Imagining Love in Early Twentieth Century Bengal: Santisudha Ghosh's *Golokdhãdha* and Sabitri Roy's *Meghna Podma*

Sutanuka Ghosh

This paper arises out of a series of questions that I posed to myself when reading writings by Bengali women focusing on the early twentieth century–the political struggles for independence and economic and social justice, the great Bengal famine, the vivisection of the nation and the accompanying violence, migration, and the concept of home, nation and citizenship. It was undoubtedly a challenging time for individuals, the institution of the family and the community, exposing each to stresses that fractured and transformed them. I wondered about the impact of these turbulent decades on human relationships and the implications for sexual politics and the politics of gender. This is a complex issue with multiple aspects that extend beyond the scope of a single paper. For the present paper I will focus on the issue of love and how it has been imagined in two fictional texts by authors who witnessed these decades, deeply involved in the political, social and economic movements. This study focuses on only on certain aspects of the complex representation of 'love' in these texts.

The texts explored here are Santisudha Ghosh's *Golokdhādha* (p. 1938)[1] and Sabitri Roy's *Meghna Podma* (p. Parts I-1964, II-1965, and III-1968).[2] *Golokdhādha* is one of the two novels written by Ghosh, a political activist. It is a complex and intriguing text which connects love and sexuality in a way that is rarely found in women's fictional writings from this period. *Meghna Podma* has a long time span as it runs into 3 volumes covering a period that extends from the revolutionary activities in the early 1930s till the years after the partition when the refugees were trying to find their home in a new nation within the old country. Both texts are exploratory in the approach to 'love', and the understanding and experience of love of

Ghosh, Sutanuka : **Imagining Love in Early Twentieth Century Bengal : Santisudha Ghosh's Golokdhadha and Sabitri Roy's Meghna-Podma.**
International Journal of Bengal Studies, Vol. : 2-3, 2011-2012, PP 244-258

the subjects is inextricably woven with an individual's construction of the self, which is itself tentative, hesitant, and rebellious. The multiple subject positions of the protagonists, as theorised by William Du Bois,[3] also problematises the experience of love. Ghosh and Roy's texts locate how the awareness of the 'being that I am' is integral to the experience and expression of love that is also, paradoxically, regarded as an ahistorical and universal emotion. In these texts the narratives portray how the construction of the 'self', conceived as a continual process rather than as an unchanging finished product, is pivotal to the understanding of love, as an emotion and as an act/action, that determines who is loved and in what way. Alexander Nehamas argues that 'the self, according to Nietzsche is not a constant, stable identity. On the contrary, it is something one becomes, something, he would even say, one constructs'.[4] 'The subject is a process' says Catherine Belsey while making a case for the possibility of transformation.[5] This subject in the 'making' is itself contingent upon social, political, and economic processes. Consequently the understanding and experience of love is also rooted in the material matrix of history. This paper argues that in these works the authors have imagined love not as an abstraction, an out-of-body ecstatic response to an individual or thing. Love is tied to material circumstances, shifts in the discursive fields that constitute subjectivity, and it influences and is influenced by mundane daily living and events. It is also felt in the body. Sexuality is not elided or ignored in the texts. The texts attempt to understand female sexuality and the relationship between love and sexuality. The texts also examine how the mechanism of power is manifest in the expression and act of love; offering and acceptance of love becomes an expression of the hierarchical position in the power structure that is determined by economic factors, caste, gender and marital status. The authors have also imagined love to be creative and enabling, making a space for the expression of the self.

The paper will briefly discuss the issue of marriage but only so far as it pertains to the issue of love. As love and marriage are not necessarily connected or follow each other, marriage is peripheral to the discussions here. Marriages do figure significantly in the texts but I contend that love and sometimes the lack of it are accorded greater significance by the authors. They interrogate the traditional notion of marriage as the fulfilment of love and frequently within the narratives marriage is almost exclusively associated with the household and procreation. When in the newer generations love precedes marriage, there is the possibility of a qualitative change in

the marriage and it is undertaken by the man not solely for the purpose of begetting heirs. Though there are seldom radical structural changes in the relationship, there is a possibility of alteration in the power dynamics.

