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**Women in the Novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee,
Saratchandra Chatterjee and
Rabindranath Tagore**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE SAURASHTRA
UNIVERSITY
FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF
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IN
ENGLISH

Submitted by:
Monali Chatterjee

Supervised by:
Dr. Sanjay Mukherjee
Senior Asst. Professor
Smt. S.H. Gardi Institute of English & Comparative Literary Studies,
Saurashtra University, Rajkot.

2009

Smt. S. H. Gardi Institute of English and
Comparative Literary Studies
Saurashtra University
Rajkot

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work embodied in this thesis entitled “Women Characters in the Novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Saratchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore” has been carried out by the candidate Monali Chatterjee under my direct guidance and supervision for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts of Saurashtra University, Rajkot. I further declare that the work done and presented in this thesis is original and independent. I certify that the work has not been submitted either partly or fully to any other university or institute for the award of any degree.

Forwarded by:

Supervisor:

Dr. K. H. Mehta
Head of the Department
S. H. Gardi Institute of English &
Comparative Literary Studies,
Rajkot.

Dr. Sanjay Mukherjee
Senior Asst. Professor
S. H. Gardi Institute of English &
Comparative Literary Studies,
Rajkot.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the research work in this thesis is prepared by me after studying various references related to the thesis. The analysis and the critical interpretation found in this thesis are entirely original. Hence, I state that I am responsible for the critical opinions and the other details found in this thesis. I further declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted to any university or institute for the award of any degree.

Date: 17th January, 2009

Signature of the Candidate:

Place: Rajkot

Monali Chatterjee

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
Acknowledgements	i
1. Introduction	1
2. Bengal's Political, Social and Economic Development	36
3. Women in the Novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee	87
4. Women in the Novels of Rabindranath Tagore	140
5. Women in the Novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee	198
6. Conclusion	278
Bibliography	304

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This research endeavours to study the women characters in the novels of three nineteenth century Bengali writers against the backdrop of the nineteenth century Indian Renaissance. This study proposes to attempt a detailed study and draw inferences which might offer a fresh perspective to this topic.

The East India Company:

The discovery of the sea-route to India by Vasco-da-Gama in 1498 brought the Portuguese and the Dutch to India long before the British. Vasco-da-Gama landed in Calicut and established his fort in Cochin. The Dutch ended the Portuguese colonization by wresting Fort Cochin from them. The French continued their transactions with Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast as their centre. Gradually the East India Company which was chartered in 1600 established their settlements in Madras (1539), Bombay (1668) and Calcutta (1698). The French also established a trading post in Pondicherry near Tamil Nadu as the Portuguese did in Goa. In the early and mid 19th century British interest in India remained in the seminal stage. On 31st December, 1600, a group of merchants who had incorporated themselves into the East India Company received the privileges of monopoly on all trades with the East Indies. The Company's ships arrived at the port of Surat, in 1608. As the emissary of King James I in 1605, Sir Thomas Roe secured for the British the right to establish a factory in Surat, from the Moghul Emperor Jehangir. In course of time the British eclipsed the Portuguese and over the years they

witnessed a massive expansion of their trading operations in India. Numerous trading posts were established along the east and west coasts of India and English communities flourished around the three presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. In 1717, the Company achieved its pinnacle of success when it received a *firman* or a royal decree from the Moghul emperor exempting the Company from the payment of custom duties in Bengal. Thus, “the Company whose original aim had been primarily commerce and not conquest soon discovered its manifest destiny of filling the vacuum created in the 18th century India by the gradual disintegration of the Moghul Empire”. (Lal www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Eco.html¹)

The East India Company’s conquest of India was hastened by the chaos that allegedly followed Aurangzeb’s death. The East India Company had become one of the great mercantilist enterprises in the world as well as the east, and in asserting its dominance over the ever large parts of the sub-continent, it thrust existing weaker Indian mercantilist institutions on to the higher levels of development. The relational web between India and Bengal was woven quite early—well before the actual British dominion was formalized. (Stein 5) The East India Company had initially established itself for trading purposes, and its military establishment was intended to protect this trade. Gradually and almost inconspicuously, it had expanded the territory under its control, chiefly by taking sides in the local disputes helping one rival against another. The Company’s troops were better skilled and being an asset to any side, the Company extracted heavy payment for the aid. (Nehru 277) So the Company’s power developed and its military establishment enlarged. People regarded these troops as mercenaries to be hired. “When it was

realized that the British were playing nobody's game but their own and was out for political domination over India, they had firmly established themselves in the country." (Idem.) A few years later the Company acquired the right to collect revenues on behalf of the Moghul emperor but the initial years of its administration were devastating for the people of Bengal.

In Bengal, after a few months of succeeding to the throne of the Nawab, Siraj-ud-Daulah launched an attack upon Calcutta. He had demanded, as was his right that British fortifications in Calcutta, designed to be used against him be destroyed, and when his demand was not complied with he captured the city. The Nawab was then falsely implicated in the infamous episode of the Black Hole Tragedy of Calcutta in which one hundred and forty six English prisoners were said to have suffocated to death by being confined in a small airless prison. The Nawab, in the end, had an unhappy ending. In early 1757, Clive recaptured Calcutta and a few months later the encounter between Clive and Siraj-ud-Daulah moved to a decisive close. Betrayed by his old grand uncle, Mir Jafar, and deserted by his army, Siraj-ud-Daulah lost the battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 which has been dignified by historians with the epithet 'battle', although it lasted no more than a few hours, and, indeed the outcome of the battle was decided long before the soldiers came to the battle field. The aspirant to the Nawab's throne, Mir Jafar, was induced to throw his lot with Clive. By far, the greater number of the Nawab's soldiers were bribed to throw away their weapons, surrender prematurely, and even turn their arms against their own army. The forces of East India Company under Clive triumphed and the administration of Bengal fell into the hands of the company. The Nawab's body was found in the river a

few days later. From then, the day of the battle is regarded as the day of the establishment of the British dominion in India. Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (1946), justly describes Clive as having won the battle "by promoting treason and forgery" (275), and pointedly notes that the British rule in India had "an unsavoury beginning and something of that bitter taste that clung to it ever since." (Idem.)

In one fundamental respect, the battle of Plassey signified the state of things to come: few British victories were achieved without the use of bribes, and few promises made by the British were ever kept. No doubt it was these traits of "honour" and "fair play" to which Thomas Macaulay was alluding when he wrote with his usual pomposity, "no oath which superstitions can device, no hostage however precious inspires a hundredth part of the confidence which is produced by the 'yea, yea' and 'nay, nay' of the British envoy." (qtd. in Lal www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Eco.html) The victory made the Command virtually the master of Bengal. Thus, the British government carried on the French wars of the eighteenth-century India in support of the Company's trade, and then realized that it had seized overnight, through the action of Clive, a dominion in India of its own. (Spear 113) It saw the rise of its fortunes and its transformation from a trading to a ruling enterprise as a result of the conquest. Hence the British who had come to India to sell also decided to rule.

In 1858 the East India Company was dissolved despite a valiant defence of its purported achievements by John Stuart Mill, the Commissioner of correspondence at India House, London, and the administration of India

became the responsibility of the Crown. In short, by the beginning of the 19th century, the Company regime was strongly entrenched in India. The Company's servants were largely a rapacious and self-aggrandizing lot, and "the plunder of Bengal left the formally rich province in a state of utter destitution". (Lal www.sscnet.ucla.edu/~Siraj.html)

The Revolt of 1857:

The Revolt of 1857 was the most dramatic instance of India's struggle against foreign rule. But it was no sudden occurrence. It was the culmination of a century long resistance to domination by the British whose scale, duration and intensity of plunder were unprecedented in Indian history.

In Bengal, in less than thirty years, land revenue collection was raised to nearly double the amount than collected under the Mughals. The old *zamindars* and *poligars* were deposed and replaced by a new class of money merchants and money lenders who pushed rents to ruinous heights and evicted their tenants in case of non-payment. The economic decline of the peasantry was reflected in twelve major and numerous minor famines from 1770 to 1857. The very first one, soon after East India Company secured political control of Bengal in 1757 killed about 10 million people, the scale of death unknown in the history of India till then. Not only was the old ruling elite displaced and the peasantry pauperized, the artisan class was annihilated. Indian goods, much valued in Britain, had to face imposition of duties as high as 80% so that the mills of Paisley and Manchester could keep running. The British manufactures, on the contrary, had virtually a free entry into India.

The rebellions began as soon as and wherever the British rule was established. From 1763 to 1856, there were more than 40 major rebellions. The Sanyasi rebellion of Bengal (1763-1800) was followed by Chuar uprising of Bengal and Bihar (1766-1772 and again 1795-1816); other uprisings in Eastern India such as Rangpur and Dinajpur (1783), Bishnupur and Birbhum (1799), Orissa *zamindars* (1804-1817) and Sambalpur (1827-1840). Dewan Velu Thampi of Travancore organized a heroic revolt in 1805. The Mysore peasants too revolted in 1830-1831. Among the numerous tribal revolts, the Santhal uprising was the most massive. The rebellion which lasted as late as 1866 was crushed ruthlessly. More than 15,000 Santhals were killed.

The episode of greased cartridges provided the spark for the sepoys and their mutiny provided the general populace the occasion to revolt. The Revolt began at Meerut, on 10 May 1857 and then, gathered rapid momentum throughout Northern India. On 29th March 1857, soon after Mangal Pande, a young soldier, was executed for revolting and attacking his officers, the entire Bengal Army rose in revolt which spread quickly. Avadh, Rohilkhand, the Doab, the Bundelkhand, Central India, large parts of Bihar, and the East Punjab all shook off British authority. Many rulers of the princely states remained loyal to their British overlord but their soldiers revolted. Many of Indore's troops rebelled and joined the sepoys. Many small chiefs of Rajasthan and Maharashtra revolted with the support of the people. Local rebellions also occurred in Hyderabad and Bengal.

Everywhere in Northern and Central India, the mutiny of the sepoy was followed by popular revolts of the civilian population. After the sepoys had

destroyed British authority, the common people rose up in arms often fighting with spears and axes. The chief centers of this revolt were at Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Bareilly, Jhansi and Arrah in Bihar. Bakht Khan represented the popular and plebian element at the headquarters of the Revolt. After the British occupation of Delhi in September 1857, he went to Lucknow and continued to fight the British till he died in a battle on 13 May 1859. The old Emperor Bahadur Shah was perhaps the weakest link in the chain of leadership of the Revolt. At Kanpur, the Revolt was run by Nana Sahib, the adopted son of Baji Rao II, the last Peshwa. Helped by the sepoys at Lucknow, and by the *zamindars* and peasants of Avadh, the Begum organised an all-out attack on the British. Maharaja Sindhia, loyal to the British, made an attempt to fight the Rani but most of his troops deserted to her. Kunwar Singh, a ruined and discontented *zamindar* of Jagdishpur near Arrah, was the chief organizer of the revolt in Bihar and defeated the British forces near Arrah. Maulavi Ahmadullah of Faizabad was another outstanding leader of the Revolt. When the general revolt broke out in May, he emerged as one of its acknowledged leaders in Avadh. Most rulers of the Indian states, and the big *zamindars*, who were selfish to the core and fearful of the British might, refused to join in. The rebels were dealt an early blow when the British captured Delhi on 20 September 1857 after prolonged and bitter fighting. With the fall of Delhi, the focal point of the Revolt disappeared. One by one, all the great leaders of the Revolt toppled. Nana Sahib was defeated at Kanpur. Tantia Tope escaped into the jungles of Central India and later died fighting. The Rani of Jhansi had died on the field of battle earlier on 17th June 1858. By 1859, Kunwar Singh, Bakht Khan, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, Rao Sahib,

brother of Nana Sahib, Maulavi Ahmedullah were all dead, while the Begum of Avadh was compelled to hide in Nepal. By the end of 1859, British authority in India was fully re-established, but the Revolt had not been in vain. It was the first great struggle of the Indian people for freedom from British imperialism. Thus, Governor General Wellesly's Forward Policy, Subsidiary Alliances and Lord Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse and Annexations and the introduction of greased cartridges which hurt the sentiments of the Hindu Sepoys all precipitated into The Great Mutiny of 1857 called the 'the First War of Independence' and a subsequent wave of revival and rethinking in nineteenth century India.

Nineteenth Century Indian Renaissance:

One of the immediate outcomes of the nineteenth century Indian Renaissance was the initiation and advent of Indian English literature. Sir Aurobindo remarked that the Indian Renaissance in the larger context offered an opportunity to the reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse of self expression to literature as well as to reshape the spiritual force behind the national awakening, and to harness it in reconstructing an erstwhile dormant nation under British Rule. (Naik 8) Jawaharlal Nehru perceived the awakening as two fold: India borrowed ideas of expression of literary and political terms from the West and borrowed from her own past to salvage, to restore and to project the national identity. (Nehru 330-331)

Deriving the benefits of western education and drawing inspiration from political freedom struggles that European history was replete with, the first Indian Freedom Movement of 1857 augured for a change. Indian literature

was gradually emerging out of its restraints imposed by the British hegemony and gained authentic artistic utterance, as vouched by M.K. Naik. (28) Side by side with this political awakening, a force at bringing people to experience religious and spiritual consciousness became necessary. This need was fulfilled by Raja Rammohun Roy's Brahma Samaj which sought to abolish religious and social superstitions, to create among people the sense of oneness, equality, which alone could project Indian national image. Ramakrishna Paramhansa's Missions and the Mohammedan Literary and Scientific Society of Calcutta in their separate ways sought to extricate the populace from its narrow religious and social confines.

As more Indians learnt the standards of western societies from literature and philosophy and heard the harsh criticisms levelled at the Hindu society by the rulers of Christian missionaries, so they questioned a wide range of social practices as *Sati*, the prohibition of widow remarriage, the treatment of widows, child-marriage, mechanisms of social avoidance and condemnation of foreign travel as polluting. (Browne 153) At first the social reformers were prominent individuals or coteries who responded piecemeal to particular issues which made them realize acutely the tension between the society in which they lived and the values to which they were exposed by their alliances with the West. Among the early nineteenth century reformers were Rammohan Roy, whose crusade against *Sati* encouraged the British to legislate against it and I. C. Vidyasagar, famous for his pleas for marriage reform and the enabling of widow remarriage making it acceptable to the Hindus. Instead of overturning the Hindu society or abandoning the religious

heritage, they argued that the Indian tradition sanctioned reform without endangering the pure core of the Hindu heritage. (Idem.)

Amongst many societal reforms, those concerning women in particular witnessed a continental co-operation in the 1880s which affected most educated Indians in all religions particularly Hinduism, the age of marriage of Hindu girls. Early marriage even before puberty, was favoured among higher castes, which often caused the groom to be much older than the bride, the 'sale' (Idem.) of young girls to older men, physical mistreatment of child-brides and the likelihood of young widows who were neither permitted to remarry nor sufficiently educated to be self-supporting. After a bitter controversy in Bengal over the Age of Consent Bill (1890 -1892) the marriageable age of a girl was raised to twelve years. (A. Sen 47) In short, the Indian Renaissance began as a broad cultural event in the midst of the British political rule. It would be pertinent here to explore the origin of the numerous Indian languages in order to acquire a better understanding of the Indian Renaissance, i.e. Indian Renaissance literature.

The Origin of Indian Languages:

The Indian literary tradition is primarily one of verse and is also essentially oral. The earliest works were sung primarily to be or recited and were so transmitted for many generations before being written down. As a result the earliest records of a text may be published later by several centuries than the conjectured dates of its composition. Furthermore, perhaps because so much Indian literature is either religious or a reworking of familiar stories from the Sanskrit epics, the Vedas and the mythological writings of the

Puranas, the authors often remain anonymous. In medieval Indian literature, the earliest works in many of the languages were sectarian, designed to advance or to celebrate some unorthodox regional belief. R. N. Pandey opines that the most important of all, for later Indian literature, were the first traces in the vernacular languages of the northern Indian cults of Krishna and of Rama. (2: 1)

The northern Indian languages from the Indo-European family evolved from Old Indo-Aryan such as Sanskrit, by way of the Middle Indo Aryan Prakrit languages and Apabhramsa of the Middle Ages. There is no consensus for a specific time when the modern north Indian languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi and Bengali emerged but 1,000 A. D. is the generally accepted starting period. Pandey further points out that each language had diverse influences, with closely related languages, like Hindi/Urdu being strongly influenced by Persian and Arabic. (Pandey 2: 9) There are two major families of Indian languages—Dravidian languages, confined largely to the south and Indo-Aryan languages, spread over to the north of India. Pandey explains that originating over five thousand years ago, the linguistic history of India describes the evolution and transformation of early human communication-techniques—from pictures and pictorial scripts and engravings to the modern Indian languages that belong to the Indo-Aryan languages and the Dravidian languages. Technically, Sanskrit is the oldest of the Old Indo Aryan languages. (10) Its daughter languages include the Prakrits of ancient India, Hindi, Bengali, Kashmiri, Urdu, Marathi, Gujarati, Assamese, Nepali, Punjabi and Romany (spoken by the European Roman people).

The Origin of Bhasha Literatures:

With the establishment of Mughal Rule in India, the fourteenth and fifteenth century- literature of the Sanskrit mould broke down and deviated into different languages. In Europe, Latin was gradually broken down into vernacular literature; in India 'vernacular' is a pejorative term. Hence, it is known as Bhasha literatures. Like Indian languages, Bhasha literatures were written either under the influence of Islam or Hinduism. The former is rooted in the Mughal conquest, composed mainly in the Urdu form of Hindustani. From early 16th century till the introduction of printing in the early 19th century such literature was composed almost entirely in verse, modelled on Persian metres. The compositions were standardised by the 17th century poet –Wali of Aurangagbad, often called *the Father of the Rehta* (Hindustani). His literary successors like Refi'u's-Sandi, Mir Taqi from Delhi, Mir Hasan (18th century) from Lucknow contributed to poetry and Ratan Nath Sarshar and Abdul Halin Sharar made valuable contributions to the 19th century fiction. (Kapoor 14: 4340) Although this literature flourished under Islamic auspices, the masters of the educated Hindu litterateurs adopted its language. The beginnings of Hindu literature in the modern vernacular were religious. In southern India, Tamil dominates a great collection of Shaivite texts dating back to 2nd or 3rd century and Vaishnavite texts dating from before the time of Ramanuj (12th century). Vadagalais, or northern Tamilians, wrote in Sanskrit, while the Tangalai, or Southerners, wrote in Tamil. In Northern India, vernacular religious literature was largely Sanskrit, which originated from the spread of Vaishnavite Bhakti-Marga under Ramananda. Litterateurs of this period belonged to humble ranks and were not Sanskrit scholars. Hence each wrote

in his own vernacular. Bhakti literature, which was devoted either to Ramachandra or to Krishna, included not only devotional works but all branches of literature ancillary hitherto. Kabir's wise and pithy doctrines in the 15th century, Nanak's hymns in *Adi Granth* of Sikh religion in the 16th century, Tulsidas's Awadhi epic poem *Ramacharitmanas* in 16th and 17th centuries and *Ramayana*—in Bengali, in the 16th century by Kirtibas Ojha, in Tamil by Kamban in the 11th century, in Malayalam in the 11th century and Kannad by Kumara Valamiki in the 13th or 14th century dominated the literary scene in the succeeding years. While Rama-literature underscored God as the Father-leading to devotional literature in Awadhi, Krishna-literature depicted God as a lover, leading to erotic poetry rooted in the glorification of sensual relations in Braj Bhakha dialect spoken in Mathura. *Sur Sagara* (16th century) by Sur Das, *Sat Sai* by Bihari Lal (17th century) of Jaipur, and the works of Vidyapati Thakur, Tukaram and Mirabai in Northern India and Bamma Potaraja among other in Southern India were landmarks of Krishna-literature. Saivite literature flourished in Bengal due to the prevalent worship of Goddess Durga, *shakti* or Shiva's energetic power, particularly through Mukundarama Chakravarti's *Srimanta Saudagar* (17th century), the *Chandi* and the songs of bards of Gujarat and Maharashtra. Thus evolved the varied gamut of literatures collectively called "Indian literature" according to K. M. George (1:1)

The art of story-telling might be said to be rooted in the social, cultural and religious instincts of human beings. Since early civilization, such stories have revolved around human life, work and the seasonal festivals. Since there were numerous variations in the art of story telling in different places, various

forms like *Itihas*, *Puranas*, *Charit*, *Akhyan*, *Hari Katha Shaili* (which flourished in Andhra Pradesh), *Ram Leela* (story telling through a musical monologue) and *Kushilava* (the recitation of Valmiki's *Ramayana in Ayodhya by Luv and Kush*) became popular. In the process of narration, according to Vishvanath Naravane many ways of structuring the tale have been devised like interiorization (a contrast or even a contradiction is effected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence), serialization (the structure of the typical Indian narrative which has an apparently never ending series of episodes to a unified, streamlined course of events, centering around a single hero or heroine), fantasy (transforming apparent reality into invisible or intangible legend or myth), cyclic narration (the placement of a single story in a chain of rebirth stories as in *Jatakas*), allegory (fables, perceiving animals as human beings), anonymity of narration and fluidity or an undefined area of time and space, stylization and improvisation. (2) This structuring is regarded as an art. According to Saroj Bandhopadhyay Sanskrit prose tales have presented the widest possible range through minimum effort. Both Sanskrit and Prakrit prose have evolved to capture the diverse nature of life as in *Jatakas*, in *Panchatantra*, in Gunaadhya's *Brihatkatha*—but never without making a statement. (qtd. in Mukherjee 33) In addition to the development of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Itihasa* and the *Puranas*, there grew a solid ethical, moral, pragmatic and at the same time a purely earthly tradition of *Kathasaritsagar*, *Jataka* tales in Pali, and the *Panchatantra*. The *Kathasaritsagar* is a compilation of lively tales of wisdom wit and delight, the *Jatakas*—the world's first collection of didactic birth tales of Buddha in innumerable previous lives and the *Panchatantra*—the world's first

compilation of fables. Indian stories were also found embedded in the hymns of the *Rigveda*, *Hitopadesh*, the *Sukasaptati*, the *Dasakumaracharita* and the *Vetalopanchavisati* in Sanskrit and a host of stories in modern Indian languages.) Some of these stories have traveled to such distant countries as Arabia and have found an honourable place among the stories of "*Thousand and One Night*" (Alif Laila). The fascinating account of the travels of Sindbad is a nice example of the westwards migration of these stories and the traveller Sindbad is none else but Sindhupati of ancient Indian tales. This literature which was oral in nature soon began to be recorded in print with the arrival of the colonizers and the advent of printing in the 19th century.

Fiction in India:

The year 1857, which recognised India's political needs, also gave a fillip to Indian English Literature, particularly through the fiction of later writers like Bankim Chandra, Tagore and Sarat Chandra. Indian English literature really came of age after 1857, when India's rediscovery of her identity became a dynamic, all-engrossing quest and she had learnt sufficiently from the West to progress from imitation and assimilation to creation. (Naik 35) The longer and shorter forms of prose-writing, fiction and short-story – both in their mother tongues and English appeared. The production of fictional works in Bengali marked the Renaissance in Indo-Anglian fiction: some novels and short stories were translated by the writers themselves and others were translated by persons other than writers. This must have generated a situation for the growth of readership from all rungs of the society—both among men and women.

Portrayal of Women in Indian Literature:

The woman in Indian literature is portrayed as an idealised being who willingly accepts her socially assigned roles and when her mind strayed away from these confines she was overcomes with a terrible sense of shame and guilt. Mary Anne Fergusson observes,

On peculiarity of the images of women throughout history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes. Another way of putting this would be to say that in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex-object –their role in relationship to men. (qtd. in Shirwadkar)

The image of women in literatures emerges partly from the existing reality of the society and partly from the author's sensitivity to its burning issues. Roles other than those assigned by the society as a self dependent, bold or strong individual, as an achiever, as a leader are, by and large, rarely found in literature and these too represent the exceptional variety of the woman's individual ability. In the male-dominated society of India, where a platonic relationship between a man and a woman is uncommon, a woman's individual self receives little recognition and respect. Contrary to the deification and glorification in myths, in reality woman have been seldom perceived beyond stereotypical roles. Juxtaposed with such a conventional variety, the insurgent minority of women characters are also present in Indian literature.

The transient facts of life are inevitably reflected in literature and women's position in the society is no exception to this phenomenon. The image of women all over the world, especially in India has been altering in the recent times. This coincides with the germination and development of Indian

literature in English. The individuality of typical Indian women was overwhelmingly swamped by the male-dominated attitudes along with the backdrop of an exclusively male-oriented culture. She was attributed with no individuality or personality of her own. Her agony and suffering that the wanton man inflicted on her were gloried. Holding the image of Sita as the cannon, women yearned to conform to the ideal of the submissive and obedient wife and become the mother of sons. Women have succumbed to such male-chauvinist attitudes through the ages without questioning them or doubting their relevance. The woman existed in life and in literature only “as a shadowy, suffering, pathetic creature.” (Shirwadkar 1) Woman as a wife was mostly the sacred. The Sita-Savitri image was firmly imbibed into the wife’s mind. Shirwadkar further comments that the older women exhorted her to seek fulfilment either in her duty to her husband or in spiritualising or in sublimation of her feelings. A depiction of such women is a unique contribution to Indo-Anglian novels. (147)

Hypothesis:

Tagore, Bankim and Sarat Chandra have been able to capture the Renaissance spirit, particularly through their portrayal of women in literature. They critiqued through their creative works the condition of women in their own society and depicted women transgressing the social norms, lured not by material goals but by their quest for the implementation of noble human values and unconditional love. The trio explored such inconceivable possibilities for the futuristic women and yet remained palatable to their reading public. It is interesting to note that each of these writers has also posited progressive theories regarding women—namely, Bankim in “Samya”,

Tagore in an essay called 'Woman' in his collection of essays *Personality* and Sarat Chandra in "Narir Mulya". These are some of their important dissertations expressing their ideas about women; apart from the numerous scraps and pieces of their writing. The trio of writers have expressed their vehement defiance against social evils through the adaptation of a foreign genre into the Indian context.

Women in the novels of Bankim, Tagore and Sarat find their portrayal as representing the prevalent social laws relating to women. The general picture of the Indian woman, with all its contradictions and her points of strength and weaknesses can be found in the literature of modern Indian languages. Early fiction writers sought to give an idealised picture of the women who survived within the limits of wifehood and motherhood and rendered her as completely devoted, emotionally and physically to her husband through her supreme duty of keeping him happy and satisfied. This was the role ascribed to her not only by the patriarchal society but also considered the most natural by herself.

These sensitive areas of social concern have often excited my interest and driven me to explore the various kinds of portrayal of women in fiction, particularly in Bengali fiction. The three writers dealt with in the following chapters have been the torch bearers for the depiction of some of the serious social issues during the initiation and growth of Indian Renaissance literature. This trio has not only captured in their narratives the malpractices but has also faithfully recorded its drastic repercussions on its inevitable victims—generally women. This delineation has been so realistic that it projects a psychological

drama transcending boundaries of its regional and context specific locale. The sentiments of women generated are universal and the thoughts and actions are contemporary as can be found in the characters like Bimala and Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini* and Shanti in *Anandmath*. As a woman it has been easier to identify with their conflicts and empathise with them for their pitiable plight. Widows like Binodini and Kiranmayi have encountered an unmerited condemnation from society. While these women have been faced with denunciation, most of them like Ayesha and Binodini have found solace in the renunciation of their amorous pursuits. It may be noted that Debendranath Tagore did not support widow remarriage and in Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1902) the widow Binodini rejects Bihari's proposal of marriage and withdraws herself to Kashi, ostensibly renouncing worldly pleasures for spiritual ones, an option favoured by most novelists. In this novel Tagore argues in favour of women's moral superiority over men and the novel makes a strong plea for women's right to live with dignity and self-respect. I. C. Vidyasagar's work *The Marriage of Hindu Widows* (1855) launched a country-wide debate on the topic and although widow-remarriage was condemned by the upper-caste Hindu society, the controversy brought to light the wretched condition of widows who were denied the right to lead a normal life deprived of economic security, treated as inauspicious, often exploited sexually and even forced into incestuous relationships. Most of the social novels written during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century form a part of the discourse on "the condition of woman in general and widows in particular". (Sogani and Gupta xiii-xiv)

Bankimchandra's views on widow remarriage becomes clear through his essay *Samya* (equality) wherein he states that the right to remarry was given to the widows only to be "taken away in the name of chastity and morality". (Mukhia 21) In the novels of Saratchandra, the issue of widow remarriage has been given a serious space, questioned from diverse angles and finally thrown into oblivion as it was not considered conducive to public morality, although thematically it remained central to his concerns. (Idem.)

The pathetic condition of the widows and the remote possibility of their remarriage were rampant during the time of Bankim, Tagore and Saratchandra. In the past, inspite of the reformation movements and arguments cited in favour of widow remarriage, the society remained reluctant to accept it. According to Biswas,

Ordinarily, the restrictions of caste, *gotra*, religion and above all financial liabilities associated with the Hindu marriage have made it a problem to find out suitable matches for the unmarried girls. In this situation if the widows are permitted to marry, the competition will become more stiff. (105)

The Gandhian period began from 1915. As a part of the struggle for the true Swaraj and social reform, Gandhi

championed the cause of women's freedom, denouncing child-marriage, the dowry system and enforced widowhood. He opposed birth-control by artificial means and advocated self-control and voluntary chastity instead. (Naik 123)

The changes in woman's consciousness in various parts of the country as reflected in literature were mostly related to the national movement launched by Gandhi and represent a significant situation. Large-scale movements like Satyagraha changed the position of the woman to a great extent. The idea of protest emerged much before the Gandhian era in Bengali Literature with Bankim Chandra making some of his heroines behave quite radically vis-à-vis

their socio-historical context. Suryamukhi of *Visavriksa* (1873) leaves home and Bhramar of *Krishnakanter Uil* questions the husband's right to always dominate. Issues like the woman's right to love, her defiance of the marital codes as imposed by the society and her involvement with public life were articulated in clear terms in Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1916). The traditional woman thus underwent a radical transformation. Political movements surging in the outside world ushered new meanings and free participation for the women, a freedom denied to them for centuries by confining her within the narrow domesticity. Women's involvement in the Satyagraha movement was received with warm approval. According to Gandhi, a woman's participation in public work does not lead to neglect of home; domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time. The Gandhian movement enlarged the social space for women, and generated forces to demolish the wall dividing the public and the domestic world. It gave a fillip to several Indian literatures. For instance, Kumudini, the protagonist of Tagore's *Yogayog* (1930), though accepted 'defeat', is certainly one of the most rebellious women of her time. Sarat Chandra's *Ses Prasna* (1931) projects a radical woman, Kamal, who challenges the sanctity of marriage itself.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1894):

Bankimchandra Chatterjee has been the finest product of the 19th century literary Renaissance and the pioneer of the novel-form in Bengal. His first novel was *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864). *Kapalkundala* (1866), *Krishnakanter Uil* (Krishnakant's Will, 1875), *Kamalakanter Daptar* (The Scribbling of Kamalakanta, 1875), *Rajsimha*(1881) *Anandmath* (The Mission of the

Anandas, 1882), *Durgeshnandini* (1884), Mrinalini, *Vishabriksha* (The Poison Tree), *Chandrashekhar, Rajani* and *Debi Chaudhurani* (1884) are some of the greatest manifestations of his supreme power and art of story-telling and well-knit plots. (Naik 106) They were essentially romances. *Durgeshnandini* was his first Bengali romance. His next novel *Kapalkundala* is considered to be one of his best novels. The theme and the story are scintillating and the action gripping. The melodrama and the dual-plot, notwithstanding, the plot is skilfully structured: The heroine is named after the mendicant in Bhavabhuti's *Malatimadhava*, and modelled after Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* and partakes of some traits of Shakespeare's Miranda (*The Tempest*).

In *Krishnakanter Uil*, the novelist added some amount of feeling to imagination, and hence it approaches nearest to the western novel. The plot is somewhat akin to *Vishabriksha*. His only novel that can claim full recognition as historical fiction is *Rajsimha* (1881). *Debi Chaudhurani* (1884) has been romantic, interesting and delightfully narrated. His last novel *Sitaram* (1886) has for its theme the insurgence of a Hindu chief of lower central Bengal against the impotent Muslim rule. The central figure is well delineated but the other figures are either too idealistic or impalpable. *Kamalakanter Daptar* contains half humorous and half serious sketches somewhat after De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-eater*. *Rajani* can be seen to have followed the autobiographical technique of Wilkie Collins' *A Woman in White*. The title has been presumably taken from Bulwar Lytton's Nydia in *The Last Days of Pompey*. In this romance, of a blind girl, the author is at his best as a literary artist. *Rajani* is the odyssey of a simple country-girl who travels

from the darkness of vision, ignorance, poverty and misfortune to the illumination of her happiness.

Anandmath is a political novel without an adequately viable plot. The plot is based on the Sanyasi rebellion that occurred in North Bengal in 1773. As fiction it is not an outstanding work. Its fame rests on the song “Bande Mataram” (I worship mother). It is for this reason that from among the host of his novels I have chosen *Rajmohan’s Wife*, *Anandmath* and *Durgeshnandini*. The other novels like *Kapalkundala* and *Rajani* may be discussed only in a passing reference. This is in keeping with the variety and close portraiture of female characters and particularly the protagonists. The women characters in these novels are modelled on both types and individuals.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941):

Rabindranath Tagore was a mystic poet, a philosopher, musician, and composer, painter, and Nobel laureate. He continued the glorious tradition of Bengali literature begun by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1834-1894). His first two novels *Bauthakuranir Hat* (Daughter in law’s market 1883) and *Rajarshi* (The Saintly King, 1887) are historical. *Chokher Bali* (Eyesore or Binodini, 1903) is one of his greatest, social novels. Tagore’s works are classics in their own way, that is, for the lyrical beauty and spiritual poignancy. Tagore applied his mind to current social, political and economic problems. He obeyed his own instincts, regardless of social and other restraints. He approached the problems with a perspicacious mind. Whatever the problem he leapt from the circumference to the centre and seized it and rendered the particular, universality. *Nauka Dubi* (The Wreck, 1905), *Gora* (1910) and *Ghare Baire*

(The Home and the World, 1916). *Nauka Dubi* deals with two marriage-parties drowned in a boat wreck, with only two survivors, a bridegrooms and a bride of different partners. The two, Ramesh and Kamala, are in a fix. Ramesh realizes the mistake and later Kamala finds her real husband who too survives. One may resent the improbabilities but the novel's incidents sustain interest. The characters are ably portrayed. *Gora* has won acclaims from critics and readers. It is the story of a foundling, the hero Gora. The novel does not have well and finely or delicately portrayed female characters. It makes a plea for universal, secular brotherhood, the mantra that Indian nationalism, then, most needed. Since this research project revolves around the aspect of female characters, the discussion of this novel will deserve only a peripheral mention.

I have selected the novels, *Chokher Bali*, *Ghare-Baire* and *Shesher Kabita* for detailed study.

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938):

One can discover the influence of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee on the works of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. In his major works, *Parinita* (The Married Girl, 1914), *Biraj Bou* (Mrs Biraj, 1914), *Devdas* (1917), the themes and the treatment are not very different from those of Bankim Chandra, but the setting is modern and the language is lucid and matter-of-fact. The influence of Tagore's short stories and novels *Chokher Bali* and *Gora* is traceable in some those of Sarat Chandra. Sarat Chandra draws the themes and action from his own experiences: the most significant of his works are *Srikant* (in four parts 1917, 1918, 1927, 1933), *Charitrahin* (Characterless 1917), and the first part

of *Devdas* (his first novel). The later phase of his literary career began with the conscious attempt to tackle a plot that is akin to Tagore's *Gora*. As a novelist Sarat Chandra excelled in his realistic portraiture of society, particularly focussing on the predicament of woman in contemporary times. In his novels Sarat Chandra's women characters are underprivileged or socially, precariously placed women. His women are carefully portrayed in their inner and outer life, their compulsions, their dependence and the semblance of 'self' they try to assert or surrender. His female characters like Rajlakshmi, Paro and Chandramukhi are a class apart from those of Bankim Chandra and Tagore. There is ample scope to explore their female consciousness.

I have selected for my study the three novels *Devdas*, *Srikant* and *Charitrahin* for the subtlety of portrayal and the inner depths of character's psyche that is revealed. The female characters in this novel are unforgettable and unique representatives. They share certain cultural traits with those of Bankim and Tagore and also impress with their uniqueness.

The selection of the topic, the authors and their works can be justified on the following grounds:

Though doctoral, or individual or separate research-projects have been undertaken on Tagore or Bankim Chandra or Sarat Chandra in Bengali, in English these are few and far between. Several of the translations of works other than Tagore's are not available. A project which contemplates bringing the three pioneer Bengali authors/novelists together has this justification that I am a bilingual. I have briefly translated excerpts from the selected novels of Bankim Chandra to get a workable base for my study. Additionally, the three

writers and their selected novels provide scope for studying female consciousness and the female as human from several angles: there are common grounds on which the three writers stand as far as the portrayal of the female characters are concerned. There is also distinctiveness in the portraiture of certain female characters by each of the writers.

This doctoral project could serve as a precursor to further research, because of the fact that the proposed project envisages the projection of a somewhat complete emerging and vibrant female selfhood, formed out of the selected works of these three writers, who have served as some of the earliest explorers of women's all-round consciousness. It is neither too ambitious nor unacceptable to hypothesise that the modern highly conscious and confident Indian women have been formed out of the women or representative woman these writers have projected.

The conventional theoretical injunctions relating to women in *Manusmriti* and the Sita/ Savitri prototype together provide a framework within which the response of women characters to male domination could profitably be studied. There is a considerable variety in the women characters' attitudes reflected in the novels under study. These range from passive sufferers to women defying traditional wisdom about marriage and family, intending to plough a lonely furrow. Between these two extremes lie a lot of attitudes combining compliance and protest in varying proportions. The Hindu tradition itself was not homogeneous. The Vedas point to a society that was free from the inhibitions of later Hinduism. The Vedic *rishis* as well as the laymen, relished beef and alcoholic drinks. Moreover, *The Rigveda* does not mention

child-marriage, ban on the remarriage of widows, the caste system, 'Karma', rebirth or avatar. In considering the compatibility of the Hindu religious tradition with the spirit of modernity, one has to be clear about the particular tradition one has in mind. The dominant Hindu tradition referred to here, is the one that had governed and continues to preside over the attitudes to women in India today, namely, the framework of ideas, attitudes and institutions as codified by Manu. Undeniably there is much in this tradition that is fit to be consigned to the scrapheap but because of the presence of vital elements in it is capable of providing direction for the future. Bhikhu Parekh has provided a synoptic view of the critical resources of the Hindu religious tradition. He points out that many of the 19th century reformers made use of resources successfully challenging unacceptable practices. For instance, Raja Rammohan Roy appealed to the Upanishads to argue against 'sati', Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar to the *Parassmriti* (in place of *Manusmriti*) to struggle against the ban of widow remarriage. (qtd. in Jain 10)

The novels under study provide a fascinating glimpse into the minds of Indian women as they live their lives in the patriarchal set-up bearing the weight of tradition and at the same time reacting to the pressures for change and modernity. Some novels present a synoptic view of women as seen in ancient Indian tradition. The value of a study of these novels lies in the recognition of the fact that "in any society women are the chief preservers of tradition, and in a sense, no change however momentous becomes complete or real unless it involves them and carries them along". (Jain: 9) The Feminist Movement in America in the twenties for instance, chiefly liberated the male

and it required another revolution in the sixties for the idea to gain ground that sexual desire in a woman was normal. So a study of a woman-fictional character's response to change in the lives of those around them and their quest for selfhood could provide a valuable glimpse of India in transition. The novels throw into bold relief the questions of women's identity, self-fulfilment and sexuality—how women characters in Indian novels coped with their lives and with their rival pulls of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in their search for identity, independence, fulfilment and affection, whether within marriage or outside it. (Idem.) The introduction of authors under study is appended with necessary historical background within the respective chapters.

The style of my research work is modelled on the guidelines proposed in the sixth edition of The MLA Handbook and the norms specified in the booklet of rules for researchers of Saurashtra University with effect from the year 2004. The names of the three major authors, focused herein, may appear in a multitude of variations in both form and spellings, as used by various literary critics in the past, and thus quoted here according to their pertinence to the context. For instance, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee may have been referred to as Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Bankimchandra Chatterji, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bankim Chandra, or Bankim. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee may appear as Sarat Chandra Chatterji, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay or Saratchandra. Similarly, due to the Anglicizing of Bengali names into English there may be a minor disparity in the orthography of the names, while quoting from different sources. For instance, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Charitraheen* may also appear as *Charitrahin*; Bankim's *Visavriksha* may be spelt as *Bishabriksha*, Surabala may be written as

Surobala, Paro or Parvati may appear in some passages as Parbati or Binodini may appear as Vinodini. Most of the volumes of the Bengali versions of collected works of the three authors, from which passages have been quoted in the Roman script, bear the Bengali date. An approximate English equivalent of the Bengali date has been calculated according to the Christian calendar and replaced in the lists of works cited. No part of this research work, to the best of my knowledge, has been borrowed from any source, the reference of which is unacknowledged. The present research project may fall into the following chapter divisions:

Chapter1: Introduction

This present chapter gives an outline of the chapters of the dissertation, the motive behind the selection of the above mentioned topic of the dissertation. It also elaborates on the hypothesis along with the necessity and the importance of such a study. It anticipates certain derivations that the research might draw towards in the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Bengal's Political, Social and Economic Development

This is an introductory overview of the Indian Renaissance, the national consciousness, its impact on literature, a broad treatment of characteristic works; defining the types or modes of feminine aspects in the novels. It also traces a trajectory of the evolution of the Indian narrative, adapting of the Novel form as a foreign genre and its manipulation by various authors to spread an awareness of perturbing social concerns, particularly those involving and victimizing women and the challenges they face in society. During the Colonial rule Indian literature underwent a drastic transformation in

the form and content of writing. The new ideas imported from the West brought about advanced perspectives in the attitudes towards women and liberated them from despicable social malpractices like *Sati* and child-marriage. The present dissertation aims at examining the way the portrait of woman emerges in the new literary genre—the novel—adopted as a European genre but moulded to integrate perfectly with the Indian content and context. This study focuses from this dimension on the novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, namely in *Rajmohan's Wife*, *Anandmath* and *Durgeshnandini*; Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, namely in *Devdas*, *Charitrahin* and *Srikant*; and Rabindranath Tagore, namely in *Chokher Bali*, *Ghare-Baire* and *Shesher Kabita*. The introduction of writers of the selected novels is appended with necessary historical background within the chapters.

Chapter 3: Women in the Novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee

This chapter deals with three novels. *Rajmohan's Wife* is the first ever novel to be in English by an Indian. The novel outlines the challenges of Matangini within rural settings, against her husband Rajmohan, remaining morally upright despite having a paramour and brother-in-law Madhav and her abduction by Mathur. The story ends with her escape and the retribution of all those who had done injustice to her. *Durgeshnandini* is a gothic saga of Bimala's revenge for her husband's death, the love between Tilottama and Jagat Singh and Ayesha's sacrifice of her unreciprocated and unfulfilled love for Jagat Singh. *Anandmath* is a historical romance tracing Shanti's journey from an ordinary wife to a brave patriot fighting for the cause of the nation. The novel is unique since the country of India is perceived as a motherly

godlike entity and noble individual giving rise to the immortal slogan—“Vande Mataram”.

Chapter 4: Women in the Novels of Rabindranath Tagore

Chokher Bali (or Binodini) takes us to the early 1900's to the time of the colonization of Bengal, by the British. The novel unfolds a tale of passion and betrayal in the vortex of which Binodini is caught. Working as a care taker in the house of the English speaking Mahendra, Binodini, the widow is entangled in love with Mahendra. The conflict between social taboo attached to a widow's existence and the demands of the heart and body are portrayed with great delicacy and frankness. Binodini revolts against an outmoded morality. The aspect of female consciousness of self-will and the question of female empowerment find appreciable exposition. One can notice with particular interest that Tagore's heroines are educated, outgoing and self-reliant.

In *Ghare-Baire* (*The Home and the World*), there is a political conflict as it was the religious one that Gora had. The action is set in Bengal in 1905 when the Swadeshi Movement and Bande Mataram rent the atmosphere, in a battle-cry against the British. There are three principle characters, Nikhil the idealist husband, Bimala his wife and Sandip, his friend. Bimala's sudden introduction to the world outside her sheltered life of a Hindu wife posits the question of the female consciousness. The character-study is incisive and illuminating. In *Shesher Kabita* (*Farewell My Friend*, 1929) Tagore describes the heroine, Labanya as a highly educated woman earning her own livelihood. Amit, who had pursued his studies in the Universtiy of Oxford, discovered that her charming countenance was radiant with the light of intellect. She stands

unparalleled among all the female characters of Tagore's novels in her staunch sense of dignity and self-respect.

Chapter 5: Women in the Novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee

The tragic tale of *Devdas* has enthralled readers of all ages. The story revolves around a Bengali zamindar's son, Devdas in love with Paro, a village girl of a poor family. They share an inexplicable nexus of affection in their childhood. Unable to disobey his father's command and cause him displeasure he rejects Paro only to lose her to an elderly widower. Returning to the village his heart yearns for Paro. Unfulfilled in his love and dejected he immerses himself in alcohol and the arms of Chandramukhi, a courtesan. After the unhappy relationship with the prostitute who falls in love with him, the hero reduces himself to an alcoholic and dies on his way to meet his old village beloved. The characterization of Paro and Chandramukhi is deftly done and the female in both the women is superbly projected. The story of *Charitrahin* revolves around two widows—Savitri and Kiranmayi and their unrequited love from Satish and Upendra respectively. On the other hand, Sarojini finally wins over Saitsh's love and Surabala, Upendra's wife, meets an untimely death.

Srikant in the novel of his name is a drifter and he idealizes and adores the chaste Annadadi, whose selfless devotion to a worthless husband is subtly portrayed. The female consciousness of Annadadi offers scope for study. Srikant's meeting with Abhaya leads us to another facet of woman. Through the eyes of Srikant the author seizes the opportunity to take the reader through a roller coaster ride to the various rungs of the society and it

forms an artist palette of varied women in miserable predicaments. As a result characters like Rajlakshmi, Annadadi, Abhaya and Kamallata have become immortal in Indian literature.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter is a comparative study of the portraiture of the female characters by the three writers —their similarities and distinctiveness. It will be seen if it can be explored that the three writers have contributed to evolve a 'Novum Femme' of Indian ethos.

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www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Eco.html

www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Siraj.html

¹ The development of East India Company can be accessed for greater detail from this site:
www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Eco.html

Chapter 2:

Bengal's Political, Social and Economic Development—15th century onwards

The East India Company had acquired the unusual distinction of ruling an entire nation. However, its origins were much humbler. Before the victory of the eighteenth century, Bengal was one of the most economically developed regions of the Mughal Empire. This region had not been directly involved in the political struggle of the feudal lords surrounding the Mughal throne. The basis of Bengal's wealth was mainly cloth production. Community-money relations were rather highly developed there. The peasants of this region cultivated various sorts of rice, cotton and sugar cane. The landlords, known as *zamindars*, were given salaries in return for their collection of taxes and their delivery of the same to the treasury. Yet, at the same time, they too were obliged to make large money deposits. Soon this system degenerated into one of tax-farming. In the lands which they controlled, the *zamindars* began to wield their power with no thought for principles and legal norms. They collected taxes with the help of their own armed detachments, they administered justice and meted out punishment to the local population and they bribed the government officials. At the same time the *zamindars* and tax farmers were still dependent to a large degree on Murshid Quli Khan, the first Nawab of Bengal. When the payments were in arrears he could even incarcerate them in a specially dug pit in Murshidabad. During the reign of his successors, the independence of the Bengal *zamindars* became more pronounced. They began to pay sums into the Nawab's treasury which did not correspond to the income they gleaned from the landed possessions. The rent-cum-tax in the *zamindars'* estates was

gradually transformed into 'pure and simple' rent, while the *zamindars'* estates themselves were inherited, thus developing into private feudal possessions.

After their victory in the battle of Plassey, the British demanded to be paid by the new Nawab an enormous indemnity (close on eighteen million pounds) probably exceeding all movable property of Calcutta's inhabitants. Resistance on the part of the local land population and two attempts by the padishah¹ of Delhi in conjunction with the ruler of Oudh (in 1759 and 1760) to seize Bihar provided the British with the excuses for squeezing money from the Nawabs of Bengal. Henry Vansittart who was appointed governor of Bengal in 1760 deposed Mir Jafar and made his son-in-law, Mir Kasim, Nawab in his stead, after the latter had paid the Governor, and the members of the council £ 2,00,00 and made over to the Company the three richest regions of Bengal: Burdwan, Midnapur and Chitagong. This move led Mir Kasim to lose half his revenue and increase his debts to the Company and individual members of its staff.

The overt plunder of the feudal lords by the British conquerors had most important results. It marked the beginning of shameless pumping of India's riches over to Britain. According to estimates by Indian economists, between 1757 and 1780 Britain drained from India commodities and coins amounting to a total value of one million pounds. The loss of power and revenue by the ruling feudal class of India gave rise to a certain degree of deterioration of the country's economic life. In the mid-1760s after the gradual liquidation of the Nawab's court of the feudal lords, the now unnecessary

cavalry detachment of *Jagirdars*, the crafts, crucial to the supply of their needs fell into decline along with the production of the finest, most expensive varieties of cloth in Dacca and cheaper kinds of fabrics. This decline in craft manufacture led to a spread of poverty among the artisans. Not long before the conquest of Bengal, the Company had decided not to make use of Indian merchants as their middle men and carried out their dealings with the weavers directly through their agents, the *Goshmatas*. (Antonova et al 23) After the conquest of Bengal they became tremendously powerful and compelled the weavers with violence to surrender their cloth to their Company, using the cover of the edict issued by the great Mughal in 1717 which had given the British East India Company the sole right to carry on duty free external trade, its officials began trade exempted from duty within the country as well. Moreover, they started selling their agents *dastaks* or certificates that exempted commodities of East India Company from duty and ousted the Indian merchants who were not co-operating with the British. In the words of a contemporary observer, the East India Company behaved like a “state in the guise of a merchant”. (Idem.) Mir Kasim made the Indian merchants exempt from all duties, thus placing them on the same footing as the British.

