthodox society. He has sympathy for their enduring in which he represents the importance of women's emancipation, their impulses for love and affection, as well as the societal barrier. Meena Shirwadkar says, "Sarat has carried the torch of realism to many nooks and corners of Bengali homes and showed widows in their actual surroundings." (Shirwadkar, 1979, p.17)

Sarat delineates different facets of women in contemporary rural and urban Bengali conservative society. In *Shubhada* (1898), Lalana becomes the victim of the unconcerned society who is a widow falls in love but refuses to marry again. She may think about social dignity because in contemporary society widow remarriage is not accepted publicly. *Chota Bhai* (1912) depicts the negative effects of the domination of an inhuman widow who plays a significant role as a woman in this novel. *Arakshaniya* (1916) also represents a widow who suffers from the tartness of her law family. In these novels, Sarat describes the position of Bengali women in contemporary society. He also shows the strong women characters of the domestic novels. Most of his novels are in a rural setting and women protagonist dominates the whole novels and short stories. Woman characters are so common of contemporary writings in both Bengali and Marathi literatures.

Violation of the dogmas is another dominating theme in Sarat's writings. He attempts to demonstrate the societal customs of errors in judgment that men committed for following traditional standards. He also does not attempt against the negative forces. However, generally, people follow a simple way of living to belong a peaceful world but very few people rebel against societal rules and regulations. In his novel *Srikant*, Annadadidi is honestly led her life but she once challenged the traditional legislation. After that, she ignores to respect her society. Rajlakshi becomes the victim of the conservative society because the society refuses all her genuine appeals and people also restrict her entry into the sober society. Sarat shows the sufferings of the prostitutes which has induced sympathy to his readers. Dipti K Biswas says,

Sarat's novels described numerous issues of Hindu society viz., caste, widow re-marriage, polygamy, etc. But he offered no solution for them as he professed that he never intended to be a social reformer but a novelist and his business was to paint human characters with reference to social situations. (Biswas, 1974, p.64)

Sarat's female characters suffer a lot from societal barriers, and people treat them inhumanely in most cases. The patriarchy dominates women thoroughly and they have no sympathy for the uncertainties of the fallen women, widows, and

victimized women. They harshly criticize their faults with the frame of the caste system, dowry system and suppression of women. K. K. Ruthven says,

The social system which corresponds to such a phallogocentric order — a system which enables men to dominate women in all social relations — is known in feminist discourse as ‘patriarchy’, a term which some feminists find unhelpfully vague, but which continues to be used because no satisfactory alternative is available. The oppressive effects of patriarchal domination manifest themselves as ‘sexism’. (Ruthven, 1984, p.2.)

In *Devdas*, Parvati has self-actualization and she rejects Devdas’s marriage proposal when her marriage is finalized with Bhuvan Chowdhury. However, she wants to make Devdas realize the feelings of rejection in love and marriage. She is so obedient to her parents, and she also understands Devdas’s mood swings. She has enough confidence to refuse him, which represents her consistency in her decisions. Sarat shows the power of a woman to make decisions with a cold brain. In *Ses Prasna*, Sarat delineates a progressive woman, Kamal who confronts the spirituality of marriage. He estimates a maid servant, Savitri as the protagonist of his contentious novel, *Charitrahin*. She is presented with all womanly virtues as Chandramukhi in *Devdas*.

Sarat depicts women’s involvement in the broad world which emphasizes on political and social participation like in *Pather Dabi*. In this novel, the female characters are the major political desperado in the National Movement. The women who remain home are solely dependent on their husband but she also participates in their country. Sarat presents the housewife’s participation in political and social works for the first time to Bengali literature. It also adds new dimensions in Bengali literature but within a few years, it became a very common phenomenon in Bengali literature. Women have changed their roles within the boundaries of orthodox social values. He mainly describes their rectification of the inequities innate in that tradition. In *Srikanta*, Annadadi and Rajlakshmi and in *Devdas* Parvati and Chandramukhi, Ma-Shoye in *The Picture* and Bijli Bal in *Light Out of Darkness* are quoted as occurrences.