Introducing the authors

Santisudha Ghosh was born in 1907 in Barishal that is currently in Bangladesh. Her father was an academic and her mother was also quite well read, partly a result of her own efforts and the rest through her husband's encouragement. Ghosh was educated partly in Barisal and partly in Calcutta. She was a brilliant scholar who studied mathematics and won the Ishan scholarship, awarded to the student who topped the humanities in the B.A examination in Calcutta University. Her family was not politically active though they had nationalist leanings. While she was pursuing her higher education her youngest brother had joined a revolutionary group. Her stay in Calcutta for her education had also opened up the world of political struggle as she witnessed the Congress meetings, the resolution of her sister and her sister's friends to boycott examinations and so on. She became involved with the revolutionaries of the *Yugantor* group and was variously imprisoned, placed under internment, sent out of the state to Orissa. She continued to lecture in Mathematics and subsequently came under the influence of Gandhi.

Sabitri Roy was born in Dhaka in 1918 to a middle class Hindu family. Her father lived in Faridpur and Roy went to a boys' school in a nearby village. Later she went to Calcutta for further education at Bethune College. She was also trained as a teacher and she taught for a while in Madaripur and Munshigunj. At the age of twenty-two she married Santimoy Roy. They were both involved with the communist movement. Roy's writings represent various aspects of the turbulent times, from the political machinations in the pre-1947 years to the struggle of the refugees living like cattle in a state that was ill prepared to host such a large population. Her daughter Gargi Chakravartty notes that her mother developed a sensitive understanding of the lives and trials of the refugees as her parents lived at the edge of a refugee colony. The Roys offered voluntary service to shelter, protect and transport people affected by the riots in Calcutta and closely interacted with the displaced people. Roy's writings are quite radical in their political views as well as in her portrayal of women and social practices.

Introducing the texts

The protagonist of *Golokdhādha* is Shanta, a young girl growing up in a British ruled India with her parents and sister Lolita. When her father passes away suddenly she comes to live with her Uncle and Aunt along with her mother and sister. Her femininity is continually emphasised in the codes of conduct laid down by her Uncle who is a professor. Her intelligent sister, who was also a close friend, is married off and Shanta is shocked at her sister's transformation after her wedding. She has debates and discussions with her friend Otoshi about the necessity of marriages for women and female sexuality. A student of philosophy, Shanta is a socially aware and restless soul trying to understand the meaning and purpose of life. She is not a strident rebel but she cannot accept what is 'normal' or socially prescribed as the right path to be followed unquestioningly. There are three men who are attracted to her and seek a relationship with her, Oporesh, Sotyokam and Barin, which pushes her to confront her own sexuality. Shanta does not accept marriage as the only destiny for herself nor does she see motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment of a woman's role. Her Uncle's disapproval notwithstanding she joins a group with revolutionary zeal, in a tentative manner, all the while searching for a path out of the maze of questions to which there are no easy answers.

Meghna Podma was initially written in two parts and published in 1964 and 1965. A third part was published in 1968. It follows primarily the life of a little girl Bonya as she comes to her father Indrokumar's village in rural undivided Bengal nestled amidst the rivers Meghna and Podma, with her mother Torulota and three brothers Kripan, Kishan and Tuphan. Bonya learns quite early that her mother reserves all her affection only for her sons. She is a dreamy girl who finds her source of living in the wonder and colour of the world without. She visits the potters' quarter to see them create all sorts of beautiful images and colour them. She has her first lessons in painting from them. Her mother is not bothered about her formal education, as she will get married sooner rather than later. However Bonya continues to learn and paint. There is an orphan girl living in the house called Uma, who grows up to be a beautiful and graceful woman and is soon married off to Obhijit, the scion of a wealthy landowning family of the village. Bonya meanwhile meets Meghjit, Obhijit's cousin, an artist who has come back to the village after receiving training abroad. Meghjit recognises Bonya's talent and offers to instruct her. Bonya falls in love with Meghjit but is rudely

awakened when Meghjit returns from Dhaka with his bride Uttora. Hurt and bewildered Bonya leaves the village to go to the city to study further.