Mir Kasim (reign 1760–1763) made an attempt to recover Bengal from the hands of the British. In 1764 he enlisted the help of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II and Nawab Shuja–ud–Daulah of Oudh. But their troops were defeated in the Battle of Buxar by the company troops led by Major Hector Munro. Robert Clive returned to India in 1765. On 12th August, a treaty was signed between the Mughal emperor Shah Alam and Robert Clive resulting in

the British getting the *diwani* (the right to collect revenue) from the provinces of Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar. In return the Mughal emperor was promised a yearly payment of Rs. 2,60,000. The battles of Plassey and Buxar paved the way for almost two hundred years of colonial rule over India. "As the fortunes of the company and the revenue area in the eastern region increased, so did the importance of Calcutta, the Company's headquarters of this region." (Lal sscnet.edu/Siraj)

Once the system of 'dual government' had been introduced, trade matters were only of secondary importance to the company and its officials. The main source of their revenue became the collection of taxes from Bengali peasants. The sums obtained in this way were used to purchase Indian commodities and export them to Britain. This practice was hypocritically termed 'investment'. (Antonova 22-26) The money obtained by plundering Bengal was used to finance aggressive wars in other parts of India. In this way the people of India were being forced to finance the enslavement of their own country. The tax collectors seized from the peasants not only their entire produce but also the grain that the latter had saved for their food.

The shift in relations between British and the Indian capital and the transition to a new capitalist order in India was most closely associated with the governor-generalship of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, which began in 1828. Under his administration, policies which had limited the ambitions of government to those inherited from the preceding regimes began to be abandoned. Policies of 'reform' and 'improvement' were substituted in their

stead. In the economic sphere Bentinck invested in improved transport facilities, which enhanced the impact of the British imports and opened the way for cheap, industrially produced cloth to displace Indian textiles and to deal a death-blow to the ancient commercial structure.

The overtly interventionist policies in social and economic matters marked a heightened confidence in the British Rule. Bentinck's modernizing reforms had the effect of favouring the interest of the capitalists, especially those of Britain, against the older landed groups of India. Some interpretations of the Indian Rebellion of 1857-1859—the greatest challenges to the British rule--insist that Bentinck's measures in 1830s contributed to it. They represented an attempt to impose the social mores of the metropolitan capitalists on to their erstwhile Indian collaborators, who were in the process of being moved steadily to a moral, as well as economic and political periphery.

The famine of 1769 – 1770, which the company policies did nothing to alleviate, may have claimed the lives of as much as a third of the population. The company despite the increase in trade and revenues from other sources found itself burdened with massive military expenditures and its destruction seemed imminent. State intervention put the ailing Company back on its feet and Lord North's India Bill known as the Regulating Act, of 1773, provided for greater parliamentary control over the affairs of the company besides placing it under the rule of a governor general. According to Vinay Lal, Warren Hastings was appointed governor of Bengal in 1772 and the first Governor

General of India in 1773 with his de facto control over other regions. Under his dispensation, the expansion of the British rule in India was pursued vigorously, and the British sought to master indigenous systems of knowledge. (Lal sscnet.ucla.edu/Hastings)

The East India Company turned towards arms and overt militarization which had an immediate impact on Indian politics, although marked by complexity and ambiguity. Clive's victories especially that at Plassey, had been achieved by the new European techniques of infantry warfare. In the wake of his victories, the Company's grip on commerce (or at least of its officials and merchants in their 'private' trading capacity) had greatly increased. Seeing this, many of India's new independent rulers paradoxically were drawn closer. The Company received a host of requests from kings in India for officers to train their infantry divisions. So it soon added mercenary services to many other functions which it provided in its new dominions, and rapidly came to realize that this method advanced its influence at a very little cost. A 'subsidiary alliance' system was conjured up, whereby planting of the Company soldiery on Indian States that paid their expenses became a prerequisite for doing further business. The further business, in turn, included a variety of commercial services which brought the treasuries of many States under effective Company Control. When, towards the end of the century—and in the context of war with France—the British State committed itself to an imperial mission in India, pressing the Company to convert its influence into territory, conquest was achieved with remarkable ease.

The Company concealed its character and ambitions as it developed behind two screens. Stein maintains that on the one hand, it made no bid to establish itself as an independent source of sovereignty. (5) It did not behave as a sultan or a king, with a display of royal symbols; nor did it evince formal claims to territorial expansion. Rather, it continued to recognize the sovereignty of the Moghul emperor; and presented itself as merely the supplier of set technical and commercial services for hire. On the other hand, knowledge of the Company's political position in England was freely available in India, and suggested that any imperial role would be against the interest and wishes of directors and the Parliament. In such circumstances, Indian rulers were lured into the belief that the services they bought would be without threat to themselves—certainly not in comparison to other more immediate dangers at their doorsteps. Warfare between regional rulers was intense and 'subsidiary alliance' brought protection against neighbourly invasion. (Idem.)

Hastings remained in India until 1784 and was succeeded by Cornwallis. Cornwallis initiated the Permanent Settlement, whereby an agreement in perpetuity was reached with *zamindars* for the collection of revenue. For the next fifty years the British were engaged in attempts to eliminate Indian rivals, and it is under the administration of Wellesley that British territorial expansion was achieved with ruthless efficiency. Major victories were achieved against Tipu Sultan of Mysore and the Marathas, and finally the subjection and conquest of the Sikhs in a series of Anglo-Sikh Wars led to British occupation over the territory of India. In some places the British practised indirect rule, placing a Resident at the place of a native ruler who

was allowed sovereignty in domestic matters. Lord Dalhousie's notorious Doctrine of Lapse whereby a native state became part of British India if there was no male heir at the death of the ruler, was one of the principal means by which the native states were annexed; but often the annexation such as Awadh (Oudh) in 1856, was justified on the grounds that the native prince was of evil disposition, indifferent to the welfare of his subjects. The annexation of the native states, harsh revenue policies, and the plight of Indian peasantry all contributed to the rebellion of 1857, also referred to as the Sepoy Mutiny. Energetic leaders like Tantia Tope and Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi created immortal epics of courage and self-sacrifice. The formal abolition of East India Company by Queen Victoria's Declaration of 1858 signified the end of the major conquest and the launch of an era of responsible colonial Government in India.

The proclamation of Queen Victoria, in which she promised that she and her officers would work for the well-being of her Indian subjects, heralded in the final phase of the British Raj. This was also the period when the reform activities in India gained the maximum momentum. Among Indians, there were debates concerning female education, widow remarriage, the age of consent for marriage and more generally the status of woman. In the meanwhile, with increasing emphasis on English education, and the extension of the government, large numbers of Indians joined government service. There was, similarly, a considerable increase in both English language and vernacular journalism, and in 1885 the Indian National Congress, comprising largely lawyers and some other professionals, was founded in order that

educated Indians might gain something of a voice in the governance of their own country. However, nationalist sentiments could not be confined within the parameters set by a gentlemanly organisation such as the Congress. Both in Maharashtra and in Bengal there were radicals carrying out armed resistance against the British.

Reform:

According to Lal, the British provided the bridge for India to pass from the medieval world of the Moghuls to the new age of science and humanism. Along with English literature came various ideas from the West, and the administration of missionaries provided, as it were, a working model for western moral precepts. They introduced mechanised industry and brought India within the orbit of the new world economy. (Lal sscnet/Bengal) Lord Macaulay was responsible for the introduction of English education in India. But it had a professional aim. The British interest in trade and profit resulted in the expansion of coal and iron mining; the development of tea, coffee and cotton-growing, the construction of India's vast network of railways and massive revolutions took place in the field of agriculture too.

Many social reforms cropped up due to education. The Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) fought against *Sati*- the inhuman practice of self-immolation of the wife on the funeral pyre of her husband. It attempted to recognise Hinduism along the lines of repudiation of idol-worship and superstition. According to Judith Brown, being an important religious figure, Roy's monotheistic Hindu reform movement ultimately

became a separate Hindu sect in 1828, when he founded the Brahmo Samaj. So, Brahmo Samaj, in its early days was one of the first signs that Hindus would reassess that religious heritage as part of their interaction with the West. (74-78)

Swami Vivekananda, the man with a modern vision established the Ramakrishna Mission for world-wide missionary work. The appearance of Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1838-86), a genuine Hindu saint and mystic at this juncture showed how the ancient Hindu tradition was still vigorous enough to produce new living manifestations. By making his entire life an ecstatic pilgrimage of spirituality, he cast a spell on the youth of modern Bengal. During the last year of his life, his disciples led by Swami Vivekananda, formed a holy brotherhood which finally took the form of the well-known Ramakrishna Mission. Under Swami Vivekananda's dynamic leadership, the Mission effectively propagated ancient Hinduism abroad, while in India itself, his fiery eloquence, having overwhelmed the West, instilled a new poise in the minds of his compatriots.

Sri Narayana Guru of Kerala fought against the caste system, especially in Kerala. Brown infers that by the end of the 19th century a number of organisations in different parts of India were engaged in reforming the country and rejuvenating Indian culture. (67) Thus, if the British attitude to the Indian underwent a radical transformation, the Indian too was changing and changing very fast. When the first products of higher education in India started coming out of the portals of the earliest Indian universities (established,

ironically enough, in the year of the Revolt itself), the seeds of the ideas sown by Raja Rammohan Roy a generation earlier, began to sprout vigorously. Naik agrees that the gradual growth of the native press in the bigger cities and the acquisition of a common language—viz., English—soon brought the new Indian intelligentsia close together. (31) While the old Indian aristocracy remained latent, licking its wounds, dreaming of the past splendour and shutting its eyes to the realities of the present, there was

born from the middle stratum of society a new integrated all-India class with varied background but a common foreground of knowledge, ideas and values...It was a dynamic minority. It had a sense of unity, of purpose, and of hope. It was the new born soul of modern India. In time it was to infuse the whole of India with its spirit. (Spear 91)

The spirit found expression through movements of social, political and religious reforms. Raja Rammohan Roy already made a beginning in this direction. After his death, the movement was strengthened by Dwarkanath Tagore. With Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-84), the movement pervaded all-over India leading to the establishment of similar organisations like the Prarthna Samaj by M. G. Ranade and R. G. Bhandarkar in Bombay in 1867. In spite of a schism in the Brahmo Samaj in 1866 brought about by the growing differences between the conservatives and reformers, the movement continued to be vigorous, especially in Bengal, and influenced in a greater measure, the thoughts of Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. Besides Raja Rammohan Roy, a social reformer, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) reformer and educationist, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) a poet and nationalist, Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-1899), a novelist, and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1829-1873), a poet became the

torch-bearers in making Calcutta “a centre of Indian intelligentsia and leadership. (www.bengalweb.com/hist/calhist1a.html)

The Arya Samaj, established in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-83) was a similar movement. It attempted to revive Hinduism in its pristine purity of the Vedic age. Repudiation of Puranism and polytheism, rejection of the hereditary caste system and revival of proselytization were its chief doctrines. Having started a number of educational institutions imparting both oriental and occidental knowledge, the Arya Samaj, later continued its mission of militant Vedic Hinduism with renewed vigour under the guidance of Swami Shraddhanand and Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928). The year 1857 also witnessed the rise of the Theosophical Society, founded in New York by Madam H. P. Blavatsky, Col. H. S. Olcott and W. O. Judge among others, a movement based on ancient Hindu religious and philosophical thought. Unlike the Arya Samaj this was a western movement but the society shifted to Adyar, Madras in India in 1878 founded by Annie Besant who championed the cause of Home Rule in India. But like the Arya Samaj it also helped the prevailing climate of the Indian resurgence. Theosophy was an eclectic creed, as a blend of Hinduism, Buddhism, Pythagoras and Plato, ancient Egyptian thought and early Christianity.

This was one of the significant milestones of the new religious resurgence. Under the impact of western education, the Indian, swept off his feet by European culture and thought, had often been inhibited by the inferior feeling due to the state of his own tradition-bound religion and culture. In

Bengal, especially the younger generation had even renounced Hinduism to embrace Christianity. "The new reform movements proved a strong remedy and restored the balance." (Naik 31-33)

Calcutta's Growth and the Bengal Renaissance:

In 1687, Job Charnock (?-1693), an agent and the chief of the English factory in Cassim Bazar, secured the permission to establish a factory in Sutanuti. A peace treaty was signed between the Mughals and the Company in 1690 granting it some respite. On 24th August 1690, Charnock established a factory at Sutanati. This is generally accepted as the date of foundation of modern Calcutta. In 1698 Aurangzeb appointed his grandson Mohammed Azim Al Din as Bengal's Subedar (Governor) and in the same year the Company bought the *Zamindari* (rights to collect land revenue) of Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapur from the Subarna Chowdhury family. The union of three villages - Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapur came to be known as Calcutta. (www.bengalweb.com/hi-st/calhist1a.html) There are, of course, several other theories about how Calcutta got its name.

Around Warren Hastings' time Calcutta's population had grown to over two hundred thousand. Calcutta became an important centre for opium trade as the Company earned huge amounts of money by exporting opium to China. The Company also traded in salt, pepper, indigo, muslin, silk and spices. The seeds of Calcutta's growth as a premiere trading centre were sown.

As British India's most important city, infrastructure improvement and the growth of western education began to have an effect on the citizens of Calcutta. The Asiatic Society was founded in 1784 by Sir William Jones. Sir William Carey, a missionary established a printing

press in 1799² and Asia's first modern university in Serampore, (a Danish settlement) in 1827. Bengali language, literature and culture went through a period of Renaissance and Calcutta became the centre of what is generally known as the Bengal Renaissance. Many of India's modern reform movements started in Calcutta. Some of the finest people of India came in the limelight during this time. (www.bengalweb.com/hi-st/calhist1a.html)

Literary Activities in Bengal:

Bengali folk literature blossomed under the influence of Islam and the patronization of Pathan kings like Husain Shah, a benevolent but shrewd *Gaudadhipati* or King. (S. Sen 74) He wanted Bengal to possess a culture, religion and a value-system that were unique and distinct not only from North Indian Hindu culture but from the whole of India. He undertook to translate all the Hindu epics in Bengali. *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* were first translated by the patronages of Paragal Khan and Husain Shah. Sen remarks that hence the Hindus regarded Husain Shah as the *Avatar* of Krishna. Under his patronage *The Mahabharata* was translated once by Paramesvar Das and then he had the more 'varied version' as occurring in *Jaiminaiya Samhita* rendered into Bengali verse by his own court poet *Srikara Nandi*. With the advent of printing in India on March 5, 1801, "a momentous day on which the first Bengali New Testament was published" at the press in Serampore, which was initiated by William Carey, literature began to be available in quick profusion to the reading public. (S. Sen 164)

Gradually the missionaries had helped to establish printing presses in different parts of the country and books in the vernacular as well as in English were coming out since the beginning of the 18th century. The printing press

inevitably led to the circulation of newspapers and *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, India's first newspaper, came out in 1780, and others followed in due course.

The initial steps of Bangla prose followed suit and could be seen in school textbooks, but it matured drastically and became the chief medium of dialogue in the drama of Bengali life. Rammohan Roy still carried traces of Sanskrit rhetoric in his Bangla prose. With its *purva-paksha* and *uttar-paksha* bipolar positions, such Bangla prose became the vehicle of direct communication in the writing of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. Such prose remained an asset for the prose for the next half a century and became one of the chief acquisitions of the century. As a result it directly addressed the issues of communication of the *bhadralok* class and the language gained a standard maturity.

With such development in Bangla prose writing, the novel was to follow suit soon, and being erected on the foundation of society, the novel form successfully mirrored the state of development in social consciousness more faithfully than any other form of art. The orthodoxy in Indian social life along with the slow progress in literacy and education rendered little scope for literary innovation. These factors along with the gender distinction deterred the novel from being absorbed into Indian Literature. This late and slow development of the novel was also caused by the fact that the novel requires a self-conscious and refined society which could recognize individuality, dignity and rights. Only a meagre recognition of this kind pervaded India in the form of folk-tales which were democratic in theme and didactic in style; but the

sense of realism was so strongly intertwined with supernaturalism that they cannot be regarded as novels. Like the rest of India, even in Bengal, the Bengali novel could emerge only under the impact of European Literature. Thus during the period from 1857 to 1920, the Indian ethos gradually underwent a sea-change from the “shock of defeat and frustration to a new-found feeling of self-awareness”. (Naik 35) It is against this background that the remarkable works of prominent writers like Kashiprasad Ghose, Rammohan Roy, Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore took shape. Through poetry, which reminded and rekindled the spirit of Indians about their roots, culture, Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu, and through their fiction Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Tagore rendered the people become aware of the overall reform of the society to afford them an expression or a voice. It is to the field of fiction that my research project relates.

The Rise of the Bengali Novel:

Bengali literature was the first to be influenced by western development and demonstrated a remarkable rapid growth. The novel is essentially a modern form of art and emerged only after a more democratic spirit had pervaded the society in Europe. The European Renaissance and the Reformation helped to break old social and religious conventions and created conditions favourable to the growth of individuality. The European impact indirectly helped to create a similar situation in India, many centuries later and the change was most far-reaching in Bengal. According to Sen the eighteenth century saw in Bengal the decline of the power and prestige of the Nawabs,

Rajas and especially the feudal aristocracy. Their position was gradually occupied by a new class whose members depended for their prosperity on the connections with the East India Company. This is reflected in the growing ascendancy of the Dewans, Banias, Mutsuddis and Housedars who constituted the 'nouveau riche' in Bengal. A new class of landlords also grew as a result of the Permanent Settlement system which led to a rapid expansion of the middle class through the creation of a large number of intermediaries. (164) The establishment of the printing made it easier to provide books to cater to the needs of this growing class. Conditions were thus created for the development of the novel which is essentially a projection of the democratic temper engendered by the growth of a new middle class. This found expression in the movement away from the feudal society and a conscious revolt against it. The new middle classes stressed on the issues of individuality and human dignity. It is natural that their major literary genre, the novel, should deal with ordinary men as opposed to the princes and princelings who were heroes of earlier tales. Because the novel deals with ordinary men, a novelist must possess the powers of acute observation which enables him to distinguish one individual from another. Concurrently, as life gets more settled and occasions for extraordinary deeds become rare, the novelist must also have the capacity of presenting small incidents of life in an interesting way.

The development of the novel in all countries has been related to the growth of the middle classes. During the industrial revolution in Europe, society was divided mainly into the aristocracy and the labouring poor. The

aristocrats, whether they were feudal lords or commercial oligarchs, developed as did the major literary forms, the epic and the romance dealing with men and women of what may be called the high society. Similarly, the labouring classes which included the farmer, the artisan, the serf and slaves had their own form of literature in folk tales and ballads. This folk literature was close to the earth and had a certain racy saltiness. Both types of literature were characterised by wild improbabilities in which the distinction between the natural and the supernatural was often overlooked. This was the age of faith before science had made a significant impact on social and intellectual attitudes. Limited knowledge and still more limited understanding of natural laws made men believe in forces that were outside the range of experience and commonsense and in consequence the literature of the day was full of what we regard as improbabilities.

The growth of the novel is associated with the development of the scientific temper along with the emergence of the middle class. The novel is essentially a reportage on life and demands fidelity to facts and interest in individuals as such. In epic and romantic literature, the heroes and heroines are persons of extraordinary proportions whom we rarely meet in life. Their unusual exploits fall outside the range of humdrum experience of everyday. Even in folk literature there are sharp deviations from the actual. Folk literature may have greater realism than the aristocratic literature of epic and romance but it also lacks in verisimilitude. The emergence of the middle classes broke the sharp distinction between the upper class and the working people. Life became more settled and conventional. Interest in literature in

this new environment could be sustained only by bringing to sharper focus the individual idiosyncrasies of ordinary men and women. The novel in Europe grew as the middle class gained strength. In India too, the novel began with the growth of the middle classes and since this took place first in Bengal, it was in Bengali among the other Indian languages that the novel first emerged as a distinct literary form.

With the consolidation of the British power, the conditions of life in Bengal became settled and commonplace. Old feudal classes were broken and scattered. In their place emerged an ambitious class whose major interest was material pleasure and worldly life. The stage was, thus, set for the appearance of the Bengali novel and it is significant that its first drafts should appear through reports in journals and periodicals. Though concerned mainly with major events and personalities, newspapers also delight in reporting minor incidents and characters. They also make constant efforts at refining their reporting so that their readers may find interest in commonplace happenings. The publication of *Babur Upakhyan* in *Samachar Darpan* in its issue of 24th February, 1821 may be regarded as an example. This and a subsequent sketch on 9th June, 1821 offer a sharp caricature of the members of the emerging middle class who owed their wealth to their connections with British trade. They were naturally anxious to please their British masters while at the same time yearning for the luxury and social prestige enjoyed by the old feudal aristocracy. The author who successfully captured these sketches was the ostensible Pramatha Nath Sharma who also wrote *Nabo Babu Bilas* two years later in 1823 and *Kalikata Kamalaya*.

Rev. James Long in 1855 described this sketch of the 'Babu' as "one of the best satires on the Calcutta Babu as he was thirty years ago" and was the precursor of *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, *Hutam Penchar Naksha* and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Muchiram Gurer Jiban Charit*. Kabir points out that many scholars think that it was Bhabani Charan Banerjee who wrote under the pseudonym which explains his biting sarcasm about the new middle class of Bengal. (6) Banerjee was the editor of *Samachar Chandrika* and *Samvad Kaumudi*, both representatives of Hindu orthodoxy in the most virulent form. He had, of course, an easy target in the Babu and more so because the Babu had few redeeming features. His weakness for luxury and dissoluteness was not the result of western education but was a direct reflection of the low standards and the vulgar approach of the mercenaries who then ran the East India Company. The Babu of *Nabo Babu Bilas* was quite distinct from and indeed almost the antithesis of the representative Young Bengal of the day. Those who called themselves the Young Bengal were ardent champions of a renaissance based on unquestioning acceptance of western values and total rejection of what they called 'Indian superstitions and beliefs'. They were passionate followers in rationalism and sought a new valuation of ancient traditions. The 'Babu' of *Nabo Babu Bilas* had little interest or concern for any intellectual and moral principles and was interested only in acquiring money and spending it in dissolute living.

Karuna and *Fulmani* by Mrs. Hannah Catharine Mullens appeared in 1852 and is according to most modern critics the first proper novel in Bengali.

(Kabir 6) It credits the author with not only mastering a foreign language but also entering deeply into the life of the ordinary people of the land. It is interesting to note that an English woman has been the pioneer in this field, perhaps instigating/inspiring Bengali women to follow her example. Strongly didactic in tone, the novel tells the story of two Indian families which had accepted the Christian faith. Fulmani is a genuine Christian and her whole life is governed by high ethical principles. Karuna, on the other hand, is Christian only in name. Fulmani's deep faith and Karuna's lack of belief are reflected in their personal and family life. The story may be trite but the book is important as it discards irony and sarcasm and describes the simple joys and sorrows of ordinary men and women with sympathy and insight.

Since the arrival of the novel as a form, says S. Bandopadhyay, it has become the most flourishing form in Indian literature. The meaning of the word 'upanyas', the Bangla term for the novel has evolved through a large number of connotations like 'an unreal entertaining tale', 'casual anecdotes or invented accounts' and 'a means to deposit or install experience and deeper significance before a social presence'. (Mukherjee 32) It is interesting to speculate how far these early skits about the 'Babu' were influenced by Dickens. There are certain analogies with *Sketches by Boz* but the two sketches about the Babu were written before Dickens had published his work. (Idem.) Their temper also differs, for Dickens, even when he ridiculed, had a certain feeling of sympathy for the objects of his ridicule. Sharma's condemnation was complete, unqualified and unrelieved by any human sympathy. Dickens also influenced *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (or A Spoiled Child of

the Rich Family, referred to hereafter as *Alal*) by Pyarichand Mitra, the next important book, which marks the growth of the novel in Bengal. Its appearance in 1857 is in more senses than one symbolic. The year 1857 saw the final defeat of the feudal revival in India and marked the close of the purely mercenary rule of the East India Company. It was also the year of establishment of the three universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras which gave a new turn to the intellectual life of the country. India was now consciously turning towards the modern age in economics, politics and philosophical output. *Alal* with its realistic portraiture of contemporary village and town, school and law courts and social and family matters shows a new and healthy nationalism in Bengali literature. It was the first Bengali novel to project the original treatment of contemporary life and manners. Its hero, Motilal, has some pretensions to western education for he had been a pupil in a school run by one Mr. Sherborne. Beyond a few English words and slight familiarity with some English customs, he shows hardly any influence of western beliefs and ideals. Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutam Panchar Naksha* (1862) is also a satire on the newly rich semi-mercantile class which was developing under the aegis of East India Company. The *Naksha* consists of a series of sketches of the newly rich with their unrestrained and uncultured manifestation of ostentation and luxury. It was easy to hold up to ridicule men and women who were aping the externals of the debased European society of the day.

These early works have a certain historical importance in the evolution of the Bengali novel. *Alal* is easily the best. It describes not only the crowds

on the street but also gives interesting portraits of family life. The seamy side of society is shown in its description of prostitutes' houses and proceedings in the law courts, but it also gives some insight into the cultural life of the day in its account of poetic contests and social gatherings. Mitra had also succeeded in conveying a sense of the order which was being slowly established by the British after the lawlessness and anarchy of the preceding hundred years. At times reminiscent of Dickens' style of caricature, Mitra has made an attempt to portray the total life of Calcutta. He projects a balanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional Hindu society and the society of the new rich as well as that of rebellious Bengal. In spite of his keen sense of humour and acute power of observation, Mitra cannot claim to be the first novelist of Bengal. This is because he lacked the story-teller's art, and could not bring to light the individuality in any of his characters. They remain abstractions unlike the characters of Dickens who, in spite of being stereotypes developed into individuals because of the author's amazing love of life. Kabir conjectures that perhaps Mitra's greatest contribution to the development of the Bengali novel was his remarkable mastery over the rhythm of the spoken language. He was in this respect far in advance of his times and excelled all his contemporaries including Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. In spite of his example, the Bengali novel had to wait for the emergence of a genius like Rabindranath Tagore before the language of the common man could become the language of the novel. (3-9)

Sen sums up that under the influence of Islam and the patronization of Pathan kings like Husain Shah, Bengali literature shook away the dominance

of the Brahmin and flourished in folk literature. (137) The decline of the dominance of the Pathan kings, Rajahs, and Nawabs and the feudal aristocracy was overshadowed by the emergence of the middle classes. This, coupled with the advent of science exercised a considerable influence on the growth of the novel. Folk-literature generally concentrated on the vivid depiction of the life of ordinary people. Gradually, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Bengali folk-tales which were professedly written were becoming more and more secular and democratic in nature. The introduction of the novel in India was an immediate result of English education, introduced in the 19th century by British rulers. In contrast to folk literature, the novel was inevitably character or individual-centred, demanding of the author a faithful representation of reality. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly points out that fictional stories written in different Indian languages, later identified as novels, came to be estimated in terms of their imitation of the western models. She further observes:

The canon legitimized by literary historians was constructed on the unarticulated premise that there was a universal paradigm of novel writing and since we are introduced to it through Europe, all subsequent narrative texts of a certain length need to be judged by standards set there. Thus in India, literary status was long conferred and the appellation 'novel' bestowed only on long narratives which best adapted this European form to incorporate local material. (1996, vii)

In 1880 Bankimchandra Chatterjee drew a parallel between the European Renaissance and the religious and cultural achievements of fifteenth and sixteenth century Bengal about the '*Bhadralok*' culture of his own times. He tended to be deeply ironic and satirical. (Chaudhuri 96) The literary

circles in the *Bhadralok* culture began to associate the use of prose in its various forms with the evolution of the novel like the early European novelists. Bankimchandra compared *Bhadralok* prose with the early European novels. Therefore the vast majority of the contemporary literature reflected on the day-to day bustle of ordinary people. Most of the cultural activities relating to the Renaissance were located outside Calcutta, around the '*Bhadralok*' clusters in district towns or among educated Bengali communities in other provinces. Sumit Sarkar comments,

The Bengali middle class was bound to be utterly different from the bourgeoisie of early modern Europe, because the forces of 'modernity' and 'development' in metropolitan countries normally produce under-development in the colonial periphery. (97)

The reciprocal influence between the novel of Europe and the novel in regional languages has been rather more intimate and intentional than such influence in the areas of poetry and drama. 'Literary renaissance' first manifested itself in Bengal but almost immediately afterwards, its impact could be noticed in Madras, Bombay and other parts of India as well. Under the spell of colonization, the educated members of the society imported the genre of the novel. The dual dimension of the influence of the British impact and the colonized consciousness explains why English was used not only as a medium of instruction but also as the language of prose in a country which bore a deep-rooted tradition of literature in its native languages. It was due to colonial dominance in imperialist design, that the Christian missionary and Indian intellectuals were instrumental in expressing themselves through English. Writing the novel in English became the centre of attraction for Anglicized Indians and the Indian English novel was encouraged by the

victims of colonization to carve for themselves a distinct identity. Thus, the development of the novel as a genre was not the contribution of a single individual, but it resulted from the combined efforts of the contemporary moment, milieu and the race.

Education pervaded rather dramatically into the Bengali middle-classes. In the early 19th century, education was the privilege of the upper classes. Schools and colleges were established in cities mainly in Calcutta. However, the British had intended only a few to benefit from the education that they catered to the Indians. This educated minority was expected to take on clerical and administrative tasks, thus curtailing the expenditure of importing civilians from Britain. (George 610) Yet, the *Bhadralok* seized this opportunity of becoming learned and education began to spread far and wide. This *Bhadralok* or the middle class made the business community the target of their satiric attack. According to S. Bandopadhyay during the transitional phase, the *Bhadralok* was regarded as “a self-reflective, knowledge seeking progressive group.” (Mukherjee 31) However, the number of readers did not increase simultaneously, for only some could read. The reader was now a part of the privileged class, the members of which could spend time and money on knowing their alphabet. The writer also belonged to the same class because he too had taken trouble in learning his letters. The distinction between the literate and the illiterate was rooted in this class base. Moreover, the class which both created and consumed literature was an outcome of the phenomenon of urbanisation. In India, class distinctions were intrinsically connected with the caste system. Both class and caste accentuated the

economic condition of an individual and hence it determined his or space in the society. Indian litterateurs seriously dealt with the tender issue of this inequality generated by the caste system, although very few could conjure up an image of a caste-free society. According to S. K. Das, the movement of reform being led by Jotiba Phule who belonged to a 'low' caste embarrassed the Brahmins. Leader like Dayananda, a Gujarati Brahmin and Vivekananda, a Bengali Kayastha successfully exploded the traditional belief that caste was an integral part of Hindu religion. This inspired many writers to form a public opinion which gradually became more widespread. (301)

Ramamurti believes that the social structure of the middle class of the 19th century closely resembled that of the 18th century England. This class began to correlate the use of prose in its various forms with the evolution of the novel. Hence most literary outputs centred on the daily activities of an ordinary individual. (32-33) For all Indian languages the adoption of prose as the "literary vehicle" was a 19th century innovation. (Clark 15-16) The desire of some authors to write in English was rooted in a creative impulse which was a widespread literary trait of the times and not in their desire to imitate western models, or impress the western reader, though the latter was also perhaps present as a secondary motivation.

The forms used for the narrative fiction, the novel, the novelette and the short story were beginning to gain currency. A vast majority of writers began to explore new themes and subjects. For a while certain languages persisted upon traditional themes, romances of princes and princesses,

legendary figures and some heroes possessing supernatural powers, exhibiting superhuman strength and mobility. In spite of this, innovative writers ventured to draw their themes and subjects from contemporary issues and life. The development in Bengal illustrates the process which, directly or indirectly, was paralleled in most of the other languages too. Under the influence of the western culture and literature the literate population became more aware of the present society and its problems and their interest in the past lost its vigour. The age-old literary form of the verse no more reigned supreme as the most popular literary medium among the new literatures. The monopoly of the great poets had been broken. The advent of the printing press had altered the method of transmission of literary creations. It was primarily in the urban areas and gradually in the rural areas that recitation at religious festivals, *kirtan* singing, *jatra* plays and such other oral/folk performance lost popularity to the printed book. The patron to whom the medieval poets had turned for support was in time displaced by a circle of readers who had paid for what they wanted to read. Letters to the newspapers reveal that the reading public was interested in current affairs and world news and authors fulfilled this demand. The divine or semi-divine heroes and heroines of the medieval epics and ballads gave place to local, realistic heroes and heroines taken from the familiar backdrop of town and village society. Later, importance in literature was also given to warrior heroes who rose to fame during the period of India's most recent history, the Pathan, the Rajput and Moghul princes, local leaders of modern times, social reformers and even forerunners of India's freedom struggle. The new writers were concerned with social problems and with the awakening of patriotic sentiment.

Some writers placed religious belief and practices upon the anvil of critical review. Moral tales in many Indian languages, particularly in Bengali flourished due to two concerns: the production of proper textbooks and moral teaching modelled on writers in 'Victorian England' who were popular in 19th century India. Characters in their works exemplified the dictum of virtues rewarded and vices punished, being uniformly white or black. Such moral tales, though tedious were still popular.

The prose narratives which are based on social situations share a common didactic intention with the moral tales and the method of presentation also being similar. Characterization, for example, is generally featured by the same black and white method of delineation. The themes differed from language to language and generation to generation. However, some of these themes succeeded in evoking universal interest, especially those which focused on the family, marriage and education. In Bengali, many authors satirized the malpractices prevalent in the social system. However, the perils of violating the time-honoured, age-old customs with special reference to marriage and the upbringing of children were also revealed. Moreover, certain authors inveighed against the rigid adherence to custom and portrayed prominently with considerable passion the agony involved in child-marriage, the sale of brides to elderly husbands, the ban on widow remarriage, the practice of polygamy by certain *kulin* brahmins and the debarring of girls from obtaining a good education, the blind imitation of the younger generation of western modes of behaviour, chiefly the vices of drink and immorality. Mund points out that the themes revolving around the 'new Babu' a term coined in

Calcutta around 1825, pervaded throughout the literature of not only Bengal but those of other languages as well. (86) These youngsters under the western influence were portrayed as wearing clothes alien to their own culture, consuming forbidden foods and alcoholic beverages, frequenting brothels and as either atheists or near atheists who paid only lip-service to the norms and rituals of their own religion as a form of social insurance. Mund further observes that the varied delineations of the conflict between tradition and innovation or “modernism” within contemporary society in the 19th century are often crude and oversimplified, which are, however, powerful and are bolstered by a wealth of detail and elaborate description. (Idem.)

Social and Historical Issues in Bengali Literature:

The social novels and stories of this period were not however confined to the consideration of the domestic scene. From time to time they tentatively refer to certain political and social consequences of the British dominance and to relations between Hindus and Muslims. In *Anandamath* Bankimchandra Chatterjee glorified independent government but also proposed that it should be deferred as our country was not yet prepared for it. Education was perceived as a direct consequence of the British impact. In Bengal, several authors, including Hindus and Muslims, like Dinabandhu Mitra, condemned the oppression of the indigo planters and the support or the lack of it they received from the British magistrates. Authors from Bhavani Charan Banerjee (1780-1848), to Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873)--the poet and dramatist, Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873)--the dramatist, Taraknath Ganguly (1843-1891)—the novelist and many others wrote not only to improve the

moral values and the taste of their young readers but also to entertain them. (S.N. Mukherjee xxviii) The mutually peaceful relationship shared between the Hindus and the Muslims has been depicted in historical novels which began to appear in 1860s. Narrative prose with a historical setting was also characterized by hero worship, the reverence of great warriors from India's past. For example, Bhudev Mukherji's *Anguriyavinimay* (The Exchange of Rings, 1862) was perhaps the first creation of the historical novel as a genre. Here, Shivaji has been portrayed as a national figure and is dealt with sympathetically by the author. The wars between the Rajput kings and the imperial Muslim power were first delineated by Bankimchandra in his historical novel *Durgeshnandini* (1865). These two authors have based their models in terms of form and method of treatment on the British novelists Lytton and Scott respectively. The early Indian historical novels bear little political interest or bias. There is no reference to or depiction of any trace of hostility against the Muslims though the authors were Hindus. It is true that in the early novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee victory for the Hindu hero is desired, but the Muslim soldiers are presented as brave and honourable men. However, in Bengal this impartiality in the perceptions of both communities did not last long. As Clark rightly points out,

In his later novels Chatterjee lost no opportunity to vilify the Muslim characters. He unfailingly presented their soldiers as poltroons. The British characters, though few in number, were also treated unfavourably. They were depicted as arrogant, unfeeling bullies though unlike the Muslims they always fight bravely. Christianity too was weighed in balance and found wanting in comparison with a new idiosyncratic version of Hinduism. The admiration of Hindu heroes and the association of them with their Hindu faith had now reached a point

which it is possible to discern the seed, as yet unfertilized, of nationalistic sentiment. (18)

Thus, Indian prose fiction gained maturity only gradually. Much of these early writings appear crude, laboured and unconvincing. Clark states that characterization is over-simplified, flat, and lacking in an ability to portray those individual attributes which are the essence of the human being and draw him as distinct from other human beings. The methods of descriptions were also stereotypical and imitative. Most of the stories were set within a common landscape and the situations were incorporated within the framework of a frequently used locale. (18-19) The dialogues sound neither natural nor effortless and hence they deprive the characters of a sense of urgency and inevitable spontaneity. The structure is erected on a weak plot. The earliest English writings which had generations of literary prose writing behind them were not free from such limitations. The development of Indian novels on a sequence of episodes was largely rendered inevitable by the necessity of conforming to the requirements of the newspapers, which were for many the only avenue to publication. Nevertheless, the serialization of novels in journals delayed the consciousness of the structural potentiality of the new literary form.

Women's issues in literature:

With the launch of English education and the propagation of the broad-minded notions of the West, the position of women in the society needed to be reconsidered. The outlook towards the role of woman in the family and the society had undergone some modifications in the course of the different

stages of the history of India. However, in the early 19th century, to quote the words of Majumdar, Raychoudhury and Datta, women were still “subject to the will of their masters”. (qtd. in Mund 86) In the 18th century, the darkest era in Indian history, the woman’s plight “reflected a general state of decadence and digression in social life”. (Idem.) Though the Renaissance in Bengal started almost at the beginning of the 19th century, it took another fifty years or so to be suitably voiced in literature. Literature produced by certain leaders of the Brahmo-Samaj movement, after Raja Rammohan Roy, retains its distinction even today. Michael Madhusudan Dutt laid the foundation of the modern literature of Bengal in the middle of the century through his acquaintances with Christian missionaries and European languages and literatures. Rammohan gave the nation the lead of intellect and humanity while Madhusudan Dutt offered an experience of ecstasy that appealed universally. (Wadud 13-14) Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Beramji Merwanji Malabari and other reformers and thinkers inspired in the government an administrative will to abolish social evils and malpractices—especially the persecution of women. *Sati*, child marriage, infanticide of the girl child, suffering of widows, economic dependence of women and many other social evils corrupting Indian society were curbed considerably, by official regulations. This movement of reformation, observes Mund, laid its prime emphasis on the position of women. Raja Rammohan Roy promoted women’s education as an effective means of the progress of women in the society and campaigned in favour of modifications in Hindu Laws of Inheritance for the welfare of widows. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar successfully persuaded the government to legalise widow remarriage and B.

M. Malabari propagated against child marriage. (87) The literature of that time reflected these reformist endeavours. According to Mund,

The nineteenth century Indian novel in English has captured the pulse of the time and has faithfully portrayed the Indian woman in a changing social situation. One can see a realistic portrait of woman in a changing social situation. One can see a realistic portrait of woman in relation to man in the family and community. While still in the grip of social discrimination, we see Indian women slowly getting liberated. In this new context, man-woman relationship could not be assessed applying the traditional norm. The complex human relationship with its varied dimensions of perception has fascinated the novelist. On the other hand, the Indian writer's general tendency to preach and idealise has often been in conflict with his artistic self. (88)

Mund further comments that destiny, religious values and age-old concepts of relationship have usually encouraged Indian authors to explore the complexities of the experience of man-woman relationship. The Indian novel in English could not thoroughly liberate itself from the overbearing influence of its literary tradition. (89) The general attitude towards women changed radically under the influence of English education and the spread of Christianity. Indian reformers and spiritual leaders attempted to educate the common people about the need for female education. Issues concerning women also captured the attention of Indian novelists like Chandu O. Menon in *Indulekha* (1889), Krupabai Sathianandan in her *Miscellaneous Writings* and Madhowadas Raghunathdas in his *The Story of a Widow Remarriage* (1890) (Idem.)

The Trio of Writers under Study and their Portrayal of Women:

Among the gamut of illustrious writers who rose to prominence through the literature of the Indian Renaissance, particularly in 19th century Bengal,

Bankimchandra, Tagore and Sarat Chandra have contributed most remarkably. It is these three writers who have not only afforded special attention to women characters in their novels but have been pioneers in their radical depiction. Each of these writers may be seen as a milestone who has heralded a new phase for the portrayal of women in literature. For instance, in Bankimchandra's first novel *Rajmohan's Wife*, the title itself spells a neglect of conferring upon the protagonist Matangini the status of an individual. Her identity is derived only from her social status of being her husband Rajmohan's wife. Shanti in *Anandmath* marks a transition from this phase when she achieves importance in the novel disguised as a man. Sarat Chandra's women, particularly the prostitutes, Rajlakshmi and Chandramukhi reform themselves and redeem their lives from the squalor and shame of their profession. Sarat Chandra becomes more audacious in his portrayal when he depicts Abhaya who is sufficiently bold to go and live with another man after being abandoned by her ruthless husband. This may be seen as the second phase of women-portrayal. In the final phase Tagore portrays futuristic women like Labanya and Binodini who prize their own individuality over their respective love interest by renouncing the opportunity of marrying the ones they love. All the three authors through their women characters have offered a melange of their contemporary society, the future towards which they wished to advance and the trials and tribulations of women all over the world which exist even today. This trio have, thus, been the representatives of their time and visionaries of the future. The challenges of women recorded in these novels bear testimony to the contemporary social malice directed towards women and their radical moves and upsurges against them. Secondly, taking

into focus this trio of writers in the selected order reasserts the rapid progress by which women gained importance in literature as characters. Some of the woman protagonists in these novels have been based on real characters like Rajlakshmi, Paro, Chandramukhi while others might serve as models for the whole human race by virtue of their audacity and their refusal to accept falling a prey to social and religious malpractices. Characters like Abhaya, Binodini, Ayesha and Labanya may be instanced here. Hence, a comparative study of the woman in the selected novels of these three writers is indispensable to the study of the literature of Indian Renaissance.

Transitions in Women's Status during the Reformist Movement:

Shelley opined:

Can man be free if woman be a slave?
...Well ye know—
What Woman is, for none of Woman born
Can choose but drain bitter dregs of woe,
Whichever from the oppressed to the oppressors flow.

-- *The Revolt of Islam*, Canto Second

The status of women suffered a definite deterioration in the post Vedic Age. But in all these periods there was no seclusion of women or even a reference to child marriage. With the advent of Islam strict veiling of women became the common practice and strict imposition, not only among Muslims but also among the Hindus. The introduction of the *purdah* into Hindu families may have ensued from their tendencies to imitate the ruling class. According to B. K. Nanda, Barbosa, an early sixteenth century traveller observed that this practice was more sternly adhered to in Bengali households. (157) Eunuchs mediated the communication between male and female members of

a royal or noble family. It was observed less rigorously by Rajput families and not adopted at all by South Indian families of the Vijaynagar Empire, barring some Muslim families of the province. Women of the lower stratum of society were completely free of these restraints since they were expected to help their husbands in all external labours. The birth of a daughter was often considered inauspicious, particularly by Rajput families. According to the feudal system the custom of early marriages did not allow girls for whatever reasons to remain in their parents' home more than six to eight years. The rigidity of the custom left little room for the bride or the bridegroom to have time to think of a partner of their choice. Dowry was often demanded and sometimes disregarded the suitability of the match and cared primarily for a rich dowry. Monogamy was prevalent in the lower stratum of the society. Polygamy was the privilege of upper-class Muslims and *Kulin* Brahmins. Women were seldom expected to be highly educated. Ever since the Age of Consent Bill was passed girls were married away at the age of thirteen. Pursing any form of education was unthinkable after this stage. A woman's sexual issues were given little importance. Her marital health was always neglected not only by other members of the family, but also by herself because she was socially conditioned to do so.

Legal and Property Rights for Women:

According to the Dayabhaga system of Hindu law prevalent in Bengal, as R. L. Choudhury points out, women could neither inherit their father's land nor had a definite right to the land of their husbands. At most if they were widows they had usufruct rights on behalf of minor sons. (qtd. in T. Sarkar 19)

If for the daughters and the wives of landowners the denial of property right led to a somewhat ambiguous class status, it was complicated by larger uncertainties about the notions of land and home. Women, given away in marriages that were made without their consent in early infancy were ousted from the lineage they were born into and implanted upon a new one of which they were ignorant at first. Sarkar mentions that patrilocal marriages similarly, removed them from their natal homes and grafted them onto the household of complete strangers who might live far away. (Idem.)

E. P. Thomson has pointed out that ideas of class derived from the categories of a fully industrialised society would be ambiguous if they were applied to a different social formation.

If the nineteenth-century Bengal presented more fluid inchoate picture of class relations than those that obtain in an established capitalist structure, then we may have something to learn about the ways of understanding the social perspectives of subordinated groups in as-yet weakly industrialised societies from his study of eighteenth-century England. (qtd. in T. Sarkar 19)

For what may define the consciousness of these groups more clearly will be such factors as their degree of dependence: that is, their dependence on or independence of the lines of interest, influence, advancement and patronage structured society from top to bottom. Thomson also argues that tradesmen and artisans enjoyed a large degree of occupational independence from interest and patronage and were thereby able to nourish “a more robust anti-court and sometimes republican consciousness.” (qtd. in T. Sarkar 19)

With an upper-caste affluent gentlewoman like Rassundari, who published the first autobiography in the Bengali language in 1876, a far more complex and compromised relationship exists with the allocation of socio-economic power and influence. On the one hand, these women of high caste, important families, enjoyed economic security and affluence that fell to the lot of a relatively few Bengalis of their times because they could wield the power over their servants, tenants and labourers; but not on money or property, on the other hand. Since the sixteenth century, the Dayabhaga system had reduced the woman's access to *stridhan* or bridal gifts considerably, laments Sureshchandra Bandhopadhyay. (qtd. in T. Sarkar 20) Women's autobiographies expressed the sense of a rather thin integration with family and lineage, and with the land that these women possessed on both sides of the family line. They would survive somewhat as an incomplete class and caste subjects, permanent refugees, in a sense, in both households. The woman was, moreover, required to provide heavy unrewarded and often unacknowledged labour at home. Additionally, Rashsundari's memoirs reveal that she was often condemned to observe enforced starvation like the poorest labourers. Early reforms in this area met stiff resistance. Liberal reformers were mocked, ridiculed, cast out and physically attacked for starting schools for girls. Although the cultural nationalism valorised the non-reformed woman as the residue of past freedom and the nucleus of the future nation, women themselves were sometimes outspoken in their criticism of past customs and in the celebration of modernity and its resources. However, the power and the powerlessness of woman made up a changing cycle, depending upon the status of her husband, her possession of sons, her fertility, appearance,

health and capacity for domestic labour. The middle-aged mother of grown-up sons could be a powerful matriarch and elderly mothers-in-law could command and oppress young wives. The woman “would get more securely stitched into the fabric of lineage, caste and class at a later stage in her life cycle.” (21) This research is inclined to separate male and female domains—this is seen in many instances of feminine writing as a seamless union, forming opposites of total power and total powerlessness. Patriarchy, however, operates through far more complicated trajectories, with crisscrossing power lines that fracture both domains and that, at times, unite segments across the alliances. “The same woman, depending upon the presence of sons, her husband’s status and fortune, and her age gets to know both subjection and rule.” (Idem.) Thus, perhaps, women become complicit to the pervasiveness of patriarchy and its many oppressive practices, including the inhuman one of *Sati*.

However, the issue of the abolition of *Sati* gave rise to a great controversy. Most notably it divided the generation of Indian intellectuals and commercial men who had grown up with the rise of the British power and were now obliged to confront its fuller meaning for the future of their own society. On the other side, stood the likes of Raja Rammohan Roy, who was strongly opposed to the practice. Roy not only brought to bear a variety of learned arguments to support his case, but showed deep sympathy over the cruelties and indignities that women were forced to endure in everyday life. In his view *Sati* was the only extreme logical extension of the general degradation that was the lot of Hindu women in his time, as for the millennia in

the past. Among his most passionate and eloquent denunciations of the treatment of women by his compatriots were two pamphlets, written originally in Bengali some dozen years before the abolition and self-translated into English. In these pamphlets Roy stimulated debates between an 'advocate' and an 'opponent' of 'sati'.