Sarat’s essay *Narir Mulya* (The Value of Women) describes “an impassioned yet closely reasoned plea for the recognition of woman’s right of self-determination and the moral and spiritual value of her personality.” (Mukherjee, 2007), p.i) He points out ardently the significant majesty and perfect character of a woman. However, Sarat makes every woman is able to contract innate imperishability, and morality which able her own execution and sacrifice. These divulge the firmness of the female characters is socially liberating, but very few women are conservative and approach of allowing patriarchal domination. Most of his female characters struggle against male domination and they want freedom. However, Sarat never revolts against patriarchy and he has antipathy of the rigid customs of contemporary society. He presents the social, historical and cultural difficulties in his writings which have significant of having sympathy, love, humanism and a sense of justice. The widows like Kiranmay and Sabitri, abandoned women like Sorasi and fallen women like Chandramukhi are sufferers from the cruel and vintage social system and the heartless men. Judith Kegan Gardiner says,

One way of shifting the discourse on masculinity might be to ask questions about the powerful forces that bind masculinity to realness. While normative masculinity depicts itself quite simply as real masculinity, it simultaneously exhibits some anxiety about the status of its own realness: male masculinity as an identity seems to demand authentication: Am I real? Is my masculinity real? The fact that male masculinities of all kinds seem to require recognition of some kind also has the counterintuitive effect of making their instability and their distance from the real. (Gardiner, 1893, p.353)

Sarat demonstrates the complex conundrums of widows’ sufferings, child-marriage, disease, poverty, public bias and fallen women’s victimization, which focused his perception of social realism. He also bravely expresses his claim for the freedom of women in personal and professional life as well as the importance of female logical improvement as a human being. He realizes their inner agony, like Rabindranath Tagore and Bankimchandra. In his writings, Tagore effects are clearly visible because of the treatment of the women violate social codes the ‘triangle’ in *Chandrashekar*, *Nashta Nir* (The Broken Nest) and *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World) independently.

Sarat proclaims his fondness for the development of women and he artistically shows the problem of society’s treatment of women. Humayan Kabir comments,

A woman should be measured with the same yardstick as a man. Often, even today, women who pride in their virtue and respectability are found to be petty and base in their interaction in their dependent, selfish and hoarding attitudes in their relationships. (Kabir, 1952, p.45)

Sarat distinctly describes women as honest, pure, sacrificing, sometimes revolutionary, widow, and fallen women, which been held the contemporary literary trend. Women only sacrifice their interests for the betterment of the family and the male dominated society never acknowledges their selfless contributions.

*Narir Mulya* (1922) is Sarat’s feminist Essay which depicts women confined to orthodox norms for want of an acceptable response to society. Annadadi follows blindly her wicked husband and traditional ideals in *Srikant*. He shows the love of widows as Savitri and Kiranmayi with sympathy. He also demonstrates extra-marital relationships of women who are misdeeded by their husbands like Abhaya. *Srikant* presents a galaxy of women characters: Rajlakshi — a child widow and Kamallata — Vaishnavi nuns are extraordinary among them. Women attempt to find space outside the society because the prostitute has no place in the society and similarly a nun disowns the society.

## 5. Conclusion

Sarat portrays his personal life experiences in his novels, which are autobiographical masterpieces. He often has a playmate named Paru who comes into view as Paro in *Devdas* and Rajlakshi in *Srikant*. Rajlakshi later becomes Pyari Bai, the prostitute in *Srikant* and resembles Chandramukhi in *Devdas*. He also delineates women's psychoanalysis in his novels which modeled on the mythological character of Savitri in *Charitrahin*. However, *Charitrahin* through Kiranmayi represents the frameworks of chastity for the first time which also comes to a climax Kamalmayi in *Ses Prasna*. He describes the psychological mood swings in the minds of contemporary women. It focuses on women's intelligence and emotions. The struggle for love is the dominating theme in their lives and there is Upendra who can conquer his love for Surbala but loses Kiranmoyi in *Charitrahin*. Similarly, Satish fulfils his love for Sarojini but loses Savitri. Most of his novels demonstrate a strong portrayal of the fights for attaining real love.

Sarat sheds light on the cruel practice of child-marriage and how little girls are treated inhumanly in the name of marriage. As a result, they become widows and victimized by the maltreatment of surviving like a refugee in society. The patriarchal society only evaluates women by valuing their castes. Many of Sarat's women characters are deliberated of poverty which degenerates the effects of Tagore and Bankim. Rajlakshmi has sold for money and Sabitri belongs to a poor family. Kiranmayi faces the corroding effect of poverty in her life.

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