In the city Bonya meets a girl Bonojyotsna who is a poet. Bonya moves out of her aunt's house to live on her own for the first time, with Bonojyotsna. Her relationship with Bonojyotsna is very stimulating and through her Bonya meets with two men who become important in her life: Bonojyotsna's cousin Omlan and Jyotirmoy. Bonya begins living on her own at this point, desperately trying to survive as an artist. Just before partition Indrokumar dies and Torulota comes to the city. When Kripan's family comes apart after his wife leaves him, Torulota is left to run a family with her sons and also her grandchildren. She requests Bonya to come and live with them and to take up a clerk's job at a city office to feed and clothe this family. Bonya agrees to take up the soul-deadening job to ensure the survival of the family. At this time there is again a chance meeting with Omlan who is still in love with her. He asks to accompany her on her journey and they go to the opening of a new colony for displaced, homeless people.

Imagining Love

Just as Santisudha Ghosh has imagined her protagonist Shanta in *Golokdhādha,* she has also imagined 'love' as it manifests itself in the life of this young woman, consciously fashioning a 'self' at the same time as when a new nation is being made. The making of the new nation and the making of the new woman are inextricably linked in Ghosh's novel, as in many other novels that focus on this period. Apart from the fact that the construction of the new nation required the 'recasting' of women, as Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid put it,[6] the desire for freedom of the nation from servitude to the British also led to the desire for freedom and a new servitude among the female sex – freedom from gender inequalities and servitude to the nation. It is in this context that the love for the nation impacts the warp and the woof of the other loves that a woman experiences in these novels. There exists a tense relationship between the making of a 'self', heterosexual love and love of the nation. Love for the imagined nation that still exists in the realm of ideology and is yet to be born as a physical, political entity, sits uneasy with 'romantic' love because of what is perceived to be divided loyalties. For both women and men, their 'making' in a mould that is befitting a 'worthy' son or daughter of the nation is also compromised by

heterosexual love that restricts their 'becoming' and confines them to the 'familial' home as opposed to the 'national' realm.

In *Golokdhādha,* the experience of love is mediated through Shanta's evolving sense of her identity as an autonomous being, a woman and a participatory citizen of an emerging nation. This extremely self-aware introspective character probes deep into herself through her emotional response to her sister and the three men with whom she forms different kinds of relationships. These emotions and the expressions of these emotions are fluid as they are transformed through the prism of her increasing self-knowledge and her ideology framing the 'construction' of her 'self'. Shanta's evolving understanding of love through the course of the novel calibrates her response to this emotion as it hits her from different quarters. This understanding must also be situated in the context of her private ruminations and her discussions and arguments with her sister Lolita, friend Otoshi and others. These discussions are about marriage, sexuality and a woman's role in public life.

Lolita's transformation after her wedding, apparent in her cheerful capitulation to her husband's desires and regulation of her life according to his wishes, appals Shanta. Lolita's intellectual life is constrained and her growth is a carefully supervised one, if at all there is any growth. While the narrative does not question marital-love, which is supposed to emerge, even spontaneously, after the wedding, the sacrifice of the individuality of the woman, her thoughts and feelings at the altar of conjugal harmony and happy matrimony is not something Shanta acquiesces to. Shanta is quite traumatised by the abrupt termination of a stimulating and fulfilling relationship. Lolita does not share Shanta's interests and enthusiasm any more. There is a distinct vacuum in Shanta's life as Lolita was not merely a sibling but also her dearest friend and Shanta experiences a feeling of abandonment after Lolita's wedding and subsequent change. After Lolita's virtual disappearance from Shanta's life, the other great love that she experiences is for Sotyokam. It is troublesome and traumatic because it leads to Shanta's realisation of her powerful sexuality that had hitherto been perceived as being inimical to her 'becoming' and 'growth' as an autonomous individual.