According to Mund, some of Roy's contemporaries saw things differently and opposed the Abolition of *Sati* Act of 1829. (87) Their own arguments were laid out in two petitions, both phrased in terms the writer felt might have weighed with their peculiar conquerors, who talked of freedom and welfare but employed force and expropriation, and reflected a sensitivity to the use repeatedly made of women as objects in defining the limits of colonial intervention; more along those lines was to come later in the century. While the opponents of *Sati* pictured the widow as weak, helpless and often drugged, the advocates presented her as strong, self-willed and heroic. In a petition to Lord Bentinck, *Sati* was defended on the grounds of ancient custom and 'our sacred books'. It too argued that the Governor-General's regulation against *Sati* violated the constitutional guarantees of Indian subjects to religious freedom, and went on to compare Hindu population favourably with the Muslim compatriots with respect to loyalty. This petition failed and *Sati* was legally abolished. With the approval of the Governor-General's Council, a measure was enacted on 4th December, 1829 and published as Regulation XVIII, in the official gazette five days later. Under its provisions, *Sati* was declared illegal, "an act of culpable homicide", punishable by fine, imprisonment or both. (Mehtar 69) According to Stein, this abolition, affected

only a small number of upper or aspiring castes, and, as Roy pointed out, the conditions of the generality of women during their lives remained wretched, regardless of whether *Sati* was legal or not. During the entire *Sati* debate, women themselves were never heard from, while for men it was not so much the issue itself, but the control of social customs, that touched a nerve. (221-2) Similarly, the government prohibited the practice of infanticide as murder through the Bengal Regulation XXI of 1795 and another Regulation in 1804. (Mund 87)

There was evidence that some Indians also supported the change to western education, because of the material benefits it offered, particularly in the case of the eminent Bengali reformer, Raja Rammohan Roy because they were genuinely moved by their contacts with the West towards the reform of their own society. Government's need to reduce the administrative costs and employ more Indians who knew English also affected the outcome of the controversy. Brown points out that colonialism intended English education to produce clerks for running the administration cheaply and to create an alienated loyalist group. But Indian initiative caused much of the spread of modern education. Thereafter English medium higher education of the sort experienced by students in England boomed; on the triple initiative of government, missionaries and Hindus who wanted such education for their sons but hesitated to send them to secular or overtly Christian institutions. (Brown 74-78) Rammohan Roy's letter to Lord Amherst in 1823 pleaded for English education a decade before Macaulay, and emphasized its relation to scientific culture in total contrast to what it would be visualized in the latter's

notorious Minute of 1835. Sarkar observes that the *Bhadralok* initiative in the late nineteenth century carried English education into the interiors of East Bengal, a process only lately helped by ungenerous official grants-in-aid. (S. Sarkar 102)

The new education, however, had ideological and political implications and repercussions which were of almost immeasurable consequences in the making of modern India. It stimulated radical reconsideration of Hindu tradition and society among a few, as western religious and secular values became available as a source of comparison. Equality of all because of their basic humanity, the status and significance of women in their own right, charity and liberty were but a few of the ideals which challenged much of what was expected in India together with specifically religious stress on monotheism and Christian morals preached by the missionaries. The result was a commitment to social reform among a group of educated Indians, centred in Calcutta where opportunities for the new education were aplenty. Some were as outspoken about what they saw as evils in their own society as were the critical outsiders who felt that it was their moral duty to promote the upliftment of India. Slightly later, I.C.Vidyasagar concentrated on ameliorating the plight of widows, and was important in persuading the government that it was safe and right to pass the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. (Raj 21) He had just published a major book, *Hindu Bidhabar Punarvivah* (Marriage of Hindu Widows), which argued that widow remarriage could be justified by reference to Hindu teaching, not just to reason. (Brown 74-78)

According to Jain, women are seen moving slowly but surely from subordination to autonomy, from 'Dharma' to personal goals, from sexual purity to sexual emancipation and from silence to speech. Just like Aminocentosis is a modern scientific procedure, often used to kill the female foetus, it is also a return to age-old bestiality. The attitudes that the terms 'tradition and modernity' signify may overlap and may often co-exist in the same individual. For instance, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's "Samya" a powerful attack on inequality, published in 1864, did not include untouchability among 'the four great social evils' of our society. (Jain 11) A great many women characters, however, while questioning traditional values are in favour of adapting themselves to their situations within the framework of the family. Jain posits different dimensions of the tradition and modernity issue referring to these vital points:

- I. Subordination—Autonomy
- II. Dharma—Personal goals
- III. Sexual purity—Sexual emancipation
- IV. Silence—speech

The aspects on the left show namely subordination or acceptance of male authority whether father husband or son, 'dharma' or duty, sexual purity both premarital, virginal and marital fidelity, and silence are all cherished Indian values sanctified by tradition and particularly enjoined upon women. All the points on the right are directions in which women could be moving under the impact of new ideas. An attempt to establish the relationship of the women characters under study with the pairs of these points has been made

at the end of the analysis of all the women characters (Chapter 5). Though for the sake of clarity the points have been separated; they are interrelated and overlapping. (Jain 12)

I. Subordination—Autonomy

In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth her husband's and when her husband is dead, under her son's. She should not have independence. – *The Laws of Manu*. (tr. by Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith—New Delhi: 1991, rpt.1992, p.115)

Child marriages were rampant during the Indian Renaissance. Bengali families were both “patrilinear and patrilocal”. (Walsh 36) A member in the family was traced through the male lineage and women lived with their husband's families after marriage. The age of marriage for girls in the mid-nineteenth century was between eight and twelve and twelve was generally perceived as the dangerous outer limit. In India, women's self-perception and also the society's expectation from her have been largely determined by the complex of ideas and values and beliefs codified in *Manusmriti*. In Mythical terms the dominant feminine prototype still is the chaste, patient, self-denying, long suffering wife Sita, admirably supported by other figures like Savitri and Draupadi. (Deshpande 11) The values embodied in these ideal figures loom large in the consciousness of women even when they reject these role models. (Jain 12)

II. Dharma—Sexual Goals:

Integral to the larger question of ‘subordination—autonomy’ is the urge towards living freely and it includes living for self realization in order to be happy. Needless to mention, the Indian woman's psyche has traditionally

been determined by the need to do one's duty or act according to one's 'dharma'. According to Manu, a wife must live for her husband and children.

Verses 27 and 28 of Chapter 9 of *The Laws of Manu* are relevant here:

27. The wife is the visible form of what holds together the begetting of children, the caring for them when they are born, and the ordinary business of everyday.
28. Children, the fulfilment of duties, obedience and the ultimate sexual pleasure depend upon a wife, and so does heaven, for oneself and for one's ancestors. (200)

Clearly, Manu does not give a woman an existence apart from her husband or his family. When does happiness enter the agenda of a woman? The goal of self fulfilment includes happiness. Evidently, a life of domesticity is no longer sufficient to absorb all of a woman's energies. Although it is yet not the central issue, the question of happiness is slowly edging its way past several other concerns into the frame in today's times.

III Sexual Purity—Sexual Emancipation:

Chastity has been a traditional means of patriarchal control of woman's sexuality. Our mythical prototypes in this respect are Sita and Savitri—Sita who did not yield to the persuasion of the demon king Ravana to marry him and who later proved her wifely virtue by coming out unscathed from the ordeal of fire. On the other hand, due to the power of her chastity, Savitri could restore her husband to life from the world of the dead. All Indian women are expected to conform to the virtues of these two models. The myth of Kali is yet another example of the prowess which chastity confers on women. Thus, the ancient Indian ideal enshrined in *Manusmriti* has been an abiding

influence on the man-woman relationships ever since. The question of women's sexuality is central to any consideration of tradition and modernity. The idea of chastity and purity is still the norm and any kind of deviation is generally deeply disturbing to the male psyche. Male promiscuity is, however, tolerated and dismissed as a sign of masculinity. But there are clear signs of a change. This includes a growing awareness of a woman's sexual needs. (Jain 19)

Traditional Indian literature has often depicted women's relationship to men as an interaction emerging from the dogmatic and the idealistic. (Mund 86) Hence, the characters were not individuals but types and their relationship was not perceptive but definitive. Indian society exhibits a tendency to model 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, not only by successive writers but also by ordinary people. The former three figures have set unprecedented examples with their unconditional devotion to their respective husbands while Radha symbolises a perennial longing and whole-hearted surrender to Lord Krishna. Nonetheless, women who are mythical figures are also found to transgress definite social codes as dictated by the religious scriptures in their relation to men. Kunti's pre-marital relationship and Draupadi's polyandry are classic examples.

IV Silence-Speech:

Silence-Speech dichotomy can be useful in locating women on the tradition-modernity axis. How do women characters respond to the male

hegemony? Is it silence or is it speech? Not to talk back is a part of the culturally inherited value of modesty and is considered essentially feminine. In this sense, silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition. On the contrary, speech signifies self-expression and liberation. This would depend on their self-perception and self-awareness. But silence and speech may not be diametrically opposites. Silence which results from a freely chosen refusal to speak, may signify displeasure, resistance or suppressed anger, and speech may mean collaboration with the oppressor. Moreover an alternative to silence may be action, not speech which may be dismissed as mere words. (Jain 23-25) The whole question of woman and language is complex and has been given a detailed coverage in the concluding chapter.

Society, Literature and Women:

Literature is a partial document of society. This leads to the question whether literature may be regarded as the mirror or the lamp. Literature can be effectively regarded through both these metaphors. Yet, literature is distinct from a sociological text. A sociological text offers empirical data and reveals singular instances while literature provides plural data through psychological, sociological, economic and political perspectives. The narrative forms, particularly fiction, relates through fictive instances based on real-life issues and contemporary dilemmas that common people encounter in their day-to-day lives. These novels that often centre in women's predicament also anticipate the dreadful probabilities if the issues in question are not resolved with the required effectiveness. Thus, here literature serves to spread a

general awareness through popular entertainment among common literate people. Perhaps these literary texts under consideration in this research only offer a number of grotesque facts about social evils in a socially palatable manner. The reporting of these social issues has been often undertaken through a subjective perception than an objective reporting of facts. While a sociological text states examples a literary text suggests possibilities. Through literature we come to know, with the aid of fictional characters and instances, a society that is complementary to a sociological text. However, this challenges the status of the feminist theory which regards a work of literature as a social document. The resolution of literature is pluralistic. This stance argues for the contemporary post-structuralist theory that any system of signs can be regarded as a text. It can be inferred that every text may offer multiple implications. Hence, arriving at a single conclusion, especially about the status of women in the given period of time, may be incomplete, fallacious and unreliable. The literary works under study are examined under the focus of the status of women. This study cannot be taken as the final statement regarding the status of women. The observations arrived at in the subsequent chapters about the predicament of women in the society are tentative and variable. I have focused on the works of these writers keeping the essential nature of literary works and these objectives in mind.

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Endnotes:

¹ Used formerly as a title for the monarch of Iran; a former vassal of Delhi, the former Nawab i.e. Mughal governor—*Badishah* or *Badshah*

² There is no agreement regarding this date among the critics. The year varies from 1799 to 1801.

Chapter 3

Women in the Novels of Bankimchandra Chatterjee

Bankimchandra Chatterjee is regarded as the founder of the modern school of Indian fiction, by common consent of critics' opinion. His early literary efforts were produced in verse. In 1853, he brought out two volumes of poems entitled *Lalita* and *Manasi*, but after this Bankimchandra discarded poetry for fiction. Under the influence of the contemporary craze for writing in English, his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), was also written in that language. Bankim grew up in an affluent Brahmin family. His academic pursuits included the highest levels of the new western education available to an Indian of his day, a modern school, Presidency College, Calcutta University and a law course. He was first married at the age of eleven but his child-wife died when he was fifteen. He soon married again and his second wife, in those times, was relatively grown-up for a marriageable age. Throughout his life, Bankim satirized the "contemporaneous romanticization of child-marriage and wrote longingly about the self-aware love of strong and mature women." (Sarkar 137)

Bankim's first noteworthy contribution was a serial novel called *Rajmohan's Wife* in the 'Indian Field' edited by Kishorichand Mitra. His second novel *Kapalkundala* (1866) deals with the mysteries of the mind of a woman brought up in the midst of virgin nature far beyond the reach of human society. It has a scintillating theme and a story, along with its gripping action. Notwithstanding the melodrama and the dual plot, it is skilfully structured. Tanika Sarkar points out how in *Kapalkundala*, Bankimchandra attempts to

describe a distinct, a-social, woman who remains thoroughly “undomesticated”, in spite of experiencing the most perfect form of domestic and sexual love. The heroine embodies the ideal of a non-attached person possessing wisdom, kindness, concern and self-sacrifice but finds fulfilment entirely within herself through self-reliance. (146) *Mrinalinee* (1869) bears the first traces of patriotism. *Bishabriksha* (The Poison Tree, 1873) is his first social novel which centres on the plight of widows. *Indira* (1873), *Jugalanguriya* (1874), *Radharani* and *Chandrashekhar* (1875) are his next novels. *Rajani* (1877) is a fusion of a romance and a novel, modelled on Bulwar Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*, narrated through the character of a woman. Here, Hiralal is a caricature of a certain journalist who is totally unconcerned with the pressing problems of the day, such as the marriage of widows, polygamy, child marriage, the improvement of social conditions and the emancipation of women. The novel can also be seen to have followed the autobiographical technique of Wilkie Collins’ *A Woman in White*. *Krishnakanter Uil* (1878) is a realistic social novel and revolves around a widow’s socially inhibited love and its grim tragedy. In it, the novelist blends feeling and imagination to arrive closer in style to the western novel. Its plot resembles his other novel *Bishabriksha*. Bankim wrote in the preface to *Krishnakanter Uil* that, “novels are expositions of difficult problems of human life.” (S. K. Das 204) Both *Bishabriksha* and *Krishnakanter Uil* make widow remarriage the central problem of the story.

His best humorous work is *Kamalakanter Daptar* (1875). The last phase of his career as a novelist shows a union of issues that are religion and

nationalistic. *Anandmath* (1882) is a soul-stirring novel, wherein Bankimchandra introduced his celebrated song 'Bande Mataram'. Here, the insurrection of the *Sannyasis* that erupted in North Bengal in 1773 is given an interesting politico-religious twist. It also projects a bitter dichotomy of the patriarchal perception of women: the nation is regarded as the Mother while women are forbidden to crusade for her cause. *Debi Chaudhurani* (1884) is romantic, appealing and a glorious testimony to the valour and prowess of unfettered womanhood. In *Debi Chaudhrani*, Bankimchandra has made a woman character comment upon the sanctity of the orthodox Hindu marriage. He also illuminates the dignity of wives who perceived their most important duty in the service and devotion to their husbands. The end of the novel is unconvincing and disappointing as Prafulla is forcefully made to conform to the norms of the society which she had once opposed. She meekly surrenders herself to her passionless husband. *Sitaram* (1887) is a tragedy of unbridled passion. Instances of polygamy can be seen in the cases of Brajeshwar in *Debi Chaudhrani* and Sitaram in the novel which is named after him. Each of these characters has three legally wedded wives. *Sitaram* shows how the poignant scene of Sita's trial in *Ramayana* is inverted and subjected to condemnation, protest and question by another woman, who forces the trial to close down. These novels are some of the greatest manifestations of Bankimchandra's power and art of story-telling and well-knit plots.

Bankim's real place in the history of Indian literature is his contribution as a novelist. Bankimchandra, Pyarichand Mitra and Bhudeb Mukherjee are not only pioneers of the Bengali novel but are pioneers of the Indian novel as well. They not only introduced the novel form in India but paved the way for

the emergence of the novel as a form of literary expression in this country. Indian literature in English is only one aspect of modern Indian literature and within it, the emergence of the Indian novel in English was only an aspect of the great creative surge, the manifestation of which was voiced in almost all the Indian languages around the same quarter century. Some of them including Bankimchandra tried to experiment with form in English itself but soon changed over to a medium more suited to their genius and a language more suited to the women readers of their time.

Often regarded as a literary monarch of Bengal, Bankim was endowed with a remarkable literary genius. Attempts at a fresh appraisal of his literature are being made in recent times. He has been one of the pioneers to portray in his works women as individual characters within the framework of the squalor of the realistic society. He has also been able to maintain a balanced view of the two important religions in India: Hinduism and Islam. Kazi Abdul Wadud has rightly remarked:

The modern critic of Bankimchandra finds no basis for the charge against him of anti-Muslim spite. For one thing, he has created some beautiful Muslim characters; for another, as a socialist, he championed the cause of the have-nots against the haves, irrespective of race or creed. (Kumarappa 14)

Such an opinion can be clearly exemplified through the character of the valiant and sacrificing Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini*. His profound concern for issues like his eager quest for the truth, love of humanity and his anxiety for the oppressed has aroused diverse critical opinions. His women characters assert his deep understanding of the human mind and his remarkable power of delineation. All his novels including the historical novels have the theme of

love as their principal human interest, which easily lends the women-characters a certain level of prominence. Bankim can deftly narrate a story centring on a domestic problem even while narrating a historical romance. His language is simple and supple, and his descriptions, realistic. His sense of the comic runs throughout his narratives. His characters all belong to the landed gentry or the educated middle class, but almost all his women characters are beautiful, intelligent and memorable as artistic creations. His natural inclination as a writer was towards portraying a grand, majestic and mysterious history. His imagination had a sweeping power, tempered by his strong, ethical views and conservatism. With the exception of *Krishnakanter Uil* and *Indira*, all his novels have elements of miracle and deus ex machina and are crowded with co-incidences and thrilling incidents. In *Radharani*, the heroine chooses her own mate and pursues him to the happy conclusion of marriage. Indira in the novel of the same name is married at a young age. The husband unfortunately forgets how his wife looks, but she recognises him when they meet in Calcutta and she is happily reconciled to him. The heroine is named after the mendicant in Bhavabuti's *Malatimadhava*, and modelled after Kalidasa's Shakuntala and partakes of some traits of Shakespeare's Miranda. Bankimchandra's only novel, which can be considered as a mature historical fiction, is *Rajsimha* (1881).

Thus, Bankimchandra's novels project many defiant heroines like Ayesha in *Durgeshnandini* and Shanti in *Anandamath* and some other characters from his early novels. But in his later novels, women who try to change their destinies or defy society are inevitably faced with a tragic end like that of Kundanandini in *Bishabriksha*, Shaibalini in *Chandrashekhar* and

Rohini in *Krishnakanter Uil*. His model woman, as the society would prefer her to be, appears in *Debi Chaudhurani*. Though she is totally dependent on her husband, Prafulla is innovative, resourceful, and hardworking and possesses the potentials of a true leader. Yet, at the end of the novel, she abandons her stance of challenging the outer world and enters her husband's household along with his other existing wives. Therein, according to the prevalent social ethics, lay the fulfilment of womanhood. In this novel, Bankimchandra scales the climax of the prevalent feudal Hindu morality but also attempts to give us a glimpse of his own idea of an ideal progressive society. K. M. George notes Bankimchandra's critique of the present day society which is still hesitant to rehabilitate kidnapped women or molested victims or runaway wives. (611) By defying the norms of the society, a woman may endanger and lose social security forever. Yet in *Bishabriksha*, Suryamukhi returns to her husband and is silently accepted in the village community. Indira returns to her husband after being abducted by robbers but the censorious Hindu society which relishes gossip spares no hue and cry for her. Even Prafulla is absorbed into her husband's harem without any objections (611). Clark has exaggerated while pointing out that,

The social life of Bankim's novels is pitched at different levels, according to the status of his principal characters. He himself came of a middle class family, and it is only when dealing with characters of this class that he is at home and that his descriptions are realistic and convincing. (Clark 69)

A contradiction of this point is evident from Bankim's vivid description of Shanti's disguises as a woman outside her household in *Anandmath* and Bimala in her adventurous escapades and vengeful pursuits in *Durgeshnandini*.

Bankim disapproved of Pyari Chand Mitra and Dinabandhu Mitra for delineating 'unreal' women characters in their works. He believed that Pyari Chand Mitra's women characters were 'very faintly drawn'; they were all identical and they gave very little idea of the influence which the wife within the walls of the 'zenana' exercised in Indian daily life. He also observed that Dinabandhu Mitra's women characters were poor imitations of characters from English novels and Sanskrit *kavya*, quite distinct from the 'real Bengali women who were strong and independent'. (qtd. in S. N. Mukherjee xlv) It has been rightly pointed out that although Bankim greatly emphasized characterisation in his novels, the diversity of human nature attracted him the most. His women characters are "complex and exciting. Unlike his men, the women are flexible, kind or cruel, active, diplomatic, sometimes conniving and speak in a simple and informal language." (xlv) In his women characters like Suryamukhi, Kundanandini, Sundari, Shaibalini, Bhramar and Rohini, we not only see the universal features of a woman but discover how and in what forms eternal womanhood is lent particular definition by the soil of Bengal, its climate, its fields, natural beauty, family and social life. Bankim's discontentment with social codes which exercised a profound control in the literary representations of women transcended the limits of both the reformists and orthodox customs. Through his women characters like a chaste wife, an accomplice to a crime, an adulterous wife, and an ambitious widow are characters that have suffered through pitiable plights, have faced injustice and have accused the men who have been responsible for it. Such women assert themselves as individuals independent of men and occasionally uphold

themselves as human beings who are superior in ability to men, as seen in the character of Prafulla in *Debi Chaudhurani*. In depicting such women who rise in defiance against accepted social codes, he sternly prosecutes the culprits who have detracted from the humane codes of morality. On one hand, Bankimchandra moves beyond the codes of practice and belief acknowledged by Hindu texts and on the other he is critical of the fact that the society perceives the advances of progressive women as whimsical aberrations. This is particularly noticed in *Debi Chaudhurani* for Prafulla and in *Durgeshnandini* for Bimala. Sarkar believes that Bankimchandra's objection to the impact of domesticity on a woman's inner self and his radical representation of the powerful, assertive and self-sufficient woman are more influential than the reformist agendas of his time. (148) He does not argue for the drastic structural changes in women's immediate social predicament. In these novels, the sense of guilt towards women has been dissipated as reformable aspects of women's social existence or as concrete perspectives of normal human existence. It is dealt with, instead, in individual tragic situations which result in mental insanity or imbalance in psychotic situations rather than in social ones. The novels tend to throw open-ended conflicting points of view. They represent "the inclusion of alternative, even transgressive possibilities within the narrated world; and this world as a whole reveals a range of unrealized possibilities that throws a particular form of existence into sharper relief through a series of comparisons and controls". Bankimchandra's essay "Prachina O Nabina" (The Old-Fashioned and the Modern Woman) expresses the view that under the pretext of improving the condition of women, men actually confine them to their own standards and manipulate to accommodate

them according to their changed views and expectations. (151) He suggests that the reformist plans of companionate marriage use woman in an instrumental manner. Such courageous feminism is thus directed not so much against the orthodox Hindu who resents the progress of women, but against the reformer who sees the need for change.

Rajmohan's Wife

It must be admitted that Bankimchandra was indeed the pioneer of the Indian novel in English, since he produced a novel which proved that it was possible to write about Indian life and depict Indian scenes in a foreign language without any blind imitation. Unlike in poetry, the writers of early Indo-English fiction never stumbled into the pitfalls of aping English themes and moods in English metrical forms. From this perspective Bankim's *Rajmohan's Wife* makes an interesting study. The novel is fascinating for many reasons. It reveals how as a young author Bankimchandra was not only a past master in writing English with ease and fluency but was well aware of the plight of women in the society. The text reflects his wide knowledge of the literature of his time. It was remarkable for a young man of twenty-five to weave so mature a story and project women realistically in their prevalent social set up. The characterization of women is amazing and 'shows a real criticism of life' (M. Das 100-102) *Rajmohan's Wife* may not be regarded as Bankim's finest novel but it established Bankim's place as the first Indian to write a novel in English. Realism is the chief trait of this novel. The novel may appear to be fashioned in the mould of a romance particularly due to the manner in which elements of mystery and suspense, trysts, devious intrigues and nocturnal exploits, burglaries, abduction, sudden turns of events, unexpected revelations and

challenges have been effectively deployed. These traits set against the theatrical backdrop of thunder, rain, storms and lightning, swelling rivers combine to build up a medieval ambience, modelled on the gothic novels of Sir Walter Scott. But *Rajmohan's Wife* is a faithful depiction of the rural setting of Bengal in the dark days when the evils of the old feudal order associated with the *zamindari* system was still prevalent. For example, the frequently conspired attacks of loot and burglary by bandits, dacoits and highwaymen were rampant in Bengal and other parts of India until William Bentinck's reforms put a curb to it. The novel is, hence, a study in realism, rather than in romance, as it records the happenings in 19th century Bengal and is characteristic of the transition from romance to realism which was afoot in the Bengali literature of the period. Although the novel lacks that vigour in his plot which distinguishes his later novels and although the scope of the plot is narrowly confined to a native setting, the novel sketches a truthful picture of the life of the times enclosed within a confined perspective which enables us to witness the phenomenon of transition from medievalism to modernity.

The story of *Rajmohan's Wife* is one of a mismatched marriage of the heroine Matangini along with the intrigues for possession of property in a typical nineteenth century Indian feudal set-up. The story lacks maturity as compared to his later works but it portrays the feelings of women very impressively through the character of the heroine. The title of the novel itself speaks about the writer's increasing preoccupation with the suffering of women. It also suggests that women in the society of that time will always bear subservience to men. Even if they received prominence they would be regarded only in relation to the social context they belonged to, in terms of

their relationship with men as daughter, wife, mother or widow. Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes that although in the present novel Rajmohan interests us very little as a person, Matangini's identity, as announced in the title, is irrevocably connected to her marital status. (2002, 144)

Many of Bankimchandra's novels have women as protagonists. Moreover, many of his contemporary novelists in other parts of India lay emphasis on women and their plight. The miseries of real women did not escape the attention of these writers when reform was in the air. This can be seen in the first Marathi novels *Yamuna Paryatan* (1867), *Pan Lakshyant Kon Ghetto* (1890), the early Hindi novel *Devrani Jethani Ki Kahani* (1870) and Premchand's *Nirmala* (1926) among many others. *Rajmohan's Wife* shows the crises of a silent, suffering, chaste, sacrificing Indian wife which become ubiquitous in Indian fiction. Matangini is the first in the cycle of bold women in Bankim's novels who have been penalized though their rebellion and self-assertion may win admiration from the author and the reader. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, the burning issues concerning women of that time are of universal significance; and in *Rajmohan's Wife*, characterisation is not Bankimchandra's speciality, yet, Matangini occasionally shines out. (144) Mund rightly observes:

Matangini's character is the most fascinating aspect in the novel. The conflict between the individual and community is very boldly presented through the passions of a woman in flesh and blood and her predicament to accept the value system of her society. Matangini is portrayed as a brave and fearless woman, capable of deep love and wonderful restraint. (Mund 93-94)

Bankimchandra devotes a long lyrical passage to Matangini's physical description as he has done for many other women characters in his novels. The notion that all women can be described as beautiful and attractive is an Indian classical or traditional concept, often of the *Shringar rasa* mode, although the description here does not completely match that artistic convention. Bankimchandra describes Matangini as follows:

The dainty limbs of the woman of eighteen were not burdened with such abundance of ornaments,... Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the lustre of her fair complexion. Yet her bloom was as full of charm as that of the land-lotus half-scorched and half-radiant under the noonday sun. Her long locks were tied up in a careless knot on her shoulder; but some loose tresses had thrown away that bondage and were straying over her forehead and cheeks. Her faultlessly drawn arched eyebrows were quivering with bashfulness under a full and wide forehead. The eyes were, often only half-seen under their drooping lids. But when they were raised for a glance, lightning seemed to play in a summer cloud. Yet even those keen glances charged with the fire of youth betrayed anxiety. The small lips indicated the sorrow nursed in her heart. The beauty of her figure and limbs had been greatly spoilt by her physical or mental suffering. Yet no sculptor had ever created anything nearly as perfect as the form half revealed by the neat sari she wore. The well-shaped limbs were almost entirely bare of ornaments. There were only *churis* on the wrists and a small amulet on her arm. These too were elegant in shape. (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 3)

The character of Matangini has been moulded with various contrasting hues of light and shade, between that which is assumed and that which happens in reality, between the overt and the covert and between the norm and its violation. For example, at the opening of the story, Matangini tells Kanak that her husband has forbidden her to fetch water and she prefers

remaining caged in her house rather than facing her husband's wrath. It shows how women have been victims of coerced confinement within their own home. Matangini's thoughts and actions vacillate between the moral and what is seen as the immoral. The elaborate description of her beauty is juxtaposed with some nameless sorrow and anxiety which hover over her. In spite of her tender age, 'Yet her bloom was full of charm as that of the land-lotus half scorched and half radiant under the noonday sun.' (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 3)

Mathur and Madhav reserve contrasting attitudes about 'a respectable woman' like Matangini. Beauty has been vested with the powers of both--to charm and to destroy. Mathur represents men who exploit women while Madhav stands for those who support and protect them. Thus, men can be typified or generalised under these two broad categories, according to Bankim's portrayal.

We get a glimpse of Matangini's courage when she returns home and is chided by her husband, Rajmohan for going out of the house. Bankim ridicules the prevalence of domestic violence that women of almost all wrung of the society face in some form or the other. At this point, Matangini asserts, "I am your wife." And she had left the house to fetch water without taking anyone's permission "because", as she retorts, "I thought there is nothing wrong in it." At her display of boldness, Rajmohan tries to strike her in his beastly fury.

The helpless woman (Matangini) seemed to understand nothing. She did not move away one step from her assailant, but only looked at him with such pathetic eyes that his hand remained motionless as if spellbound. (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 12)

By using her silence as her sole mode of defence, she triumphs over Rajmohan's angry outbursts and his paroxysms of fury that finds outlet only through a series of abuses and threats like "I'll kill you". Thus, Matangini submissively tolerates Rajmohan's atrocities towards her and stoically bears them without complaining as it is a common scene in almost every household. Here, a significant contrast may be noticed between a woman character who is young and innocent and another who is old and sagacious. The former is Matangini and the latter is Rajmohan's aunt who does his cooking. Though, in his fury, Rajmohan flings abuses at her, the scene of Rajmohan's scolding Matangini ends when Rajmohan's aunt seizes control over the unpleasant debate and chides her nephew in turn. She avenges Matangini's insult by humiliating Rajmohan in filthy language and 'paid the nephew back in his own coin'. (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 13) Such scenes of marital discord are found in most Indian households, yet a woman seldom walks out of her marriage or takes any punitive measures against her own husband, for fear of losing social support or falling from the favour of the male-dominated society. A flashback of this current scene reveals the circumstances of poverty which compel her to get married to the brutal and robust Rajmohan who does nothing to earn a living and support his family. Although Matangini knows that Rajmohan is too idle to get absorbed into a vocation and excessively haughty to come under an obligation, her benevolence and anxiety for her husband provokes her to request her sister so that the latter might get Rajmohan an employment. At this juncture Matangini's fatalism comes to the surface as she willingly accepts the consequences of being married to a poor and idle husband.

Yet, on most occasions, Matangini's language is submissive and bears subservience to that of her husband and she rarely asserts her importance. As the norms of the culture and the society dictate, Matangini refrains from having dinner without her husband. Most of her dialogues consist of pleas, laments, meekly made complaints and 'melancholy reflections' (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 29). Her body, particularly the beauty of her face which could have been her forte becomes her weakness and the cause of her later abduction. However, she evinces signs of a modern woman of her day through her debates with her ever-oppressive husband. She faces him with composure and resolution and is aware of how she must face him. Mund appropriately points out: "...she discovers the individual in herself but does not assert it. In her it is the glory of womanhood which decides her behaviour." (95) Her postures, especially after a debate with her husband, are that of resignation and defeat. She laments: "But my husband, whatever he is, sister, Heaven made him so –he is my husband and I care for him. He has now nothing to do and is reduced to great straits." (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 19) Bankim contemplates about a woman's absence of control over her own body as well as her sexuality. She seems to have laid down her arms in an unequal battle with Rajmohan:

Matangini lay in her bed brooding over the sufferings she was doomed forever to bear. Her husband, she knew would not see her that night, as was his wont whenever he was offended with her. She, however, felt all the happier for it, and felt a pleasure too in being left alone to indulge in her reflections... Matangini's chamber was without a light, and total darkness pervaded it,...With her head raised from her pillow and supported on her hand, her 'anchal' thrown off her bosom towards the waist on account of the sultry heat, Matangini gazed on the single ray of moonlight that recalled to her remembrance the days when she could sport beneath the evening beams with the gay and light heart of childhood...The loud laugh was forgotten, the faces which she loved

... she never more could see... her life was a continued misery, and Matangini wept as she thought it could be nothing more. (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 29-30)

This passage not only describes a defeated woman but also probes the thoughts and longings of many secluded women cloistered within their households by the ruthless members of their families. When Matangini learns that her husband was about to assist a band of robbers to steal Madhav's inherited money and his uncle's will, she nearly collapses with shock and dismay. It is at this point of time that she resolves for the first time to act against and implicate her husband—"the man to whom she had pledged her faith before God and Man." (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 37) It pricked her conscience to turn informer against Rajmohan. She ponders over every possibility of rescuing Madhav and his wife from the impending danger but at the same time prevent Rajmohan from playing accomplice to the heinous crime, typical of an Indian woman's conflict due to the rigidity of her social and moral conditioning.

Matangini now perceives with despair that her only resource lay in herself. She must go herself. Her whole soul recoiled at the idea. She thought not of the danger, though the danger was great. (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 38)

However, these external sources which could possibly cause her physical agony are not the only reasons for her fear. Plenty of strange inhibitions of warning her brother-in-law at the odd hour impede her on moral grounds and she reflects: "What would Madhav think!" (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 39) Bankim has narrated most of Matangini's trauma and conflict at this crucial point, leaving little to the reader's imagination, yet at this heightened state of

anxiety her thoughts are externalised in the form of the silence before the approaching storm. Her tempest within is projected as the tempest without:

Undecided she heaves a deep sigh, and to relieve herself of the heat that oppressed her, she ventured to open the little window. The trees now cast shadows of huge length and the moon hung over the far horizon, shedding a waning light. In an hour she would vanish, the loud shout of the robbers would be heard, 'and then,' thought Matangini, 'it will be too late to save them.' The near approach of a certain danger banished her scruples, her love returned with ten-fold energy, and she no longer hesitated. (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 39)

Here, Matangini may be seen as an embodiment of Goddess Kali as the former rises to superhuman heights of prowess, administers justice, punishes the sinner and destroys the evil. Matangini is another name of Goddess Kali. Matangini's upright nature turns her against her husband. Matangini also means a delirious river that is out to destroy everything in its way. Similarly, the heroine Matangini puts her own marriage at stake in her determination of meting out justice. Despite her fears and weaknesses, her immense inner resolve is revealed in her language when she attempts to rouse Madhav's household from its sleep by knocking at the door and crying to the maid servant, "I am a woman and no thief, come and see." (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 43)

Matangini symbolises the transition of the new Indian Woman seeking her liberty from the atrocity and tyranny of the medieval past for various reasons. Matangini is endowed with a remarkable degree of boldness and audacity. She escapes to the house of her former paramour and brother-in-law, Madhav, and warns him about the impending danger which is about to befall him. Once the crisis subsides, in one of the key scenes in the novel, she

re-assures Madhav of her love for him. But at the same time her strong sense of moral uprightness and virtue prevents her from committing any form of adultery. Meenakshi Mukherjee comments:

Given the rigidness of the power structure within the family among the upper caste Bengalis in the nineteenth century, it seems surprising that the first Indian novel in a contemporary setting should have focused on a woman of uncommon vitality who refused to be completely subjugated either by her brutal husband or by the expectations of the society. Matangini's unrequited love for her own sister's husband is presented with authorial sympathy but the abruptness and the ambivalence of the ending may be the result of an anxiety such a woman of energy generated, by posing a threat to the social order and creating a moral dilemma for the author. (vi)

A bold character like Matangini in the first Indian Novel in English was a literary revolution for that class of writing in India. Mukherjee further points out that literary echoes of Radha's *abhisara* in Vaishnava poetry when she braves the elements on the way to her tryst with Krishna is commemorated in Matangini's solitary journey through the woods in a bleak night of thunderstorm and lightning. It can also be agreed that when Matangini unties her knot of hair to let them hide her face from the robbers while she was in the pond, "in this rootedness in a recognizable literary culture we catch a glimpse of what Bankim would be able to achieve when he no longer be inhibited by the anxiety of tailoring his sensibility to suit the cloth of English idioms and metaphors". (146) Unlike the typical Indian woman Matangini not only refuses to submit to her husband along with his flaws as soon as she learns about them, but also secretly nurtures her love and admiration for men other than her husband. Prior to her knowledge about her husband's crime she represents any woman of a conservative household who experiences the

liberty of indulging in minor acts of disobedience against her lawfully married husband. Once she learns about Rajmohan's illegal pursuits she unleashes from within herself the qualities that Bankim could have attributed to an ideal woman of the generations, thriving in an egalitarian society. Matangini respects the social and time-honoured codes of conduct, but only upto a certain point and when the passions of an erstwhile dormant love that she has secretly fanned emerges before her in flesh and blood in the form of Madhav she does not grudge a momentary indulgence. However, the novel does not specify anything about the origins of the relationship between Matangini and Madhav, which, in the rigid social structure, must never transgress the relationship of a brother-in-law with his sister-in-law. Even when Matangini goes to intimate Madhav about the dacoity in private, her body, which vies with the elements in her frightful journey, suddenly becomes tender on a recollection of a long lost passion: 'Matangini stationed herself close to the wall with a downcast head as befitted the modesty of her sex and age, her face scarcely turned towards that of her brother-in-law.' (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 47) Yet, when this timid and gentle woman suddenly turns capable of immense heroic exploits, it is far from being out of place. She warns Madhav just on time, betrays a momentary weakness, when he meets her in private to acknowledge his gratitude for her help. She bids him farewell, but she checks herself before losing herself in her love for him. Even at this point she remains loyal to her husband as she does not reveal to Madhav that Rajmohan is involved in the imminent dacoity. During Matangini's meeting with Madhav at his home and in the agony of the ensuing separation she tells him: "Spurn me not for this last weakness; this, Madhav, this may be our last meeting; it must

be so, and too, too deeply have I loved you—too deeply do I love you still, to part with you forever without a struggle.” (*Rajmohan’s Wife*: 53) According to Mund, Bankim has portrayed with authenticity the married Indian woman’s sense of guilt in indulging in an extra-marital relationship. According to conventions, a woman after marriage ought to be entirely devoted to her husband. Love is sanctioned by the society only when it is shared between man and wife. Any other relationship is immoral and sinful. (94) Raji Narasimhan observes: “Probably no other notion coming to us from the West as much as that of love has blinded us to a whole set of seasoned conventions for viewing the man-woman association and relationship.” (qtd. in Mund 94) Matangini is a victim of ‘seasoned conventions’ which make her feel guilty.

While Matangini is brave and adventurous, Rajmohan is villainous. Although she belonged to the brutal Bengal of the mid-19th century, she is endowed with the qualities of the new woman emerging out of her cocoon into the world of light and freedom. Mund comments,

The new Mantangini that emerges here is not bound to traditions—but she chooses to respect them. She has found her own path.... In the same night after the failure of the robbery Rajmohan follows his wife. He accuses her of having gone in that dark night to see her paramour. She not only admits it, but also fearlessly tells him that she had been to Madhav’s place to forewarn him of the robbery. (95-96)

Matangini is also capable of sharing an immense degree of love. “Her heart was a warm spring of inexhaustible love, but it found no vent, and the cold breath of unkindness congealed the celestial dream at its source.” (*Rajmohan’s Wife*: 30) Moreover, when Madhav offers to do her a good turn

for her help she only asks of him the utmost, an affectionate sister could ask of another: "Should she (Hemangini) ever fall under your displeasure, which Heavens forbid! May the memory of her sister's sufferings obtain her pardon! As for myself, I could not do otherwise than I have done it--...." (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 52) Certain descriptions in the succeeding passages are suggestive directly of the European influence from which the novel as a literary form has been borrowed. For example, Matangini is depicted as staring wistfully at Madhav with 'her large blue sorrowful eyes.' (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 53) Having blue eyes does not befit the description of a typical Indian village woman. When Madhav 'felt sure earth had not to show a more dazzling vision of female loneliness', it immediately recalls the opening lines of Wordsworth's 'Upon Westminster Bridge'. Thus at this point Bankim's description of Matangini is not without its flaws.

Matangini's strong and unyielding virtue even until death is projected during her suffering in the dreadful days of imprisonment in one of the lustful Mathur Ghose's secret vaults. As Mund says, it is not merely moral or physical courage but the courage that "emanates out of the strength and determination of self-destruction in order that her virtue remains unmolested". (94) When Mathur approaches her determined to gratify at once both his revenge and lust she does not give in. In Matangini, the mythical glory of the Indian woman seems to be revived with a new ardour. She is the new woman, who has love for freedom and knowledge. According to Mund, it cannot be ascertained whether Matangini had received Western education, but the novelist had. Her character, therefore, appears to have been carved out of the image of the women the novelist had formed under the influence of English

education. (96-97) It is perhaps this realisation that leads Bankim to remark, "...the power of woman and her beauty have their influence upon all,..." (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 80) The beauty and dignity of her character remains intact inspite of all the hindrances that impede her path. In most cultures, the responsibility of maintaining the norms of customs and tradition has been handed down to women and Matangini is in this sense no exception. Matangini heralds the new Indian woman who asserts her individuality and respects her own natural feelings without exhausting them completely. She characterises the rise of individualism and emancipation of Indian woman from the yoke of age-old submissiveness and self-annihilation. However, Matangini only anticipates in *Rajmohan's Wife*: many more women of revolutionary, independent and of somewhat audacious temperaments like Bimala, Ayesha, Rohini and many more to be portrayed later.

Makarand Paranjape's essay "The Allegory of *Rajmohan's Wife*: (1964): National Culture and Colonialism in Asia's First English Novel" posits an exaggerated analogy. According to him, Matangini is not just *Rajmohan's Wife* but the personification of Colonial India retorting to Frederick Jameson's stance that the Third-World novel is an allegory. (qtd. in Mukherjee 143-160) However, Bankimchandra's *Rajmohan's Wife* does not fit into the allegory for the following obvious reasons:

- i) A country like India which became the hub of innumerable rebellions cannot be compared to a simple village woman who projects a natural blend of meek and heroic qualities.

ii) At the same time, British rule, which is here being compared to a churlish, worthless husband, has also been responsible for various social reforms including education for women and the eradication of 'Sati' and widow remarriage. Ironically, it is the same representation of the colonial government, as a just and white Irish man who administers justice to Matangini which is shown towards the end of the novel.

Hence, the comparison between Matangini's untiring energy under the control of her worthless husband, with India under the British Government is a very far-fetched allegory. However, it may be agreed that Matangini has been perceived as an object of possession and desire that three men wish to subjugate. They are Rajmohan, who is legally married to her; Madhav, whom Matangini loves truly and Mathur, who spares no love for her but lusts after her body. Thus, inspite of her unfulfilled dreams and an insecure life, Matangini triumphs over others by virtue of her love for those who loved and respected her in turn. Bankimchandra allows the novel to take its natural course without giving any scope to exaggeration or fabrication, and documents the social position of women through this novel.

Apart from Matangini, the novel is also crowded with other women characters. For instance, the novel opens with the description of Kanakmayee (Kanak), who is gifted with beauty despite her coarse, dirty sari and is a friend and confidante of Matangini, whom she loves very dearly. In the course of the story we learn that Kanak's polygamous husband who is a Kulin Brahmin refuses to shoulder the responsibility of his wife or provide her with a home. Perhaps it is because of this reason that Madhav is filled with admiration for

her. "What a girl Kanak is! She can laugh with so much sorrow eating into her heart." (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 9) A woman gains admiration in the society only by enduring pain and agony that her husband inflicts upon her. A Kulin Brahmin could make a profession out of polygamy and not stay with any of his wives for a long time. Kanak is evidently the wife of such an absent husband. It is perhaps this reason that prompts Bankim to describe her as 'a formidable champion of the world conquering sex'. (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 1) Karunamayee, a rich widow marries Banshibadhan Ghose, leaving him an inheritance of a large amount of movable property, which ultimately becomes the cause of the family's downfall. Hemangini is Matangini's younger and fortunate sister who was married to the gentle Madhav. Domestic servants like Suki's mother and Karuna have also received their just importance in the novel and have been sketched more realistically than the men in the novel. Tara shares her affection with Champak as her co-wife of the lustful bigamous Mathur Ghose. She is a foil to Champak. Bankim has devoted a long but subtle description of not only her physical appearance but also of her inner self and moral uprightness. She is more mature and has been Madhav's playmate since infancy, and with his help comes to the rescue of Matangini who is held captive by Madhav. Such childhood friendship is guileless; childhood is the only time when boys and girls are permitted to mingle freely. However, their love has matured into an affection that is close to that of a brother and sister. Since they address each other by their first names, Bankim lays emphasis on the equality in such an idyllic relationship. This is also evident in the title of the twentieth chapter of the novel: "Some Women Are Equals of Men". (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 118) Though Bankim lavishes great praise over

Champak's beauty he is not blind to her faults. Most of these women have been portrayed with a high degree of vivacity in contrast to the men who are mostly flat characters in the novel. A vivid description of vigorous activities conducted by women within the zenana, at its busy hour is only a reinforcement of how women are typically viewed in such circumstances. The noise and the bustle have been described with a combination of comedy and grandeur. Quarrels, debates and the vigour of the activity suggest that there was more noise and less work. Mukherjee comments:

The mock-serious account of the bustle and commotion in the kitchen courtyard in Chapter 5 where cooks, servant woman, children and girls with tinkling ankle-bells vie with each other to keep the decibel level permanently high; and a more relaxed scene in Chapter 14, when the slanting rays of the late afternoon-sun fall at regular intervals through the balcony rails in an upstairs veranda where women sit dressing each others' hair or painting their feet with 'red lac', discussing the different ways of braiding hair in Radhaganj and Calcutta, reiterating a recurring concern of the novelist—the relative merits of rural East Bengal and the urbanised West Bengal dominated by Calcutta. But both these engaging scenes are suddenly shattered by the unexpected arrival of the masters of the houses, abruptly silencing the women into awe and making them scurry and hide from the authoritarian male gaze. In positions of absolute power, the masters of the house, depending on their mood, can order obedience, punish defiance or confer favour. Compared to this predictable man-woman relationship, the equations among women across the classes have a more nuanced texture in the novel—of mutual bonding, subtle rivalry, friendship, sympathy or betrayal. (145)

The author, however, does not spare the opportunity of describing the vivid trends and styles of women's toilet. On the other hand, no attention has been paid to the inner recesses of a woman's psychology as the writer has been too preoccupied with their external appearance and action, as was the

literary trend of the day. Bankim's use of language is sometimes unconvincing. When an unsophisticated village woman of East Bengal exclaims "Go to Jericho!" as an expression of friendly remonstrance or a reference to Billingsgate, then one detects the author's difficulties in incorporating the novel within the framework of the Indian culture. The lyricism of the dialogues exchanged between Madhav and Matangini to express their love for each other shows that their language is at odds with the culture that is portrayed. The author also takes the sacrilegious liberty in projecting the female deities: Kali as "terrific" and possessing a grim black figure and "gorgeous" Durga with a "crab-like form". (*Rajmohan's Wife*: 76) These are unnatural epithets used to elaborate the dubiousness of the atmosphere in Mathur's house where such representations are displayed as paintings. Connotations of such a description have been elaborated at the end of Chapter 5.

The agony of women as depicted in *Rajmohan's Wife* anticipated fiction based on similar themes. Taking after the models of Victorian fiction Indian writers also began to delve deep into the nuances of the relationship between individuals and the society and between a man and a woman. The novel operates at two levels: The incidents in the novel have been narrated from the view point of Matangini, as though the author advocates her stance in a suit presented in the court of law wherein the final judgment is reserved for the discretion of the reader. Hence, the prose of narration is formal and grand. On the other hand, the language used by the women bears the diction of the typical gossip among rural Indians of various castes and classes. In

certain portions of the novel the story lacks subjectivity from Matangini's point of view, like the discussion among the robbers with Rajmohan before attacking Madhav's house for the will. According to M. R. Anand,

At the outset of his career as a novelist, Bankimchandra displays gifts of a high order; the narrative flows steadily, his heroes, villains and heroines are vividly presented... The novel is realistic, about the events of his own day, and the author is able to interpret life with its ironies in *parda* households with an intimate description of small things. He is particularly successful in portraying the women for whom he feels sympathy, but whom he subjects to the test of sacrifice if they stray. Matangini avows her love for Madhav when she goes to his house at night to inform him about the intentions of the thieves, but she willingly accepts her fate with Rajmohan after confessing her feelings for the man she loves. The sanctions of *dharma* are in the background. Between God in heaven, the supreme deity, and the god on earth, her love, the heroine chooses ultimately to abide by the injunctions as prescribed in the orthodox *sashtras*. The intricate web of Hindu customs and manners is thus sought to be reconciled with the partial freedom demanded by the new forces. However, this freedom is denied to women, while the men, especially big landlords, can do as they please. (B. Chatterjee 155)

Mund emphasizes that creative writers like Chatterjee assumed the self-imposed role of the reformer and teacher. Bankimchandra was involved in debates and socio-religious issues of his time and had achieved reputation as both a reformer and an idealist. (26-27) The conflict between his two selves—the creative artist and the idealist teacher is evident in his novels. His women characters, like Matangini, bear the characteristics of a 'new woman' but they are bound by social customs. There is extra-marital love in his novels as much as widows and married women falling in love with married and unmarried men. In the traditional Indian society, even today, such relationships do not enjoy the sanction of the society. In *Rajmohan's Wife*

Matangini can never reunite with Madhav, her paramour before her marriage to Rajmohan. She cannot return to her fiendish husband either. So the author finds a solution in the renunciation of her family. Mund further observes that many other writers at the turn of the century had contrived similar solutions for their forsaken heroines. For example, in Kshetrapal Chakravarti's novel *Sarala* (1896), Indumati loves Hemachandra, a married man. She hopes for the reunion in her next birth. Even in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Chokher Bali* (1902), Binodini, a young widow, who oscillates between Mahendra and Bihari in her passion, ultimately accepts renunciation in the present life and a hope of reunion with Bihari in her next birth as her solace. Discussing the genre of this novel, Ramamurti states:

Though *Rajmohan's Wife* was more an exercise in social realism than in romance, the romantic and moralistic elements in his writings triumphed over the kind of realism which distinguishes the novel from all other forms of story-telling. What was true of Bankim was true of every other Indian writer who was steeped in tradition, whose outlook on life did not give him the mental make-up and the vision and perspective needed for seeing life steadily and seeing it whole. Writers like Bankim were still preoccupied with the "universals" in ethics and philosophy while what the novel's realism demanded most was rejection of the universals. (40)

However, the romantic element in this novel is restricted not only to fulfil the necessity of literary creativity, but delineate natural predicaments of human life that transcend the boundaries of Bankim's locale. Bankimchandra did not attempt to win further laurels from the English Muse anymore. It was unknown as to what was instrumental in altering his plan. But it was certainly a red letter day for Bengali literature when Bankimchandra devoted himself entirely

to the cause of literature. With *Durgeshnandini* (1865-The Chieftain's Daughter) Bankimchandra scaled the highest manifestation of his romances.

Durgeshnandini

The publication of *Durgeshnandini* was an epoch-making event in our literature because it was the first Bengali novel which was a synthesis of modern European and Gothic styles. It opened up a world of beautiful literature to the Bengali people. Tagore believed that its appearance in our literature can be compared to "dawn after night". (Ghosh 152-3) The 'predominant passions' of love and valour, the two enduring themes of romance, are embodied in some of the characters who are powerfully, if not subtly depicted. The occasional improbabilities and far-fetched coincidences do not mar the human interest of a story of passion and pain, renunciation and joy. Beyond human power, destiny plays its ironical, unpredictable, fickle and perverse role and puts human wisdom to shame. "Due to its historical backdrop this novel is often called a historical romance. The story centres on love and warfare." (Sengupta 1997: 22-23) Notwithstanding the fact that Bengal was considered to be a part of the Moghul Empire in 1576, the Hindus and the powerful Pathan feudal lords, for a number of decades, refused to acknowledge Akbar's authority and continued to independently rule their princedoms. The strained situation in this far off Moghul province aggravated the enmity between the Hindus and the Pathan princes. The latter behaved aggressively though they had been driven by the Moghuls into Orissa; they did not stop their depredatory raids on the Bengali forts and towns. All these caused the vassals of the Moghuls, especially Maan Singh, having his

headquarters in Patna, for a long time, to find it difficult to steer the nation out of this atmosphere of “discontent”. Based on this historical fact, Bankim, wove a beautiful and poignant historical romance by making the daughter of the Afghan Chieftain the central figure of the romance. Hence, history shifts into the background and the focus is entirely on the history of Jagat Singh’s love for Tilottama and Ayesha. (Ramamurti 40)The title *Durgeshnandini* (The Daughter of the Fortress Commander) can also indicate Tilottama as the heroine of the novel, since she was the Chieftain Birendra Singh’s daughter.

Bankim’s chief women characters like Bimala, Tilottama and Ayesha have been described here in the Sanskrit tradition. According to the critic Manoranjan Jana, Bankim has described them in such an embellished language that they never sink into monotony. His exceptional style of expression combines both the old Indian tradition and the style of the Gothic romances. His description of their physical appearances is not confined to figures of speech alone but also includes subtle hints and sounds. With his literary expertise, the beauty of each of the women has been distinctly drawn. It must be noted that the beauty of Matangini and that of Bimala have been compared to that of a land-lotus. These descriptions give life and verisimilitude to these women and bring to the plot the contentment of a poetic imagination. The lives and love of these women are perhaps a prelude to the more advanced women characters that are found in his later novels. The combination of timidity, boldness and heartburn in the love of Ayesha and Tilottama is nothing mysterious or discreet. Tilottama’s pure love needs no introduction just as the sacrifice of Ayesha’s love does not generate any mystery. It is only the expression of Bimala’s love that is unprecedented,

particularly in the way she avenges the death of her husband. Being separated from her husband she suffers agony and she quenches the fire of her despair with Katlu Khan's blood, by murdering him. She never repents of this cold-blooded murder since it is the expression of her love for her husband which prevents Bimala wavering in her decision. If it is not propelled by such a deep love then this murder would have been a heinous crime. Hence this murder does not go against the nature of an affectionate woman and the otherwise immoral act is justified through revenge out of pure love. The author uses the gothic mode used often in Greek and Roman revenge-tragedies. Therefore the mode is not new and has been employed even by writers in the West. Tradition has revealed that women, being actuated and inspired by love, have taken part in battles and murders. Women who lack such passions are not held in awe by Bankim. Women adopt hazardous courses to remove the obstacles in the way of their love. Once these obstacles have been removed they return to their tender selves. They fight and kill, not to compete or outdo men but to assert the existence of their passion and affection. Like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim modelled his women characters on the European ideals. This can be subtly found in the character of Bimala and is prominently found in the women characters of Bankim's later novels.

This novel also demonstrates how women have been perceived by men as objects of their sexual desire who may be seduced but not be given an acceptable status in the society. While fulfilling this sexual desire and begetting illegitimate children these men seem to remain oblivious of the castes of the women they seduce. It is only when they encounter the

commitment of marriage and have to secure the social recognition of their relationship, that such men shirk from undertaking the responsibility. It may be observed that Bimala and her mother are initially discarded by their respective lovers on the pretext that they belong to a low caste. The caste division enabled the upper class society to continually exploit the people of the lower caste. This is because the people of the lower caste would neither be able to unite and protest against this oppression nor resist such an offence. The plight of the women of the lower caste was even worse: they were often sexually harassed but their upper caste tormentors knew that such women had neither social support nor the courage to raise their voice against such a heinous crime. Instead they were condemned to remain at the mercy of such men. Tilottama and Bimala, cast away earlier by their respective fathers, are brought up by their mothers amidst poverty, each a *shudra* by caste. Though the title reveals that the central woman character is Tilottama, yet the author has rendered Bimala prominent and indelible. Bankimchandra has attempted to endow her with the virtuous qualities of an ideal Bengali woman, emphasizing her moral and spiritual values. Bimala is intelligent, dextrous, heroic and resourceful. She is selfless in her devotion to Birendra Singh and those patriotic principles he served. She is “benevolent, large-hearted and consistent”—both in her love and hatred—tender and affectionate towards her prized fellow beings, devilishly ruthless towards her enemies. (Novikova 114)

However, critics have found more than one fault in the author’s delineation of Bimala’s character. Some critics like Girijaprasanna Raichaudhury, have pointed out instances wherein Bimala is shown capable of enjoying “low humour”. (Dasgupta 36) In order to extricate herself from tight

corners she stoops to immoral depths that were inevitable in her situation. She flirts both with Rahim Shaikh and Katlu Khan to ensnare and deceive them. Readers can make allowances for the jokes she enjoys as Bankim must have derived such inspiration from the royal ladies and jesters like Madhavya and Basantaka in Sanskrit literature.

Tilottama and Ayesha symbolise pure and immaculate maidenhood. Tilottama, the younger of the two is a neophyte in the ways of the world. She falls in love regardless of all consequences. The passion brings about a complete ruin upon her life and shatters her completely. It is here that Bankim Chandra introduces the concept of fate and gives it a free play. Tilottama's hopeless passion brings numerous perils to her life. Throughout the story she is presented as a tender drooping maiden, who is young and beautiful. She is one of the most charming of a series of similar characters that Bankim portrayed so adeptly.

The main portrayal of love between Jagat Singh and the Chieftain's daughter is weak. Though she gives the title to the novel she is nothing more than a "painted doll". (Sengupta 1997: 24) She seems to have neither an active role to play in the novel nor a distinct identity of her own. Even the love that she harbours for Jagat Singh is denied to her and she is rebuffed by him. This is because he believes that since Tilottama was detained in Katlu Khan's harem; she must have fallen prey to the lust of the Pathan Sultan. A conspicuous parallel between Bimala and Tilottama is that both these women belong to a low caste, but they succeed in getting their passions reciprocated

by their respective lovers who enjoy a higher political status in the society. Among the three important women characters—Bimala, Tilottama and Ayesha, Ayesha is the only one of noble birth because she is the Pathan Chief, Katlu Khan's daughter. Perhaps it is due to this reason that Jagat Singh's infatuation for Tilottama matures into love only out of sympathy for the innocent and naive orphaned girl. Though Ayesha also gets orphaned by the end of the story her existence is sufficiently buttressed by the powers of wealth, status and her own moral courage. Hence, she fails to excite much sympathy from Jagat. Yet, in terms of valour and heroism Ayesha could have been a better match for Jagat. However, in terms of prominence in the novel, Ayesha serves as a foil to Tilottama. She is the protagonist in the second half of the novel. According to S. C. Sengupta, she is an

...unhistorical figure whom Bankim presents as a gem of a woman and who is his first attempt at portraiture of self-control and renunciation. She is not a historically plausible character because we have to stretch our credulity to believe in the story of a Nawab's daughter, nursing a Rajput prince and an enemy in the harem. Nor is she artistically convincing...Her self-control may be heroic but her professions of love, when once the bond of reticence is loosened, are theatrical. And equally theatrical is the jealousy of Osman, her cousin and rejected suitor for her hand. She retires from the story in a nimbus of glory, but except in the last lines when she throws away the ring, she does not come to life, and a sainted marionette herself, she cannot communicate any sparkle of vitality to the events of which she is the centre. Away from her Osman is quite an interesting character, but as soon as he comes in contact with her, he behaves mechanically and hysterically. (24-25)

The above comment may be countered with the positive aspects of Ayesha: She is accomplished in the matters of the state. She is sufficiently sagacious to understand the world and bestow her love on a worthy person, who may

match her valour and audacity. The action of nursing a Rajput prince may be a scope for common readers of Bankim's time to relate and identify with a character like her. They not only belong to different religions but Jagat Singh has reserved his affection for Tilottama. In spite of this she loves Jagat, being stoically prepared to accept that her passions would not be reciprocated. She holds them in complete control. Here Ayesha represents the new age, a character particularly appropriate for the novel. According to S. Bandhopadhyay, when she discards the poison ring, it is her proclamation in favour of life. Only novels can successfully depict the obscure complexities of human nature and "Ayesha succeeds in getting the signature of an incompressible destiny successfully printed on her life." (Mukherjee 32) She further observes:

In the romantic relationship between Jagat Singh and Ayesha we see an early expression of Bankim's imaginative freedom. Their meeting in the prison is by no means an episode situated in history; the inevitable explosion of Ayesha's love makes it very nearly modern...Ayesha, Despite being a part of a feudal system, not only resists its values by emphatically foregrounding her own individual self but standing at the crossroads of life and death uses her independent judgement to opt for life—a choice that clearly spells her modernity. We may wonder whether such an exercise of intellectual volition was possible for a woman who belonged to that age. But such necessary anachronism is an essential ingredient of this kind of heroic novels, and Bankim made effective use of it. (38-39)

According to Clarke, contemporary critics suggest a resemblance between *Durgeshnandini* and some of Scott's novels. (18) They claim that unreciprocated love of the Muslim princess Ayesha for Jagat Singh recalls Rebecca's love for Ivanhoe. But unlike Ivanhoe, *Durgeshnandini* is a tale of

double love interest. One is between Jagat Singh and Tilottama while the other is a triangular love affair involving Jagat Singh, Osman and Ayesha.

Bankimchandra believed that the piquancy of the novel lay in the portrayal of Ayesha. Ayesha's astonishing capacity of self-abnegation, magnanimity and charity are over-whelming. She is also a person with an unbending will and firm character, at the same time. Till the end, unlike Bimala, she never violates any traditional morals, yet she possesses feelings and inclinations which are typical of a woman of the new bourgeois epoch. She is free from prejudices, particularly those concerning castes or religions. She thoroughly evades the fact that she is a Muslim Pathan and Jagat Shingh is a Hindu Rajput. She is not troubled by the different faith of Jagat Singh or the fact that he is the sworn enemy of her father. Her fearless love arising in defiance of person or personality, gives a dramatic effect to the novel, which was unprecedented in Bengali literature. Ayesha may be described as the one of the initial conceptions of Bankimchandra, which laid the beginnings of his long and indepth exploration of the greatness of a woman's soul.

One of the major merits of the novel is that it suggests how political and marital conflicts can receive a healing touch under the humanizing influence of personal relationship involving the human heart. In this novel Ayesha becomes a symbol of passions and affections which transcend religious and racial barriers and which dissolve all hatred, malice, revenge and rivalry. She epitomizes the principles which Akbar himself followed in his career as the great Moghul Emperor of India when he triumphed over many Rajput rulers

through his own marriage with their princesses, one of whom was the sister of Jagat Singh who figures in this novel. Due to these reasons, K. S. Ramamurti concludes that this novel is an interesting study in historical fiction. (232) Anachronisms in the novel are perhaps the author's deliberate choice. The depiction of love between Jagat Singh and Ayesha is an absurdity from a historical view point. But the author contrives the situation to portray pre-marital love, which he could not have shown in a story dealing with contemporary Indian life, since that would have been an absurdity too. But the distance in time gave him the scope to suspend disbelief. He presents a woman who decides her own fate, who makes a choice. Thus he creates a woman who is yet to be born in real life. It is the contemporary perception about a woman's status that gives Ayesha her uniqueness.

Asmani had been Bimala's maid- servant ever since the latter had been taken under Urmila's employment. This character functions mainly as a comic relief amidst a chain of tragic and horrifying scenes. For example, the description of Asmani's beauty is a marvellous piece of humour. It shows how humour can be clothed in beautiful and elegant language preserving at the same time the lighter tone. Asmani's love-making is audacious and she goes a bit too far with her practical jokes. According to Dasgupta, the author ridicules the hyperbolic writers in Sanskrit and Bengali, through his description of Asmani. (37) In these novels the intricacy of plots, the play of destiny, the unfulfilled love of craving women make the readers aware of a world of "high tragedy" unparalleled in Bengali literature. (Bagchi 8)

Anandmath

The novel *Anandmath* centres in the *Sannyasi* rebellion in Bengal. Widespread peasant rebellions prevailed during the early years of British rule in India. Long before the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857—often regarded as the first war of Indian independence—hungry peasants of Bengal and Bihar, victims of the Bengal Famine (1770) revolted against the East India Company, which had been exacting money and crops from them. This was known as the famous Sannyasi rebellion. A large number of *sannyasis* and *fakirs* who were being fleeced by the British rulers through various forms of exactions, played a vital part in organizing the peasants and hence the name—*Sannyasi* Rebellion. The insurrection involved not only the peasants, *sannyasis* and *fakirs*, but also village artisans -- the famous silk weavers of Bengal, who had been made to slave for the British merchants—and the thousands of unemployed soldiers from the disbanded Mughal army. Sumanta Banerjee mentions that being led by Majnu Shah, Bhabani Pathak, Debi Chaudhurani (portrayed rather dramatically in Bankim's novel of the same name) and a host of heroic figures, the rebellion continued till the beginning of the 19th century and was marked by daring attacks on the East India Company's offices in different parts of Bihar and Bengal, the killing of notorious Indian landlords and money-lenders as well as of oppressive British traders and army officers, and both guerilla and positional warfare against the British army. (Banerjee homestead.com) In the novel, despite Bankim's lurid description of the famine and the prevalent chaos, he transforms the insurrection beyond recognition with imaginary characters introduced in it and the idea of religious and political revival that are without roots in history.

Though the setting is in Bengal, the relevance of their mission transcends the boundaries of the territory. The prominence of women characters develop only within a limited and narrow scope in this novel. However, it must be observed that since the time of India's freedom struggle against the British government in which these *Sannyasis* were involved, the entire country has been addressed as 'the Mother' and there is no other woman character in the novel who is more pervasive than the 'Mother'. Shanti and Kalyani are two other women characters in this novel.

The idealisation of the country as the Mother has been one of the grandest conceptions in this novel as well as in Bengali literature. Through Bhabanand's song 'Vande Mataram' Bankimchandra exhorts people about nationalism through literature. Bhabanand said,

Amra anya ma manina—janani janmabhumishcha swargadapi gariyasi. Amra boli, janmabhumi-i janani, amader ma nai, bap nai, bhai nai, bandhu nai, --stree nai, putra nai, ghar nai, bari nai, amader ache kebol sei sujalang, suphalang, malayajasamiranasheetalang, shasyashyamalang,- (Anandmath: 683)

We recognize no other mother. Mother and Motherland is greater than Heaven. We say: Motherland is the same as the Mother. We have no mother, no father, no brother, no friend, no wife, no son, no home and no house. We have only that land, well-watered, fruitful, cooled by the south wind, abounding in harvest,—

The idea of India being 'well-watered, fruitful, abounding in harvest' has been visualised by Bankim during the time of famine in order to instigate the patriots to combat foreign rule to restore the lost riches to the nation. The 'Santans' or patriots regard the country as the mother, the repository of all strength, the destroyer of all enemies, one whose image fills the temples, the

goddess brandishing the ten weapons, the source of wealth and wisdom, the provider of beauty, flowers and moonlight. The concept of this Mother is quite ancient in Indian thought. To many Indian devotees, God who is sexless is as much Mother as Father. Ramkrishna Paramhansa's ideas are centred in the Mother. The splendid idea in the work is the deification of India as Mother, and the organization of her worthy 'children as an order of worshippers devoted to her rescue. Satyanand finds in Durga the emblem of the almighty God-Mother. Chittaranjan Bandhopadhyay explains that the ten hands of the goddess embody strength and is strongly equipped, the rider on the lion's back; where the lion is the symbol of sovereignty over the creation; the destruction of the demon is the destruction of sin; the attendant companion on the right and the left betoken that where the Goddess comes, she is accompanied by Lakshmi—abundance, the emblem of good luck, by Saraswati—wisdom, the goddess of the harp, the fountain of knowledge, by Kartik the embodiment of power, and Ganesh or the symbol of gratified desire. (78) Bankim elaborates on the same idea, though in another direction. This according to the hermit Satyanand is the mother that is to be. The ten hands stretch towards ten different points, holding diverse weapons, each representing a force; at her feet lay the trampled and crushed foe; under her aegis flourishes the brave lion destroying the enemy.

Bankim's advanced combination of the Mother and the Motherland resulted in 'Vande Mataram'. Satyanand explains to Mahendra the different forms of the Mother—the Mother in her true self, her different forms like the one sitting on Vishnu's lap, Jagaddhatri, Kali and finally Durga. Apart from

these mythological connotations, these patriots of Anandmath are most content to visualise their country as their mother. The ardent patriots or the *santans* regard the Mother as omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and may be led to attribute the utmost sanctity and holiness to the country they inhabit. The feeling of patriotism as a divine impulse thus becomes easily intelligible, using Bhabanand's song as his mouthpiece and the author has perhaps attempted to express this urge through his famous song 'Vande Mataram' which becomes the inspiration and clarion-call for India's freedom struggle:

Twang hi durga dashapraharanadharinee
Kamala kamal—dalabiharini
Bani bidyadayini namami twaan
Namami kamalam amalang atulam,
Sujalang suphalang mataram
Vande mataram
Shyamalang saralang sushmitang bhushitam
Dharaning bharanim mataram (Anandmath 674)
 Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen,
 With her hands that strike and her swords of sheen
 Thou art Lakshmi lotus-throned,
 And the Muse a hundred-toned.
 Pure and perfect, without peer,
 Mother, lend thine ear.
 Rich with thy hurrying streams,
 Bright with thy orchard gleams,
 Dark of hue, O candid-fair
 In thy soul, with jewelled hair
 And thy glorious smile divine,
 Loveliest of all earthly lands,
 Showering wealth from well-stored hands! (Aurobindo 339)

The idea of the country as the Mother which had greatly impelled Bankim, had developed and evolved at a later stage in Indian political and cultural history. Since the days of the freedom struggle the nation was looked upon as Mother.

Apart from the country being visualised as an embodiment of the Universal Mother the story also involves the other woman characters like Shanti, Kalyani and Nimaimani.

The most prominent woman in the novel is Jibanand's wife Shanti. She has been carefree and reckless in her childhood but education finally refines her. She always encourages her husband to pursue the motto of services to the nation. For example, when Jibanand is reluctant to return to his patriotic duties after seeing her in utmost poverty Shanti says, "*Chhi—tumi bir. Amar prithivite baro sukh je ami birpatni. Tumi adham streer janya birdharma tyag koribe? Tume amaye bhalo basiyo na—ami se sukh chahi na—kintu tumi tomar bir dharma kakhono tyag koriona...*" (Anandmath: 689) (Shame on you—you are valiant. My greatest happiness on earth is that I am the wife of a hero. Will you abandon your patriotic duties for the sake of a wretched woman like me? You don't have to love me—I do not need such happiness-- But please do not renounce the religion of valour...) Thus, her patriotic impulses are not more intense than her love for her husband. Even ragged poverty and prolonged starvation does not dampen this spirit. Women were not permitted to be initiated into the sect of the Santans in Anandmath. When Satyanand discovers that Shanti is not a man but a woman in disguise, she defends herself by citing examples of Ram and Sita, Arjun, Bhima and many others to prove that women (wives) have been the strength and support of these heroic men. Women have actively participated in battles, she points out. Satyanand believes that the presence of a woman can effeminate a man's spirit and distract him from his heroic duties and due to these reasons, women are not admitted to Anandmath. Satyanand further claims that Jibanand is like his

right hand and he fears that Shanti has come to break this hand. But Shanti refutes this charge on the ground that a wife's duty is to support the husband when he dedicates his life to a noble cause. She asserts,

Ami apnar dakshin haste bal baraito asiya chhi. Ami brahmacharini, prabhur kachhe brahmacharini-i thakibo. Ami kebol dharmacharaner janya asiya chhi; swamir sandarshaner janya noy. Biraha jantranay ami kaatora noi. Swami je dharm grahan kariachen, tahar bhagini keno hoibo na? Tai asiya chhi.” (Anandmath: 702)

I have come to strengthen your 'right hand' (Jibanand). (Though I am married I observe celibacy.) For God's sake I shall remain aloof from family ties. I have come to follow the rituals of religion, not to see my husband. I am not suffering from the agony of separation. Why should I not partake of the religion which my husband follows?

She also declares,

...Patni swamir anusharan kare se ki papacharan? Santandharmashastra jadi eka papacharan bole tobe Santandharma adharma. Ami ta(n)har sahadharmini; tini dharmacharane prabritto ami ta(n)har sange dharmacharan korite asiya chhi. (Anandmath: 701)
...If the wife follows the husband, is that something against the virtue? If that is something sinful according to the laws of the Santans, then that religion is no religion at all.

She explains to her husband that, “...*Bibaha ihokaler janya, ebom bibaha parakaler janya. Ihokaler janya je bibaha, mone karo, taha amader hoy nai. Amader bibaha kebol parakaler janya. Parakale dwigun phal phalibe.” (Anandmath: 709)* (“...Marriage is for this life and the life hereafter. Assume that our marriage for this life has not taken place. It is for the next life. In the next birth it will yield twice its reward.”) This proves Shanti's powers of self-sacrifice and self-restraint. Shanti's optimism about life and belief in the next birth reaches its highest manifestation here. She also projects an enormous ability to renounce her love for her husband for the sake of her country. She tells Jibanand:

Ami tomar dharmapatni, sahadharmaini, dharme sahay. Tumi atishay gurutar dharama grahan kariachho. Sei dharmer sahaytar janyai ami grihatyag kariya asiya chhi. Dui jon ekatra sei dharmacharan koribo

boliya grihatyag kariya asiya bone bash koritechhi. Tomar dharmabridddhi koribo. Dharamapatni hoiya, tomar dharmer bigno koribo keno? (Anandmath: 709)

I am your wife co-observer of your moral duty and your assistant in following your duty. You have adopted a rigorous moral duty. It is to help you in your duty that I have come after renouncing home. In order that we can attain success in this moral duty together, I have come to stay in the woods renouncing home. Being your wife, I will enable you to accomplish your duty, why should I impede your path?

While Kalyani had left her husband for his benefit, Shanti followed her husband so that the mission of his life may be truly fulfilled. When Satyanand asked Shanti dissuade Jibanand from killing himself, she says,

Amar swamir dharma amar swamir hathe; ami tahake dharma hoite biroto koribar ke? Iholoke streer pati debota, kinto paraloke sabari dharma debota—amar kachhe amar pati boro, tar apeksha amar dharmo boro, tar apeksha amar kachhe amar swamir dharma boro. Amar dharma amar jedin ichha ami jalanjali dite pari; amar swamir dharme jalanjali dibo? Maharaj! Tomar kathaye amar swami morite hoye moribe, ami baron koribo na. (Anandmath: 715-16)

My husband's duty is his own affair; who am I to interfere into his matters? In this life the husband is a god to the wife but after death duty is the god of all. To me my husband is great but greater than he is my duty; his duty is even greater. I may abandon my own duty any day; but how can I abandon my husband's duty? My Lord! If while obeying your orders my husband dies, let him die, I will not forbid him.

This promise shows Shanti's awareness about her duty and her sense of responsibility towards her husband and her country. Thus, Shanti's lofty ideal of love enables her to view her marriage from a religious standpoint. In a novel like *Anandmath* which has an overtly political theme, Shanti has been portrayed as an active member of a political organization who even participates in terrorist activities. As a married woman, though she is temporarily separated from her husband, she enjoys a certain degree of emotional security and immunity from danger.

Bankim's emphasis on the woman's role as a *Sahadharmini*—a helper in the husband's spiritual efforts is integral to Bankim's conception of reciprocal devotion of husband and wife. His poetic expression redeems this hackneyed notion from "its banality by making resplendent the careers of his literary heroines who were projected as guides rather than servile spouses". (Nath 105-106) Thus, Shanti is delineated as investing the life of her husband with a meaning that makes their existence glorious by taking radiance from a love, that could be mistaken for compassion but was in reality a kind of woman's devotion so sublime as to make it a name for heavenly grace—"sanctifying their brief hours of mortality". (Idem.)

Kalyani, Mahendra's wife, shows complete devotion to her husband, like Shanti. Her presence of mind enables her to escape the clutches of robbers who had kidnapped her. However, in comparison to that of Shanti's hers is a lacklustre delineation. She is also impulsive. As soon as her daughter Sukumari faints after swallowing a poison pill, she immediately assumes that she is dead. Out of grief and deep affection for her daughter, she too consumes poison. Bhabanand nurses Kalyani back to life in the forest after she attempts at committing suicide, and while tending her with care, he falls in love with her. This situation recalls that of Ayesha and Jagat Singh in *Durgeshnandini*. Bhabanand proposes marriage to Kalyani assuming her husband Mahendra to be dead. She is utterly shocked, since widow marriages were uncommon and he was a sage. Yet, Bhabanand unscrupulously justifies his stance on the grounds that ever since he has

saved Kalyani from death he has fallen in love with her while nursing her. His love for her becomes more important than that towards his country. Being blinded by her beauty he also claims that if he knew that he would meet a beauty like Kalyani in his life then he would never have embraced sainthood. But it is Kalyani who dissuades him from deviating from the path of her moral duty. Her strength of character gathers greater impetus when she assures him that she would surely remember him even after his death, but only as a traitor. According to Manoranjan Jana, through this character, Bankimchandra suggests that if the beauty of a woman is capable of enticing a man away from his dharma, then such beauty is wretched and abominable. He also points out that the woman (Kalyani) whose beauty tempts Bhabanand to deviate from his religion is the same who remains morally erect, unmoved as a stone, to resist the Bhabanand's uncontrolled desires, dashing upon her like waves. (Jana 126-127)

Both Shanti and Kalyani give the author a higher acclaim. They are devout, and dedicated. The felicity of their conjugal love can be clearly read between the lines in the whole history of Shanti and Kalyani. However, J. C. Ghosh remarks about Bankim,

He cannot see far or deep, but he knows his men and women well from the outside, and he can chat about them agreeably. Irrespective of the social, or political significance of his theme, his interest always narrows down to domestic matters, and all his novels are in essence domestic novels. (160)

In the light of the merits of Bankim's delineation of characters in the above-mentioned novels, this argument does not hold good. Secondly, it is difficult to imagine a precursor during the dawn of novel writing to explore themes that

are far from being domestic. Every action is associated to the character's familial ties. Various social, political, religious and domestic factors play vital roles upon the individual's psyche and hence domestic themes within are also necessary to offer multi-faceted dimensions to the development of a certain character. Bankim asserts that if India was to progress, she would have to change "her archaic beliefs and outmoded social institutions". (P. Chatterjee 15)

Bankim clearly wanted to raise the status of women in the Hindu society by elevating the conception of womanhood without violating the time-honoured social customs. R. C. Nath agrees that his treatment of the issues relating to women was quite different from that of his contemporary reformers who believed that these laws were outdated and required a thorough revision (106). The plots of *Durgeshnandini* and *Anandmath* developed in historical terms and grew through patriotic and heroic motifs. They also offer an intense focus on sexual and emotional tangles within domestic arrangements. The richly textured backdrop consists of war, history and patriotism, accentuating the dramatic tones of human relationships in his works. At the centre of Bankimchandra's explorations through contemporary and historical times

lay the vexed questions that liberal reformist critiques of Hindu conjugality had fore-grounded. Bankim posed them with clarity and pushed them with an audacity that took them well beyond the modest and respectable confines of compassionate marriage framework which had been as much as the reformers had hoped for. His concern was to counterpose different patterns of female sexuality and the ways of loving one another, to project them out within contrasting domestic and extra-domestic conventions, to question the limits of accepted codes and transgressive behaviour, and to test given models of male

sexuality and love as well as suggest alternative possibilities... He articulated wide-ranging configurations of female transgressions within extra-marital relationships and contrasted the woman's moral-emotional dilemmas with socially sanctioned codes. (Sarkar 144)

Bankim also compared female sexuality and love at different stages of life, and within familial and extra-familial contexts: the child-like angelic, innocent love of a very young girl who is coy and inarticulate in love and who is born to be the doting wife (a romantic model derived largely from the aesthetic conventions of classical Sanskrit drama), as against that of the older passionate, determined woman who finds herself in an unconventional, even amoral roles and situations. This is apparent in the contrast between the young and innocent Tilottama and the powerful figure of Bimala in *Durgeshnandini*. Bimala represents the adult, mature and passionate woman holding an independent stance of her own with considerable expertise in political intrigues, sufficiently competent to take a man's place in a crisis, and could be an ideal of intellectual and moral behaviour. Yet she is capable of transgressing Hindu gender codes and encounter emotional and social crisis where she had to make her own decisions. In his sociological essay "Samya", Bankimchandra offers a breathtaking and penetrating analysis of inequality in India's caste system, gender inequality and that of the establishment of the supreme truth of equality between men and women. He bitterly condemns inequality in Hindu society making gender oppression his focus of attack, since sexual hypocrisy is most blatant. It permits male polygamy while demanding from woman chastity, seclusion and an ascetic widowhood, and forbidding widow remarriage. He laments that the degree to which women are enslaved by men here cannot be found anywhere else. He refutes the

argument that unequal rights are grounded in unequal capabilities, since capabilities are not naturally unequal but have been thus created by unequal conditions. Bankimchandra dismisses the need for a woman's absolute chastity on the grounds that it probably does nothing to improve her life but affords a feeling of security to that of a man. Thus, he probably proposes an equal distribution of rights and responsibilities between men and women. He emphasises that our society does not recognize that if capabilities differ, it should lead to unequal rights. Advocating the absolute value of liberal rights he appeals for women's education, economic independence by earning and fair property inheritance rights, freedom from seclusion through fair division of sexual and domestic labour. In addition to his reasons in "*Prachina O Nabina*" he denounces the demand for "absolute and unconditional chastity" from women, because men are not expected to conform to those standards. (B. C. Chatterjee 99-106) Even if the terms of oppression are accepted by women, due to centuries of brainwashing, the continuation of such oppression cannot be justified. These ideas are best illustrated through the novels discussed above. Like Bankim, many later Indo-Anglian writers like M. R. Anand and R. K. Narayan, under the impact of the West, turned to the image of the Mother. Idealized characters of mothers loom across the pages of many Indian novels. She is universalized and glorified as the Mother principle and she tends to be symbolic. The nineteenth century colonization prompted Bankim to attribute the powers of Goddess Durga to the Mother (motherland). Later in the twentieth century a great poet as Aurobindo acquired an interest in the Mother principle, probably under the influence of Bankim, after his transition from the western to the Indian mode. Aurobindo moved a step ahead to posit the

theory that the one whom we adore as the Mother is the divine conscious force of the Supreme that dominates all existence. She is so multifaceted that following her movement is possible neither by the quickest mind nor the greatest intelligence. The mother acts upon both—the universe and the individual as well as the entities beyond them. (Aurobindo 94-95)

However, there is a bitter irony depicted in the men in Bankim's novels who treat the nation as a 'mother' on one hand and debar the mothers or women from being part of the nationalist cause. The Mother principle was posited by Bankim from the nationalist point of view and in the next century Aurobindo did the same from a spiritual point of view. This might have been the embryonic stage of the theory which modern eco-feminists assert: the entity of the mother is that which nurtures, nourishes and does not discriminate. Yet in practice it is the woman (including, a mother) upon whom gender discrimination is applied. Thus, Bankimchandra stormed the literary field with his sweep of imagination, broad outlook, master craftsmanship and a superb power of character delineation, especially that of woman emerging from the strong shackles of medievalism into modernity.

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Chapter 4

Woman in the Novels of Rabindranath Tagore

One of the greatest singular events in the Indian literary history was the emergence of Rabindranath Tagore as a major source of influence and inspiration. Tagore was a prolific litterateur with versatile achievements. A poet, short-story writer, song composer, playwright, essayist, an actor, a philosopher, painter, a social reformer, an educationist and a humanist, Tagore introduced new prose and verse-forms and the use of colloquial language into Bengali literature, thereby liberating it from traditional models based on classical Sanskrit. In spite of being the most admired writer in Bengal, Tagore was an unknown figure to the rest of the country till he received the Nobel Prize in November 1913. His appearance before the Indian public was sudden, unexpected and an exciting phenomenon. He was a writer celebrated by the Western world before the Indian literary community discovered him with its own initiative. (S. K. Das 192) He was instrumental in introducing the best of Indian culture to the West and vice versa, and he is regarded as an outstanding creative artist and visionary of modern India. The youngest son of the religious reformer Debendranath Tagore, he was educated at home but at the age of seventeen he was sent to England for formal schooling but he could not complete his studies there. He began initially to write verses, and returned to India from England in the late 1870s. Then he published several books of poetry in the 1880s and completed *Manasi* (1890), a collection that marks the maturing of his genius. It contains some of his best-known poems, including many in verse forms new to Bengali. Some poems embody social and political satire that criticised his

fellow Bengalis. He was a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, which was a new religious sect in nineteenth-century Bengal and which attempted a revival of the ultimate monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the Upanishads. In his mature years, in addition to his many-sided literary activities, he managed the family estates, a project which brought him into close touch with common humanity and increased his interest in social reforms. On December 22nd 1901, he also started an experimental school at Shantiniketan named Brahmachary Ashrama, modelled on the lines of the ancient *gurukul* system, where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education. He actively participated in the Indian nationalist movement, though in his own non-sentimental and visionary way; Gandhi, the political father of modern India, was his devoted friend. Tagore was knighted by the ruling British Government in 1915, but within a few years he resigned the honour as a protest against British policies in India.

In 1891, Tagore went to East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to manage his family's estates at Shilaidah and Shazadpur for ten years. There, he often stayed in a houseboat on the Padma River (i.e. the River Ganges), in close contact with the village folk, and his sympathy for their poverty and backwardness became the keynote of much of his later writing. He was a prominent figure in the 'partition of Bengal' agitation, though he did not subscribe to its wilder form. However, he protested by founding at Shantiniketan, Vishva-Bharati—the rallying centre of international culture.

The epithet, "myriad-minded" which Coleridge applied to Shakespeare seems to be equally applicable to Rabindranath Tagore whose long life of

eighty years was marked by ceaseless and torrential flow of creativity manifested in the richness and variety of all kinds of art and literary forms—dance, drama, music, painting and original organizational activities. Touching the kindred points of heaven and earth he was both a man of action and of contemplation, a seer and also a pioneer in cooperative movement, a writer of most profound poems and an author of children's text-books including books of science, a nationalist and internationalist, a man of royal grandeur like his grandfather, a prince, and an ascetic like his father, a *maharshi*. In his philosophy of life the best of the east and the west are reconciled into a harmonious whole enriching the quality and substance of life which he always saw steady and saw it whole. His life was marked as much by Shakespearean fecundity as by protean plasticity. His inclusive mind aspired after the universal man shining in the glory of creation and *joie de vivre*.

Tagore's unflinching faith in man and divinity, his concern for women and solicitation for children, his sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden, his philosophical speculations and practical wisdom, his perception of the *zeitgeist* and the evolution of taste—all find expression in the all-encompassing sweep of his writings in a magnificent synthesis of philosophical profundity and aesthetic luxuriance. With the passage of time Tagore has only grown in stature and is now recognized as an increasingly significant and complex personality. Whether seen as a great sentinel or a complete man, the finest exponent of the Bengal Renaissance or the harbinger of a new age, a majestic personality or a deeply scarred individual, it is rewarding to revisit Tagore—a miracle of literary history—in the light of the women in his novels

that were grounded in the social and political conditions of his time. Perhaps this prompted Humayun Kabir to suggest:

Tagore's literary life covers the outline history of the evolution of the Bengali novel. Starting with *The Queen Consort's Fair* which is a weaker version of Bankim's historical writing Tagore ended with novels like *Farewell, My Friend* or *Two Sisters* which have the sophistication and harshness of the most cynical modern. (Kabir 58)

Like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Tagore also began his endeavours in fiction with a historical novel, *Bau Thakuranir Hat* or *The Queen Consort's Fair* (1883). It was Tagore's first novel and projects obvious traces of Bankim's influence. Tagore achieved recognition as a novelist with *Chokher Bali* (1902—which will be referred to hereafter as *Binodini*) His other vivid and lively novels are *Naukadubi* (1906), *Gora* (1910), *Shesher Kabita* (1929—henceforth referred to as *Farewell, My Friend*), *Jogajog* (1929) and *Char Adhyay* (1934). In each of his novels he has mirrored the sore points of contemporary social life, particularly the innumerable instances of social injustice, especially to women. He also held up “the ideal of self-reliant Indian women, fighting not only for their own rights but also for those subjugated nationality and the down-trodden humanity”. (B. Majumdar 1) Many of these women characters were models, instrumental in heralding the so-called progressive age in which we live.

Featuring some of the major issues of contemporary society Tagore attacks the orthodox customs of Hindu tradition which included child marriages, the dowry system and so on. This is best exemplified in *The Wreck* where Kamala suffers as the most miserable victim of an accident in which

two different boats containing two marriage-parties were wrecked. While Hemnalini an educated *Brahmo* is the precursor of the other modern woman characters like Sucharita, Lolita, Labanya and Ela of his later novels, *Brahmo* and Hindu religious conflicts break up family relationships, as in the case of Kshemankari. Binodini in *Chokher Bali* is not the daughter of a rich person, yet a European Missionary woman is engaged to educate her. It dramatises the struggle of a young, beautiful widow for self-actualisation and selfhood in a social system that denies all scope for such attempts. Sucharita and Lolita in *Gora* are highly educated without being enrolled in a college. *The Home and the World* records Bimala's transition from her secluded life in a *zenana* to national politics. In *Chaturanga*, Damini flouts Hindu orthodoxy and Vaishnavism to assert her existence as an independent individual in the society. Sharmila in *Two Sisters* faces crisis in her relation with her husband due to her motherly affection for him. Similarly, in *The Garden*, Niraja suffers emotional turmoil and insecurity when Sarala extends a helping hand to her husband during Niraja's illness. This anguish can be found in the mind of every wife who feels that her connubial relationship has been threatened. *Charodhyay* or *Four Chapters* explores Ela's unfulfilled love for Atindra, due to the conspiracy of Indranath who perceived her only as an object of sex and desire.

Following the footsteps of Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Tagore also advocated the emancipation of women through his novels, essays, poems and plays. In order to study their problems closely he projected women as protagonists in almost all his novels except *Gora*.

According to M. Sarada, Tagore brought to the attention of the society some of the issues concerning women including,

1. The plight of widows in the joint families who are economically exploited and prevented from remarrying;
2. the struggle of the modern educated young women for equality and freedom in the male dominated conservative society, and
3. the complications that arise in the family set-up when the modern women participate in the freedom struggle. (129)

Tagore does not suggest any solutions to the problems he points out. He feels that the problems resolve themselves as a result of the responses from the society. (Idem.) The artist and the student of the human heart, in Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Tagore afford “a holistic and objective picture of life and makes us realize its glory and pathos”. (Sastri, Ramaswami 397) For the study of women characters, in this chapter, *Chokher Bali* (1902; first translated in 1959 as *Binodini*), *Ghare-Baire* (*The Home and the World*) and *Shesher Kabita* (1929; *Farewell, My Friend* or *The Last Poem*) have been selected. Women characters from the other novels will receive a peripheral mention.

Chokher Bali (Binodini)

Besides being recognised as the first psychological novel, *Chokher Bali* has aroused admiration of many critics. For instance, Sukumar Sen comments:

Here for the first time in Indian Literature the actions and reactions arising out of the impact of the minds of individuals and not so much the external happenings propel the plot. The psychosis of the characters is followed realistically and this is unique for Indian literature. (233)

The story of *Chokher Bali* has been successful not only in literature but has also been adapted into the screen play of a film of the same name, directed by Rituparno Ghosh and released in 2004. With this novel, for the first time, Tagore broke free from Bankim's influence in several respects inspite of the fact that Binodini, the protagonist, is found to be reading Bankim's *Bishabriksha*, perhaps drawing her inspiration from it as Tagore did from Bankim. Tagore's psychological study is subtler and more realistic than Bankim's *Bishabriksha* and *Krishnakanter Uil* which exploit a similar theme. According to Amaresh Das even in the ancient trend of Bengali fiction, *Binodini* was not a sudden change. In novels like *Krishnakanter Uil* and *Rajani*, Bankim shed light into the recesses of the human mind. Tagore further expanded the horizons of human psychology through his writing. In order to give the characters the necessary verisimilitude, Tagore flouted the social responsibility of showing moral values which Bankim supported and explored even the deep abysses of the human mind in order to depict the woman characters realistically. (A. Das 51) The title *Chokher Bali* has multiple meanings. Binodini and Ashalata (will be referred to hereafter as Asha) choose this nickname meaning 'eyesore' as a common address between themselves that characterized the intimacy between two women in those times. It can be translated as an idiomatic - expression called 'sand in the eye' that suggested roughly a phrase like 'throwing a spanner', a destabilizing factor - the third agent in an otherwise harmonious relationship, usually between a man and a woman. In their own distinctive ways, says Shirwadkar, the three women Binodini, Asha and Rajlakshmi represent the evolving social and moral climate at the turn of the 20th century. (17)

Binodini is the central character in this fascinating social drama that was a radical departure for women in classical Bengali literature. She is portrayed as, “the eternal feminine trudging through the ages in quest of her lover, weary with pain, distracted with longing, bursting the throb of desire, trailing through poetry, through song until she stands on the other shore crying ‘Ferry me across O boatman!’” (Iyengar 318) She evolves in many different ways throughout the story. Of all women characters in Tagore’s novels, Binodini is the most real, “convincing and full-blooded.” (Kripalani 2001, iv) The opening of the novel itself mentions how her father had spent so much money on her to be tutored by an English lady that he had nothing to offer to her as dowry in marriage. He had failed to find a suitable match for her and dies without giving her much money or a husband to depend on. This speaks volumes about the society in Binodini’s time. Women rarely received higher education. Moreover, the system of dowry was rampant and mandatory for survival and respect in the society. Soon after Mahendra refuses to marry her, Binodini is widowed after her marriage to Bipin, an undeserving “barbaric monkey of Barasat” or “*Barasater barbar bandor*” (*Chokher Bali*: 1902, 2: 415). Binodini’s entry into Mahendra’s household as a governess is her initiation into a world of happiness and sensual pleasures of which her untimely widowhood had deprived her. The blissful conjugal relationship between Asha and Mahendra intensifies her frustration and vengeance. It painfully reminds her of her physically, emotionally and intellectually deprived life. She sets out to captivate Mahendra, all the while befriending the innocent Asha, who is increasingly bewildered by the rapidly changing dynamics of relationships around her. Binodini assumes the *femme fatale*, thereby

unleashing the forces into motion that could destroy existing relationships. She is not ready to hide her burning beauty and desires within the white folds of her widow's attire. She, conceived as a 'new woman' in Bengali fiction, sets out to burn others and herself with the fire of her passions. However, as the story proceeds one gets the feeling that perhaps Tagore was sure of how to handle and shape this fiery seductress and so at the end her fire is doused and she is transformed into a repenting and a conforming woman who sacrifices her life and passion at the feet of her beloved and her redeemer. Binodini is the intelligent, impulsive, passionate, pulsating and throbbing lifeline of the novel. She shrewdly blends within herself, the polarities of the virgin and the whore, the seductress who also befriends the wife. She matures from a timid young girl who does not question the destiny of her marriage; she transforms into a blatantly sexual woman who draws courage from the fact that she has nothing to lose but bound to conform ultimately to the diktats of the moral world by a male author who also conforms to such existing moral codes. Tagore's voyeurism as a male author is visible here: he offers space to his protagonist and then chastises them for their transgression. Binodini's advances with her ruthless motives generally project her in a negative light as a vamp but her angelic regression from the object of her own yearnings presents a sudden contrast. The societal evil transforms a young woman to a widow. Tagore claims to be able to reflect her psyche and yet denounces her.

Binodini inspires diverse emotions in various members of the household. Rajlakshmi relies completely on Binodini for running the household smoothly. Bihari, the inveterate bachelor regards Binodini as a

poison tree who could ruin the family. Binodini is indeed found to be reading Bankimchandra's novel, *The Poison Tree* wherein a widow brings doom upon the family. Mahendra complains that Binodini has become his wife's latest obsession while Asha regards Binodini as a dear friend. Once Asha gets Binodini to meet Mahendra, Binodini enchants him with her beauty and repartee to such a degree that he is impelled to see her frequently, pretending to click photographs of her. Binodini also restores order and punctuality to the household. Teasing Asha for her incompetence, she takes upon herself the task of looking after Mahendra, his wardrobe, his food and sends him to college regularly. Binodini's solicitude can be recognized by Mahendra in everything in the house and even in Asha, whom Binodini dresses up every evening to receive him. According to Rajlakshmi, since Binodini did most of the work she gave Rajlakshmi respite from drudgery. Thus, Binodini carves a niche for herself in Mahendra's family within a short period of time. She has sufficient aptitude to exercise her superiority over everybody and make herself indispensable in the house. Here Mahendra's house can be viewed as an epitome of the social order. Given the opportunity, she would have proved herself worthy to be respected in any human society.

The way Binodini performs the numerous chores, she grows larger than life, like a super-woman. All these talents and energy are expended ultimately to please the man she supposes to love. Although she devises many schemes while staying in Mahendra's household, she could neither get rid of her baneful widowhood nor helps any woman (except Annapurna who has formerly undertaken all the household responsibilities because of Asha's incompetence) nor brings happiness into Asha's household. On the contrary

she fakes romantic advances towards Mahendra and Bihari, gains their displeasure and ruins Asha's conjugal happiness. Yet, Meena Shirwadkar remarks that the novel, "projects Indian fatalism fully operative clouding Binodini's life with perverse events." (17) Unfortunately this Indian fatalism does not affect men, but it victimizes women.

Binodini's character can be considered as a foil to the other three women in the novel. She surpasses Asha in education, maturity, sexual appeal and flair in managing the household chores. She befriends Asha but cannot overcome her coveted rivalry in winning Mahendra's affection. She excels Rajlakshmi in undertaking the smooth running of the house. She refuses to pamper Mahendra unlike Rajlakshmi but at the same time he matures under her care. Annapurna represents the typical widow of Tagore's contemporary society who conformed to all the rituals and restraints which the society dictated a widow to follow and which are still prevalent today. Binodini is a bold and rebellious widow who refuses to conform to her cultural forms and her ultimate fate and questioned the rationale of these codes on humanitarian grounds. Binodini had several causes for her crusade against the misery and destitution to which she is entitled as a widow. However, she projects much finesse compared to the other widows portrayed in popular novels of the day. Unlike Kunda, a widow in Bankimchandra's *Bishabriksha* Binodini does not commit suicide but accepts the adversity of life as a challenge. She asserts her identity in life—but that identity remains that of a widow. It finally leads her to her acceptance of the patriarchy. Tagore strangely draws her as a social rebel and a modern woman but makes her withdraw to the codes of convention. She decides to detach and disengage

herself and does it with much dignity, on her own terms, without surrendering herself. The rebellion in her heart is not condemned nor faced with retribution by Tagore, as is meted out to Shaibalini in Bankim's novel *Chandreshekhar*. Binodini thus comes across, "as a woman of great beauty and charm with contrary feelings and wishes and torn by rival passions that pull in different directions." (Kabir 37)

According to Amaresh Das, the household which could have honoured Binodini as Mahendra's wife receives her like a refugee. This increases both her prudence and her tact in handling issues concerning the intricacy of human relationships. (52- 53) Through the novel, Tagore had anticipated a time when women would demand their own individual position in the society. Hence, he casts the central character with beauty, intelligence and education suited to such a revolutionary age for women. *Binodini* narrates the story of a widow's revolt and her steadfast refusal to conform to a decadent society's moth-eaten morality at a time when widows willingly accepted the position of unpaid labourers in the society. However, she pays a huge price. The doomed Binodini's attraction to the two men creates an unspoken wedge between the two friends. Her spirit caves in, but she never loses her spiritedness, teasing and taunting the men in turns. The way she oscillates and shuttles between the passion of Mahendra and that of Bihari is the result of neither her fickle nor frivolous nature. It is because she has been treated continually as an object of pity, neglect and deprivation in the society that provokes her to do so. Binodini further clarifies her stance in a letter to Bihari, that she had been married to "an obscure unworthy man who died soon after the marriage and got erased out of her memory". (Idem.) Ever since then she has served the

sentence of a widow in an orthodox Indian society infested with irrational values and her life was no different from life-imprisonment. She argues in the letter about crusading for individuality and self-respect in the social order. Hence when she rises in Bihari's esteem, she experiences immense satisfaction of winning the respect of at least a single human being. In all the above-mentioned instances, she clearly projects her self-willed vivacious and attractive traits. Her imagination, stimulated by her voracious reading of romantic novels, is prompted by her imagination about the character and form of physical love. Her pitious plight of loneliness inspires sympathy in the reader as it did in Rajlakshmi. Binodini always believes that if Mahendra or Bihari had agreed to marry her then she would never have had to encounter such misfortune. The seed of rancour and resent takes root with this rejected proposal of marriage and makes her act the way she does in the novel.

The second stage of evolution of Binodini's character involves the rift between Bihari and Mahendra. Through the subversion of male authority women have often tried to assert themselves and thus, widen their own space. It may be granted that,

Binodini also successfully undermined male domination and male ego by making Mahendra grovel before her and then quietly transferring her loyalty to Bihari...she subverted the social norm as well as the individual norms of behaviour...she had the fortitude to take her own decision and stick by it which is the ultimate testimony to the realization of one's self-identity. (Mukhia 69)

The third stage of Binodini's love consists of her fall from Bihari's high esteem for her. Her tragedy stems from her oscillating between two men who lack the courage to procure for her a place of social honour for which she pines. But,

being moved by Bihari's instinctive integrity and strength of character, she begins to nurse a futile passion for him, earning in return only his contempt because he sees her only as a widow but "offers to marry her more out of his desire to protect Asha from unhappy developments than out of love for her." (Kabir 37) She resists his marriage proposal as this would have led to the latter's defamation and social ostracism. She says, "*Chhi chhi, e katha mone korite lajja hoy. Ami vidhava, ami nindita, samasta samajer kachhe ami tomake lanchhito koribo, e kokhono hoitei parena...*" (*Chokher Bali*, 2: 508) "The very thought of it is shameful. I am a widow and, besides a woman in disgrace. I can never allow you to lose caste on my account...." (*Binodini* 243) Her profound love for him forbids her to accept his sympathy. If she fails to win his affection, then it is better that she should remain free. With both pain and dignity, she refuses the proposal and resolves to withdraw from the life of Asha and Mahendra. She chooses to aid Bihari in rendering his selfless medical services to the poor. Moreover, she possibly starts believing what she had once told Asha in jest: "*Maran chhara to sohager lok amar ar kehoi nai.*" (*Chokher Bali*, 2: 435) "Death is the only bridegroom I can ever have." (*Binodini* 109)

Binodini, however, shows a multitude of noble traits in her. Her love and sympathy is extended not only to the members of Mahendra's family like Asha and Bihari, but she also nurses the servants when they are ill. She loves and respects Rajlakshmi. She partakes of revelry only after attending to the sick Rajlakshmi and discharging the household chores. She can also trace the psychology of people around her. It has been rightly observed that "Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated woman, who are no

longer prepared to be downtrodden by the society but fight to assert their rights.” (Singh 50)

Asha is the second important woman in the novel. The novel traces her growth from the teenaged, unlettered and naive bride of the hedonistic, manipulative and opportunistic Mahendra to a mature and responsible woman at the helm of Mahendra’s household. Being an orphan Asha is brought by her uncle Anukul Babu of Shyambazar. He is anxious to get Asha married as soon as possible without offering a dowry. The story of the novel moves around the rich, flamboyant Mahendra and his simple, demure, sweet, gentle, forbearing, beautiful wife Asha - a young couple who are befriended by the pragmatic Bihari. She ignores all the duties of an ideal daughter-in-law to spend time with her husband who also neglects his medical studies. Tagore describes Asha who blossoms into womanhood as

Jekhane tahar rakter sambandha chhilo, sekhane se kakhono attiyotar dabi korite pai nai: aaj porer ghare asiya se jakhan bina prarthanay ek nikatotama sambandha ebang nihsandigdha adhikar prapta hoilo, jakhan sei ajatnalalita anather mastake swami sahaste lakkhir mukut paraiya dilen takhan se apan gaurabpad grahan korite leshmatra bilamba korilo na, nabobodhujogyo lajjabhoy dur koriya dia saubhagyaboti streer mohimar muhurter madhyei swamir padaprante asonkoche apon singhasan adhikar korilo. (Chokher Bali, 2: 383)

In the uncle’s house where she had passed her maidenhood she had almost no rights; in the new home which she entered as a stranger she found herself the darling of a devoted husband. The neglected orphan was suddenly seated on the throne as the queen of her husband’s domain. Naturally and gracefully without any hesitation, she assumed the new role assigned to her casting aside the bashful timidity of a new bride she took her rightful place by her husband’s side in the proud dignity of a beloved wife. (*Binodini* 17)

Mahendra also keeps her confined to the room, under the pretext of educating her. This embarrasses both Annapurna and Rajlakshmi to such an extent that the former taunts Mahendra: “*Ekhonkar meyeder moto novel paria, carpet bunia, babu hoia thaka ki bhalo?*” (*Chokher Bali*, 2: 382) Would you rather have her as a modern girl, lazily lounging about the whole day reading novels or fancy knitting, waited upon by others? (*Binodini* 15)

According to the critic M. Sarada, Asha’s lack of dexterity in household chores may be compared to that of Hemnalini in *The Wreck* and stands in contrast to Kamala in the same novel. (36) Like Hemnalini, she too is painfully aware of her lack of accomplishments. She forms a sharp contrast with Binodini. Being simple-minded and straight forward, Asha has no inkling of the possible hazardous consequences of permitting another woman—and that too of Binodini’s beauty and competence—in the house. Being an orphan she has been always made to feel that she can exercise no right. As a child-wife she is like a benign planet in contrast to the ‘Saturn’- like Binodini who has scattered to the winds the bonds of friends, the bonds of wedded love, the peace and sanctity of the family. (Sogani 119) While Asha is timid, Binodini is strong, self-willed and outgoing. Asha gets entrenched in domesticity but Binodini moves towards freedom and self-dependence. Asha nurses a complex which makes her unduly shy before strangers as though she is constantly on guard against any possible rebuff. For Binodini, Asha is a triumphant rival and tension mounts when the two first meet. As a bewitching widow Binodini manages to strike a winsome rapport with Asha. The latter is overawed by Binodini’s beauty, grace and intelligence. She rears the poison plant called

Binodini that her mother-in-law has planted till it poisons her own marital relationship. She provides Binodini vicarious delight by narrating their private conjugal life. She rouses Binodini's dormant, frustrated longings. She naively introduces Binodini to Mahendra failing to apprehend the risk of doing so. She even provokes him to become intimate with her. The dissolute Mahendra soon succumbs to Binodini's charm. This unleashes savage passions that rage until the peaceful home is nearly burnt.

Asha's inferiority complex intensifies on facing the extrovert Binodini, who exploits every opportunity to take full charge of the household and attends to the personal comforts of Mahendra and his mother with astonishing ease. Asha also becomes the victim of the envy of the two widows—Rajlakshmi and Binodini. Asha recognizes her husband's true character only when she chances upon Binodini's letter to him reproaching him. On realizing the truth, she begins to flounder in a sea of despair. Being crest-fallen, Asha is unable to integrate the cruel contents of the letter with the ideal character of Binodini. Soon after Mahendra's scandalous elopement with Binodini, Asha does not collapse or break down, but rises to the occasion and asserts her position in the house. Her devoted care for Rajlakshmi wins the latter's sympathy. Mahendra's god-like image that has been enshrined in her heart crumbles down as he has degraded the sanctity of married life. She differs with Mahendra's mother in the belief that it is the wife's responsibility to prevent her husband from deviating from the path of virtue. She refuses to attempt to win back her husband's affection. Mahendra stoops so low in her esteem that she feels ashamed to acknowledge him as her husband. From a simple-minded woman she evolves into a rational and practical woman who

refuses to indulge in self-pity. She voraciously pours over her primers, novels and journals and educates herself. The enormity of her tragedy transforms her

from a naive, innocent girl-bride to a commanding, self-assured householder. She was deserted by her husband in favour of another woman. The humiliation involved in it must have been heart-rending, but that did not provoke her to abandon all her duties and responsibilities which devolved upon her in her husband's absence. It, on the other hand, provided her with a rare sense of power and self-possession and also had given her a distinct identity. For no longer was she a puppet following all the whimsical commands of her husband without protests. She was now a self-assured individual with a clear sense of purpose in her demeanour and action. Even her husband was amazed at her transformation. (Mukhia 79)

Asha may be seen emerging like a phoenix from the ruins of a broken conjugal relationship to become the lady of the house, assuming complete control over the family. Perhaps Binodini was instrumental in bringing over the change in her and Asha subconsciously begins to vie with her competence and live up to the standards that Binodini sets to achieve domestic excellence; and thereby prevail over all the members and acquaintances of the family. B. Majumdar aptly comments:

The transformation of Asha from a simple, artless and incompetent to an efficient mistress of the household commanding respect from every one concerned is one of the chief attractions of the novel... Asha had every claim on the affection of Mahendra and yet she could not retain it for long because of the strong counter-attraction from Binodini. (216)

Asha, the dependant and betrayed woman, emerges as a dutiful woman in power at the helm of the family which once looked down upon her. She takes over the responsibilities of the family. Mahendra loses his authority

or power in his own house and has to stand outside his mother's room burdened with guilt, and wait. Hence Perrot remarks, "Domestic heroines, with their suffering, sacrifices and virtue restore the harmony of the household and family peace. They had the power and the duty--to do good." (qtd. in Mukhia) According to Mukhia, by 'doing good' Asha carves her niche, her rightful space in the household and in her husband's heart, which can be perceived in Mahendra's unconditional admiration for his wife and in admission of his guilt. The acceptance of his guilt, transforms their relationship. Asha is

now an empowered woman, deriving her authority from her conscious effort to 'do good' to others. The foregrounding of her husband's guilt and his sense of shame, on the other hand legitimatizes the power and authority assumed by her in her husband's absence and in his household. This, in its turn, created the other Asha who could establish her moral authority over her guilty husband ever so confidently. (Mukhia 79)

Rajlakshmi, the mother of Mahendra is an egotistic and arrogant widow. She bestows excessive affection on him and thereby pampers him and spoils him, making him stubborn and impetuous. With a sardonic attitude, she may be compared to Harimohini in *Gora* and her caustic words resemble those of Bara-Rani in *The Home and the World*. Rajlakshmi is totally indifferent to public gossip. Being an embodiment of envy and malice, she is a contrast to Annapurna who is both sympathetic and virtuous. The two sisters-in-law are bound in an intimate relationship, co-habiting in the same house since childhood and mutually sharing their joys and sorrows. The misunderstandings between the women begin to develop soon after Mahendra attains his adolescence since he valued Annapurna's views more than those of his own mother. Infuriated and feeling insecure by his respect

and concern for Annapurna, her bitterness for her own widowed sister-in-law increases and becomes more evident soon after Mahendra's marriage to Asha. Their differences become more pronounced when Rajlakshmi fails to prevent her son from marrying Asha despite her objection to the match. She spares no opportunity to reproach Annapurna for every mistake that Asha committed.

Conforming to the hollow ideals of the Hindu traditional mother-in-law, Rajlakshmi looks down upon Asha as unworthy of her son and regards her as an unsolicited intruder into her family. She forces on Asha the household drudgery, odd errands and makes her massage her feet, keep her company and sleep beside her. She is often seized by the terror that Asha might further widen the schism between Rajlakshmi and the remaining members of the family. She thinks that Asha would secure the undivided attention of Mahendra who would hence be estranged from her. Being a conceited mother, she sneers at Annapurna to such a degree that the latter is compelled to leave the house for Kashi. Her unsympathetic and self-pitying nature leads her to the loss of not only Annapurna's support but also the affection of Mahendra and Asha. She is doting and loving but imperious and possessive. Rajlakshmi faces many situations in which she repents her decisions. For example, being overwhelmed by Binodini's caring nature, she feels sorry for not making her Mahendra's bride. Later in the story, she repents of entrusting Mahendra to Binodini's care in Asha's absence and dismisses her as an evil sorceress. Towards the end of the novel Rajlakshmi experiences remorse for having rebuked Asha in the past and for misunderstanding her affection for over-indulgence. Thus, Rajlakshmi is a commonplace mother who is too

engrossed in the world of her only son Mahendra with all his whims, eccentricities and frivolities. Bihari, Mahendra's close friend, is almost a son to her. Yet, it cannot be denied that she treats him only as a shadow of Mahendra or a surrogate son and not her real son. A mother of her kind is perhaps accepted as a role model in the middle-class society in our country.

According to M. Sarada:

In the character of Rajlakshmi, Tagore points out how mothers like her, due to lack of education, wisdom and being ignorant of the ways of the world, spoil their children by pampering them and thus bring misery to every one around them. (Sarada 33)

Of the three widows portrayed in *Binodini* Annapurna is the most ardent follower of social customs. She is widowed at a tender age and like Binodini retains only a shadowy image of her husband. As a childless widow she endures a great deal of humiliation but she endures them stoically with her unshaken faith in God. Mahendra follows her advice to arrive at important decisions. Though childless, she treats both Mahendra and Bihari as her own sons. Both Mahendra and Asha seek solace in her unrestrained affection. Being generous and affectionate, she bequeaths all her share of family property to Mahendra and a pair of thick gold bangles to Bihari for his bride. As a self-sacrificing and self-respecting woman, she feels ashamed, humiliated and disgusted with the couple's over-indulgence. Hence she abandons the house and sets out for Kashi to spend her remaining life in Lord's devotion. However, it is through her absence that Asha realises her inadequacy. Despite her love and sacrifices her unfortunate life only brings unhappiness and her misery leads her to conclude that her life is futile and crowded with rebuff. She inspires Asha to accept the difficulties in life

courageously. Her affection for Bihari is unconditional as though he were her own son. Thus, she is a humble and sympathetic woman who never turns bitter despite all the rebuffs she faces in life and inspires the other women in the novel to follow her example through her actions.

Mukhia observes that a number of women characters in Bengali fiction represent the motherly figure of the mythical *Annapurna* to the people around them. Leela Dube comments: “The ideal of *Annapurna*, the unfailing supplier of food, is accepted across different regions of India.” (qtd. in Mukhia 29) Sogani aptly reviews her character,

Annapurna, like a *deus ex machina*, performs the task of resolving all conflicts and bring about a reconciliation among the various characters. Responding to Asha’s call for help, she leaves her peaceful seclusion of Kashi to attend on Rajlakshmi’s family and unite the family before her death. She brings Bihari back to the house from where he had been banished, and assigns to him the task of finding Mahendra and restoring him to his wife and mother. Due to her benign influence, Rajlakshmi is able to forgive the transgressors before her death...Annapurna forgives Mahendra for his lapses..., persuades Asha to overcome her resentment against Binodini and treat her with simple friendliness...Finally, she takes the erring Binodini under her wing in a spirit of true compassion to assist in her moral recovery. (Sogani 162)

In the mixed and ambivalent emotions of Binodini, we see Tagore’s attempt to question gender stereotypes that hold true till date — the conflict between social morality and the need for emotional freedom. *Binodini* was perhaps the forerunner in portraying the psychological conflicts and the passions of a young widow. It also depicts the central character Binodini in a persuasive manner. The other three women characters Asha, Rajlakshmi and

Annapurna expose the trauma that women were often doomed to encounter in a joint family of that time. Harimati receives importance only as Binodini's mother who features only in the beginning but disappears in the remaining part of the novel. Two pairs of contrasting women have been shown: Binodini and Asha who belong to the younger generation; and Rajlakshmi and Annapurna who belong to the older generation. It is arguable as to who is the bolder woman of the two: Binodini, who tampers with a couple's conjugal happiness or Asha, who fails to keep Mahendra in her bond of affection for long. While Rajlakshmi is seen to deviate from the path of virtue, blinded by the affection for her own son, Annapurna remains steadfast despite all the agony she endures. Both Binodini and Rajlakshmi have been flouting and have been indifferent to social norms: while the former overtly expresses her sexual desires, the latter cares least about the gossips and suggestions from other people but follows the dictates of her heart. Binodini, Rajlakshmi and Annapurna are all widows, yet they assert their individuality in their own distinct ways. Asha nearly loses Mahendra but secures an individual identity only in Mahendra's absence. Asha or Ashalata 'the creeper' becomes 'a sturdy oak'. Another debatable point is about the person responsible for restoring Mahendra to the path of righteousness. The reason for Mahendra's return to Asha may be due to her own virtues or because Binodini spurned him. However, it is certain that if Mahendra had never met Binodini then Asha would never have recognized his true nature, since it is only in adversity that one's real character comes to the surface.

Throughout the novel, Tagore maintains his deft authorial flourishes along with a gentle irony while commenting on human frailty. The alternately

lithe and pithy dialogue underscores the abject state of widows in India. This novel was not the first to project the problem of young Hindu widows which came to the forefront in the middle of the last century by the abolition, in 1829, of the inhuman practice of *Sati*. The sad plight and the disturbing influence of young widows—young due to the prevalence of child-marriages in Hindu marriages—had been used as a motif by Bankimchandra Chatterjee in his novels *Bishavriksha* and *Krishnakanter Uil*. Despite Vidysagar's philanthropic efforts in getting the Widow Remarriage Act passed in 1856, the widow continued to be perceived as an incarnation of ill-omens. The young widows Rohini in *Bishavriksha* and Kundanandini in *Krishnakanter Uil* are shown as bringing doom to the families they marry into. Lacking psychological delineation, they pose as *femmes fatales* without any redeeming features which Bankim uses to moralize about the hazardous consequences of unharnessed carnal desires. In contrast, according to a critic, in *Binodini*, Tagore has etched with profound humane insight the dialectical tension and conflict in the feminine psyche: the anger, frustration, defence mechanisms, revenge, passions, desires and aspirations—natural to a charming and beautiful young widow. (Raj 22) She is, hence, alluded to as the second poison tree in the novel by Bihari. Tagore's radical departure from Bankim's novel is marked by a shift from a rhetorical to a psychological characterization. These sharp feminist attributes of Tagore's novel bear a powerful testimony of the female empowerment. Replete with beguiling moments, *Binodini* is both a story with a love triangle and a microcosm of a traditional society moving slowly and painfully towards modernity. Tagore did not want the novel to be censored by his reading public. Therefore he

engineered a palatable end to it in order to suit the psyche of the society. He wanted women to internalize Binodini's positive traits, have their own convictions or views of life and live life on their own terms.

Kripalani aptly summarises Binodini's character as

a beautiful, talented and well-educated girl (who) cannot get a husband because the parents have spent what little they had on her education and could not save enough for the dowry. In panic—since an unmarried girl over twelve years of age is a social disgrace to a respectable Hindu family of the day—she is married off to a poor and sickly nobody who dies soon after, leaving her stranded in an unsympathetic village. Conscious of beauty and wit she rebels against the unjust privations of a bleak and humiliated existence to which as a widow she is condemned for life and asserts her right to love and happiness. She burns her fingers and nearly burns up a home. In the end she retires from the contest it is not because she is crushed but because she disdains a victory achieved at too sordid a cost. Her tragedy is a lasting shame to the Hindu conscience. (*Binodini* iv)

Ghare-Baire (The Home and the World)

Tagore structured *Ghare-Baire* (1916; first translated in 1959 as *The Home and the World*) such that three main characters represent the turmoil of the Partition looming large on India's horizon. Each of these characters harboured personal doubts and the habits of place and class, but none of them had anticipated the tremendous revolution that was lurking for them with drastic results just before the British quit India. The plot of this novel has been as powerful as it has been in its adaptation as a screenplay for the film of the same name, directed by Satyajit Ray and released in 1984.

Bimala, married to Nikhilesh (or Nikhil), remains confined within the traditional domestic privacy. She harbours no expectations from her life and never deviates from her domestic duties. Nikhil, educated and enlightened, wants his wife to come out of the secluded existence and realize the real worth of married life and in the process to be able to know the real worth of the man she has married. They are a happily married couple until Sandip a revolutionary activist, whom Nikhil supports financially but not ideologically, comes to Nikhil's *zamindari* and makes his friend's house the centre for carrying on his political activities. Being demonstrative in his emotions, he strikes a special chord of friendship with her before long. He manipulates his background as a political activist and a freedom-fighter and then he begins extolling her potential as her devotee. He idealizes her as the epitome of "Mother" India; he pursues Bimala without reservation, driven by his mission. Flattered by Sandip's attention, Bimala questions the nature of her marriage and her role as a woman. His supposedly unbiased notions about the service to the country and the vital roles that women can play in this sphere assumes undertones of his personal interest and produces a mesmerizing impact on Bimala's body and soul. Nikhil, who never looks upon his wife as his personal possession but an independent individual, remains only a silent spectator without interfering in Bimala's affairs. To prevent the rift between Bimala and Nikhil from widening Nikhil's elder sister-in-law, out of affectionate consideration for him warns him against the imminent breakdown of the relationship. The climax comes with Bimala's own realisation of Sandip's real character. His avaricious nature eclipses the noble in him. He provokes the eruption of communal violence among Nikhil's subjects. Nikhil goes out to

quell the fire. The story ends with the news of Nikhil's serious injury and the uncertainty of his survival floating up to Bimala's conscience stricken feverish self.

Thus, the three characters embark upon an emotional journey that permanently changes their lives, just as India lurches into a lengthy period of upheaval and unrest. This era of tremendous social change would resonate across the country in unspeakable acts of violence, irrevocable change of lives. Of the three, Sandip is transparently shallow, while Nikhil thoughtfully considers every aspect before embarking on a course of action, a quality that works to his detriment. Both men indulge in lengthy discourses. The allegorical nature of this tale is evident as the characters plunge headlong into a chaotic future which they could never have anticipated and which costs Bimala dear. *Ghare-Baire* presents a rhetoric of some kind of revolution. Tagore stringently critiques its glorification. Bimala gets instigated by it and questions her hitherto happy marriage only to realize the falseness of the sophistication of such a revolution.

The Home and the World embodies two aspects of socio-political significance—the political upheaval against the British and a wife's emotional involvement with one other than her husband. Against the backdrop of the political overtones Tagore exposes the misty desires of the high society *zamindars*. At both the levels the novel centres on intrusion, usurping and ousting of a foreign power in a domain. On the one hand, the British government swindles the Indians in their own domain leading them to ruin by tempting them with unfulfilled promises. Similarly, Sandip intrudes into Nikhil's

domain and like an impostor attempts to extract both wealth and sensual pleasures and alters situations to satisfy his vested interest by flattering Bimala. Through this novel, Tagore bitterly critiques the violence of ostentatious flashy nationalism, just as W. B. Yeats (who has also translated Tagore's Gitanjali) was critical of the violence of the Irish National Revolution opining that the death of innumerable people in Easter 1916 (in a poem by him of the same title) seemed futile. Both these poets believed that it is impossible to achieve a Utopian world by breaking up a home which is the microcosm of the world. Therefore, happiness within is inevitable for happiness outside. The novel is a

poignant story of a woman who suffers terrible mental agony and turmoil by taking part in the Swadeshi Movement and is torn asunder by the conflicting loyalties to the house and the outside world. Tagore elevates the simple story of a love triangle to literary heights by making the two male characters in the novel, Nikhilesh and Sandip, represent the conflict between realism of truth and illusion. (Sarada 77)

The Home and the World stands distinctly apart from the other novels of Tagore which revolve around the theme of love. It depicts for the first time in Indian literature the socially offensive passions of a woman of society. Bimala is the first Indian woman to make a "frank analysis of her illegal passion." Tagore deviates from the traditional linear method of narration and makes the three chief characters of the novel narrate from their own points of view, offering a glimpse of the mental conflict of each but it often makes them sound self-conscious and artificial. Hence when Bimala goes through incessant turmoil she fails to arouse the sympathy of the reader. The long monologues of the characters fail to heighten the gravity of the impending

doom of the complex characters like Nikhil and Bimala. The novel touches upon the issues concerning the significance of a woman at home and outside. Tagore favours Nikhil's realistic ideologies against the idealistic ones of Sandip. The British had appointed titular heads who were called *zamindars*, who collected revenues which went into the coffers of the British. However, Nikhil essays something different: Tagore uses Nikhil as a mouthpiece to convey that service to the humanity should be privileged above human relations. In his essay "Nationalism in India", Tagore reminds us: "The degradation which we cast upon others in our pride or self-interest degrades our own humanity—and this is the punishment which is most terrible, because we do not detect it till it is too late." (129) For example, at Sandip's instance when Bimala asks Nikhil to withdraw foreign goods from his Suksara market Nikhil refuses her, thereby incurring her displeasure. Yet, Nikhil knows that if he agrees then the poor people who thrive on the transaction of such goods would be doomed. Krishna Kripalani points out that "the novel is equally a testament of Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, of love and truth, of his insistent warning that evil means must vitiate the end, however nobly conceived." (qtd. in Sarada 79) He further mentions that *The Home and the World* was Tagore's powerful retort to those who had accused him of deserting the Swadeshi Movement. Like Nikhil he had also incurred huge financial losses in attempting to manufacture Indian goods, which proved futile for want of adequate machinery and technical know-how.

The novel describes Bimala's transition from the *zenana* to the world outside. She represents both the traditional and liberated classes of women. In *The Wreck* Kamala represents the traditional conservative class while

Hemnalini is a free-thinking woman. Similarly in *Binodini* Asha stands for a traditional woman while Binodini is an advanced educated woman. Bimala, a *zamindar's* wife, is a sensitive, tall, dark, slim, "lanky" woman with lustrous eyes. She often laments about God's injustice to her because she inherits the dark complexion from her mother. She compensates for her plain appearances by aspiring to be an ideal traditional Hindu wife like her mother. She has learnt from her mother that beauty alone is not a woman's asset but service and devotion to her husband are equally important. It is due to this reason that Bimala seems to evoke the tradition-bound aesthetic of Hindu womanhood to suggest that such a privilege of the mode of being she has inherited from her mother. This mode, "with its fusing of love and worship, stitched the woman securely with an ancestral tradition, a shared female world, a feminine form that was recognised universally as beautiful." (Sarkar 2003, 28) Her story started with a memory of her mother clad in a conventional red-bordered *sari* vermilion powder in the parting of her hair. Bimala recalls with nostalgic regret the bestowal of all the conjugal happiness that a traditional Hindu girl is brought up to dream about and often does not attain.

For nine years, Bimala discharges the duties of a traditional Hindu wife. She receives the luxury of all the amenities that even a modern woman may rarely find. Like a conventional wife, she begins her day by consecrating herself by the dust of her husband's feet. She considers sacred everything associated with her husband. She preserves his letters in a sandalwood box and worships his photograph with flowers. She is aware that her husband detests such idolatry and denies her any opportunity to venerate him. Bimala

considers this his greatness. Yet she wishes that he accept her services, which she has been trained to render right from her parents' home to the palace where she arrives upon her marriage. Since she neither belongs to an illustrious family nor is endowed with beauty, she considers it to be her great fortune to be bestowed with the honour of becoming the younger daughter-in-law (*Chota Rani*) in a *zamindar's* family. Perhaps the habit of receiving excessive happiness later prompts her to step down from the position of the queen of the fairy tale Prince to Sandip's Queen Bee and Mother Goddess for an intangible cause of the nation and meet her tragic fall.

She has been instilled with the belief that a woman's salvation lies in surrendering her pride to her husband through devotion. The daughters-in-law of the Rajah's (Nikhil's) house would never leave its seclusion and were called "*Khachar pakhi*" or "*caged birds*" but according to *Bimala*, "*Ei khachar madhye amar eto dhorechhe je bishweo ta dhorena.*" (*Ghare Baire*, 4: 479) "I had so much in this cage of mine that there was not room for it in the universe--..." (*The Home and the World* 9) However *Bimala* often remains deprived of her husband's attention like *Charulata* in Tagore's short story *Nashta Nir* (*The Broken Nest*). *Nikhil* who is an idealist aristocrat, has his duties on the estate, his tenants to look after, his business managers to confer with, family members to attend to and visits to Calcutta to keep him engaged. Hence *Bimala* is left to the care and mercy of the women folk.

Nikhil's grandmother and the older daughter-in-law (*Bara Rani*) are the only other elderly women in *Nikhil's* household and *Bimala* pleases them by keeping them company and engages them in their own way. For example,

she would read out short stories to Nikhil's grandmother from English books. Contrary to those of Bimala, Nikhil's views about a conjugal relationship are quite advanced. An important aspect of the emerging Bengali *bhadralok* was alleviating the status of women in the society. Like Nikhil, Bengali men often began the process by educating their wives and daughters. As the Tagore family had done, turning some of the women in the household into highly enlightened and accomplished individuals. Brahmo families tried to emulate the Tagores. (Mukhia 43) As Mukhia observes, "Women coming out of the *purdah* and receiving a certain amount of education albeit within a restricted curriculum were more or less the order of the day, at least in the educated society of the Bengali elites." (Idem.) As a result conjugal relationship improved and the concept of companionate marriage gradually acquired shape in the mind of the elite Bengali society as portrayed in *The Home and the World*. Being a twentieth-century man, Nikhil wishes to bring Bimala out of the *purdah*, initiate her into the outside world and mould her personality from a mere wife to an individual. However, Bimala hesitates to attach much importance to her husband's contention and it is only when she comes out of the four walls or the *purdah* does she realize her own value as well as her husband's. He wants her to relate to him on an equal footing and not worship him. He treats his wife with loving consideration without ever imposing his authority over her. He values the affection which is offered out of free will and in the open competition with the outside world and not as an obligation or duress.

B. C. Chakravorty points out that Nikhil wishes Bimala to know the larger world so that her love might develop unfettered by the bonds of matrimonial life. (207) According to Sarkar,

This dangerous freedom is catastrophic in its consequences; it disrupts moral and social orders fatally and destroys Bimala's feminine selfhood by presenting her with difficult choices that she cannot handle. Bimala thus concludes her final narrative with the conviction that the new modernity is compatible with Hindu female selfhood. Her contention that her stature of the Hindu wife is equal in real terms through a paradoxical act of submission and adoration is also an argument that Hindu cultural nationalist had regularly used during the debates on marriage reform in the late nineteenth century. (Sarkar 2003, 29)

In a Bengali household, wherein the wife was confined to the *zenana*, it was difficult to give her the freedom realized in the outer world. Nikhil had appointed an English governess, Miss Gilby as a tutor to Bimala. Nikhil believed that a woman should come out of the *purdah* to realize her true worth. He thought that he and Bimala need to meet and recognize each other in the real world to find out if their love is true. Bimala, however, is reluctant and unprepared to be confronted by the outer world. Bimala embraces the rigidity of aristocracy though she was born in a lower middle class family. This prompts Nikhil to believe that Bimala has only come into his home but not into his life. For a civilized and reformed appearance, she entertains her fastidious tastes by succumbing to extravagant dressing ignoring Bara Rani's bitter remarks. She makes an ostentatious display of European goods before her special guests. Conscious of her rank she is reluctant to part with her right as the mistress of the household. She staunchly considers that one ought to stand up for one's own rights. Hence, she refuses to accompany Nikhil to

Calcutta for his higher studies, lest Bara Rani, whom she regards her rival, should take charge of the establishment, during her absence. Bimala rationalizes that to go away leaving everything in the hands of her enemy is nothing short of accepting defeat.

The advent of Swadeshi movement synchronises with Bimala's modern education and alters her narrow outlook on life and society. Mesmerized under the impact of Sandip's eloquent speech, an impulsive Bimala removes the screen of the *zenana* and under his spell she no longer feels like the lady of the Rajah's family but the sole representative of Bengal's womanhood. She is entranced by his euphoric praises becoming oblivious to everything else around her. Being both gullible and vulnerable she begins to believe that "...*amake jeno samasto desher bhari darkar.*" (*Ghare Baire*, 4: 496) "... all the country was in need of me (her)." (*The Home and the World* 31) With the passage of time Bimala becomes aware of her illegitimate entanglement with Sandip. During her first meeting with Sandip his dynamic and charismatic personality and impetuous vitality fascinates and hypnotises her beside which her husband's love of truth, eternal and absolute, seems to be very thin. Her devotion to the country is combined with her attraction of the country's hero, Sandip. (Sengupta 223) Being selfish and crafty, he flatters Bimala as the incarnation of *Shakti* (power), who is the source of inspiration to all the comrades of Bengal. (B. C. Chakravorty 207) Before long, she realizes that this indulgent man had been deluding her. Bimala is aware that in Sandip's appeals his worship of the country got subtly interwoven with his worship of herself. It is for this reason that E. M. Forster described the novel as a

“boarding-house of flirtation that masks itself in mystic or patriotic talk.” (qtd. in Sarada 83)

She assumes that she has lost her home and her way. The end and the means had become equally shadowy to her. Yet she is conscious of the strength that she possesses. She perceives herself as untamed Shakti and the Universal embodiment of joy. Blinded by the brilliance of her own glory, she holds the overweening conviction that none could deprive her of what she wanted. While Sandip wants to deify Bimala, Nikhil wants her to realize her own individual self. It is Amulya’s report about Sandip’s character that acquaints her with the gruesome reality about him. She feels repelled from him, withdraws from temptations and is thus, thwarted from committing adultery. She sees him in his true colours, and realises that all his eloquence was mere bluster and all his songs of praise false. She discovers that behind the sparkle of Sandip’s brilliance, there is “a slime of weakness, cowardice and meanness, and she recoils in disgust”. (Sengupta 223)

For Bimala retreating to Nikhil is like the river of love meeting the sea of worship. She assumes that she has passed through fire and nothing—neither herself, nor anybody else would frighten her. K. V. Surendran points out that what is inflammable had been burnt to ashes and what is left is deathless. Bimala surrenders herself to the person who accepts her sins into the depths of his own pain. (11) Her remarks on womanhood reveal a new acceptance of the limited sphere of activity and self-expression of womanhood. P. K. Datta mentions that Bimala declares that if women keep to their ‘banks’, they

provide nourishment, if they want more then they destroy all that they are.

(17)

Sandip works on Bimala's sentiments which is facilitated by his professed, unflinching devotion to the cause of the country's freedom and selfless sacrifice for it. Yet, it is imbued with mutual sexual attraction, though never overtly expressed. Under his impact she is prepared to go against her husband's express interests. Nikhil does not favour Sandip's brand of patriotism. He chooses to remain a silent spectator while his wife drifts away from him as he was too gentle to intervene and restore his wife forcibly. With his intellectual insight Nikhil can comprehend the loopholes in the marital relationship and can see its roots in Bimala's mental make-up and innate drawbacks. Nikhil is sensitive, his sense of justice and fair play and his sympathetic understanding of human nature, particularly women's nature marks him out as a diametric foil to Sandip. Sandip is aggressive, blatantly assertive and hence irresistible to Bimala, who laments the lack of this conventional masculinity in her husband's character. The apparent undercurrent of sexuality in their relationship is the danger that she tries to avert as much as she welcomes it. It is this mixture of joy, elation and apprehension, which provokes her to stand on the threshold of the ominous from the viewpoint of the society and herself. She becomes prepared for the inevitable retribution—desertion from one's own kin. As a result, her relationship with Sandip thrives on "the dual sense of glory and triumph as well as of guilt and shame". (Mukhia 48-49) The approach these two characters take to Swadeshi is worth mentioning here. Nikhil's approach is limited to personal use: he uses country-made goods and tries to manufacture

some of them himself but realises that adopting en masse would adversely affect the poor inhabitants within his territory. Sandip, for whom the term is more of a heroic catch-phrase, exploits this purported difference of opinion and wins Bimala to his side.

Bimala does not really step out of the confines of her domesticity. In the form of Sandip, the world outside actually enters, outlives its invitation, threatens to stain Bimala's chastity, gives her the disrepute of "Robber Queen" from Bara Rani, pains her with the angst of her guilty conscience and demands from Amulya the sacrifice of his life to release Bimala from the serpentine coils of Sandip's world outside. A. Dutt rightly points out:

The home itself probably runs like clockwork with an army of maids and servants carrying out their duties... Bimala is also childless after nine years of marriage and though there is no complaint from the family in this regard, the situation cannot be one of satisfaction for Bimala. There are no visits to or from her parents' home either which is why her relationship with Amulya as the younger brother to be loved and protected develops so rapidly. It is really that and not ultimately her love for Nikhil that saves her from the devastating grip of Sandip. Bimala feels she is in love with Sandip because through him she is embracing a cause and through his words she feels she is representing India, and its womanly strength—Shakti. It is unfair to say that Bimala has an extra-marital affair because theirs is only a platonic relationship. There is no sex between them, only a book that is rather explicit on the subject that he knows she has been reading which he rather vulgarly or maybe mischievously discusses in her presence. (A. Dutt 2002, 25)

Nikhil's unblemished character and his true unswerving love for Bimala makes her cast her lover aside, repent and retreat back to him. Hence it cannot be agreed that Bimala "retraces her steps and comes back to her husband ...on

account of a revulsion of feeling towards her lover". (B. C. Chakravorty 208) Nikhil has faith and trust in his own love and does not hesitate setting her at her free will. Bimala's happy re-union with Nikhil is short-lived. At the end of the story, Nikhil is brought home from the outbreak of the communal riots, in a palanquin with a serious injury in the head. The conclusion is open-ended as it is not clear whether Nikhil survives or not. It has been rightly remarked that

Bimala is able to realise the explosive potentialities of a self-centred Sandip who under the guise of a chauvinistic stance unscrupulously exploits the religious and patriotic sentiments of the people with disastrous results –almost breaking Bimala's homelife by postulating a false connection between the home and the world. (Raj 63)

Bimala grows and matures through the conflicts within herself created by these contrasting characters and she finally discovers herself. In a detailed study of the novel Ashish Nandy remarks that Bimala is the link between two forms of patriotism the men represent. (qtd. in S. K. Das 73) She is not only the symbol for which Sandip and Nikhil fight, but her personality incorporates the contesting selves of the two protagonists and becomes the battlefield on which the two forms of patriotism fight for supremacy. Nandy further notes Nikhil's form finally triumphs, but at an enormous social and personal cost. (Idem.) Sandip despises Nikhil's brand of patriotism which does not approve of boycotting England-made goods and burning them because the poor could not afford to buy country goods. He denounces Nikhil's *zamindari* to be a straight road while Sandip posed to adopt a 'difficult route' in order to restore a united native rule back to the country. However, it is through Bimala's narration that we learn about Sandip's coveted interests and his confession to her about the shift in his reverence from the Mother to Bimala—his beloved.

Sandip's variety of patriotism consists of his cosy radicalism wherein he is found to smoke only foreign made cigarettes but he makes an ostentatious spectacle of his patriotism by preaching Swadeshi in public and boycotting and burning mill-made clothes. Nikhil values the reality of people above hollow ideals. For his poor tenants, country-made goods were neither usable nor affordable. Perhaps, Tagore has indicated that the blind adherence to Gandhi's ideal of Swadeshi and boycott might not be the superlative expression of patriotism. Tagore voices his own opinion through Nikhil. Tagore's family invested a great deal of money in manufacturing goods within the country but failed. His brother Jyotirindranath had set up a ship manufacturing yard but his ships sank oblong with the hopes of the Tagore family to give the poor people country-made goods. Through his novel *Anadmath*, Bankim wanted Indians to resist foreign rule but he was aware that our country was not equipped to govern itself as a united government. Tagore echoes the same sentiment in this novel.

Bara Rani has been absorbed as a part of the Rajah household at the age of nine as the bride of Nikhil's older brother. Being only three years older than Nikhil, she becomes his playmate and is helped by him for her doll's play. Bara Rani, in turn, secretly provides him with all the delicacies that were denied to him by the doctor's orders. Tagore could not allow Bara Rani to go unpunished for her 'deviant' role. According to Mukhia, "...what in the eyes of the upholders of norms and codes of good behaviour could be more 'deviant' than for a married woman to be in love with another man and that too her brother-in-law." (55) Nikhil's fond reminiscence of his childhood with Bara Rani evokes a rare charm as it transcends the circle of mundane pettiness

that is wont in interpersonal relationships in a joint family structure. As a child after an early marriage Bara Rani is transported to her in-laws' family where she would certainly flounder in the sea of strangers and responsibilities. Mukhia states that amidst an unsympathetic atmosphere a meaningful relationship with Nikhil, a member of her husband's family guides her through all the ordeals that she would have to encounter. He even acts as a mediator between Bara Rani and her husband. (55-56)

Bimala envies their harmonious relation which has matured as a result of their childhood friendship. Nikhil recounts their joint venture to the mango grove and about picking raw mangoes and relishing them together. There is an early suggestion of romance which does not transgress sexual boundaries. Yet, in this idyllic relationship, the latent threat of innocent romance transgressing the limit and turning into something dangerous remains intact. It threatens Bimala's faith in her and she perceives Bara Rani as coquettish. She has to suffer immensely due to her husband's deviant behaviour when he was alive, but this does not give her the authority to challenge the system, the structure of relationships which defines women's roles very carefully and are irreversible on them. By being sarcastic about Bimala, she not only gives vent to her pent-up frustrations but also disapproves of Bimala's assumption of "masculine attribute". (Mukhia 55-56) Bimala also subscribes to the same perception and she herself is amazed at the change that came over her after the appearance of Sandip in her life. According to Bimanbehari Majumdar, "She plays the part of the chorus in Greek drama, offering comments on the events which were taking place." (133) She has no individual identity of her own but is only a stereotypical figure of any elderly woman at home. Her only

identity is that of Bara Rani or Senior Rani without a name of her own. According to Sarada, Tagore depicts the plight of widows and the envy and petty clashes between sisters-in-law and through Nikhil blames the social codes for the widows' vindictive and surly nature. (88)

Nikhil's old grandmother is the mistress of the house. Due to her profound affection for him, Nikhil never experiences any difficulty overstepping any of the ancient customs. For instance, when he brings in Miss Gilby to teach Bimala and be her companion, he sticks to his resolve in spite of the poison secreted by all the wagging tongues at home and outside. His grandmother never protests when Nikhil fills up the house with twentieth century modernity, against her taste. She is even prepared if Bimala, the daughter-in-law of the Rajah house leaves its seclusion. Under the influence of modern age, she listens to stories from English books from Bimala every evening. She is an absentee character in the novel as most of the crucial incidents unravel only after her death. Another minor woman character is Miss Gilby. There arises a great flutter when Nikhil appoints Miss Gilby, an English lady, to educate Bimala. Nikhil brushes aside all objections to this. But one day she is insulted by a young boy whom Bimala's family has been supporting. Nikhil turns him out of the house and bids Miss Gilby farewell. Thus, it is clear that not only Indian women but even British women have often come under the shadow of patriarchal oppression. Khema and Thako are the maid servants who are the only other women characters in Nikhil's household.

The Home and the World thus, reveals Bimala's trials and tribulation as she partakes in the National Freedom Movement. Bimala as a woman consciously makes a choice: when she realizes that Sandip is not worth eloping with, then there is clarity in her mind. This realization of an irrational conviction in Sandip's apparent radical nationalism impedes her from committing a severe mistake. However, Tagore has initiated an open-ended debate through the vague ending of the novel. It is not clear whether Nikhil meets with his death at the end. Nikhil's death stands for Bimala's punishment and if he is alive, it indicates her happy ending and her self-realization that Nikhil as her husband never imposed his brand of chastity upon her. Here she represents the transition of women from secluded domesticity to State politics. At a certain level

it is a story of husband-wife relationship challenging the notions of chastity and norms of domesticity as distinct from public life. It is also a drama of a psychological challenge for a woman lashed by the winds of change shattering the distinction between the private and the public world. (S.K. Das 73)

Belonging to the upper class, she is the inspiring subject of the National Freedom Movement; as a woman she is simply its object of mobilisation; in precise terms, "an instrument for empowering its male leadership". (P. K. Datta 16) Tagore demonstrates through this novel his feminist leanings, using pathos to depict the plight and ultimate demise of Bengali women trapped by duty, and family honour; simultaneously, he treats the decline of Bengal's landed oligarchy. Although Tagore belonged to the class of Bengal's landed gentry, he remained sensitive to the positive and negative traits of his own class (the support to art and culture by the

aristocrats, and the exploitation of the farm labourers being one obvious juxtaposed pair) which was being gradually taken over by the middle class bourgeoisie of uncouth traders. The spirit of nationalism of Tagore and Bankim may be best captured through a comparative analysis of their songs of patriotism.

Bankim's song ("Vande Mataram" in *Anandmath*) is addressed like a prayer to the motherland—evoked as Mother. The poet lavishes great praises on her opulent reserves. The first stanza abounds in images of the mother's abundance—in her perennial rivers, fruits, crops of the harvest, trees, the soothing moonlight, her laughter and speech. The nation is perceived as the constant benefactor of boons and blessings. The mother is hailed as the holder of multitudinous strength and the mother of seventy million valiant patriots. The second stanza adopts a spiritual strain and the Mother is viewed as an embodiment of knowledge, conduct, heart, soul, life in our body, love, faith and hence the image that is worshipped in every temple. Bankim ascribes the Mother the dual image of Durga—brandishing her ten weapons of war, the goddess of strength and power and Kamala (or Lakshmi)—the goddess of beauty and wealth, who is "pure and perfect, without peer". The song closes with the image of the mother cast into the mould of a common Indian woman who is "dark of hue", "candid", with "jewelled hair" and "glorious smile divine". As Goddess Lakshmi, she is the lady of plenty. The tone of the song reflects the devotion and dedication of Bankim and his compatriots. This is reinforced with the frequent recurrence of the inspiring and thought-provoking phrase "I bow to thee, Mother!" and it still moves the hearts of millions of Indians all over the world, having achieved the status of a National

Song par excellence. The song enables one to perceive the nation as an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent entity. As a result, it became the battle-cry for Indian nationalism and it continues to evoke the spirit of nationalism even today.

In Tagore's song (untitled) which Sandip sings in *Ghare-Baire*, the protagonist hails his invaluable connoisseur who wanders in the gardens and plays an emotional tune on an imaginary bamboo flute. He believes that a true artist sings to satisfy his own fervour and not for material wealth. The song opens on a mercenary note with words like "unpriced," "spurning payments" and "bought for nothing". The next stanza contains a significant metonymy. The 'house' stands for protection against the country's surge and the people involved in it. This house discourages the protagonist (who is a rambler, but feigns to be a patriot) from surrendering everything to rescue the nation. But as a patriot, the protagonist intends to willingly surrender—not only all his possessions but also his life, and through his sacrifice, save his country and achieve immortality in the minds of his country-men. The second passage states that those who wish to discourage the patriots from their paths are ignorant of the joy of recklessness. They are unaware of Lord Krishna's summons for the patriots from the end of the warped path. The path of the protagonist is difficult and not straight or safe. The song is verbally enriched with a host of antithetical and paradoxical phrases like "court ruin", "death-draught of immortality", "spurning payments... bought for nothing" and "fearful joy of recklessness". The only imagery present in the song is that of the house, symbolizing refuge and security. Like Bankim's song, this song is also meant to be a paeon for the true patriots of India.

Through Tagore's song, Sandip claims to undertake the duty of establishing worship of the Divine Mother (or the motherland) in the country. The nation is evoked more as a beloved rather than the Divine revered Mother. The devotee urges his compatriots—to sacrifice and fling away all the possession to the call of the beloved nation so that the house which stands for the nation could be saved from an alien rule. In the course of this song, Sandip implicitly explains to Bimala that his watchword has changed since she had come across his vision. It was no longer *Bande Mataram* (Hail Mother), but Hail Beloved, Hail Enchantress. The mother protects, the mistress leads to destruction--but that destruction is intoxicating. He further says that Bimala had made the anklet sounds of the dance of death tinkle in his heart and had changed for him the picture (from a recollection of Bankim's song) he had of Bengal --'the soft breeze-cooled land of pure water and sweet fruit.' He accuses her that she as a beloved had no pity for him. He visualizes her to have offered him her poison cup which he shall drain it, either to die in agony or live triumphing over death. Sandip's song is more of an ostentatious romantic rhetoric lacking sincerity, played out to Bimala who ultimately detects his façade.

The two songs may be compared at various levels. A linguistic reading shows that Tagore's song has a casual tone and diction. It is direct and the diction is simple. *Vande Mataram* has an eloquent diction with lofty and colourful imagery. While Tagore's song illustrates the immense potential of the patriots, Bankim's song describes that of the motherland. While in Tagore's song, the patriots are beckoned to willingly sacrifice all worldly

possessions for the cause of the nation; Bankim's song describes the Mother (or motherland) to be the possessor of all material and spiritual wealth along with a large number of brave patriots. In terms of structure, Tagore's poem is short and taut while Bankim's song has repetitive phrases and is longer in content and subject matter. Although both the songs have a similar context and content, Tagore's song is probably written from the patriots' perspective while Bankim's song is written from the nation's point of view. Bankim's song also addresses a more feminine motherland than that of Tagore's.

Shesher Kabita (Farewell, My Friend)

Shesher Kabita through its sensation, sharp wit, vigour, entertainment and repartee, re-established Tagore in the realm of modern unconventional versatility. It has the sophistication and harshness of the cynical modern and is unique in intent and content. Its grave principle raises it above the level of a common love story. By means of an unconventional and distinct idiom he asserted the individuality and position of women in the society. Through *Bimala*, Tagore had initiated a revolution in *The Home and the World*. According to Kabir, this revolution was "confined and consolidated" in *Farewell, My Friend*. (54) The characters in *Farewell, My Friend* belong to the same sophisticated society, class and educational background. Educated men and women share many aspects in common but they also have their own individual identity and idiom, which resemble figments of Tagore. Even the protagonist is reduced to a purveyor of phrases. Engrossed in their passion for epigrams, display of intellect, play of passions and paradoxes, the characters lack realism and normal human feelings. In the novel, Tagore juxtaposes different points of view through the characters of Amit, Labanya

and Katie. His assertion of the importance of man and human values above everything else is reflected in this novel through the separation of Amit and Labanya. This love story centres on Labanya and Amit Rai, an affluent Oxford educated barrister of Calcutta. The characters of Sobhanlal and Ketaki help in the development of the content of the slight story.

Labanya is the daughter of Abanish Dutt, the principal of a college in western India. She is tall, slim, with a lustrous, brown complexion and large, luminous, dark eyes. She is radiant with the light intelligence, serenity, born of the profound poise of a calm and balanced mind. She is an ardent student of literature and history. Her distinct appearance and candour, like that of Maggie in George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*, entices Amit at the first meeting. She has immense dignity and self-respect. She is rivalled by Sobhanlal both in the academic performance and in her claim to her father's affection. She is intolerant of anyone who attempts to humiliate her but is considerate, practical and not driven by emotions. This can be seen when her father wishes to marry a widow at the age of forty seven but hesitates to do it in her presence. Without any complaint Labanya leaves the place and never complains against it. Her sturdy spirit of independence sets her apart from the other heroines of Tagore. Soon after being appointed as a tutor, she refuses to subsist on her father's savings. This episode also reveals how her desires transcend far beyond material wealth. Amit had held the opinion that since women cannot indulge in despotism or bind others, they have the power to drug the victim with the help of opiates, supplied to them by Nature's devilry. However, it may be due to her above-mentioned qualities that this view changes soon after he meets Labanya.

Labanya's realistic and practical outlook to life is evident from the way she refuses to be carried away by emotions even in matters of love. She knows that Amit regards marriage as vulgar. She points out that it is too respectable; it is the luxury of the scripture-quoting worldlings, who loll on fat cushions and reckon their wives among their goods and chattels. Thus, she rebels against the harsh idea of treating the wife as a commodity in astonishingly gentle tones. She projects her natural acceptance of the facts of life with self-dignity. She can delve deep into the minds of men. Amit's proposal for marriage does not thrill her. She is aware of his inconsistency in his commitments and that his mind hovers over women without alighting on them. She knows that Amit adores her idealized image, and hence her marriage with him would not be a success. Thus, she declines his offer but charms him by her reasoning. Remaining firm in this resolution, she explains to Yogamaya the true cause for the refusal: she fears that she will have to sacrifice her individuality to please her husband. She tells Yogamaya that Amit is attracted to her only as a source of inspiration for his poetry. The literary frame of Amit's mind makes each of his experience rolling a wave of words to his mouth. Hence he needs Labanya who firmly believes that love finds its true fulfilment not in union but in freedom. This conviction makes her generous and sympathetic towards Ketaki, her rival. She soon learns about Amit's previous engagement with her. She makes Amit realize that his own indifference has converted Ketaki into a semi-nude foreign doll. The scene, in which Katie throws the ring of Amit's betrothal on the table while tears flow down her enamelled cheeks, marks the turning point in the novel. (Kunjo Singh 76) Labanya introspects and resolves her conflict when Amit reports to

her about the heart-wrecked Sobhanlal. She painfully recollects how she had arrogantly turned down Sobhanlal's offer of love and is deeply moved to find that with a sad heart he had waited for seven years and adored her. Her gesture towards Sobhanlal does not create a sense of her betrayal for Amit; rather by her prudent action she avoids the possibilities of troubles in future. She is certain that Amit's genius would shine only in "the freedom of separation and not in the bondage of union with her." (B. C. Chakravorty 214-215) Among the heroines of Tagore, Labanya is the first to achieve a post-graduate degree and earn her own livelihood, observes M. Sarada. (105) Tagore reveals how the development of education and modernization of society had caused the problems of women to multiply and nothing remained straightforward any longer. Being conscious of this change, the modern, educated women exercise great discretion while selecting their spouses, from the view point of mental compatibility. Sanjukta Dasgupta rightly observes:

She enshrines the best qualities of modernity and intelligence, and becomes an embodiment of what Tagore considered the essential qualities of a modern Indian woman. She is invested with the harmonious temperament of a woman able to contend with the urbane wit of Amit while adhering to the fundamental values of a still typically traditional society. Instead of falling for the latest fashions of the West, she has imbibed the positive attributes of a Western education. Labanya is modern in a strictly Indian way. Unlike Ketaki, Labanya's modernity emerges from a rare assimilation of modern Western attitudes into essentially Indian values. (Sen and Gupta 188)

Yogamaya is one of the most mature and sophisticated widows drawn by Tagore. She had bridled her rebellious thoughts through the study of the Puranas. This forty-year old widow of Varadashankar belonged to an educated, modern family. As the mistress of her house, she had immediately

sensed beneath the literary devotion of Amit and Labanya, a deeper and mutual devotion. Despite her age and shrewdness she had a tender heart. Being intelligent and insightful she immediately perceives the possibility of a perfect match between Labanya and Amit. At the same time she apprehended that Amit was not sufficiently mature to marry. She played a crucial role in fostering friendship between Labanya and Amit and in their subsequent union. She sympathized and understood the conflict in Labanya when she decided not to marry Amit. Her tactful use of words in a critical situation like Ketaki's arrival spares Labanya from further humiliation from Katie. Katie or Ketaki Mitter appears more like a caricature or a type representing a class of women who were blind imitators of the European culture. Her brother Naren Mitter was an affluent man who had stayed in Europe for a long time and was Amit's friend. She was Amit's first love and was engaged in England to him when she was eighteen. Tagore has drawn a pen picture of Ketaki with irony and devastating wit. Like foreign liquor distilled, Katie's manners were thrice refined and concentrated of foreign make. In contrast to the average Bengali girl's pride in her long hair, she had applied scissors to her own, converting them, like a tadpole's tail, to a semblance of bob. She applies enamel over her naturally fair complexion and her eyes, once gentle and serene becomes too lofty to rest on the commonplace. Her lips bear a sneer and the cigarette held between her manicured fingers serves as an embellishment rather than smoking. Her attire seems artificial and her high heeled shoes complete all the nuances of sophisticated gait that she strives to achieve.

According to R. N. Roy, her breaking the engagement with Amit and the flow of tears over Katie's enamelled face is an utter mockery. Further he maintains that Tagore has not accounted for the metamorphosis that restores the natural tenderness of her former self. (224) The argument is implausible since parallels have been drawn between the spurning of Sobhanlal by Labanya and Katie by Amit. Labanya's analysis of her situation to Amit is most accurate. Despite her foul temperament, Katie had still retained the embers of affection for Amit burning in her heart and could not bear to part with her beloved. Her transformation can be attributed to her desire of winning Amit back as her lover. However, the reason for coquettish behaviour can be ascribed to Amit's evasive and indifferent attitude to her. Compared to all the other characters in the novel her character undergoes maximum transformation. M. Sarada aptly remarks, "In the gallery of Tagore's women Ketaki is the only example of an Anglicised woman. Though outwardly westernised, Ketaki had not lost her innate charm. Once her marriage takes place she regains her former natural poise and laughter." (106-107)

The novel demonstrates the existence of the real and the ideal. For example, contrary to Katie, Labanya is a splendid synthesis of traditional as well as modern qualities of womanhood in her. Labanya achieved a more dignified image than Katie Mitter. Though she is well-versed in all the ways of European culture, she does not blindly ape it. Katie is the westernised version of Ketaki who belongs to an upper middle class home. She is a foil to Labanya and her character accentuates the admirable qualities in Labanya. Through this comparison Tagore strikes at the root of the ideal which

prompted women like Ketaki to abandon everything of their own and imitate the Western culture and manners. (Biswas 76) He subjects this tendency to bitter criticism and advocates living on a practical approach to life.

Amit's two sisters Cissie (Shamita) and Lissie are apparelled in the latest brand of fashion. With their modish pet-names, they have been shown as having fully imbibed modern fashions. Laces, amber, and coral dazzled their saris. They trip while walking, squeak while talking, they laugh in a crescendo of squeals, tilt their heads, smiling winsomely, darting quick sidelong glances. Their rosy silken fans often flutter about their cheeks. Their demeanour artificial and they bask on their admirers' mock impertinences. Even when they set off for a sojourn in Darjeeling they are wrapped in their cloaks of imitation Persian shawls, with dainty up-to-date parasols and they flaunt their tennis rackets.

Use of names like Katie, Cissie, Lissie and Bimie are both unconventional and Anglicised Indian names. In fiction the baneful effect of western culture and education, on women has figured in the image of these women with high heeled shoes. This image has been disapproved by not only other characters but also the author himself. The inherent contradiction underlying the scheme of women's education and emancipation desired by men can be clearly discerned. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes that women have gained only what men have agreed to grant, they have not taken anything out of their own initiative, they have only received what the men wanted them to. (qtd. in Mukhia 24)

The novel concludes abruptly. Construing Tagore's message in a nutshell Iyengar observes, "The world is large and conflict is not unavoidable, there is room in this world for love possessive as well as love sacrificing, for beauty fabricated as well as beauty unadorned. (Iyengar 85) Amit echoed the same sentiments when he distinguished between the two amorous attachments he experienced: "*Ketaki sange amar sambandho bhalobashari, kintu se jeno gharay-tola jal—pratidin tulbo, pratidin byabohar korbo. Ar Labanyar sange amar je bhalobasha se roilo dighi, se ghare anbar noy, amar mon Tate shatar debe.*" (*Shesher Kabita* 5 523) "What binds me to Ketaki is love, but this love is like a vessel, which I shall daily draw and daily use. The love which draws me to Labanya is a lake which cannot be brought indoors but in which my mind will swim." (*Farewell, My Friend* 103)

The reversal of roles is another witty and humorous device that Tagore has deployed to bring home the fact that the fulfilment of love demands a high price for all those who are involved and they should be prepared for the worst possible circumstances. For example, when Amit gets drenched inside a dilapidated hut during a heavy downpour, he tells Yogamaya that he is performing the penance Uma had once undertaken to become Lord Shiva's wife. Her penance was in the Himalayas, his is amid the hills of Shillong. Yogamaya has assumed the role of Narad, the match-maker.

Thus, the novel studies the man-woman relationship more strictly in terms of character rather than of fate or chance. It is "the climax of Tagore's plea for platonic love." (Bhattacharya 77) It is a

playful mockery of romanticised love, describes the coming together and parting of two lovers in the Arcadian surroundings of a hill station but whose idealised love cannot withstand the onset of reality. They go their separate ways bidding fond farewells to each other in verse. (Raj 14)

The novel is partly playful and partly earnest. Cast in the form of a mock romance, it lays bare the transience and unreality of relationship, forged on romantic idealism. The wistful parting at the end indicates that the love of Amit and Labanya is far from being deep-rooted and they seem to be more in love with ideals than with each other. According to Raj, this explains the absence of emotional struggles and upheaval or laceration of spirit involved in their farewells to each other. (80-81)

Being revolutionary in his ideas, Tagore favoured the replacement of the old order of the society by a new order that was more rational and liberal in outlook, based on the idea of individual freedom. K. R. S. Iyengar rightly observes:

When he applied his mind to a current problem—social, political, economic—the heart ruled the head; and the heart in its turn, beat in response to abiding intuitions, not the restrictive formulas of creed, caste or custom. The light of the soul's illumination led him.... Whatever the problem, Tagore leapt from the circumference to the centre and seized it in terms of universality. The novels and the short stories are among the most valuable by-products turned out by the great creative forge...but their source of origin unmistakably stamps them with their distinguishing quality. (105)

Tagore rationalizes the cause of disintegrating man-woman relationships in his essay "Nationalism in the West". He points out:

The living bonds of the society are breaking up, and giving place to merely mechanical organisation. But one sees signs of it everywhere. It is owing to this that war has been declared between man and

woman, because the natural thread is snapping which holds them together in harmony; because man is driven to professionalism, producing wealth for himself and others, continually turning the wheel of power for his own sake or for the sake of universal officialdom, leaving woman alone to wither and to die or to fight her own battle unaided. And thus there, where co-operation is natural, has intruded competition. The very psychology of men and women about their mutual relation is changing and becoming the psychology of the primitive fighting elements, rather than of humanity seeking its completeness through the union based upon self-surrender. (Tagore 61)

Tagore pointed out that the dominance over women by men was the cause of many injustices and exploitations. The contribution of women to the progress of men has always been disregarded. Women have lived an obscure existence for centuries, cloistered within the confines of the house. The virtue of fidelity had been imposed upon women by shrewd men to own them permanently. Tagore asserts through the vivid depiction of women in the novels discussed above that “the relationship between man and woman should be rooted in mutual freedom”. (Biswas 75) These novels are variations on the eternal triangle of the man-woman relationships played out against the turbulent backdrop of post-Renaissance, fin-de-siècle Bengal. They become socio-literary explorations of the changing position of women vis-à-vis the men in their household and also in the larger political and intellectual climate. They relate to grave issues which rocked the Bengali Hindu society. Through the cultured yet colloquial tone of the conversations and the essential lucidity of his prose, Tagore deftly focuses on the multifarious roles of women in the domestic life of Bengal.

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Chapter 5

Women in the Novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee

Sarat Chandra, a Bengali novelist of the first half of the 20th century, has set most of his novels in the landscape of the southern Bengal region and has conveyed through his characters a deep psychological response appropriate to the region and time. His works form an excellent resource base to “reconstruct the society” and the people of his time and establish a phenomenological relationship through the feelings expressed by the characters in it. Feudal exploitation, *Zamindars'* tyranny, degenerative caste-division, child marriage, prohibition of widow's right for remarriage, decaying extended family and losing person-to-person relationship of the traditional Bengal were some of the features of the regional cultural geography. The cities, particularly Calcutta, had started revealing signs of modernization: industries, equal rights to women, widow re-marriage and such other elitist ideas. Bramho Samaj was pioneering the social modernization. In short, his women characters are not only by-products of a transitional stage of decaying feudalism and incipient industrialization, but were involved in a struggle between the old and the new, decadent traditional and modern, rural and urban, caste rigidity and liberal social customs, religious fanaticism and rationalism. Sarat Chandra's realism provides an inroad to understand the cultural aspects of his contemporary society.

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay has often been described as the greatest novelist of Bengal. Despite the narrow warrant of his plots, Sarat always won

the respect of his readers because of his splendid power of delineation and infinite sympathy for the distressed and the outcast. His sympathy is rooted in the implied belief that man is by nature good and that all his errors, sins and lapses are temporary and can be redeemed and he can be re-established in his 'native glory.' (Kumarappa 18) This latent faith that impelled Raja Rammohan, Derozio, Bankimchandra, Keshabchandra, Ramkrishna, Vivekananda and Tagore prompts us to regard Saratchandra, despite his so-called realism, as an offspring of the Renaissance of Bengal. It was this new and virile faith that provided the driving force behind that Renaissance.

The Bengali novel, which had been brought into existence by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in the form of historical romances in the mid-nineteenth century, was further evolved by Rabindranath Tagore who moulded characters and situations in lyrical, evocative, realistic description in the early twentieth century. Sarat Chandra's earlier novels reveal a pronounced impact of Tagore; the novels of his peak period heralded a revolution. Under the influence of Tagore's *Gora* Sarat Chandra wrote his longest novel *Grihadaha* (Home Burnt Down, 1919), *Dena Paona* (Debts and Demands, 1923), *Bipradas* (1935), a domestic novel and *Pather Dabi* (The Demand of the Road, 1926) which was proscribed by the government for a number of cogent reasons: the Imperial representatives protested against its alleged preaching of sedition from 1927 to 1939 and again in 1940 under Section 124A under the Indian Penal Code and under Dramatic Performance Act respectively. Like Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, *Grihadaha* also projects the trials of a woman in relation to two men in her life. The other novels reflect

Tagore's idea of nationalism and social reform.

Sarat Chandra, the great literary genius of Bengal, was almost a contemporary of Rabindranath Tagore. His novels were visibly distinct from those of both Bankim Chandra and Tagore. If Tagore first began by imitating Bankim and only later found his voice with *Chokher Bali*, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee also went through a Bankim stage and a Tagore stage of imitative writing before growing out of their influence in his best works like *Srikant*, *Grihadaha*, *Pather Dabi*, *Bipradas* and *Ses Prasna*. Sarat drew the attention of the public towards him in the literary scene of Bengal during the time of Tagore's preoccupation with his mystic communing. He identified himself with the down-trodden and boldly portrayed the pain and agony of the lower middle and the have-not classes. "...he was the complete novelist who used his art simultaneously as a camera, as a surgeon's knife and also as a chalice of hope." (Iyengar 319)

Sarat Chandra was brought up in his mother's family in Bhagalpur where he received his school and college education for two years. His parents' death left him wrecked and for some years he led the life of a waif in North Bihar. In 1913 he worked as a clerk in Rangoon. Some of his best known works were published in the periodicals *Yamuna*, *Sahitya* and *Bharatvarsa*. The lack of emotion in Sarat Chandra's early fiction is to some extent compensated by sentimentalism readily acceptable to the common reader. Despite wanting in profundity and polish, some of the stories were very striking for their sincerity and realism. This includes *Bindur Chhele* (Bindu's Child 1913), *Ramer Sumati* (Ram Returning to Sanity, 1914)

Arakshaniya (The Girl whose Marriage is Overdue, 1916) etc.

Sarat Chandra did not allow the bitterness of life to influence his writing. The ending of his stories, whether happy or not, was always palatable. This combined with his sympathy for womanhood and his easy, direct and pleasant style of narration has contributed to the splendour of his stories. Under the striking influence of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarat Chandra wrote *Devdas* in 1901 (published in 1917), *Parinita* (The Married Girl, 1914), *Biraj Bau* (Mrs Biraj, 1914) and *Palli Samaj*. Sarat was sympathetic to women repressed at home and tortured outside. Sukumar Sen mentions that through his fiction he offered consolation to those who suffered the unmerited reproach or displeasure of the family and community. (313-314)

Sarat Chandra criticizes the contemporary society when it is not in agreement with his own ideas but he never flouts the accepted moral of the Hindu society at any time. For works like *Srikant* (in four parts –1917, 1918, 1927, 1933), *Charitrahin* (1917), *Biraj Bou* (1914), *Palli Samaj* (The Village Commune, 1916), the first part of *Devdas* (his first novel) and *Mandir* (1904) he drew from his personal experience. S. Sen further describes how his last complete novel *Ses Prashna* (The Final Question, 1931), is an attempt at the intellectual novel where the meagre theme is inflated by highbrow discourses relating to the individual and the society, concerning, specifically to love and marriage. (qtd. by S. K. Das 293)

Bankim earnestly conformed to the ancient traditions of the Hindus. None of his characters could transcend the limits of idealism and any

deviation was punished severely. Tagore also did not place the society over man. Sarat Chandra, for the first time in Bengali novels, raised his voice against the devotion to the ancient traditions. He declined to accept fidelity as the only yardstick for womanhood. Instead of fidelity he advocated the importance of sincere love. The most remarkable feature of his novels was the women characters. They were sacrificing, bold, motherly, the cohesive force amidst all repellent tendencies within the family and society. A woman was primarily judged by her beauty but Sarat painted her poignantly and he realistically depicted the riches stored within her heart. (Biswas 63-64) He neither elevated a woman to the level of a goddess radiating celestial light nor held her responsible for the despair in the world. Sarat Chandra admitted, like all others, that depicting reality without imagination was not literature but journalism. In his works fact and fiction were perfectly blended. The women in his novels, though imaginary, were portrayed amidst realistic social forces which were responsible for making them what they were. Thus, these women were dynamic and their actions were governed by the dominant restraint of the society. Rabindranath Tagore exploited a different theme. The dynamic nature of the women in his novels, were more manipulated by the desires of their hearts and they rejected social order. Biswas maintains that Sarat Chandra allotted them important places within the social fabric. A woman enjoyed that position due to her family ties, motherhood and domestic management. (Idem.) But her more or less secluded life was not always free from conflict. Society subjected her to sufficient sorrows and exploitation.

The men he created are often considered to belong to the weaker lot. For example in *Devdas* the hero drank himself to death for his beloved. Sunil

Gangopadhyay, another prominent Bengali writer, refutes the idea. "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> 8th June 2007) Sarat Chandra's women are eternal optimists amid a sea of despair. Novelist Samaresh Majumdar agrees, "Women are the centrifugal force of attraction in Sarat Chandra's novels. It is their optimism and positiveness that have kept the magic of Sarat Chandra alive even today." (Idem.) Majumdar feels Sarat Chandra's works have an aura of the unreal which makes them dearer to readers.

The theme of man-woman relationship is dealt with by him in a didactic manner, outside the prevailing constraints of an orthodox society. He projects an assessment of moral and spiritual values inhering in the theme of personal relationships. Such an evaluation requires a profound understanding of human nature and the balance is tipped in favour of women. The women drawn are extremely complex and the growth of their characters, through a gamut of adverse situations, is often remarkable. (All Bengal Sarat Centenary Committee 145) These women can be categorized into two types; one stoical, accepting and enduring misery and then given to renunciation and resignation, like Sabitri, Rama, Bindu and Parvati. The other of bolder fibre, taking the initiative in action, exhibiting sharp intellectual analysis of baffling problems of life, like Kamal, Kiranmayi, Sorasi, Sumitra and Bharati. "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 Hardy,” remarks Das. (Idem.) Saratchandra endows them with striking nobility and dignity, and they issue from the moral and spiritual qualities that he discovered in women. He projects women pitting reason against emotion. Some of them like Kamal, Kiranmayi, Sabitri, Sorasi, Bijaya, Kamallata, Rajlakshmi and Bharati are romantic rebels. Das believes,

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. (Idem.)

He often exhibits in his novels his fond search for saintliness among fallen women. He found an abundant richness of amiability and beauty in their heart. He was engrossed in search of it. He had taken up his pen against the rigid rules of the society, especially the rules and rites governing women particularly, widows. Many critics like G. Joshi unanimously agreed about him:

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. (All Bengal Sarat Centenary Committee 87)

With an unerring deep insight he could bring out the nuances in the psychology of contemporary Bengali women—whether an educated Brahmo girl of Calcutta or an unsophisticated rustic housewife or a prostitute. His sympathy for and understanding of their sufferings, their often unspoken loves, their urge for affection, their crusade for emancipation, made them stand out as authentic pieces of portrayal. He has carried the torch of realism to many nooks and corners of Bengali homes and showed widows in their actual surroundings. (Shirwadkar 17) He depicts many aspects of women in contemporary rural and urban Bengal. (18) In *Shubhada* (1898), the widow Lalana suffers the ill-fated consequences in a nonchalant society only to find

her solace in love but denies remarriage. *Chota Bhai* (1912) portrays the evil consequences that a cruel-hearted widow can cause by trying to dominate over others. *Arakshaniya* (1916) shows how a widow has to endure the bitterness of the in-laws. These examples, may demonstrate how the domestic novel developed in Indian literatures and gave varied and powerful characters of Indian women. As a result, woman had come to be the centre of fiction in Bengali and Marathi literatures.

Sarat Chandra is often charged with violating the moral values. However, he tried to prove that errors of judgement are generally committed by categorising a person as an evil doer, solely based on social norms. He never tried to defend the evil. People might deviate from the prescribed path due to the sheer compulsion of emotions but the same society should not declare them as rebels or outcasts for the rest of their lives. In *Srikant*, Annadadidi does not commit any crime but once she defies the accepted codes she is never allowed to retreat to her respectable society. Rajlakshmi is victimised by circumstances. The society rejects all her sincere pleas and refuses the permit for her entry into it. By arousing sympathy in his readers, Sarat Chandra intended to spread awareness about the plight of such unfortunate women. Dipti Biswas points out how his novels illustrate 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 64) Sarat Chandra's woman characters stand apart for their kindness, empathy, affection and stoic acceptance of the uncertainties in life.

Sarat Chandra's *Ses Prasna* (1931) projects a radical woman, Kamal who challenges the sanctity of marriage itself. He projects a maid servant, Savitri as the protagonist of his controversial novel, *Charitrahin*. (S.K. Das 345) Like Chandramukhi of *Devdas*, she is endowed with all feminine virtues. Sarat Chandra portrayed women's participation in the larger world, particularly in social and political activities, as in *Pather Dabi* wherein one of the woman-characters is the chief of a secret political terrorist party. The National Movement opened up new avenues for women. The house wife who is the most industrious member in an average Indian family is also economically the most dependent. The whole concept of the working woman who is paid for rendering services outside home is hence a new phenomenon in Indian Literature but within a few decades such characters became a regular feature in it. He portrays women as neither tame nor submissive but etched within the framework of traditional Indian values. He chiefly delineates their reconciliation to the inequities inherent in that tradition. Annadadi and Rajlakshmi in *Srikant*, Parvati and Chandramukhi in *Devdas*, Ma-Shoye in *The Picture* and Bijli Bai in *Light Out of Darkness* may be quoted as instances. (Naravane 1996: 23) In his essay entitled *Narir Mulya* (The Value of Women) he makes "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." (S.N. Mukherjee 1945: i) He emphasized fervently the essential dignity and unblemished character of a woman. However abject and condemnable the conditions of her existence, Saratchandra created every woman as capable of retaining innate incorruptibility, virtue, a capacity

for self-effacement and sacrifice that reveal the strength of her character and the nobility of her soul. He characterises women as socially emancipated voluntarily or involuntarily; or she might be conservative in her approach, accepting the male-dominated society without protest or struggle, recognising a male indifference and self-seeking merely as an unpalatable reality and resigning herself to suffering; or she might be self-assertive, yet the focus is “never on any direct struggle against the dominance of the male as such but only on the innate necessity of following her instincts regardless of antagonism of the social pattern.” (Idem.) He elaborately discusses these problems from the historical, social and cultural perspectives in his essay and emphasizes that this value depends on one’s love, sympathy, sense of justice and humanistic approach. Fallen women like Chandramukhi, widows like Sabitri and Kiranmayi, deserted women like Sorasi are victims not only of an anachronistic and oppressive social system but also of the callous hearts of men. Saratchandra expresses his sense of social realism while dealing with complicated conundrums like child-marriage, widows, communal bias, disease, or poverty. Having the courage of his convictions, Saratchandra laid an unerring and unbiased claim for the liberation for a woman’s personality and pursued the development to its logical conclusion. Earlier novelists who portrayed women who dared to follow their inner voice invariably met with retribution in disillusionment, death, remorse or despair. Bankimchandra and Tagore dutifully administered punishment to the ‘erring’ wife violating social codes—the treatment of the ‘triangle’ can be seen in *Chandrashekhar* and *Nashta Nir* (The Broken Nest) or *Ghare-Baire* (The Home and the World) respectively.

Sarat Chandra declared his preference for a “libertine to a cantankerous prig” (Kabir 89) According to Kabir, 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. (Idem.) Sarat Chandra explicitly projects his resentment for such women. The trend which he had set of depicting a widow as a fallen angel, as a tainted but selfless lover, or as a high-principled rebel—was followed by a whole generation of writers in India like Jainendra Kumar, Ilachandra Joshi, Anant Gopal Shevade and Vishnu Prabhakar. (Sogani 212) Till the 1950s, they etched out heroines who are intellectually and sexually liberated but who sacrifice their own interests for the men they love.

Devdas

Some of Sarat’s best known works, including *Devdas* were written during his stay at Samtaber. *Devdas* is one of the most famous of Sarat Chandra’s novels. It is a stereotype image of morbid adolescent romanticism which inspired an entire generation of youth at that time. Devdas, the son of a wealthy landlord and Parvati, the daughter of a neighbour of moderate means love each other deeply. Parvati becomes Devdas’ ardent follower. They grow up together in a class conscious, tradition-bound, rural community. Their friendship turns into love as they mature. But Devdas’ father declines Parvati because of the difference in the status of two families. Hence neither does their wish get fulfilled nor do they unite with each other for the rest of their

lives. Parvati is then married to an elderly landlord. Devdas goes to Calcutta, tumbles into bad company and becomes an alcoholic. He remains generous and affectionate till the end, but excessive consumption ruins his health. Realizing that the end is near, he sets out for Parvati's home in a bullock cart from the nearest railway station. Devdas dies in front of Parvati's house. She learns of his death and is overwhelmed with grief. The pathos and tragedy of Devdas' life is conveyed with great power. The story of this novel has been adapted into the screenplays of many filmmakers including P. C. Barua's *Devdas* in Hindi, released in 1935 and Bimal Ray's in 1969.

Parvati (Paro) is Devdas' childhood friend and neighbour. She is the daughter of Nilkanth Chakravarty. He owned a few acres of land and her small brick house is adjacent to the landlord's mansion. She is Devdas' classmate and confidante. Her love and devotion for Devdas is evident since her early childhood, from her sheer willingness to endure pain to spare Devdas from it. She even suffers the termination of her school education while trying to hide Devdas' misdeeds. Yet, she reacts to this adverse situation with her enthusiasm and childlike innocence. Highlighting Paro's alacrity at the indication that she need not go to school arouses responses from her mother and her grandmother towards the education of woman. Paro's mother favours women's education while her grandmother believes that women are not expected to become a lawyer or a judge—hence people in the feudal society would generally persist in their opposition to the schooling of young girls. Paro's generosity can be seen when she gives away all the three rupees that Devdas had given her for safe-keeping to the *Vaishnavi* mendicants for

singing to her a devotional song. Her deep attachment for Devdas can be found in her failure to reconcile herself to his absence when he leaves for Calcutta for higher studies. A further lightning strikes her when on his return to Tal Sonapur, Devdas' mother declines to consider the proposal of Paro's alliance with Devdas ostensibly on the grounds that he is still studying and she does not intend to arrange his marriage at that time. Paro's courageous disposition is revealed when Paro does not hesitate to go to Devdas late at night into his bedroom and ask him if he would like to marry her. This is inconceivable for a woman of her time, and it is evident from the jolt that her friend Manorama experiences on learning about Paro's intentions.

Parvati's strong emotional integrity can be found in the episode when Devdas returns to Parvati after rejecting her, with a proposal for marriage when her wedding is finalised with Bhuvan Chowdhury. Parvati firmly resists the offer on account of two factors despite her unflinching love for Devdas: Devdas had earlier spurned her when she had made a similar offer. It had hurt her self-pride. Secondly, Paro does not wish to bring about any kind of humiliation or disrepute to her parents by acting against their wishes and marrying somebody other than the one they had chosen for her. This only shows her respect and affection for her parents. She asserts that though she belonged to a trading community she had enough self-pride to reject him so that she could remain consistent in her decisions. She flagrantly retorts to Devdas' caustic remark: "*Tumi (ahankar korte) paro ami pari ne. Tomar roop achhe, gun nei—Amar roop achhe gun o achhe. Tomra bodo lok kintu amar baba o bhikkhe kore beran na. Ta chhada, dudin pode ami nijeo tomader cheye kono anshe heen thakbo na.*" (Devdas 1917, 2: 121) "If you can be

arrogant, so can I. You may be good looking but you have no virtues—I have both virtues and good looks. Your family may be wealthy, but my father is no beggar. Besides, in a few days I will be richer than you.” (*Devdas*: 2002: 47)

This outburst is caused by severe psychological trauma, but it marks her as an individual not merely a submissive girl accepting her fate without challenging it. Banani Mukhia rightly points out, “No finer example of blending of conventionality with an upright strain of individuality could be found than in the character and demeanour of Parvati in *Devdas*.” (109)

Paro’s childhood generosity shown to the *Vaishnav* mendicants matures with her age. After her marriage she gives away all her exquisite ornaments to her step-daughter Yashoda and wins her affection. Though Yashoda is older than Parvati in age, the latter won over her through her word games. She convinced Yashoda, “*Dukkhir meye, tomader dayay ekhane ektu sthan peyechi. Koto deen, dukkhi, anath tomader dayay ekhane nitya pratipalita hoy; amito ma taderi ek jon.*” (*Devdas* 1917, 2: 130) “I am a poor girl and you have been kind enough to give me shelter. There are so many hapless, unfortunate souls who get shelter under your roof. I am just one of them, a refugee.” (*Devdas*: 2002: 66) Pramath Nath Pal holds a contradictory view: Through this gesture of Parvati giving her ornaments to Yashoda gives a glimpse of her illusiveness. She quenches her own heartburn of her secret desires: she would never be able to bear children nor lavish such extravagance on them. So she hands them to Yashoda in order to experience the pleasure of a daughter’s affection. (35)

After her marriage to Bhuvan Chowdhury, Parvati spends most of her

time attending to her husband's needs like a devoted wife and in religious ceremonies and charity. She supports orphanages, homes for widows and other institutions. She never allows hermits, beggars, students and other needy people who come to the Chowdhury mansion for help to return empty-handed. The reputation of her generosity spreads far beyond her husband's estates. People regard her as a *yogini*, as Annapurna, 'the giver of food', as Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and abundance. Yet Parvati remains gentle, humble, with a gracious smile and a kind word for everyone in her in-laws' house. Parvati is also very broadminded. At her in-laws' house she takes over most of the household chores. Since she is childless even after five years of her marriage, she feels greatly drawn to other people's children. She bears all the expenses of the children who belong to the poor families of the neighbourhood and those who have limited means of subsistence. She serves the ill, aged, homeless as well as the guests in her homestead. She secretly spends whatever she gets from her husband for her own upkeep, on meeting the costs of helping out poor but decent families financially. Mukhia aptly remarks,

Coming back to the concept of assumed or surrogate motherhood, we find it quite a common occurrence reinforcing the idea of the presence of mother psyche in all women irrespective of their age or status in the family or in society. Parvati in *Devdas*, hardly out of her teens, was the most unlikely person to assume the role of a mother to her grown up step children, but she did exactly that, and with perfect ease. How far this role assumption was out of her sense of duty to her husband, or of what was expected of her and how far was it genuine would always remain an open question. (31)

Parvati's ability to suppress sorrows and keep them to herself is her

forte. Though she receives all the comforts that any woman could desire, she is overcome with a feeling of void in her life. She has no aim to attain and no purpose to work for. Laden with sorrow, she pines for her childhood days in her village of Tal Sonapur. She evokes to her mind the sweet memories of the bamboo grove, the mango orchard, the pond, the open fields and the school where she has spent the carefree years of her life in the company of Devdas. Pal points out that it is because she wants to fill this emptiness that she remains preoccupied with numerous activities of the household, never allowing anybody to detect her true feelings of grief from separation. (35) Parvati is also sympathetic. As soon as she learns about Devdas' pitiable condition a sudden change overcomes her. She becomes hard and determined. She returns to Tal Sonapur not only to meet Devdas but also to take him to her house and nurse him. She does not hesitate to take such drastic decisions because she regards Devdas as her valuable belonging. Her immense love for Devdas gives her such boldness and later she audaciously explains to Manorama, "*Lajja abar kake? Nijer jinish nije niye jabo tate lajja ki?*" (*Devdas* 1917, 2: 147) "What is there to be ashamed of—I will take back what is rightfully mine." (*Devdas*: 2002: 102) She regards Devdas as her own thing which is an interesting usage by a woman for a man, an inversion of the proprietary right of a man over a woman sanctioned by marital custom; the inversion is all the more emphatic, for Parvati is asserting her proprietary right over a man she had chosen for herself rather than the one assigned to her by society through the ritual of marriage. Thus, Parvati possesses tremendous emotional strength to subvert conventional norms of behaviour.

Though she is married to Mahendra, Parvati can neither develop

emotional ties with him nor break those that she has developed with Devdas. However Parvati's bond with Devdas does not border on infidelity because her service to her husband is rendered based on her sense of duty towards him while she looks after Devdas out of her love for him. She firmly believes that no one can love him the way she does. Pal holds the view that Parvati had married Bhuvan Mohan not merely to be his wife. She could never accept him as her husband. Though there was no socially accepted marriage between Devdas and Parvati but in her heart she acknowledged him as her husband. She lacked the voice to revolt against the power and the laws of the society to disregard Bhuvan Mohan and accept Devdas as her husband. (35) Parvati's character thus embodies a drastic evolution from impulsive reactions to restraint over her socially unacceptable or unpalatable emotions for a man who is not her lawfully wedded husband. Her emotional integrity shudders only on a single occasion in the story. It is at the news of Devdas' death outside the gate of her house, which unleashes a paroxysm of agony in her otherwise tranquil, calm and composed temperament.

Chandramukhi is a twenty-four year old prostitute—who accepts money for the services she renders. She has no pretensions or claims to respectability. However it is Devdas' love that transforms her from a courtesan to a simple village woman. Though her profession has brought her in intimacy with various kinds of men she is astounded and strangely attracted towards Devdas. She projects a great amount of self-pride. When Devdas gives her a heavy sum of money out of spite for her, for the services she had not even offered him, she feels greatly embarrassed. Chandramukhi's patience can be seen when, out of her sheer love for Devdas she silently pockets all the

humiliation which Devdas callously flings at her. It is because Devdas sneers at her remarking how much insult and assault she tolerates due to her profession, Chandramukhi is prompted to put a stop to rendering sexual favours in exchange of money. She is so profoundly influenced by Devdas' comments that a drastic change overcomes her and she abandons all the glamour and glitter of her profession. She gives it up and sells all her jewellery and furniture to maintain herself. It is only out of deep affection for Devdas, that she remains in her old accommodation, familiar to Devdas, despite drowning in debts so that if he ever chances to visit her there, she can meet him just once before moving away from there.

Her ardour for Devdas is clearly visible in the manner in which she affectionately asks Devdas about Parvati. She has already learnt about his love for Parvati when Devdas mumbled in a drunken stupor about her. Chandramukhi's deep understanding about human nature may be revealed in the passage below:

Kintu tobuo amar biswas hoye na je, Parvati tomake thokieche. Boroncho mone hoy, tumi nijei nijeke thokiecho. Devdas, ami tomar cheye boyse bodo, e sansare onek jinish dekhechi...tomari bhul hoyche. Mone hoy, chanchal ebong asthir chitto bole striloker joto akhyati, totokhani akhyatir tara joggo noy. Akhyati korteo tomra, sukhyati korteo tomra. Tomader ja bolbar—anayase bolo, kintu tara ta parena. Nijer moner katha prakash korte parena; parleo, ta sabai bojhenā. Kenona, bodo aspashā hoy—tomader mukher kachhe chapa pore jay. Tar pore akhyatitai loker mukhe mukhe spashatara hoye othe. (Devdas 1917, 2: 141)

But still I don't believe Parvati has cheated you. Instead, I feel, you have cheated yourself. Devdas, I am older than you, I have seen much of the world...you are in the wrong. I feel women do not deserve all their reputation for being whimsical and fickle. It's you men who

praise them no end—and then it's you who blame them and pull them down their pedestal. You are able to speak your mind with ease. They cannot express themselves so easily. Even if they do, few understand them, because what they say is mumbled, easily drowned out by your loud voice. What happens in the end is that nobody sees the women's point of view—they are simply badmouthed. (*Devdas*: 2002: 90)

Chandramukhi's love for Devdas drives her to face the disgust of her existing life. She knows how to preserve her self-dignity and also be generous when she settles at Ashathjuri. She is pained to learn that Devdas has squandered much of his inherited money on drink and whores allowing Dwijodas and his wife to inherit the whole of his father's *zamindari*. She is bright, calm, restrained and collected. She goes to Calcutta to look for Devdas, pines for the ailing drunkard, spots him, nurses during his illness and wishes the best in the world for him. It is Chandramukhi who receives her reward for her devotion to Devdas. Her dedication to him transforms his revulsion into a sense of grateful affection for her. Devdas prefers to address Chandramukhi as *bou* (wife) but her love for him is selfless and she never demands any social security from him. Devdas adores her as an affectionate human being but he could never confer on her the position of his respectable wife in the society due to the shame of her profession. According to Mukhia,

Chandramukhi mirrored the social perception of a prostitute's fate and demonstrated how she had internalized it perfectly when she felt that if Devdas got any pleasure out of her company –if she could be of any service to him—that should be enough, but she could never expect any place of honour in his life. Chandramukhi, nonetheless, could create space for herself through her selfless service to Devdas and it is quite self-evident when Devdas, towards the end, the night before his death, remembered his mother and remembered another face glowing with utmost purity and affection: the face of Chandramukhi. The juxtaposition of the mother and the fallen woman in his last,

unblemished moment had raised Chandramukhi to that pedestal of ideal womanhood—purity—which life had so persistently denied her.”
(82-83)

She brings within herself a reconciliation of moral purity and sexual chastity. Her unmitigated sacrifice; even when her love and sacrifice were not reciprocated brought her some status, space and physical and moral satisfaction.

In the light of these characteristics it may be agreed that both Parvati and Chandramukhi, like most of Sarat’s women, “are strong, proactive and indomitable.” (Guha: 2002: xi) It is their love for Devdas that sustains the plot and generates incidents. Guha draws a remarkable comparison between Parvati and Devdas. The supposed heroine of this tragic love story—Parvati addresses her hero as ‘Dev-*da*’ (elder brother) an all-pervasive memory of the childhood days when these two playmates developed the complexity of the affection between them. He wounds Parvati on the brow to remember their last meeting. Guha comments,

“Much later, from Chandramukhi’s description of Devdas, we learn that he has a prominent mark on his left brow—and it is the left brow on which he gives Parvati a mark. One could read this as the effort of the self to impart similitude to its alter-ego if one wanted to...Essentially, the story of Devdas is a reformulation of the Krishna-Radha-Meera story; but the realistic character-delineation and the complexities of human feeling introduced into its structure fashions an entirely different text out of the fabular triangle.” (Idem.)

It is only later in Bombay that Devdas realizes that Paro was more like a sister to him while he insists on addressing Chandramukhi as his *bou* (wife) and provides for her like a husband.

Paro's mother has a progressive mind-set. She wants her daughter to study at a time when education to women was given little importance. She is also intelligent. Throughout the story Paro's mother dutifully conforms to all other customary practices and roles that a mother of her time traditionally follows. She is aware of the custom of their household and their trading community which involved accepting a bride-price for a girl's marriage and to give it for a boy's marriage. Both parents of Parvati abhorred this practice. They have no intention of selling their beautiful daughter and making money on the transaction. Being an optimist, Paro's mother nurses the desire that she could marry her daughter off to Devdas. She hopes that this would secure her daughter's future for good. She is also sympathetic. Though her desired alliance between Devdas and Paro does not take place, she never directs her venom at him. On the contrary, she offers her sympathy and sincere consolation to Devdas when his father passes away. She also shows her deep concern on finding Devdas in a dishevelled condition. Thus, she represents the women of her time who harboured positive emotional values and she has successfully instilled them in her daughter.

Devdas' mother, Harimati Devi, on the other hand, is a stern woman and a vigilant mother. She gets impatient with Devdas' wayward and reckless ways because he loafs around in the village instead of going to school. Being worried about Devdas who grows worthless, ignorant and rustic, she is anxious about his future. She represents the typical class and caste-conscious women of the elite society whose pride rests only on the fact that she is a prosperous *zamindar's* wife and the mother of two sons—Dwijodas and Devdas. Thus, her existence and recognition in the society is entirely

dependent on the male members of her family. Harimati Devi is observant and genuinely concerned about her son. She knows all about her son's weaknesses. Hence her practical suggestions, if followed by Devdas, would have spared him from a lot of difficulties. With her husband's death all joy seems to have gone out of Harimati Devi's life. Like a worried mother, she pleads with Devdas to marry and settle in life before she retires for good to Varanasi. It is only at this point of time Harimati Devi realizes that she ought to have got her son married to Parvati. Here a parallel can be seen with Tagore's novel, *Binodini*. At a crucial point in the novel a similar realization dawns upon Rajlakshmi that it would have been better if she had got Binodini married to her son Mahendra. After his father's demise Dwijodas takes over almost all of his father's property. Yet, conforming to a widow's customs of the day, Harimati Devi, who had settled in Varanasi neither returns to prevent Devdas from being deprived of his inheritance, nor thwarts Dwijodas from doing injustice to his younger brother, Devdas.

Manorama is Parvati's childhood friend and confidante. She acts as a foil to Paro's rebellious ways. She is a few years older than Parvati. Crest-fallen after her marriage-proposal with Devdas is rejected, Parvati seeks solace by confiding in her. Manorama has been married a year earlier. Being kind-hearted, she consoles Parvati who is unhappy about her parents' decision to get her married elsewhere. She is a conformist and never deviates from tradition. The author rightly comments, "...*ihara anarthak mathay sindoor pore, hathe noa day.*" (*Devdas*: 1917, 2: 114) "...there were women like Manorama who wore their sindoor and their iron bangles, marks of marriage to no real purpose." (*Devdas*: 2002: 32) However, she remains loyal to Parvati

as a friend. She neither gossips in the village about Parvati's clandestine sentiments for Devdas, nor speaks about him in a disparaging manner.

Yashoda is the daughter of Bhuban Mohan Babu (Parvati's husband) from his previous marriage and the younger sister of Mahendra (Parvati's step-son). She is elder to Parvati. She is miffed at Parvati's marriage to her father. She prefers to remain hostile to her step-mother, but when Parvati invites her to her house and wins her over by her word games, she is overcome with affection and respect for her new mother. Being humble, she is quick to apologise for her misdemeanour and rectify it. Though Yashoda is the daughter of the landed Chowdhury household and older than Parvati in age, she neither takes undue advantage of her position nor exercises her superiority and dominance over Parvati at any point of time.

Jaladbala is the wife of Mahendra, Parvati's step-son. She is intelligent and efficient. After her marriage to Mahendra she takes over the household chores. She strongly dislikes Parvati's charities. Since she is worried that Parvati's generosity could drain out all the resources of the family, she harshly points it out to Mahendra. However, her husband fails to perceive her practical insight whenever she complains against Parvati. Nevertheless, when Parvati learns about this dissatisfaction, she resolves to put a restraint on her own acts of charity. Yashoda later apologises for her uncouth aspersions against Parvati. Among the less important characters are Parvati's grandmother and Dwijodas' wife. Both these characters represent stereotypes—one, an affectionate grandmother and the other, a self-centred wife. Hence they have not been assigned names as characters.

Devdas enchants our imagination as the four characters Devdas, Parvati, Chandramukhi and Chunilal are convincing and modelled on real characters that the author had met and they find parallels in Saratchandra's autobiographical masterpiece *Charitrahin*. During his childhood Saratchandra often played with a girl called Paru, who appears to be Paro in *Devdas* and Rajlakshmi, in *Srikant*. Rajlakshmi later returns as Pyari Bai, the courtesan, in *Srikant*, and resembles Chandramukhi in *Devdas*. This evolution of Rajlakshmi's character also suggests a parallel between Parvati and Chandramukhi, that is briefly hinted at in *Devdas* 'through their similar Mother-images and finally made obvious in the last chapter when Devdas visualises them side by side.' (Guha viii) Rajendranath, Saratchandra's friend, who introduced him to the vices of alcohol, tobacco and dancing girls, appears as Chunilal in *Devdas* and Indranath in *Srikant*. (Idem.)

Charitrahin

Charitrahin (The Dissolute) was written during Sarat's stay at Muzaffarpur. It appeared in part in a journal called *Yamuna* and as a whole book in 1917, creating an alarming sensation among the Bengali literary public. (A. Datta 1: 654) It is about socially prohibited romance and the essence of nobility in the lives of sinners and saints in the middle-class milieu. It reveals Saratchandra's scathing criticism of social prejudices and arrogance and his scrutiny of man-woman relationship. The story revolves around two women and two men namely Savitri, Kiranmayi, Satish and Upendra. Savitri, widowed at an early age, suffers severe hardships in life; hence works as a house-maid in a boarding-house. Savitri and Satish (a boarder) foster love for

each other. Their clandestine relationship ignites a scandal among all the acquaintances of Satish, and he leaves the boarding-house. Kiranmayi, a beautiful, intelligent and well-read lady with a remarkable personality, can discuss the nuances of the Sanskrit texts, defies social conventions and scoffs at popular beliefs. She feels strongly attracted to the noble, chaste and ideal Upendra, Satish's cousin and her husband's close friend. Soon after becoming a widow she proposes her love for him but he repudiates her love. She attempts to avenge herself by hurting his weakest spot. She plans a diabolical scheme, to seduce Divakar, Upendra's ward who is almost like his son. On accomplishing her mission she is rewarded with neither satisfaction nor peace. After the demise of Surabala, Upendra's devoted wife, Upendra falls ill during which he realizes the nobility of Savitri's character, and gives her shelter as his sister. Savitri is pained at Satish's growing affection for Sarojini and brings back Kiranmayi and Divakar from Arakkan. However, Kiranmayi becomes insane and Upendra's illness aggravates to which he finally succumbs.

The title of the novel itself reveals Saratchandra's critique of conventional moral codes. The novel is named after Satish who is supposed to be a man of easy morals. The affair of Savitri, a poor maid servant with Satish, a rich Brahmin creates a great uproar in the contemporary society but also projects the author's rebellion against the social tradition. The significant characters like Kiranmayi, Savitri, Surabala and Sarojini reveal the range and depth of the author's insight. The other women characters are Jagattarini, Aghormayi, Maheshwari, Mokshada and Kamini, the maid-servant. Savitri and Kiranmayi generate the plot of the novel.

This novel presents some of the most illustrious women characters that were ever portrayed in Indian Renaissance fiction. It offers us a large cross-section of Bengali society: on one hand the novel depicts Surabala, an embodiment of an almost devotionally faithful wife, Sarojini, the romantic heroine, and Upendra, the guardian of institution and tradition and on the other, there is Savitri who has been exploited by the society. "It expresses the social awareness by describing with acute observation and detailed analysis, the sorrows and sufferings of the oppressed and the discredited in the society," observes A. Datta. (1: 654)

There is hardly anything immoral or indecent in the portrayal of Savitri's character. When the story opens she is shown to be a maid servant in a boarding house. She has been a widow since the early age of nine. She is at liberty from the social restraints that impede self-expression. The husband of her elder sister makes sexual advances towards her and then accusing her of tempting him, compels her to leave her house and reduces her to utmost destitution. She receives little help from her house but is condemned as a fallen woman. In spite of being of noble birth and belonging to a Brahmin family, she encounters severe humiliation and succumbs to offering manual labour to support herself. This illustrates her humility and self-reliance. Though she renders her menial services, she remains upright and steadfast in her character. She finally seeks employment in a boarding-house and comes in touch with Satish, a reckless but well to do student studying Homeopathic Medicine. As a result of her devoted services, she becomes "a second mother" to him. (Kshetramade 115) Gradually, she becomes conscious of

their mutual involvement with each other. Her revered values, beauty, charm, intelligence and her gentle disposition enchant Satish and he conjectures that Savitri might belong to a noble family.

Despite the mutual affection she shares with Satish, she is painfully aware of its repercussions. Hence she exercises a firm self-control. Despite her attraction for Satish she steadfastly resists any sexual advances of Satish towards her. She vehemently upbraids him, when under the spell of an impulse, Satish pulls the loose end of her sari, "*Lekhapora bhalo lagchhe na! Ekhon bhalo lagchhe bujhi meyemanusher anchal dhare tanatani kara? Jan apni iskule. Anarthak bashay bose theke upadrab karben na.*" (*Charitrahin: 1979, 4: 11*) "You don't like studies any more! ...You prefer to pull at women's *anchal*, though...Come now, go to school, don't sit there idle and cause trouble to others." (*Charitrahin: 1962: 20*) Yet, Savitri's affection is deeper for Satish than for other lodgers. Therefore, although she keeps a part of her mind for this tall, strong, handsome youth, being painfully aware of the fact that she is only a common maid, selflessly withdraws from him considering the wide disparity of status that stood between them. She is torn apart between the inner conflicts of her conventional values and the satisfaction of her instincts as a woman.

Savitri is educated, matured, thoughtful and gifted with a rare foresight but she is also romantic and impulsive. She could have easily won Satish for herself. Yet she sacrifices her love and happiness for his welfare, so that he may not be treated as an outcast in the society like her. Hence when Satish professes his intention to marry her despite the stigma with which the people

have falsely stamped her, she is on the verge of her long-awaited happiness. Her suffering, her privation and destitution is about to give way to her prized social security. Yet she turns down the offer as Binodini does to Bihari in Tagore's novel. Thus, her self-perception is conditioned by that of the male-dominated society which is shown content in negating and denying sexuality generally to women, and especially to a 'fallen woman'.

Though Savitri is aware of the fact that it is not a sin for a widow to remarry, she painfully laments the fact that the society is not yet prepared to accept it as a newly justified tradition. She adopts a new outlook after accepting Upendra's advice. Hence, she justifies her stance to Satish explaining that although he might remain indifferent to the norms of the society, it is the woman's life which gets cluttered by its taboos, trials and tribulations, which she cannot escape. Thus, Savitri is prudent, far-sighted, and she exercises restraint and recoils from the proffered happiness. She remains aloof from him and suppresses her love. Furthermore, she encourages him to marry Sarojini, who loves him, but for whom he has no warmth in his heart. The situation is ironical as it is socially palatable but an ultimate tragedy for Savitri. Sarojini's love for Satish receives its due acknowledgement—although she marries someone who does not reciprocate her love. On the other hand, Savitri's profound affection which deserves to culminate in a happy marriage remains unfulfilled since at the crucial point she fails to revolt against the conventional codes and achieve her long-cherished desire. Savitri stirs sympathy in the readers' hearts but Saratchandra offers no solution or remedy. He delineates her with an element of conservatism. She must live a loveless and frustrated life, and she also

reveals an adherence for the tradition that has little or no value for women of her plight.

Thus, inspite of Satish's indifference, his friends like Upendra and his relative Divakar, Surabala and others soon learn about Savitri's innocence. They are spell-bound at her kind and obliging nature. They also entrust a thorough confidence in her abiding moral restraint. Finally, her brother-in-law who has abducted her comes forth to assure all concerned that as long as Savitri is alive, none can seduce her and he endorses the fact with his own experience. Hence Savitri remains pure without being debauched. Through the purity of her mind and body, Savitri rises above her lowly status of a fallen woman and acquires her physical and social space within the mainstream society as Upendra's 'sister' and a selfless soul dedicating her whole existence to rendering services to others. The social norms normally excluded her from the status of a wife or a mother. It compelled her to practice detachment and forbade her to sexual and gender roles. Upendra's last advice that she should never return into the confines of society which has abandoned her but remain outside it and be useful to society, further reinforces self-denial in her. Savitri thus internalizes her society's decision about her chastity and surrendering her desires accepts to remain peripheral till the end.

The other important heroine in the novel is Kiranmayi. She is vehemently modern with no regard for religion, or tradition. It is through her portrait that the author's purpose of unveiling the innate hypocrisy of social customs becomes more prominent. At an early age Kiranmayi is married to

Haranbabu, a teacher and philosopher, much older than her who tries to 'educate' his wife but fails to satisfy the yearnings of her heart as soon as she blossoms into a youthful maiden. Her natural desires and craving of her youthful body not only remain unquenched but are also throttled under the pedagogic autocracy of her own self-righteous husband. Despite this unjust deprivation Kiranmayi finds no room to assert her individual existence as there is no other man to vie for her affection other than her husband. Moreover, she is even allowed to be sexually exploited by Aghormayi, her mother-in-law for the benefit of Haran. For instance, when Haranbabu falls ill, and his poverty disables him to be able to pay the doctor's bills, Kiranmayi is compelled by Aghormayi to allow the young family doctor to seduce her so that in return he incurs the expenses of the family. She finds it difficult to commit her entire life in petty household errands, torn between a bookish husband and a tyrannical mother-in-law. Hence she revolts against her loveless marriage. The threat that Satish recognised in Kiranmayi which perturbed the upholders of social morality was that of

...the latent sexuality of a woman, without any socially sanctioned outlet open to them...Kiranmayi's pragmatic ...cynical attitude towards life deprived from the assumption that sexuality was central to the relationship between man and woman, irrespective of their ages. This sets her apart from all other women characters of Sarat and of other contemporary writers as well. (Mukhia 50)

Kiranmayi has the qualities of individuality and self-articulation in abundance. She is not cast into the mould of a stereotype. Mukhia remarks that the element of unpredictability in her nature adds complexity to her character. She further observes that "this complexity was the accumulated upshot of her acute sense of deprivation—physical, emotional, sexual and psychological."

(96)

Kiranmayi condemns the cruelty of an unjust and unequal marital relationship. Like Binodini in *Chokher Bali* Kiranmayi feels that she has been deprived out of the good things of life. She is neither ignorant nor accepts her fate and the inherent injustice involved without a murmur. She never tries to build up her image as a devoted and loyal wife either in public or in private and challenges the concept of perpetual fidelity to one's husband by declaring that she has never loved her husband. Here she may be compared to Bimala in *Ghare-Baire* who loves her husband but also reserves her affection for another person. Kiranmayi believes that the question of devotion is relative. According to her, sexuality is normal and natural in a human being and she does not wish to suppress it. She confesses of her sexual indulgence with the family doctor with a feeling of revulsion instead of a sense of guilt. Rather than the usual sexual experience with the doctor it is her open declaration of it which "marks her departure from the norm and assertion of her self." (Idem.) She is unsympathetic and shrewd in contrast to her flawless beauty which was then normally associated with a sympathetic demeanour.

Moreover Kiranmayi's candid proclamation of her love for Upendra further reinforces her identity. It is only when she meets Upendra that her supine, unquenched passions are aroused. Upendra fills up her abject, dry and arid life with new hope and promise to her unfulfilled yearnings, being the 'ideal' man and husband. His appearance in her life unleashes the floodgates of her pent up emotions. Her frustration with Upendra prompts her to adopt an insane decision. In order to avenge her unreciprocated love for Upendra and

undermine his sense of honour, she elopes with Upendra's son-like ward, Divakar, in order to seduce him, but she is soon disillusioned. In order to punish such unconventional women and their defiant and indecorous behaviour, thereby discourage further acts of rebellion, Sarat Chandra brings her to the inevitable end. Her emotional poise gradually disintegrates. She is on the brink of insanity as Upendra succumbs to illness and soon meets his death. Her loss of sanity restores social sanity and order, and a contemporary reader's desired ending.

Despite her flagrant transgression, her sense of morality is unique and logical. It cannot be dismissed as flawed. This can be exemplified with some of the long discourses that she has with Divakar.

Tumi surjer alor sada ranger sange nyayer tulana dichhile! Kintu, sada rang ki sabgulo ranger mishrane janmay na? Ei sada alo jemon banka kancher madhye diye rangin hoye othe, nyayo day. Anyayke khama korle adharmake je prashray deoya hoy, ta mani, kintu adharmao je tari ekta rup noy, e kathao to swikar na kore parine. (Charitrahin: 1979, 4:146)

Just now you were comparing injustice with the white rays of the sun. But isn't white a mixture of all the colours? Justice also takes the shape of kindness, compassion and forgiveness through the kaleidoscope of injustice, impiety and sin in the same way as the white rays of the sun take different hues when seen through glass crystal. I agree that you only encourage impiety by forgiving injustice, and yet I don't believe whole-heartedly that impiety is another form of it. (Charitrahin: 1962: 250)

She is sufficiently well read so as to offer criticism of Divakar's stories published in journals. She is quick to rectify the flaws in her conduct. As soon as she realized from Upendra's words that she has deprived her husband of her selfless service, she begins to look after him devotedly. Instead of

allowing the doctor to seduce her and support the expenses of the family, she sells away all her jewellery to support the medical expenses of her husband. Saratchandra claimed that “the conduct of Kiranmayi and Savitri should be judged in the light of the social pressures to which they are subjected.” (Naravane 1976: 39)

Sarojini is Jyotish's sister. She has an inclination for English manners and tastes. However, when Upendra praises Satish's virtues and physique, she develops a soft spot for him and resolves to change her ways to suit Satish's Indian taste. She is very patient because she loses track of Satish often and a long time elapses before she finally chances to meet him accidentally in his remote recluse as an incognito. Being an opportunist she seizes every chance of showing her warmth and affection to Satish. Her one-sided love for him is finally crowned with success when Upendra, on his death-bed, urges Satish for an immediate betrothal with Sarojini.

Jagattarini is Jyotish's mother. Her past days have been unhappy. Her late husband Paresh Nath had gone to England to become a qualified member of the Bar leaving his twelve year-old Jyotish and his six year-old daughter in his wife Jagattarini's care. Since she was unhappy with this decision she continued to live away from her husband even after he returned and prospered in Calcutta. She is also erratic and impulsive by nature and often makes her servants the object of her short temper. Being a typically concerned mother, she is extremely anxious about the marriage of her daughter, Sarojini. Her hypocrisy in social standards is visible when she is prepared to get her son, Jyotish to marry somebody from any caste but is not

ready to do so with her daughter even though she is past her marriageable age.

Surabala is Upendra's devoted and affectionate wife. She was named Pasuraj by her grandfather because she collected lame and blind animals like dogs, white rats and birds since her childhood and looked after them endearingly. This shows her kind heartedness and her compassion for the underprivileged and neglected. This is also illustrated by the way she looks after Divakar when he hurries from home for his college getting delayed for his first lecture. With her motherly affection she stops him from remaining hungry in the morning. She is also remarkably truthful and does not believe in concealing facts. With her child-like simplicity and piety, she wins over the affection of everybody including Kiranmayi. It is by virtue of her everlasting ardour for her husband, Upendra that prevents him from being lured to Kiranmayi, who is superior to Surabala in beauty, education and intelligence. She stands out in the novel as a paragon of virtue and affection. She is thus an example of the good and faithful wife who is traditional, homely, domesticated and content with her domestic space within her restricted sphere. She is in sharp contrast to the bold and unconventional Kiranmayi who is supremely confident and can bend others to her will. Surabala's character does not develop much as she dies early leaving Upendra miserable. Although in her life and death Surabala triumphs over Kiranmayi, the latter outshines the former completely in her brilliant individuality.

Aghormayi is Kiranmayi's eccentric mother-in-law and Haran's mother. She has been portrayed as a stereotypical mother-in-law who made

Kiranmayi toil hard and subjected her to mental torture and physical punishment. Mokshada is a maid who once worked in Satish's upcountry house. She lives with Savitri at her humble lodgings. She first appears in the novel when she gets Satish to read her letter, in which her daughter-in-law states that she would return after a month. Sarat's novels are often peopled with unlettered maid-servants like Mokshada whose lives are often cluttered with norms of abstinence and temptations to violate such norms. She is a woman of easy morals, though she is much older than Savitri. She performs the function of a chorus in a Greek tragedy when she provides significant insights into Savitri's character through her revelations to Upendra about Savitri's past. Maheshwari is Upendra's eldest sister. It is she who manages everything in the house. She has lost her husband four years before and since then she has been living with her father, Shivaprasad. She compels Divakar to perform religious duties at the time of his lectures at college. Yet she is sufficiently sensitive not to disturb the family priest who is engrossed in playing dice with her father thus distracting the latter from his illness.

Sarat Chandra has lucidly portrayed women's psyche. Women of his novels are either thoroughly devoted to their husbands, modelled on the mythological character of Savitri or like the pristine Bhagirathi. However, in *Charitrahin* through Kiranmayi, Sarat Chandra, for the first time transcends the parameters of chastity which further culminates through Kamalmayi in *Ses Prasna*. Thus, he delineates the psychological fluctuations present in the minds of contemporary women. He reveals not only their emotions but also their intelligence. The novel, according to Chaturvedi, contains dual instances of the struggle for love--which people often encounter in their lives. On one

hand, there is Upendra whose successful love is Surabala and unsuccessful love is Kiranmayi. On the other hand, there is Satish whose fulfilled love is Sarojini and unfulfilled love is Savitri. (60) Most of the novel depicts a vigorous picture of the struggles for achieving true love.

Srikant

Srikant is Sarat's longest novel in four parts which is largely autobiographical. Part one describes Srikant sharing his boyhood adventures with Indranath. They visit a drug-addict snake-charmer who is rude to his wife, Annada. The boys come to her aid and regard her as their sister. The second part shows Srikant in his adulthood in the company of a prince he knew since childhood. He meets a courtesan named Pyari Bai who turns out to be Rajlakshmi, for whom Srikant reserved deep affection when they were school children. In the third part Srikant and Rajlakshmi come to a village in the district of Birbhum. Rajlakshmi gets engaged with her religious practices leaving Srikant alone. The rift between them widens. In the last part, Srikant contemplates to return to Burma but accidentally meets Kamallata through his friend Gahar in a village. The novel closes with Kamallata's departure from the *akhra*.

Despite Sarat Chandra's erudite and emotional pronouncements in his feminist essay *Narir Mulya* (1922), his own portraits of women often conform to traditional values for want of an acceptable response for the new ones from the general reader. In *Srikant* Annadadi is lauded for blindly following her roguish husband and the age-old ideals which Sarat Chandra satirizes in his essay. He appals his readers through the delicate projection of women's love,

irrespective of her marital position outside the codes of the society. He treats the love of widows (like Savitri and Kiranmayi) with sympathy and even defends extra-marital affairs of women who are wronged by their husbands (like Abhaya). *Srikant* reveals a galaxy of women: Rajlakshmi - a child-widow and Kamallata- a Vaishnavi nun are remarkable among them. Both find space outside the society—a prostitute is disowned by the society and a nun disowns the society. According to S. K. Das,

Sarat Chandra brings out the tensions and trepidations, the charms and the excitement, the moments of bliss and the agony of unfulfilled love with power, but his challenges against the social authority, though remarkable in the context of his time, are always fraught with hesitation. This only shows how strongly the hegemonic ideas have been internalised by ablest men writers and how even our finest women writers have been tutored to accept the ideology of subordination. (340)

Rajlakshmi was Srikant's childhood friend. Her relationship with him may be compared to that of Parvati with Devdas. As a child Rajlakshmi was pale and rickety with a drum-like stomach from years of untreated malaria. In order to avoid being bullied by Srikant, her classmate, she would often offer him garlands of wild berries for leaving her alone. If he did not like her gift, he even slapped her hard if she could not answer his question. She neither rebelled nor expressed any grievance. After the beating she would sulk in the corner biting her lip gloomily. She and her sister Suralakshmi were given away in marriage by their uncle to a *Kulin* Brahmin for seventy rupees. A trail of events transforms her into a singing-girl. Years later when Srikant meets her in the form of Pyari Baiji, a courtesan, like Chandramukhi, he is baffled. Her deep concern for her enables him to realize, "*Kintu ei bastuti, jahake se*

taha ishwardatta dhan boliya sagarbe prochar koriteo kunthito hoilo na, tahake se eto din tahar ei ghrinito jiboner sotokotir mithya pronoy-abhinayer madhye kon khane jibito rakhiya chhilo?" (Srikant: 1978, 1: 51) "But she, through all the bitter battles of her life and all the degradations of her profession, had kept my image burning bright and clear within her." (Srikant: 1993: 70)

Like Chandramukhi in *Devdas*, Rajlakshmi in *Srikant* flouts the social norm of chastity. This child-widow and singing-girl, professionally trained to entertain people meets Srikant after many years of separation. The illicit love between the 'vagabond protagonist' (S. K. Das 340) Srikant and "Rajlakshmi torn between her passionate love for her hero and resistant social values deeply embedded in her inner recess of her psyche generates the plot of the novel." (Idem.) The story manifests in their union but not in her rehabilitation within the domestic sphere.

Rajlakshmi is extremely kind-hearted and compassionate although Srikant remains indifferent to her. She also has a benevolent nature. For instance, when Srikant lies dying at the Ara railway station she immediately comes to his rescue all the way from Patna as soon as she receives the news. She does the same on many other occasions for Srikant, particularly as he lies helplessly in his own ancestral home. The care and nursing that this singing-girl bestows upon him may be comparable to Chandramukhi's concern for Devdas whenever he falls ill in the novel, *Devdas*. Moreover, Rajlakshmi also gets a lake built for her villagers to solve the problem of scarcity of water. Yet, since she is a prostitute, she is still ostracized by the

society and forbidden to perform the consecration ceremony of the lake. She has supported the education of ten boys from the village. She even distributes clothes and blankets to the poor every winter. She becomes the mother and guardian for her step-son Banku and treats him like her own son although he shows neither gratitude nor love for her as soon as he is married and given his due share of his property. She provides for an unfortunate Agradani Brahmin family during their crisis. She even spares Srikant from an undesirable matrimonial alliance by sending her hard-earned money to the prospective bride to finance her dowry for her desired suitor. Her love for Srikant reaches its highest manifestation when he comes to her house unexpectedly, stays as a guest and she comes to visit him in his room. She professes her constant love to him and discourages him from going to Burma to earn a living. She despairs, "*Purushmanush joto mondoi hoye jak, bhalo hote chaile take to keu mana korena; kintu amader belayi sab path bandha keno?*" (*Srikant*: 1978, 1: 85) "Why is it that a man, however degenerate, is allowed to change his ways and come back to his family and society in which he was born while a woman, should she commit the tiniest error, finds all doors locked against her?" (*Srikant*: 1993:115) She further laments, "*Amader samaj bodo nishthur, bodo nirday!*" (*Srikant*: 1978, 1: 88) "Our society is too unequal—too cruel to its women." (*Srikant*: 1993: 119)

It is commonly agreed that a woman's greatest accomplishment lies in her attaining motherhood. Rajlakshmi was never privileged with the status of a mother despite her prolonged relationship with Srikant. Mukhia reasserts Sarat Chandra's belief:

"It apparently went against her ingrained 'belief' as part of her socialization to express even desire to have a normal conjugal life with

Srikant and bear his children. All her life she had to pretend that she was happy enough to have her stepchildren around her and treat them as her own.” (Mukhia 31)

Sarat Chandra achieved popularity by projecting motherliness through not only sisters and wives of elder brothers but also stepmothers (S. K. Das 333) as in the case of Rajlakshmi and Parvati. This man-woman relationship is governed by a child-adult structure wherein the man is always the child seeking affection, care and emotional support; and the woman is the adult ever ready to offer it. This can be seen in the cases of Devdas and Parvati, Satish and Savitri as well as Srikant and Rajlakshmi. The ‘noble mother’ signifying supreme power had predictable patterns of behaviour and was received enthusiastically by the noble reader. (Idem.)

Despite all her sorrows Rajlakshmi remains serene and tranquil. Her self-denial, her sacrifice, her love for music—all contribute to the pristine purity of her soul and it enthralled Srikant. Her milk of human kindness brims over when she gifts an expensive sari to a poor old man for accidentally breaking to pieces his clay bird which he had bought with his meagre salary for his ailing daughter. Her sensitivity to the underprivileged is unprecedented. Her heart reaches out to the poverty-stricken man from the Dom community who is about to wed his nine-year-old daughter to a man who is thirty or forty years old, selling her for twenty four rupees like the way Rajlakshmi herself was once sold. Her despair reaches its highest manifestation when she remarks, “*E pora dese ja kore amra meyeder biliye di-i, tate itor-bhadra sobai soman.*” (Srikant: 1978, 1: 185) “The way we treat our women in this wretched country! From the highest to the lowest it is the same story.” (Srikant: 1993:

It is truly audacious for a woman of her time to acknowledge a man as her husband without any formal religious ceremony according to the norms of the Hindu society. Yet being a self respecting woman, she takes pride in her profession and generously spends her income, bestowing them in charity to the needy and backward people. She constantly practices self restraint, rigorous discipline and resurrects herself out of the dead remains of Pyari Baiji to become her former innocent and chaste Rajlakshmi. She undertakes this penance to attain the affection of her childhood idol—Srikant. It recalls Uma's unparalleled penance for Lord Shiva. On the other hand, this character seems to have marred much of her nobility by calling herself a slave girl with her servile attitude towards Srikant. She respects family ties and hence persuades Sunanda to reunite with her family. Srikant also reciprocates this affection by allowing her to live on her own terms and offering unconditional ardour to his 'wife.' Perhaps because Rajlakshmi is the bread-earner of the family, Srikant neither demanded any reward or dowry for consenting to live with her as her 'husband', nor refuses to give her the control over his life. It is ironical how this permanent male customer of this evangelical courtesan expected faithfulness to him alone—like the usual demand of fidelity from the wife. Any act of infidelity on the part of the 'kept' prostitute invited punishment just as in the case of an adulteress wife. Devdas expects fidelity from Chandramukhi as Srikant does from Rajlakshmi although Rajlakshmi never objects to his involvement with other women like Abhaya or Kamallata. Such men demand exclusive sexual obedience even from their 'kept' prostitutes. In these two cases, however, it is the prostitute who lends emotional and

financial support to the men.

It is through Rajlakshmi that Saratchandra's "blissful indifference to economic issues" can be seen. Characters either possess or do not possess wealth, but it is ignored that the method of earning a living affects behaviour. (Mukherjee 108) For example, Rajlakshmi owns several well-resourced houses in Calcutta, Patna and Benaras. Mukherjee justly remarks,

she buys up a whole village halfway through the novel and another village by the end. She can not only travel whenever she feels like but can send her servant with a bundle of money every time Srikant happens to be short of cash. (Idem.)

The earning or acquisition of this wealth seems to leave no mark on the character. Hence she appears to be the most unconvincing of all the women in the novel. Srikant never hesitated in accepting money from Rajlakshmi knowing fully well that the source of her income and her "plush existence" was her profession as a courtesan he so condemned. (Mukherjee 87) Thus, his dual perception reflects that of the society for a woman like Rajlakshmi.

Rajlakshmi shows a sympathetic understanding of Abhaya's bold decision to live with a man who sacrifices everything for her sake than to live miserably with her husband with a co-wife. It may have resulted from the social deprivation she herself had to suffer. She does not wish Abhaya to suffer the same fate. Rajlakshmi lacked the courage to defy her milieu but identified herself with another woman who did. Both women cherish motherhood as a valuable asset in a woman's life. Rajlakshmi displays a child-like simplicity of emotions to people around her who are not even known to her. She fondles children in a train-journey, offers sweets to them and

shares the happiness of workers returning home to enjoy with their families on holidays and weeps on learning about the misery of poor children, their maladies and malnutrition.

The continuity of the oral tradition in India which gained recognition as a vital source of historical research—provides us with the opportunity of direct observation of surviving practices and cultural representations among successive generations of prostitutes in Bengal. On one hand, they were perceived as debauchers of society and on the other, the feudal system perceived the art of these performing courtesans as their attempt to uphold their patronage of this diminishing art. Even in the 1950s, according to Sumanta Banerjee, old women were found breaking into songs which they used to sing when they were young in the closing of the 19th century. Such songs and sayings have been handed down from one generation to another—and even today snatches can be heard with modern contemporary motifs and imageries replacing the old. (Banerjee 5) Rajlakshmi in the novel has been invested as a repository of such a rich courtesan-tradition with her ability to effortlessly assay both the romantic and the devotional genres of songs highlighting the fact that among the gifted/talented and educated classes of women in India (as was the case in Renaissance Europe), the courtesan was a rare blend. A detailed research in this area can be found in Tharu and Lalitha as well as in Katharina Wilson's book, *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*.

When Srikant first meets Abhaya he learns that this *Kayastha* woman of the Uttar Rarhi clan belonged to a village near Baluchar. Abhaya's husband

had migrated to Burma eight years ago leaving her in her native village. He had kept in touch for the first two years—sending her letters and small sums of money from time to time. For the last six years, however, there had been a complete absence of communication. Her mother, her sole surviving relative, had died last month. Alone, abandoned by her husband and without support, she had found it impossible to stay on in ancestral home. She wished to look for her husband in Rangoon and claim maintenance. Thus, she was travelling to Burma with Rohini Sinha, a man from the same village, who had agreed to accompany her. She believes that a young woman without a male protector is so vulnerable in our society and that there are many ways in which she can be exploited.

Abhaya's strong desire for her husband's health and happiness is reflected in her confident declaration, "*Ami satin niye khub ghar korte parbo.*" (*Srikant*: 1978, 1: 99) "I can live quite amicably with a co-wife." (*Srikant*: 1993: 136) She is not only forward as the doctor of the Burma-bound ship tells Srikant but also sufficiently intelligent to arrange a well-furnished room in an otherwise infernal quarantine. She is morally upright. She travels to Burma with Rohini, a fellow villager, who falls ill on the way. Although she seeks Srikant's help she does not allow the slightest thread of intimacy to develop between her and Srikant. She is very caring and looks after Srikant's comforts as tenderly as if he is the closest of her relatives.

Abhaya is truly unfortunate. Yet she withstands the ordeals in her life with courage and no bitterness in herself. She goes to Burma with Rohini Babu, looks for her husband who saves his job by feigning sympathy to her,

inflicts brutal physical torture upon her, humiliates her and finally abandons her. Abhaya, true to the meaning of her name – fearless – is prepared to even share her roguish husband, with his Burmese wife and children. Her veracity, candour and her deep passionate love for Rohini enamours not only Srikant but also the readers. She has a way of baring her innermost feelings and thoughts before the glaring light of the public opinion without the slightest hesitation. There is no gap between her actions and words. She wages an incessant battle against her enemies, within and without, and strives to live by the light of her own convictions, the chief of them being, "*Satyikar manushi manusher madhye boro, na tar janmer hisabtai jagater bodo e_ amake jachai kore dekhte hobe*" (Srikant: 1978, 1: 128) "I have to scrutinize whether a human being is exalted by his actions alone or by the merit of his birth." (trans. mine) However, individuality, a distinct identity and self articulation are attributes not favourably recognized in women. "Abhaya's search for identity is genuinely spectacular because of the enormity of struggle, multiprolonged conflict of conscience which went in behind the scene to articulate it." (Mukhia 122) Her decision to live her life with Rohini enables her to emerge victoriously in the quest for identity. She initially goes to Burma to secure her identity as her husband's wife, failing in which she adopts an alternative identity. In the course of her 'personal fulfilment', through 'non-conformity' and an unconventional relationship she throws open a challenge between blind conventions and an honest relationship and sincere affection. (Idem.) Both Abhaya and Rajlakshmi strive to live a meaningful existence within their unconventional relationships outside the mainstream society and community. They are thus portrayed as social rebels.

When Srikant visits the *akhra* (ashram) in Muraripura he meets Kamallata, a young, beautiful and intelligent *Vaishnavi* singer who enchants everybody with her sweet disposition and her mellifluous voice. She undertakes to shoulder the most difficult responsibilities and tasks of the *akhra*. Many men are attracted to her and much money had been poured at her feet. Yet she lives a simple and pious life. She is about thirty, dark, slim and taut with agile and graceful movements. She originally belonged to the community of jewellers. She had been married to a person called Srikant but she soon became a widow. At the age of twenty one, she became pregnant, by her steward Manmath. Kamallata's fate takes various drastic turns till she joins a group of pilgrims and gets initiated into the *Vaishnavi* sect. But, gradually Srikant's Muslim friend Gahar becomes a devotee of not only the *Vaishnavi* sect but Kamallata as well. Soon after Gahar's death the scandal is discovered and she is treated with tremendous hostility. The novel closes with her departure from the *akhra*, with Srikant's help, to Vrindavan in search of a new meaning of love in human relationship and beyond. Her simplicity and profound insight into life makes her stand apart from the remaining characters in the novel.

Being a *Vaishnavi* perhaps gave Kamallata greater confidence for the numerous transgressions in her life and lives beyond the clutter of the mainstream society. According to Sogani, Vaishnavism was disapproved as a debauched religious sect by the respectable society of orthodox Hindus on account of its rejection of the caste hierarchy and the stringent rules of marriage, its reliance on individual gurus rather than the *Dharmashastras* and

the thinly disguised eroticism of its worship. (142) A group of women artist in nineteenth-century-Bengal who were considered to be semi-prostitutes were the *Vaishnavis*. Formerly the followers of Chaitanya, they rejected brahminical rituals and professed love to be the tenet of their faith. They altered partners as and when it suited them. By the end of the century these sects had bifurcated and multiplied and they settled in small groups called *akhra*s usually built on donated land. (125) Kamallata lived in one such *akhra*. Over a period of time Vaishnavism lost its mystical significance and became a euphemism for banishment from one's caste rather than abdication. A conversion to Vaishnava faith was often the last refuge of a person excommunicated for the violation of caste codes. Thus Kamallata may have become a Vaishnavi not so much for her piety and calling but out of a dearth of choices in a homeless life. Therefore her transgression, aborted second marriage, her own guilty conscience and her free association with the cross section of the society are responsible for her expulsion from the middle-class society she is born into. She is not a chaste woman by patriarchal standards. She confidently goes even further to arouse the wrath of the *Vaishnavi* priests when she voluntarily leaves the *akhra* to nurse the young Muslim poet Gahar in his last illness. It is ironic how a religious organisation worships the sacred union to Radha with Lord Krishna in vivid forms but fails to recognise a woman's affection in nursing a dying man. Such an act is denounced and Kamallata is condemned as lecherous and promiscuous.

Like Savitri in *Charitrahin* and Rajlakshmi in *Srikant*, Kamallata experiences the constant desire to serve the weak or immature men, without

seeking a reward for herself or making any demands on him. She is expelled from the organization and becomes a homeless wanderer once again. However, the ups and downs of her life neither affect the charm of her youthful personality nor dim the brightness of her spirit. She is candid, warm and courageous. She does not shirk passion, even in the face of uncertainty and hardship, or of disgrace and rejection. Though she wipes her eyes with regret when she admits that she has no home, her nature is too independent to accept the constraints of domesticity. In her relationship with Srikanta, she is as loving as Rajlakshmi, but unlike Rajlakshmi, does not stifle him and is ready to relinquish her claim in favour of the other. She is a fascinating and romantic figure because she is not rooted in any kind of material longing. Being without a family, community or money, she seems to have no urges except the desire to love which she fulfils by extending her unbounded sympathy to men, women, nature, living creatures and even the idols of stone and metal which she tends with great devotion. Kamallata is Saratchandra's fantasy about an independent woman liberated from the prudery and vulnerability of her sex but still looking towards men for her personal fulfilment. For all her unconventionality, Kamallata is sentimental about her first husband whose name she will not pronounce and emphasizes the essential timidity and dependence of women on men: a respectable woman was not supposed to articulate the names of her husband and her senior relatives. Kamallata displays her confidence and autonomy when she moves out of the *akhra* that sheltered her and refuses any physical and financial assistance even from Srikant. He reciprocates this in equal spirit by making her bed in her compartment of the train. Through Srikant, who does this

menial service despite being a male Brahmin, Saratchandra acknowledges her superiority over manhood itself.

Annada (Didi or Annadadi) is a poor snake charmer's wife. She is said to be a high-born Hindu who had eloped with a low-class dopey Muslim charmer called Shahji. Annada makes Indranath, the young village boy swear that he would never bring any money for Shahji again. This makes Shahji furious and he beats her mercilessly. She would earn a little money by selling dung cakes and wood. She would feed him out of that and even buy him *ganja* to appease him. Yet he would always demand her for more. She holds a practical outlook towards life. She is aware that being a snake-charmer herself deceiving people is a part of her profession. She can neither restore the dead back to life nor fly cowries and she truthfully confesses it to Indranath. Furthermore, she believes, "*Jara itor, tarai shudhu ojana ochena loker kathay sandehe bhaye pichhiye daray.*" (Srikant: 1978, 1: 26) "Only mean and base people shut their eyes to the truth and take pleasure in thinking ill of others." (Srikant: 1993: 35-36) She is patient and self-supportive. After her husband's death by an accidental snake-bite, she refuses to take shelter in Indranath's house as Shahji has left her many debts to be cleared in toddy shops. Besides she never wishes to grab an undue advantage of one's generosity and has a great deal of self-respect. This is evident from the way she refuses to accept Srikant's gift of money to her. Her husband leaves her only sorrow and debts. But she pays them by selling her ornaments. She is also very considerate. She does not wish to upset the young minds of Srikant and Indranath. Hence she leaves a letter for Srikant revealing her past, before disappearing, leaving behind Srikant's gifts of money with the grocer to be

returned to him. It is only through this letter we learn that Shahji was only a poor Brahmin boy whom Annada's rich Brahmin father had educated and then got him married to Annada. However, one night this ingrate murdered Annada's widowed older sister and disappeared only to appear several years later in the garb of a Muslim snake-charmer at Annada's courtyard and eloped with her. Few people knew that the Muslim snake-charmer was her own Hindu husband who had fled after committing rape and a murder. It is perhaps this agony and suffering which prompts Srikant to wonder. "*Amader ei Sati-Savitrir deshe swamir janyo sahadharminike aparisim dukkho diya Satir mahatva tumi ujjal hoite ujjaltara koriya sansarke dakhaiyacho...kintu amar emon didir bhagye eto baro birambana nirdesh koriya dile keno?*" (Srikant. 1978, 1: 35) "In a country like ours, where Sita and Savitri are deified for their chastity, why was Didi (Annada) made to suffer such shame and humiliation? (Srikant. 1993: 47) According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Srikant's lyrical rapture is based on the fact that Annada placed her true *satitva* higher than her social reputation." (118) She clings to the concept of being a *patibratya* in hostile surroundings against all odds. It is not clear why she endures terrible shame and humiliation, knowing all about his heinous crime, she deliberately leaves her 'sheltered existence' behind for a dubious and unhappy existence. (Mukhia 39) However this might be a possible cause: compelled to endure celibacy which she may not have enjoyed, she would rather succumb to her repressed, though live sexuality, which could be quenched only if she eloped with her husband, however roguish or socially stigmatized he might be. Mukhia aptly observes, "Nevertheless, a certain boldness on her part to court endless blasphemy sets her apart from total submission." (Idem.) Thus, as an

embodiment of the supreme ideal of womanhood, Annada impresses as indelibly on Srikant's mind as on that of the reader.

Nirupama is an absentee character in the novel whose case Srikant narrates as a peripheral incident. Large hearted, self-sacrificing and devout, this virgin widow is loved and looked up to as a model of Indian womanhood by her family and neighbours alike. Then, one day, when she is thirty year-old, she is found to be carrying a child. The shock and horror of the Hindu community know no bounds. Its guardians are of such immaculate character themselves and so zealous of the community's moral welfare that they are forced to advocate a policy of ruthless ostracism, eventually causing her death. The episode, though trivial in the novel, condemns the ridiculous expectations of sexlessness imposed on widows in the feudal society whereas a similar stricture never applied to widowers.

Sarat Chandra brings to light the shocking practice of child-marriage wherein little girls are sold in the name of marriage and are destined to suffer the persecution of surviving like a refugee in a stranger's household. This makes Srikant despair, "*Amader samaj jati-bhed boliya je ekta bororakam samajik prashner uttar jagater samakkhe dhariya diya chhilo, tahar churanto nishpatti ajjo hoy nai.*" (Srikant. 1978, 1: 67) "Our great Hindu culture which, under the cover of its network of cast and creed encourages and propagates the most sordid discrimination against the women of our land." (Srikant. 1993: 89) However the patriarchal society has succeeded in shaping women's psyche who prize the high value of their castes. This is however found only among women who belong to a high-caste in the hierarchy of the social order.

Tagar, Nanda Mistri's Vaishnavi wife is a caste- fanatic who provides comic relief in the novel through her rigid bigotry. She abuses her husband for teasing her about her obsession regarding her caste.

In Gangamati, a remote village, Srikant and Rajlakshmi learn from a family about how a learned woman called Sunanda, who values truth and honesty, much more than the ties of emotional relationships, separates with her husband and her son from the rest of the family as soon as she learns that her brother-in-law had allegedly deprived a poor man of his property by usurping it through unfair means. Here Sarat Chandra critiques the vanity of education: if rigorous education can bring only discipline and information but it is unable to render one the intelligence to discern another's action on humanitarian ground, then it defeats the very purpose of education. Sarat Chandra despises people, whose education helps neither to benefit people, nor mend bridge relationships, thereby giving way to separation and sorrow within their family. Through Srikant, the author laments that Sunanda's in-depth study of the *Shastras* have failed to provide her the lessons of life. She is 'a spirited woman' who resists exploitation and is finally condemned because her bookish theories of right and wrong break up the joint family. (Mukherjee 110) Thus, in Sunanda's case Sarat despises the vanity and rigidity that education might bring while in the case of the Burmese woman he criticizes the *bhadralok* culture.

While returning from the quay of the coolies after nursing his friend, Srikant chances upon an Agradani Brahmin family on the way. Through her he learns about their deplorable caste. Their ancestors of the Agradani

Brahmin accepted alms for conducting the funeral rites of Brahmins. As a result, the society looked down upon them. The malpractice has been perpetuated over the years. They belong to the lowest wrung of the Brahmins in the society. Their poverty and abject living conditions agitate Srikant. Such a caste-system poses a major impediment to the economic and social growth of the society.

Srikant's grandfather also forces an alliance between him and a girl of seventeen called Putu, who is five years past the marriageable age. Srikant's grandfather falsely promises him a heavy dowry in return, from Putu's father. However, it is Putu who disregards her accursed, impoverished existence and her sincere confession about her desired suitor prompts Srikant to pay for her dowry and thereby escape being compelled into the alliance, although it required him to give up the savings of his entire lifetime. She has to incur a heavy dowry since she is over-aged for marriage. Sarat Chandra ridicules the prevalent system of dowry and child-marriage which plagues the so-called modern society which claims to bring the value of women at par with that of man.

Kapila Vatsyayan rightly complains that Sarat Chandra is an "incisive and sensitive author who could penetrate into every layer of a woman's psyche—too, deals with the adolescent woman, the young woman as mistress, wife, courtesan or rebel with rare insight, but the girl child does not hold his attention." (qtd. in S. K. Das 325) Das rationalises this by explaining that a woman's life revolves round the obligatory institution of marriage, which determines her position. It is partly due to the significance given to marriage

that the girl-child in her childhood failed to capture the attention of pre-twentieth century litterateurs. As soon as a girl, irrespective of her age, is married, she is not treated as a child anymore; the marital position eliminates her childhood. (Idem.)

In *Charitrahin* and *Srikant*, Sarat Chandra projects several widows as 'fallen women', yet depicts their room as a patch of purity amidst an abject atmosphere of general squalor. It might be read as the purity of their virtue and integrity despite the adversity which they encounter. In *Charitrahin*, Satish respectfully removes his shoes before entering Savitri's room in the servant's tenement, which is otherwise inhabited by women of dubious reputation. The presence of books neatly arranged and the paraphernalia of worship reveals to Satish her high caste and refined tastes. Similarly Rajlakshmi's room in her mansion in Patna is simple, tidy and contains minimum furniture in contrast to the lavish style of the rest of the house. Kamallata's room is cosy, austere and inviting although the remaining *akhra* is mean and wretched.

Many of Sarat Chandra's heroines are affluent but he is more conscious of poverty and its deteriorating effects than either Bankim or Tagore. Rajlakshmi was sold for money. She becomes a courtesan to acquire wealth. Sabitri belonged to a poor family. The corroding effect of poverty is seen more vividly in *Kiranmayi* which makes her susceptible to Ananga's advances. (Kabir 88) All the major women characters share 'a tangential relationship with society, standing outside the pale of its structured and ordered network'. (Mukherjee 117) Annada is a Hindu woman living with a low-caste Muslim snake-charmer; Abhaya unites with a man who is not her

husband; Rajlakshmi is a trained singer who 'amassed a fortune' by amusing her affluent clients. According to Mukherjee, "These are perpetual outsiders who have no inherited code of values, who have to wrestle with reason and instinct constantly to devise their moral systems." (Idem.) Women like Abhaya, Rajlakshmi, Kamallata and in *Srikant*, Paravti in *Devdas* and Kiranmayi in *Charitrahin* challenge the validity of the customs and restraints imposed on them and similar women in the society. They question the institution of marriage which compels each of them to unite with a stranger—a man normally much older than them—to be accepted as their husbands, to be revered and depended upon all their lives without attempting to trace any space for their own individual subsistence. They have been projected in contrast to the blind imitators like Annada and Manorama who represent the upholders of the patriarchal morality, which the author reflects in his novels.

Most of Sarat's heroines exhibit 'a refusal to revolt'. (Naravane: 1976:166) With the single exception of Abhaya, they consciously remain within the framework of the generally prevalent patriarchal world-view, despite their frustrations. Yet, they reveal strength and tenderness. In addition, they adhere devoutly to the norms of Hinduism, particularly in the case of Rajlakshmi, Sabitri and Parvati. Kamallata actually joins the religious orders. Chandramukhi can be seen in a mellower and nobler light in a devotional mood. Women like Annadadi, Savitri and Surabala in all the three novels have been projected as having only a marginalised and servile existence, as ancillary to their respective husband or beloved. Woman like Kamallata and Kiranmayi who have exhibited their defiance against social norms have been denounced as deviant and hence social outcasts. Sarat Chandra has thus

conformed to contemporary poetic justice and accepted morality of the time but raised sensitive issues that required urgent reformation, particularly through the characters of Abhaya and Kiranmayi. Thus, Sarat Chandra's portraits of socially condemned women are unprecedented. Kshetramade made the point remarkably well when she wrote,

His Annada, Sabitri, Parbati, Chandramukhi and Rajlakshmi make a splendid galaxy of noble dames. They do not belong to the limited region of Bengal, but the whole of Indian society can claim them as its own. They will ever inspire womanhood everywhere with noble aspiration and guide them as stars of first magnitude. (All Bengal Sarat Centenary Committee 116)

She further proclaims that silent suffering of young widows, their suppressed instincts and feelings were vividly and realistically painted by him. They sprang from his deep experience of social life which was hide-bound by traditions. They were as inhuman as they were considered immutable. He made the mute pathetic creatures speak out their suppressed feelings with the strength of creative art, sensitive and compassionate mind, his photographic transcription of life and its comprehensive understanding and innate, uncommon sensibility. The gallery of remarkable, realistic, poignantly appealing portraits which he painted of these women is the highest accomplishment to the credit of his art of novel-writing. They resulted from the direct and intimate experience of the society where he lived. They highly value chastity, devotion, reverence for elders, absolute obedience to parents and older members of the family. They accept their destinies calmly and gracefully. They sometimes rebel against ignoble practices but never denounce the traditions as a whole. (Naravane 1976: 165) As a result, his narratives were centred in the thoughts, joys, heartbreaks and the day-to-day

lives of ordinary people. His realistic fiction was almost unprecedented and beckoned many followers to imitate his literary trend. (Guha vii) Thus, Saratchandra's women enable us to explore many facets of a woman's personality under diverse circumstances.

At this juncture, it would not be out of place to discuss the large number of women characters in the novels studied according to the bipolar categorization, as put forth by Naresh Jain between which women are often faced with mental and moral conflicts:

Silence-speech

Binodini works through silence, Asha through speech; Rajlakshmi¹ through silence Abhaya through her speech and convictions. Bimala in *The Home and the World* works through silence while Bimala in *Durgesnandini* carves a niche for herself as an immortal character through her speech and action.

Subordination-Autonomy

Asha emerges in the novel through her subordination to every member in her house before and after she is married. Binodini is a contrast to her through her autonomy and her refusal to be bent and subjugated by daunting patriarchal customs for widows. She understands very clearly that being a widow she would have to strive for her own survival and self-dependence. Being constantly persecuted by her husband Shahji, Annada moved from subordination to independence only after her husband died.

Dharma—Personal goals

While Surabala is the embodiment of a perfect wife of her devoted husband,

undertaking her *stridharma*-(duties of a wife) with complete sincerity, Kiranmayi stands for the fulfilment of her personal goals and violates the *dharma* of widowhood. However, her actions may be justified on the grounds that she had been deprived of all the pleasures of marriage even when her husband was still alive. So she has been tempted to fulfil them through immoral means that are condemned by the society.

Sexual purity–Sexual emancipation

Both the widows Savitri and Kiranmayi are deprived of sexual pleasures throughout their lives. However, Savitri remains chaste and prizes her sexual purity more than the unalloyed love of Satish. She is not prepared to encounter the consequent social condemnation if she gives way to her fervour. In contrast, Kiranmayi gives way to her passions at every opportunity but outshines all other women in terms of her unique personality and individuality.

The present section, after the discussion on the dichotomous pairs above, aims to review the key issues related to the discipline of feminism and its application in the reading of the novels under study. Systematic subject-deprivation of women has been a fact as much as in life as in literature. Feminist consciousness seeks to analyze and understand the material conditions through which gender has been constructed within the specific languages and bodies of literature. The strong wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s in the West helped theorize a woman's discourse all over the world. Since fiction as a literary genre is in close proximity to realism, it responds emphatically to this new awakening. The image of woman in

literature emerges out of the existing world which is dominated by the patriarchal ideology. Not only the history of modern Indian women but also the condition of women is an index to measure the nation's progress. The new print culture, journalism and other forms of vernacular prose took up discussions about 'private' familial relations and 'intimate' subjects concerning women and the household: *Sati* or widow immolation, age and forms of marriage, the possibility of divorce, of widow remarriage, education and male polygamy and so on. Social and religious reform associations spent a great deal of time arguing about such matters. Later, with the deepening of popular anti-colonial protest, the possibility of women's participation in this extended the area of discussion still further.

A woman's position in the society is determined by her adherence to the prescribed social norms of behaviour. The freedom of modern Indian women to interact with men is hampered by traditions and conventions. A woman who refuses to conform to the image is either annihilated or denigrated. According to Mary Ann Fergusson, "One peculiarity of the images of women throughout the history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes...In every age woman has been primarily seen as mother, wife, mistress, sex-object—their roles in relation to men." (as qtd. in Bhat 1) She further demonstrates that literary texts commonly represented women in sexually defined roles. Women were mothers, good submissive wives or bad dominating ones, seductresses, betrayers, prim single women, or inspiration for male artists. Fergusson regarded these images as false. She assumed that women's writing would reflect women's *real* worlds and their

real experiences and much of the most persuasive feminist criticism of the early 1970s worked from the same principle. A woman's individual self has very little space for identity and self-effacement is the normal way of life. When men consider the adverse impact of received patriarchy, even if they consider women's cause, it may be still be regarded to be under the aegis of men discussing about women. Under such a category the male writers should be aware how women should be portrayed. The portrayal of man-woman intimacy was forbidden by the Victorian morality. A received notion was hence imported into colonial India and all other colonies that since this was censored in English art and literature, it should be banned in India as well. However in the light of these three writers, it may be observed that to a large extent Bankim and Tagore have been successful in delineating women characters. They have attempted to imagine from a humane and social point of view the agony that a woman might suffer. For example, in Bankim's novel *Rajani*, the protagonist of the same name is blind but she lends the readers an insight into her psyche. Similarly, Tagore gives voice to the mind of a woman called Bimala (*Ghare-Baire*) to depict her conflict between the necessity of chastity and the lack of it. In order to render these characters credible, both the novelists have given the women the opportunity to speak through their first person narratives and justify their stance.

The eighteenth century Telugu poet Muddupalani's classic poem, *Radhika Santwanam* had achieved the rare balance of all the nine *rasas* or basic emotions such as joy, anger or sexual pleasure in the perfect measure, according to the classical aesthetic theory. In the prologue she proudly traces her literary lineage through her grandmother and her aunt, and narrated an

account of her self and her considerable and respectable position as a poet in the court of Pratapsimha who ruled between 1739 and 1763. She was also accomplished in dance and music. (Tharu and Lalita 2: 2) It can be hence concluded that her work was truly appreciated in her own times. There were several eminent literary women at the royal courts, existing during the pre-colonial era, who were privileged with the leisure and liberty to improve their art, shape their identity through their art, explore their talent and create an individual space –‘a room of one’s own’. Muddupalani’s creative faculties as well as the literary and social context won her the due acclaim for her work. Her contemporary writers were extending recognised courtly forms to criticize ravenous landlords, depict within the scope of literary language the everyday lives of craftspeople and record political and social changes related to the medieval movements of artisanal rebellion, often called *bhakti* movements, which began in the eighth century and continued during Muddupalani’s time. In *Radhika Santwanam*, Muddupalani celebrates a young girl’s induction into womanhood and her first sexual experience. (Tharu and Lalita 2: 7)

Citing the example of Muddupalani as a learned woman and distinguished courtesan, Tharu and Lalita emphasize how the use of sexual overtones in poetry was as natural to women as to men. Yet, it is the woman’s verses that were often mauled by male chauvinist critics like Kandukuri Veerashalingam who represented the Indian and western psyche. The British government was convinced that *Radhika Santwanam* was a hazard to the moral health of their Indian subjects and hence banned it. Muddupalani had exhibited unprecedented confidence in tracing her geneology in matriarchy. After Muddupalani, no woman writer has exhibited such confidence. Hence

there may have been a regression. Due to the commercial and military establishment of the British authority over India during the second half of the eighteenth century old rulers were overthrown. Hence poets, musicians, scholars and artists of all kinds who depended on the patronage of the courts lost the means of sustenance. Thus, when monarchy dwindled it took away the patronage from the decadent kings and the reactionary Brahminical codes deprived the artists, particularly women the right to improve their talents. Women's voices were clamped. Women artists, namely folk singers and dancers, who depended on wealthy households, were forced into poverty and prostitution.

Thus, the Indian literary tradition is not without the representation of women by women-writers. If one is to believe Tharu and Lalita, women's writings in the pre-colonial period flourished greatly till the late twentieth century and taboos on such literature were absent. The reversal or break seems to have come in the intervening years of colonization. If the colonizers brought this dark period in India then the hiatus may have been caused by questioning a woman's view-point and the areas of censorship, thereby determining factors under which texts like the one by Muddupalani may have been banned. Tharu and Lalita delineate a continuum of women writers to show how with the invasion of the colonizers the entire agency for women was replaced by that of men. Western feminism has brought to light the extent to which control is exercised upon women—in terms of body, language and psyche through social conditioning. In due course of time, patriarchies engaged in Orientalist and Nationalist interests chose to accommodate only those sections of women's literature in the later periods which fit into the

patriarchal schemes. In this manner the polemical image of the respectable upper-class, self-sacrificing Aryan woman is carefully selected and co-opted into literature. The rebellious Mira, for example, becomes acceptable for her idiom ultimately because she represents the chaste and dutiful wife in a transcendental husband-wife relationship, and because she seems to be minutely aware of the regular household works while not 'rallying' for other women and the social injustices they suffer.

Patriarchal domination usually constricts women to a reproductive and nurturing role within the family. Hence the patriarchal culture recognizes women in relation to the biological context and reproductive capacities. They are socially enslaved by their own bodies and deprived from playing any part in the public sphere.

The realization that the female body was the root cause of sexual subjugation shaped much of the second wave feminist thought processes. Shulamith Firestone, Susan Brownmiller, Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin are all of the opinion that the exploitation of women's bodies is the edifice, on which patriarchy is established,

comments Jaideep Rishi. (Ray and Kundu 6:81) Emphasizing on the female body Kate Millet denounces biological determinism and projects the social construction of womanliness as the root cause of subjugation. Judith Butler proposes that sex and the female body is a social construction rather than a biological phenomenon. (6: 82) Perhaps it is this social construction of womanliness that makes a character like Rajlakshmi feels incomplete since she has been unable to become a biological mother and thereby attain a respectable position in the society. The politics of women's bodies continues

to be a central feminist concern even in third wave feminism. As noted, women are frequently measured according to their appearance but women's bodies are also subject to social control. Disciplining women's bodies to conform to social norms and standards is one of the greatest issues facing third wave feminism. Controlling women's bodies is a way of controlling women. Battles over reproductive rights are perhaps the most obvious example of the social control of women's bodies. This can be observed by the social hegemony which ostracizes women who bear children out of the wedlock as in the case of Abhiramswamy's numerous 'illegitimate' sexual relationships with women who are not his wife, including Bimala's mother in *Durgeshnandini*. Similarly Kamallata and Nirupama also suffer the same fate. However, their respective male partners who are sexually involved with them are neither despised nor chastised for such a grave social infringement. Similarly all the widows are expected to be sexless and abstain from embellishments and any form of material indulgence. This can be clearly seen through characters like Savitri, Annapurna, Rajlakshmi (*Chokher Bali*), Jagattarini, Yogamaya, Binodini and Bara Rani.

The Oriental is passive; and women are doubly passive. According to the system of *purushprakriti* a man (*Purush*) acts and a woman is *Prakriti*—to be acted upon. Thus, there is a double stricture according to which women is portrayed. A manifestation of this process can be seen through *Rajmohan's Wife* wherein Rajmohan's professional frustration finds an expression in the torture he perpetrates on his wife Matangini. It is her body which attracts the attention of the lustful Mathur Ghose who gets her kidnapped and imprisons her in his secret vault. Thus, the beauty of her body becomes the cause of her

ruin. Yet, she punishes her own body through deprivation and thereby resists the tyranny of patriarchy. A woman's claim to her body was denied to her during the colonial rule. The emerging bourgeoisie condemned its portrayal as perverse, derogatory and a transgression. A woman's biological difference from that of a man is fallaciously denigrated as inferior by the patriarchal society. The presence of the romantic relationship between Matangini and Madhav in *Rajmohan's Wife* but the conspicuous absence of description of their physical intimacy demonstrates how controversial delineation has been cautiously eliminated from the otherwise discursive novel. Similarly, details of Tilottama's illness are given little importance in Bankim's *Durgeshnandini*. Instead of a realistic depiction, their love has been revealed on the lines of Vaishnavi poetry, on a platonic level. This technique recurs more frequently in Sarat Chandra's novels like *Devdas* and *Srikant*. Paro spends an entire night in Devdas's bedroom without any physical interaction with him. Similarly, Chandramukhi nurses Devdas for months together without any physical indulgence. This neglect of physical description becomes more pronounced in the guise of nursing in his later novels. The nursing by Rajlakshmi, Savitri and Kamallata can be instanced here. Such depiction of physical cravings of sexual intimacy are censored by this trio of writers in order to secure the pleasure and favour of the reading public—particularly male readers—who had duly internalised Victorian morality to govern all forms of Indian art and literature. Therefore such literature avoided all details relating to a woman's body as though a woman's sentiments expressed through her body mattered little—particularly to the women readers of the time, who could have identified with such characters in similar situations. A sharp contrast may be

demonstrated here wherein Sarat Kumari Chaudhurani (1821-1920), a woman writer regrets the ironical lack of physical proximity even with her own lawfully married husband:

We were not allowed to meet our husband till six months after a son was born; however, if it was something essential our husband would come and speak to us secretly in the store-room or in the kitchen. (Tharu and Lalita 1: 266)

By the end of the nineteenth century the respectability of women from the emerging middle classes changed in counterpoint to debauched, crude and licentious behaviour of lower-class women. Middle class women were strictly prohibited from interacting with such lower-class wandering women singers and dancers and were cautioned to shun their art. Hence English literature began to be produced largely by the English educated urban middle-class. Due to the shifting ideology under Victorianism, the rise of the middle-class standards and notions of womanhood, the female subjectivity has been heavily inscribed by men. This is the consequence of a similar process of class-distinction based on the gender biases for women that had taken place in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the new bourgeoisie inscribed its identity on women's bodies and souls. Hence according to the western perspective, which manipulated Indian women's sexual propriety, women reflected India's moral degeneration. The patriarchal conditioning upon a woman's psyche may be clearly visible in the following passage. The belief that only a son can deliver his parents from hell and sins and can lead them to salvation is reinforced through the anxiety of a woman character delineated by a woman: "This wife of his doesn't have a baby for a long time, and now she produces only girls... At least now that his wife has

started having girls, we can hope for a son immediately.” (Tharu and Lalita 1: 264) A woman’s protest finally finds voice in the same story when she confesses that her son never cares for her in times of need in the way her daughter does.

Issues of class, gender and the Empire excited the imagination of many writers during the colonial period including Bankim, Tagore and Sarat. Bankim’s *Anandmath* projects his strong opinions on communal differences. Although he detests being governed by a foreign dominion, he firmly believed that even during colonialism our country was not sufficiently equipped to form its own government and administration. Though he subtly discusses debatable issues in his novels, he is certainly more explicitly bold in his feminist proclamations in his essay—“Samya”: “Women are also part of mankind, hence women have equal rights with men.” (Chatterjee 98) He further declares, “If it is justice that women should be the slaves and men the masters, then it must also be justice for Bengalis to be the slaves and the English the masters.” (99)

Women are subsumed under humans which means denial of their rightful space in the patriarchal society. Tagore also believed “...she must find her proper place in society and not rush to fill somebody else’s. And this she can achieve only by being true to her nature—her *swadharma*”. (qtd. in Kulasreshta) Tagore in *Ghare-Baire* revealed how India could form a sound administrative system if we could adopt the positive aspects of the foreign rule without any inhibitions. As a result, Nikhil encourages his wife to take piano lessons from an English woman and wear foreign made garments. Similarly,

Binodini (*Chokher Bali*) had been educated by an English tutor. Tagore visualised that the impact of western education, if used judiciously, would immensely assist the progress of the nation. Sarojini in Sarat's *Charitrahin* also adheres to western culture. She holds her English education in high esteem. Like Katie and Cissie in Tagore's *Shesher Kabita*, Sarojini too is a melange of Indian and English customs and manners. She wears a sari but also flaunts her shoes like an English lady, which was uncommon among the women of her day. However, all the three women seem to be blind imitators of the British which their respective creators strongly detest and critique through their novels. Bankim and Sarat Chandra have strongly advocated an eclectic approach of Indian and western education like Tagore who has been duly complimented for establishing such an institution as Visva-Bharati by Helen Keller with the words: "Your school of Visva-Bharati is a bright pledge of a noble civilization for it is a meeting ground of the East and the West." (qtd. in Chakrabarti 70)

Patriarchal ideology appears to bear little relation to any other hegemony, class, race or Empire and once it enters the literary text it is entirely independent of its counterpart in the world, and also of an equally fixed and resilient female self. (Tharu and Lalita 2: 29) Patriarchal domination gets re-emphasized through canonical texts like *Manusmriti*. Tharu and Lalita remark,

Women reared on the idea that great literature embodied, in some quasi-mystical, transcendent sense, a universally and eternally valid ethic were understandably agitated by what they now experienced as the masculine biases of the classics, (Idem.)

Despite an acute insight into the psyche of the women protagonists, all the

three writers have projected less important women as humans but not individuals. For instance, one has to stretch one's credulity too far to believe that Bimala, in *Durgeshnandini*, who had been treated like a governess all her life by her husband—Birendra, takes the trouble to avenge his death by assassinating his murderer. Underdeveloped characters like Kanakmayee and Champa (*Rajmohan's Wife*), Tilottama and Asmani, the maid (*Durgeshandini*) are stereotypical projections of women in the society. They are what the author perceives the society to consist of. They are not imagined as stereotypes. They are found in the society and it reflects realism according to the author. It also validates the biases these authors have in furthering these stereotypes. Similarly, Yogamaya (*Shesher Kabita*) and Bara Rani (*Ghare-Baire*) in Tagore's novels and Mokshada and Aghormayi (*Charitrahin*) and Tagar (*Srikant*) lack individual qualities. However, the sacrifice of the love of Savitri and Labanya at the altar of social decorum and the unquestioning devotion of an anonymous Burmese woman for her treacherous Indian husband and Annada's elopement and blind dedication to her ingrate and brutal husband may be translated as the writers' flagrant critique of social and psychological conditioning of women in the society. Yet, these characters remain underdeveloped because the authors refrain from offering much explanation for their conduct in order to preserve the continuity and consistency of the narrative which would be more palatable to the reading public which was conditioned to the morality of the Victorian society as well as the Brahminical and caste-based Hindu codes.

Other issues:

1. Women writers in Bengal:

In Bengal, till the late nineteenth century, stories were written mostly by men and formed a part of the prevailing patriarchal normative order and contributed to it. Except for a few rare instances women did not write—and certainly could not conceive to address the male readers. Women were voiced through the oral traditions of story telling and they found hidden and subversive ways to exercise their faculty and yet appear outwardly to be repressed within the social grid. Tracing the historiography of women transcending the domestic and private sphere of articulation and make her voice heard in public through the print medium might be relevant here. The initial experiments among the liberal Indian reformers and Christian missionaries to educate women from reform-minded families had produced a backlash and had hardened Hindu opinion against it. Yet, Rashsundari Debi, a housewife from an upper-caste *zamindar* family in East Bengal, secretly wrote *Amar Jiban*, the first full-scale autobiography in Bengali language by a Bengali woman. She taught herself how to read and write, at the late age of twenty-five read all the religious texts that her family possessed and completed her autobiography when she became a widow at fifty nine years of age, in 1868. (Sarkar: 96) These religious texts assisted her to audaciously structure the story of her mundane life on a sacred pattern. She recorded in her autobiography a series of trials that she survived 'with God's grace'. (97) In spite of her obedience to social codes there is a grain of resilience in her conviction. Her trials, particularly about her departure from her house after her wedding, her unquestioning obedience to the members at her in-laws' house and her helplessness at being denied the permission to attend to her dying mother show a marked departure from the hesitant confessions of social

conformity of the women portrayed by the three male authors under study here. Yet, other portrayals by them include bold professions of defiance and transgression through women like Bimala (*Ghare-Baire*) and Abhaya.

Women have protested against categorisation of their writing. The identity of a woman, of being able to reflect women's experiences and concerns and through a woman's voice constitute important aspects of women's writing. Tutun Mukherjee points out that if Swarnakumari Devi, Mokkodayini Mukhopadhyay, Rassundari Devi, Kailashbashini and other women of the *zenana* represented the rise of the feminine consciousness in Bengali literature, and if Ashapurna Devi epitomizes the 'second wave' of women's efforts towards transcending the threshold and acquiring a 'voice', writers of the 'third wave' such as Mahashweta Devi, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Bani Basu and Suchitra Bhattacharya have taken women's writing confidently forward. (xxxix) The feminine agency has been invariably associated in the stifled desire of nineteenth century women to acquire liberal education to learn by imitation and acquire national and international recognition.

2. Women Readers in Bengal:

The writers and journalists of Bankim's day realized for the first time in Indian literary history the existence and importance of women's readership. Several magazines exclusively targeted for women and books written mainly for women bear testimony of the conscious attempts by many authors in this century to appeal to the woman reader. (S. K. Das 199-213) Bankimchandra Chatterjee who often addressed the 'gentle reader' as a narrator of his novels taking after the method of some of the 18th century British novelists was one

of the first writers to acknowledge women as readers, whose patronage gave a boost to the growth of Indian fiction in particular. (Idem.) In the literature from about the 1880s as in *Anandmath* the figure of the woman

dominates Bengali works through the conceptualization of the country itself in her image; by investing the ideal patriot with womanly qualities; and by the reconstruction of feminine roles and duties—and, consequently, of the familial universe by the nationalistic enterprise. (Sarkar 250)

The early novelists in the vernaculars expected the community of imagined readers to be acquainted with the special knowledge of English literature particularly about authors like Shakespeare, Coleridge, Cowper, Moore, Scott and so on. That this community of imagined readers might include – apart from men as highly educated as themselves – Indian women only gradually dawned on these writers. Gender issues affected both Indian and English literatures. Although the social reform movement was concerned with women's education, the extent of such education was often debated. Bankim noted in his essay "Samya" that nearly all the people of Bengal in his day accepted the idea of elementarily educating women without imparting them lessons in mathematics, science, philosophy, etc. They feared that if women continued to study till the age of fourteen, who would rear children? Hence they could be educated only till they were thirteen years of age. Bankim also conformed to the idea that women should be literate and have elementary education. (Chatterjee 99) According to Meenakshi Mukherjee women of Bengal and Maharashtra were best educated through their mother-tongue. (19) So, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the intended readership of novels in Indian languages contained a sizeable percentage of women. As a result, women readers often decided the popularity or the lasting effect of

the work. They became the touchstone of authenticity for creative works (mostly novels) in Bangla during this period.

Even in the later fiction, irrespective of their education, several women have been presented as voracious readers—Binodini, Kiranmayi, Savitri and Labanya are all highly educated. Kiranmayi exhibits her potential to not only read but critique her reading material from a logical point of view. She believes that a writer can be honest and successful only when he writes from his first hand experience. Tagore's Binodini reads Bankim's novel *Bishabriksha*, a story of a widow who ruins a household and thereby reads what she should not do as a widow. It shows how Indian women became the consumers of the new identity for women. Some women have been depicted in the novels as artists: Chandramukhi, Kamallata, and Rajlakshmi are said to wield magic by their mellifluous voices by which they produce spell-binding effect. Kamallata too entrances devotees through her sensual voice, singing songs of devotion and dedication and offering her prayers to the Lord. Labanya and Charulata write poignant pieces and in *Nashta Nir*, Charulata wins great acclaim for her publication in a journal. However, the target audience of these women as artists are men. The art of the courtesans are invariably controlled by men since the economic agencies that affect them are governed by men. Such art is finally shown to be moving out from the court to the market.

Portrayal of women in Bengali Literature:

In Bengali literature in general and fiction in particular, the woman exerts a regal dignity and a maternal compassion, which makes her the

motivating force within a society or a household. She is the epitome of vibrant Shakti, yet the symbol of the Vaishnavi self-restraint, as seen in the social revolt which converts poor, exploited Prafulla into the ravishingly beautiful dacoit-queen Devi Chaudhurani of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel. She is an activist who wields justice and power with self-willed detachment. She introduces restraint and compassion into the male-dominated society as effectively as Ayesha does, amidst the inhuman violence of her father's fortress in *Durgeshnandini*. A woman is an able and steadfast companion to her man, only because of her underlying motherliness. It presupposes tremendous calm, wisdom, tolerance and universal compassion. Some women fight free of domestic shackles like Charulata of *Nashta Nir* or Bimala of *Ghare-Baire* and the result of their efforts is disastrous. For, a woman has in her the potential of a temptress, whereas, her combat is mainly alongside and not against her man. Hence, she remains the lamp warming the household, the fire in the hearth, the torch of a struggle, the balm of all wounds whom the touch of the mundane cannot pale into insignificance. Nevertheless, the average woman is still not positively related to the feminist consciousness. The ideal of a good woman continues to be associated within conformist roles.

As against these, the 'new women' like Ayesha, Prafulla and Abhaya are characterized by confidence with which they face the world; they carry themselves in an uninhabited manner in the male dominated world. Most of them exhibit audacity, economic and intellectual independence. Some of them like Labanya may even serve as models for younger women of the future generations. In spite of being a conformist Surabala shows Kiranmayi the way

to perceive the crises in life with a positive light and reinforces her faith in the good. Women like Labanya, Surabala, Savitri and to some extent even Binodini taught Katie, Kiranmayi, Sarojini and Asha respectively the path to a successful existence. They do not believe in an *a priori* confrontation with men although they challenge the accepted notions of the stereotypical. These are the seeds of the new woman cast through the characters studied in this research project. Keeping in mind these feminist reflections it may be derived that a 'Novum Femme' was being evolved by Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Tagore combining eclectically the positive aspects of the women characters in their fiction. The audacity of Abhaya, Binodini and Bimala— (*Ghare-Baire*), the unflinching love of Paro and Rajlakshmi (*Srikant*), and the intellectual accomplishments of Kiranmayi and Binodini are manifestations of the progress of women towards a better and a brighter future.

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A note on Translation:

While quoting from certain novels I have seized the liberty at one place to offer my own translation in order to preserve the original meaning and replace, what I have felt, a weaker translation.

¹ Rajlakshmi in *Srikant* is not to be confused with Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's mother in *Chokher Bali*. They are two distinct characters. Therefore they are not to be conceived as the same person. Similarly Bimala, Tilottama's mother in *Durgeshnandini* is different from Bimala in *Ghare-Baire*, who is Nikhil's wife. Harimati Devi is the name of the mother of Binodini and that of Devdas. Mahendra is the name of the protagonist in *Anandmath*, Asha's husband in *Chokher Bali* and Parvati's step-son in *Devdas*. Bihari is Mahendra's friend in *Chokher Bali* and Satish's valet in *Charitrahin* but are distinct characters.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

According to most societal and familial practices undertaken within the framework of patriarchal system of society, little importance or power is accorded to women. Since her childhood, a girl is instilled with the notion that the course of her life is directed by some man or the other. Her existence depends upon the space occupied by men. As a daughter, her life is under the impact of her father or any other male guardian whose space within the family directs the course of her life. Similarly, soon after her marriage she is thoroughly under the impact of her husband and the space he grants her in the family. This, however, depends on the status the husband enjoys in the household. In the shared space of a man-woman relationship, a woman is always the weaker partner. In case of her husband's absence, she loses even that meagre importance in the family and her space shrinks even further.

A woman's prime existence in the society is bolstered solely by the roles that men grant them in relation to themselves- like mother, sister, daughter, wife or the less secured roles like a widow or a beloved. This conclusive chapter encompasses the study of women within the familial roles (like the ones mentioned above) and their status in the society—outside the family as outcasts, as maids and prostitutes. A host of stipulated symbols commemorating age-old traditions were visible in the literature of nineteenth century Indian Renaissance and can be seen in the Indian literature of today. Finally, the last stage of analysis consists in the way in which these women under the purview of this study find their fulfilment and solace. The chapter

ends with the various avenues of further study a research of this kind might open for future scholars.

This chapter primarily compares and contrasts the women characters of Bankim Chandra, Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee with the help of the aforesaid categories. The title of the dissertation may not seem to follow the chronological order since after Bankim it is Rabindranath Tagore who accurately secures the place before Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. It was only during the course of undertaking this research that this aspect was discovered and the concomitant re-ordering was effected. Bankim's idyllic women like Bimala, Ayesha and Shanti may lead to the milestone of Sarat Chandra's realistic depiction of contemporary women like Parvati, Rajlakshmi and Savitri, leading finally to the futuristic vision of Tagore's women like Binodini, Bimala and Labanya.

Portrayal of women:

Mother:

Among all the roles which women play within the family it is motherhood which is the most cherished and revered, not only by women but also by men. This is evident from the great reverence that even a villainous man like Mathur in Bankim's novel *Rajmohan's Wife* bestows upon goddesses like Durga and Kali. Apart from these goddesses who are mythical mother-figures, most of the women delineated in Indian Renaissance literature who conformed to the norms of the society have been modelled on the legendary figures of Sita and Savitri. According to the Hindu tradition the attainment of motherhood is the highest manifestation of womankind. It is because of this

capacity to give birth (or, create) that a woman is imagined to be vested with the divine powers. Hence whatever roles a woman may be compelled to play, that of a mother-figure prevails over all others.

The trio of writers under the focus of this research manipulated the role of women-characters as mothers to the optimum degree. Bankim ascribed motherhood to the country of India, struggling under foreign dominion, awaiting her children (*santans*) to rescue her. Tagore accords India a similar identity of motherhood. However, Sandip brings out a painful irony when he hails the country under British Rule as Mother India and Mother Goddess in order to seize monetary support from Bimala. By making amorous advances towards her he perceives her only as a sexual object. Thus, he feigns to venerate one female entity (Mother India) and attempts to seduce another (Bimala).

Among the novels of Tagore, Rajlakshmi is the most doting mother, who pampers her son, Mahendra to such an extent that he grows up to be excessively obdurate, impetuous and self-indulgent. It is only when he attains his adolescence that he recognizes the egotism, arrogance, envy and malice in his mother and he turns towards his aunt Annapurna for motherly affection. He seeks maternal care and advice from her, thus making Rajlakshmi feel insecure about her relationship with Mahendra. Annapurna's sympathy and steadfastness of moral virtue prompts not only Mahendra and Bihari but also Asha to look upon her as her mother. She, in turn, regards both Mahendra and Bihari as equals and never takes Bihari for granted, as she is not related to him, the way Rajlakshmi often does. Thus, even without being a biological

mother, Annapurna attains the stature of a spiritual mother to all the chief characters in the novel—*Chokher Bali*. Sarat Chandra has delineated mothers in a more contemporary light. For example, when the mother of Nilkanth Chakravarty drops veiled hints of an alliance between Devdas and Parvati, she gives way to her genuine concern for her own family. Both the mothers of Devdas and Parvati are endowed with a practical insight to life; they are not blind to the faults of their children. However, Harimati Devi, Devdas's mother also displays arrogance and false pride due to her status in the society as the wife of a *zamindar*. These two mothers (of Parvati and Devdas) present a sharp contrast with Aghormayi, the mother of Haran (in *Charitrahin*). Aghormayi neither prevents him from imposing his authoritative dictates to his wife nor encourages him to carry on a healthy conjugal relationship with her. Both, the mother of Parvati and Harimati the mother of Binodini do not receive much significance in the novel. They appear in the beginning of the story but are conspicuously absent throughout the remaining part of the novel. While the mothers of these women characters are tossed into oblivion, those of the sons emerge as adoring and pampering mothers, thereby driving their children to their ruin: Rajlakshmi fails to get rid of her son's over-indulgence with his wife; hence he floundered in his medical exam. Secondly, Aghormayi does not discourage his son Haran from his pedagogical attitude towards his wife—hence he never enjoys the pleasures of a healthy, companionate conjugal relationship with his wife Kiranmayi. Thirdly, Harimati Devi, Devdas's mother, is unable to discourage her son from turning into an alcoholic and dying due to consumption. Saratchandra paints poignant portraits of not only mothers but also of step-mothers, thereby eliminating the stigma often

attached to them. For example, Parvati becomes the step-mother of two grown-up children—Yashoda and Mahendra who are much older than her. She wins over Yashoda's hostile attitude and rage through her humility. Similarly, Rajlakshmi is Banku's step-mother. She keeps him under her care, warmth and affection until he gets married, and receives all his share of her property from her and forgets about her. Bankimchandra has also depicted a step-mother with equal finesse: Bimala, in *Durgeshnandini*, plays the role of step-mother who braves the perils of wars, kidnapping and murder and safeguards her benign daughter—Tilottama against them.

At the social level the mother-child relationship has been designated as the most sublime and important paradigm of social relationships in India. The Indian mother looks upon her son as one who would redeem her of her suffering, bring her fulfilment and sanctify her life, as can be seen in the relationship between Rajlakshmi and Mahendra in *Chokher Bali*; while she sympathises with the suffering of her daughter who is destined to experience the same degree of agony as herself. At the psychological level the mother is perceived as one who is ever ready to forgive, offer refuge, and possessing the ultimate feminine power deified by her maternal instincts of nurturing and care. In the novels under study, the mother as an embodiment of power, divinity and purity receives only a peripheral role with the exception of Parvati and Rajlakshmi who are step-mothers. The three authors strive to critique the mother myth. A mother's portrayal primarily consists of showing a woman who suffers and passively waits for incidents to take place in her life. She does not enjoy much space in a narrative because the authors concentrate their attention on women who are active, while a mother is destined to remain

behind the veil and beyond the walls. However, Sarat Chandra explodes this myth. In *Srikant* Rajlakshmi's mother, who casually sells her daughters for a heavy sum of money and declares them to be dead in her village, is a representative of the average, poor and helpless women who consider their daughters to be a liability since they have to be given away in marriage along with a large sum of dowry which is often beyond their means. This goes against the established notion and portrays a mother who is just like any other human being who believes that the practicality of life is prior to the necessity of clinging to the mother-image. Therefore, Sarat Chandra de-glorifies motherhood.

Daughter:

Binodini is the obedient daughter of her parents who secures her education and she is married to an insubstantial person in obedience to the wishes of her parents in Tagore's *Chokher Bali*. Tilottama is a benign step-daughter who is always ready to cuddle into the care of her mother in Bankim's *Durgeshnandini*. In the same novel Bimala, being Abhiramswamy's illegitimate daughter, wins over her long-separated father with her care and affection and secures his shelter. Sarat Chandra presents daughters in a more vivid light. In *Devdas* Parvati recognizes and acknowledges her self-respecting parents and spurns Devdas—her paramour in order to marry the person her parents have chosen for her. Therefore she saves their reputation from being tainted by her desire to attain her lover as her husband. Yashoda, Parvati's step-daughter is so enamoured by Parvati's straight-forwardness and humility that she prolongs her stay with her and postpones her date of return to her in-laws' house.

Among the novels that have been discussed, perhaps the most progressive of all daughters is Labanya in *Shesher Kabita*. She is highly educated but never deviates from the path of an obedient and respectful daughter. This can be illustrated through various examples. She is rivalled by Sobhanlal not only in academic performance but also in her claim to her father's affection. Yet, she patiently withstands this subordination. Secondly, she refuses to tolerate any form of abuse directed against her father. As a student when she learns that Sobhanlal's father had accused her father Abinash Dutt of attempting to ensnare his son to marry Labanya, she is unable to endure this hideous slander and pays Sobhanlal in his own coin by ousting him from her life. Secondly, unlike Yashoda in *Devdas*, who is piqued with her father's marriage to Parvati who is even younger than herself, Labanya appreciates the fact that her forty-seven year old father has found a soul-mate on whom he can rely on and share the rest of his life. She quickly understands how her father finds it difficult to marry this widow in her presence. Presuming that her father might regard her as a burden she seeks employment as a tutor and thereby leads an independent existence by refusing to depend on her father any longer for financial support. Thus, she may be looked upon as an ideal daughter of Tagore's contemporary society and yet falls within the long-established social paradigm of the self-sacrificing and suffering woman. By belonging to the second generation from that of their mothers, daughters reveal the progress of social perspective from the time of their mothers. Among these daughters, several are delineated as orphans in order to generate greater sympathy from the readers, as in the cases of Asha, Binodini and Chandramukhi. Orphans tend to possess the primary stigma of

unknown birth, where it may signify that her mother may have transgressed through a pre/extra-marital relationship. It accentuates the fact that if orphans are left abandoned, it is the stigma of the unwed mother or the widow who becomes pregnant. Sarat Chandra and Tagore challenge the notion that orphans are not only luckless themselves, but bring ill-omens and annihilation in whichever family they are reared up in.

Wife:

According to the ancient Hindu scriptures, marriage has been prescribed as obligatory for a woman. It is the only institution which renders a woman her status and recognition in the society. She is expected to be her husband's alter-ego and yet bear subservience to him. Bankim's disapproval of this notion probably gave rise to Shanti in *Anandmath*. She endeavours to become a *santan* following in her husband's footsteps, although she was forbidden to join such a crusade as she is a woman. However, she prefers to undergo all the difficulties that her husband endures, in the guise of a man, and thus proves to be a *patibrata* (one who evinces utmost loyalty and devotion to one's husband). Kalyani in the same novel offers a sharp contrast to Shanti with her fragile health and timid disposition. Similar contrasts can be seen in Bankim's *Rajmohan's Wife* and *Durgeshnandini*. In each of these novels, a potentially strong woman is foiled by a relatively weak one as a wife. For instance, in *Rajmohan's Wife*, the brave Matangini, who courageously reports about her husband's conspiracy to her brother-in-law, may be seen as a contrast to Kanakmayee, the helpless and submissive wife of a *kulin* Brahmin (a polygamous husband who does not stay with any of his wives for a long time). Tara, the wife of the lustful and bigamous Mathur Ghose shares

her affection with her frivolous co-wife, Champak. Matangini and her brute-like husband Rajmohan draw a foil to her sister Hemangini and her kind and sympathetic husband. In *Durgeshnandini* a similar contrast may be seen between a woman like Ayesha and Tilottama as aspiring wives. In *Chokher Bali* a contrast can also be seen between Asha and Binodini. While Asha is hesitant and docile, Binodini is audacious, self-willed and sociable. Asha attains domestic entrenchment but Binodini moves out towards freedom and independence.

Abandoned and neglected wives like Binodini and Kiranmayi who are ignored by their respective husbands and gradually widowed, are predestined to be confined to a peripheral existence. However, it is by virtue of their firm resolution to seek justice for the wrong done to them by the conservative norms that they flare into the limelight. Women like Annada and Surabala give a firm proof of their chastity as *patibrata* wives. Surabala (*Charitrahin*) and Asha (*Chokher Bali*) sacrifice their individuality in order to fulfil their role as wives and mothers. In these novels, the wife is projected as plain but wholesome, comfortable but not exciting. However, it is Bimala (*Ghare-Baire*) who realizes how far she had gone beyond the threshold of chastity. She realizes for herself that this virtue cannot be imposed on a woman and it is not the only yardstick that determines the virtue of a wife. It is a mutual spontaneous commitment that secures a conjugal relationship into a firm nexus. Asha's tender feelings for Bihari also have the same realization. Erstwhile novelists who delineated women who dared to follow the urge of their personality invariably met with retribution in disillusionment, death, remorse or despair. Bankimchandra and Tagore responsibly administered

punishment to the 'erring' wife violating social codes—the treatment of the 'triangle' can be seen in *Ghare-Baire*. All the wives depicted in the novels remain within the framework of the society unless they have been wronged as in the cases of Abhaya and Matangini. Their conjugal space involves a portrayal of their sexual desires. Through such characters the authors question the sharing of a wife's economic control of the household, and intellectual interest of the 'ardhangini' space with her husband, as is more pronounced in the case of Bimala (*Ghare-Baire*). The oppression of a daughter-in-law by the traditional rival figures as a sister-in-law and a mother-in-law are reflected through these novels.

Sisters-in-law play crucial roles in undermining the esteem of the respective characters as wives by exhibiting disapproval of the latter's behaviour. For example, Bara Rani accuses Chota Rani (Bimala) of neglecting her husband and causing his ruin. In *Ghare-Baire*, Annapurna also detests Rajlakshmi's doting on Mahendra and rivals her motherhood in the perception of Mahendra and Bihari.

Mothers-in-law have been commonly projected as being at loggerheads with their respective daughters-in-law. Aghormayi, in *Charitrahin*, inflicts physical and mental torture upon Kiranmayi. Her son's ailment is of greater concern than Kiranmayi's seduction by the family physician since he would forfeit Haran's medical expenses. Similarly, in *Chokher Bali*, Asha's inability to undertake to perform the household duties infuriates Rajlakshmi and she despises Asha as an inefficient wife and daughter-in-law. She even blames Asha for allowing Mahendra to get enticed by Binodini. Thus,

mothers-in-law who secured their position at the helm of the household usually held a hostile attitude towards their daughters-in-law and were often falsely blamed for mistakes they have not committed.

Widows and the Beloved:

The roles discussed above have been prescribed by the society and are approved as secure due to the relation of these roles to men. However, roles like that of a widow and a beloved are insecure. Some of the most significant heroines who are widows, among the novels of Bankim, are Kunda in *Vishavriksha* and Rohini in *Krishnakanter Uil*. Bimala in *Durgeshnandini* who avenges her husband Mahendra's death is perhaps the most valorous of all the widows. Savitri, Kiranmayi, Binodini and Kamallata belong to the younger generation of widows who face contempt and severe oppression from the society. On the other hand, Bara Rani (*Ghare-Baire*), Rajlakshmi (*Chokher Bali*) and Aghormayi belong to the older generation of widows who inflict torture and agony on younger widows because the former group may have been treated in a similar manner. All the younger widows have been projected as reserving their affections for a particular man. Savitri does this for Satish, Kiranmayi for Upendra, Kamallata for Gahar and Binodini for both Mahendra and Bihari. The authors indicate that the older widows like Bara Rani and Rajlakshmi hesitantly violate the customs while the younger widows like Savitri and Kiranmayi transgress overtly. They tacitly call attention to the urgency of reforming the plight of widows. Being throttled by severe constraints from the society, they rebel by being able to enchant the men, but for the cause of their social responsibility they abandon their desire of materializing their alliance with them. These authors retreat to the portrayal of

widows within the decorum of existing anti-widow/anti-humane norms as considered acceptable by the contemporary society.

Annapurna stands apart from all other widows as a conformist of the norms but she is not incognizant of the malpractices that are prevalent in the society. She is a foil to Bara Rani who chews betel leaves and gossips with an obnoxious company of women she keeps around her. Other widows like Maheshwari, Upendra's sister and Jyotish's mother do not receive significant mention in the novel. Savitri and Kiranmayi have been presented as foils in the novel *Charitrahin*. Savitri is a widow while Kiranmayi is a married woman who later becomes a widow. Both have unquenched physical desires. Savitri offers her pure and undiluted love to Satish without expecting anything in return while Kiranmayi's love is largely centred in physical desires alone. Hence, Savitri turns Satish away while Upendra turns Kiranmayi away because her love is denounced as involving shallow sentiments and filthy desires. Kiranmayi tried to seduce Upendra but failed because he was judicious, calm and not fickle. By the sheer force of the large number of widows in their works, most of whom are young, the authors under study wish to draw the attention of their readers to the appalling situation for women. This signifies the vast inequality of the marriageable age during marriage. It is a gross malpractice where women have no say.

It may be noted that almost all the widows portrayed in the other novels reserve an urge for economic and social dependence upon a certain man—normally the son or a brother-in-law as in the cases of Bara Rani, Harimati Devi (Devdas' mother), Rajlakshmi, Aghormayi, Kiranmayi, Jagattarini and so

on with exceptions to Savitri, Yogamaya and Kamallata. This dependence makes them overprotective about some man or the other. Both Tagore and Sarat Chandra have projected a certain possessiveness among widows as represented by Bara Rani (*Ghare-Baire*) and Kiranmayi (*Charitrahin*). Being the wife of his older brother Bara Rani has been Nikhil's playmate in childhood. However this tender tie becomes stronger soon after she gets widowed and she depends upon him for familial and financial support. She perceives Bimala as an impediment in her relationship with Nikhil and thus she treats her with bitterness and hostility. Kiranmayi plays a similar game with Divakar when she is spurned by Upendra. She elopes with the former and seduces him. Thus both Bara Rani and Kiranmayi attempt to grab possession of men who are neither their husbands nor their lovers. That economic dependence renders all women (more so, the young widows) as probable objects for all kinds of exploitation is a strong point-of-view held by these authors through their creative works.

The theme of fallen and transgressing widows in any Indian social novel must be comprehended in the cultural context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when under the impact of Christian missionaries, the freedom movement and the movements of social reform, vigorous attempts were being made in the society to educate middle class Indians to purge the society of its malpractices, redefine moral values and question existing gender relations. However, their radical measures were tempered by their fear of disrupting the patriarchal caste-bound structures of the society which gave the upper-caste Hindus a distinctive edge. The glorification of women cast out from the mainstream society reflected the bipolarity of liberal Indian writers,

who on one hand romanticized their situation, and on the other, set impossible standards of chastity and self-denial for them. Their sexuality was acknowledged but not accorded propriety which enforced and enhanced their suppression and further exploitation. Economic requirements drove widows like Chandramukhi and Rajlakshmi into prostitution. Yet, idealized and romanticized protagonists of fiction who were widows have been shown to refuse material rewards for their sexual favours. Despite their autonomy and fervour, they are depicted as victims of the same patriarchy which oppressed respectable women within the institution of marriage and denied them their individuality.

While projecting women as beloved, all the three writers reserve special attention for women who ultimately aspire to become wives of their lovers. Matangini yearns for Madhav, her own brother-in-law, Ayesha for Jagatsingh, Kamallata for Gahar, Rajlakshmi for Srikant and Parvati for Devdas. Excepting Rajlakshmi, none of these women attains social approval for their clandestine relationships. Hence, their relationships draw to an unhappy close of separation. On the other hand, some women have been pursued by men like Sandip who feigns love to Bimala (*Ghare-Baire*) in order to draw financial support from her; Jibanand makes advances towards Kalyani (in *Anandamath*) and Amit is attracted towards Labanya (*Shesher Kabita*). However, it is only Rohini Babu (*Srikant*) who achieves the fulfilment of his affection in the form of Abhaya who is abandoned by her husband.

Tagore's depiction of a beloved has a unique strain. All the protagonists of Tagore's creation are depicted with a reversal of the

attainment of their desires: Binodini, Bimala and Labanya are driven to the verge of revolting against their moral and social codes of conduct, but are checked by a sudden invisibly thrust-upon realization and they retreat to the socially palatable situation. Binodini prevents herself from ruining Mahendra's household and Bihari's life. Bimala realizes the adultery that she was about to commit, brings it to a halt and like a devout Hindu wife returns to Nikhil and his household with a more steadfast respect for him. Similarly Labanya realizes that winning Amit's love by seizing Katie's rightful place is immoral. She also realizes what pangs Sobhanlal must have suffered when she disregarded his love for her and returns to him. However, none of these three women had the power to transgress without the support of men. Binodini reacted after being spurned by both Mahendra and later even Bihari. In *The Home and the World*, however, Nikhil wishes to liberate his wife from conjugal surveillance so that she might understand the real nature and assess the true value of their love grown from wedlock. He detests believing that his wife offered him her love as her inviolable duty. This enables Tagore to draw the contrast between the old ways and the new at home and outside.

Economically Independent Women:

The trio of writers has also depicted women who are economically independent and survive outside the ties of their families. However, most such women have been treated as social outcasts, as maids or prostitutes. Of all the maids projected in the novels under study, Savitri has received a great degree of prominence. Born in a noble Brahmin family, this young widow takes recourse to this profession only to support herself. The series of events depicted in the novel reveal her stoicism, affectionate nature and her patience

on the face of the numerous trials in her life. Annada sells wood-sticks collected from the forest to earn a living for herself and her husband. Interestingly, both the women are considered as base, not so much for their profession as for their relationship with the men they love. In *Dureshnandini* Bimala's maid-servant Asmani aids correspondence between Bimala and Birendra. She also provides light moments of comic-relief in the novel. Other maids who find mention in the novels are Suki's mother (*Rajmohan's Wife*), Khema and Thako (*Ghare Baire*) and Mokshada (*Charitrahin*).

Another category of economically independent outcasts is that of prostitutes. The abduction of young girls or the selling of daughter to evade incurring a dowry denotes the prevalence of human trafficking. Such social ills drives them to prostitution—the only means of their sustenance. Chandramukhi is probably an orphan. Her lineage may not be worth mentioning which probably indicates that she might not have a familial past. It also indicates that she is a talented singer and dancer whose art is worthless without a patronage or a “godfather”. Both Chandramukhi (*Devdas*) and Rajlakshmi (*Srikant*) abandon their profession in order to secure the affection of their lovers. Chandramukhi turns into a simple village woman while Rajlakshmi turns to social service. Srikant views Rajlakshmi's questionable past and her not so respectable profession as a courtesan as insurmountable in the way of legitimizing their relationship in the same way as Devdas thought of Chandramukhi, although both are not unaware (nor untroubled) that much of the affluence and plush life that they lead was due to money from prostitution.

Apart from these two professions, women like Labanya and Kamallata have been shown to gain financial independence and an honourable place in the society. Labanya seeks employment as Surama's tutor in Yogamaya's house while Kamallata becomes a nun in order to earn meagre returns for her whole-hearted devotion and undertaking of enormous responsibilities of the *akhra*.

Leitmotifs:

Almost, all women who have been passionately involved in amorous adventures have shown their manifestation of love through tangible and intangible symbols. A recurrent motif in several of these is that of inflicting a wound. In most cases it is the man who assaults the woman. For instance, Rajmohan often beats Matangini and threatens her in his obnoxious language. Similarly, in *Chokher Bali*, Bihari pushes Binodini out of spite and accidentally wounds her elbow. Since Binodini fails to arouse Bihari's affection, she prizes this injury as a token of his love and allows nobody to nurse it for her. Just a few days before Parvati's wedding to Bhuvan Mohan, Devdas hurts Parvati's brow with a fishing rod in order to avenge his hurt ego because Parvati declined his marriage proposal. However, she does not reveal to anybody that it is Devdas who caused her brow to bleed profusely. She later regards the scar on her brow as a mark of her pride and the only tangible remnant of his childhood affection for Devdas. Rajlakshmi (*Srikant*) is beaten in her childhood by Srikant when her garlands and gifts to him were insufficient to please him. Binodini, Parvati and Rajlakshmi do not protest against these acts of violence as they believe their lovers possess the right to govern them as they are their 'spiritual husbands'. This is a direct effect of the

social conditioning instilled in a girl-child; a reminder of domestic violence still not uncommon in many regions in India and abroad. Of all the novels under study, only Bimala (*Ghare-Baire*) violently pushes Sandip away when he proceeds towards her feigning to offer her his respect. Similarly, Bimala (*Durgeshnandini*) avenges her husband's murder by killing his assassin, Katlu Khan. These instances of a woman's retaliations are still small in number as compared to the amount of violence they tolerate.

Food is an all-pervading channel through which men and women are known to weave their relationship together. The association of food, art and literature with women is a common literary theme all over the world. Brahminical Hinduism developed the use of food as a ritual object, a providential blessing to human beings and even a substitute for a sexual encounter or maternal affection. Food, here, is indicative of not only physical appetite but also of spiritual and emotional cravings. Binodini shows her affection for Mahendra and Bihari by serving good food. Saratchandra uses food to a great extent—as a sexual symbol: Rajlakshmi serves delicacies to Srikant; Kiranmayi entices Upendra by offering good food while Savitri waits upon Satish while he eats his food. Saratchandra also uses food to project motherly care, as in the case of Surabala compelling the deprived Divakar to have his breakfast before hurrying to his college and Kiranmayi feeding Divakar and Satish in order to win their confidence. All these women voice their innermost desires and agonies while their men eat. Thus, the women find their ways to the hearts of these men proverbially through the stomach. In *Chokher Bali* Tagore uses the motifs of starvation, fasts and feasts to project the conflicts about Binodini in Bihari's mind. None of Saratchandra's widow-

heroines like Rajlakshmi, Savitri and Kamallata give up the customary restrictions on their diet, but they derive great contentment by cooking for and feeding the men they love.

Symbols of marriage or a sexual union are also found to accentuate and sanctify man-woman relationships in these novels. These symbols commonly relating to the Hindu wedding like the exchange of garlands, the bridal attire, the *sindoor* and the iron hoop worn on a married woman's wrist, are often used by writers to legitimize relationships outside marriage. For instance, Rajlakshmi gives garlands made of berries to Srikant in her childhood as Parvati does to Devdas. A mythical union is used to sanctify a sexual relationship. In *Chokher Bali* Binodini is like Radha, the supreme devotee, whose worthless life receives infinite value under Bihari's impact. She meets Bihari in Allahabad, where the sacred rivers of Ganga and Yamuna merge into each other. Srikant avoids going with Rajlakshmi to Prayag—the confluence of sacred rivers as his guilty conscience pricks him because his wedding with Rajlakshmi has never been solemnized according to the Hindu customs.

Nursing is yet another recurrent motif. Savitri is found to nurse Satish when he is ill; Chandramukhi cares for Devdas when he is sick and drunk. Parvati is pained at Devdas's unkempt appearance and offers to nurse him whenever he needs her help. Rajlakshmi restores Srikant back to health whenever he falls ill. Jagat Singh and Gahar are devotedly nursed by Ayesha and Kamallata respectively. These men are found to be constantly ailing

under some spell or the other, thereby inserting a narrative pretence to bring their beloveds in greater intimacy with them.

Prevalent Social (Mal)Practices:

All the nine novels question the prevalence of complicated conundrums like child-marriage, widowhood, polygamy, communal bias, or poverty and underdevelopment in the society, many of which still exist in the Indian society. For example, Parvati belonged to a trading community wherein their family would accept a bride-price from the groom's family during a wedding and use it to give it away for the son's marriage. Asha and Binodini were compelled to marry because their guardians or parents could not afford to pay a handsome dowry. Putu was about to sacrifice the affection of her desired suitor because his parents had demanded a heavy dowry. Selling women was another social evil. Rajlakshmi was sold with her sister to a rajah and declared dead by her mother. She may have done so in order to avoid paying a large dowry for her daughters' marriage. It was due to this inability to procure the required dowry that Kamallata's father fails to get her remarried and hence her wedding ceremony remains incomplete. Agradani Brahmins were looked down upon with contempt as their ancestors accepted a sum of reward for performing the funeral services. They have to get Muslim workers from another village to get their house repaired. Such a grievance is vividly voiced by a woman who is an Agradani Brahmin in *Srikant*. This mirrors the rigidity of the caste-system which is still prevalent in our society.

Abstinence in widowhood was yet another glaring malpractice. Yet several widows of the day of these three writers refused to succumb to such

illogical rigidity. In *Srikant*, Savitri, aged twenty-one or twenty-two years old, chews *paan* with dried tobacco leaves. This was forbidden for widows as such ingredients along with spices and non-vegetarian food items like meat and fish were believed to enhance sexual desires. Bara Rani (*Ghare-Baire*) never conforms to the norms of widowhood. She chews betel leaves and indulges in several habits that a widow is prohibited to do. All other widows in these novels conform to most of the social codes. But they give way to their emotions and get emotionally involved with some man or the other. They envy all those who enjoy conjugal bliss. For example, Asha's marital satisfaction with Mahendra was envied by Binodini, Rajlakshmi and Annapurna. Similarly, Bara Rani detests Bimala's liberal treatment by her husband. Finally, many widows like Harimati Devi (Devdas's mother), Annapurna and Binodini are shown to find their respite in Kashi, a forced place of retreat or ostracism for widows.

Women projected by several writers have been shown to attain fulfilment and self-actualization through the means like reformation, renunciation, rituals and education. Prostitutes like Rajlakshmi and Chandramukhi are sanctified by their path to self-reformation. They not only abandon their despicable profession but offer humble services to the villagers. Several women find their ultimate fulfilment through renunciation. Binodini renounced Mahendra out of spite and pity and she gave up Bihari so that he may not be treated as an outcast. Savitri and Labanya do the same for their respective lovers. Conducting religious rituals is yet another channel through which women have found their solace. Kamallata, Rajlakshmi, Parvati through their acts of charity, Rajlakshmi (*Chokher Bali*) and Chandramukhi have all

adopted this to attain their contentment in an otherwise much dissatisfied life they lead.

Education for women, according to the characters of the novels under study was not sufficient in order to achieve a good husband, a sound family, social status, wealth and emotional happiness. Binodini, by virtue of her English education, entices both Mahendra and Bihari but she fails to turn either of them into a husband. Kiranmayi suffers the same fate. Educated by her husband, she achieves knowledge and wisdom. She enamours Satish, Upendra and Divakar but remains deprived of sexual fulfilment. However, her education enhances her self-expression to courageously voice her innermost feelings without any hesitation. In *Devdas*, Parvati's mother and grandmother debate over the necessity of education for women. Sarat Chandra blames education for causing a rift in a family in his novel, *Srikant*. Sunanda, a learned woman, gains knowledge but she fails to acquire the wisdom of uniting her family. Her staunch values create sheer misery to all the members of her family. While the learning of the *Puranas* makes Sunanda and Kiranmayi rebellious it bridles the defiant thoughts for Yogamaya. On the contrary, in *Shesher Kabita*, Labanya gains insight to make the right choice of preferring Sobhanlal's devoted love to Amit's ephemeral passion for her. Education makes Ketaki only a blind follower of the Western culture. Sucharita and Lolita in *Gora*, Tagore's novel, are highly educated without being enrolled in a college. They exhibit intelligence and have a practical outlook towards life, like Hemnalini in Tagore's *The Wreck*. Thus, education only shows the direction. It has been in the hands of these women to manipulate it to the optimum degree in life. In these novels questions of self-

awareness do keep rising but it is only later that the issues of personal fulfilment and individual happiness come on the agenda of women characters.

Some conclusions about the characterization of women of the three authors may be drawn. Through characters like Shanti, Bimala, Matangini and Ayesha, Bankim Chandra not only redefines womanhood as the unique blend of beauty and courage but he has also portrayed them as warriors, braving social or political menaces with finesse and dexterity. The aspect of female consciousness of self-will and the question of female empowerment find appreciable exposition in his novels. It can be noticed with particular interest that Tagore's heroines are educated, remarkably outgoing and self-reliant. In his novels, women like Binodini, Bimala and Labanya anticipate a liberal society that is purged of its blind morals and holds a futuristic and modern attitude towards women. A woman can aspire for higher goals, achieve equal or greater importance in the family and enjoy her own space to realise her objectives in life. Women like Annada, Savitri and Surabala in all the three novels have been projected as having only a marginalised and servile existence, as ancillary to their respective husband or beloved. Women like Kamallata and Kiranmayi who have exhibited their defiance against social norms have been denounced as deviant and hence social outcasts. Sarat Chandra has thus conformed to contemporary poetic justice and accepted the morality of his time but raised sensitive issues that required urgent reformation, particularly through the characters of Abhaya and Kiranmayi. However, most women of his time succumb to the world-view despite their frustrations in order to gain social security.

This dissertation may pave the way for a multidisciplinary scrutiny of the existing social and literary aspects like gender studies, sociology and cultural studies, etc. It purports to bridge the gulf between studies involving women and literature. It can open a wide range of investigation on comparative studies. For example, this trio of writers who portrayed life-like women are male writers. They may be compared to similar women characters in fiction as delineated by women writers. Moreover, similar groups of writers from other regions depicting women in fiction may be studied in the same light. Such women as portrayed in fiction may be compared to the real women on whom such characters have been modelled. Various women-centred issues may also be examined on similar grounds, as in this work.

This study was an attempt to present a kaleidoscope of changing images of women as captured by authors themselves in times of 'storm and stress' of an India caught within the decadence of the Mughal empire, the surging prominence of the British Raj and the remnant recalcitrance of Hindu orthodoxy not to forget the rising tide of reform. It cannot claim to be comprehensive or exhaustive since no such study can be complete in itself. The focus has been primarily on fiction, a genre on ascendance then, partly because it is also the most prolific form of writing today and partly because it is essentially more concerned with social-realist issues. Fiction often reflects the contemporary social conditions, though the writer may not necessarily accept them. Even when he writes a historical or a futuristic novel, he is not entirely segregated from the present. The depiction of women in fiction is also dominated by the prevailing attitudes towards women and the author's response to them. In this male-dominated society, the extolling of the feminine

mystique is a traditional and stereo-typical outlook. Every woman is expected to serve as an ideal wife, an affectionate mother and an efficient home-maker, irrespective of the provincial boundaries of India. She is supposed to be a paragon of virtues.

The complex structure of the Indian society embodies peculiar rigid customs, compulsions and irreconcilable contradictions, particularly in the case of a woman. On the one hand, it attributes to women qualities of emotional and spiritual prowess and on the other it expects them to have a subdued and submissive existence. It holds motherhood in high esteem and yet it is the father who governs the family. Yet, on the other hand, it is the woman who is the deciding authority in the matters of her family and even the dominant men of her household accept her sagacity and prudence. A woman also has to be the reconciling point between the polarities of tradition and modernity. It is a woman's responsibility to follow the customs and observe rituals in order to keep an age-old tradition intact. At the same time she is expected to achieve material goals as well, though outdoing the spouse in this respect is desired less often.

Unlike most of these women of the novels of all the three novelists, characters like Ayesha (*Durgesnandini*), Labanya (*Shesher Kabita*) and Binodini (*Chokher Bali*) and Savitri (*Charitrahin*) stand highly apart from the rest of the characters. They are enigmatic women who decide their own fate, being already smitten by it, and rise like phoenixes from their own ruins. They make their own choice and do not give in to abulia. They are women far ahead of their own times. It is the contemporary perception of woman's status

that gives these women their uniqueness. Keeping in mind these feminist reflections it may be derived that a 'Novum Femme' can be evolved by combining eclectically the positive aspects of the women characters in the fiction of these authors. The boldness of Binodini, Abhaya and Bimala— (*Ghare-Baire*), the steadfast affection of Paro and Rajlakshmi (*Srikant*), and the rational approach of Kiranmayi and Binodini are demonstrations of the evolution of women towards a more secured life. They boldly exhibit their firm resistance to the tyranny that patriarchy inflicts on them. Confidence, determination, candour, creativity self-dependence and sincerity are some of the positive traits that may be distilled from these characters to create a kind of a woman who may not exist as a character in the works discussed so far, but may aid in building-up the image of a new woman who could become the role-model of the present-day society and the generations to come. Women with these qualities do exist today in our twenty-first century. Yet, it is equally true that newer means of exploitation have surfaced under several global guises. Most importantly however, the thrust of these authors – as well as one of the most emphatic feminist issues – has been an advocacy for more choices in women's lives, and a greater freedom to them to exercise their decisions in matters of these choices. Nineteenth and early twentieth century women in these works can thus serve as useful references as to how much the Indian society has become sensitive to their existence and supportive of their ambitions to etch a better life for themselves and the society they want to see themselves in.

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