Shanta's uncle and mother would like her to get married but having witnessed the impact of marriage on a woman's 'becoming', Shanta realises that she does not want to become another Lolita. Shanta also refuses to accept the notion of serving the nation vicariously through her child and adopting the role of a 'mother of brave sons'. Shanta rejects the idea that a woman should live her life

passively, as an inert object, when she is equipped to play an active role, participating in and shaping events. It is in this context that we should examine her love for the nation, which is not romanticised as a powerful, overwhelming emotion but is a significant stimulus in Shanta's life, seeking to shape it. The cult of nationalism with a glorious servitude to the nation as its beacon call feeds Shanta's desire to construct herself in a certain image. The narrative itself is hesitant and exploratory because Shanta does not have a role model that she can emulate. However there is quite clearly a connection that is being made between the creation of a new nation and the emergence of new women where the process of creating the nation opens up new spaces for the creation of new subjectivities for women. Hence, one of the reasons Shanta's tentative foray into the nationalist movement through Oporesh comes about is because of the way she envisages her 'becoming', that is suggested in the arguments that I have just outlined. Unlike the other women in her family Shanta is not content to love the nation virtually but is not quite certain as to the appropriate way of expressing her love.

Shanta discusses sexuality with Otoshi while talking about marriage as an avenue for the expression of female sexuality and Otoshi refers to Havelock Ellis as an authority. Shanta denies the prevailing notion that women have a voracious sexual appetite which is fulfilled through marriage. It is something that she reacts to with distinct distaste. Her reaction to Oporesh's profession of love for her can be understood in this context. She reads in Oporesh's words and gestures a strong sexuality that she shrinks from, regarding it as crude, and resents what she considers to be a display of power. She does not love Oporesh and resists the power that is covertly present in such declarations of love; Shanta refuses to be willed by someone like Oporesh even in the name of love. Ghosh is attempting something very interesting here: Shanta is not the passive recipient of love whose refusal of Oporesh's overtures maybe read as prudishness or bashfulness. Shanta thinks and discusses about love and sexuality actively in those spaces where she can unhinderingly do so, and the parameters of the relationships that she forms are well considered and thought out. In fact Shanta rationalises later that there is no significant reason why she should spurn Oporesh's overture; he may even be considered to be an eligible young man. Shanata grants Oporesh that; what she cannot articulate is the power-play that Oporesh brings into the relationship. He, almost imperceptibly,

coerces Shanta to consent to a 'romantic' relationship with him, which Shanta resists. She comes into the public forum through Oporesh but here also she refuses to submit her will to that of Oporesh and other men in the organisation. It is probable that Oporesh wanted to bring Shanta into the organisation because he was attracted to her. However the way he approaches Shanta with his feelings creates a hierarchical relationship that Shanta cannot accept because she is trying to break out of the mould that women like her sister have submitted to. Oporesh enters into her scheme of things in so far as she visualises a public role for herself in service of the nation but she cannot respond to the kind of love that Oporesh proposes. As a 'new' woman of the 'nation-in-the-making' Shanta cannot replicate the older power structures that take away her participatory role and reduce her to a grateful receptacle. One must also note that Oporesh's wooing of Shanta, though unsuccessful, comes in the garb of loving the nation and working for it.

In the case of Sotyokam, Shanta responds to Sotyokam's presence with a force that takes her by surprise. Sotyokam is drawn to Shanta but that is not what evokes the vehemence of her feelings for him. She falls in love and is forced to acknowledge her own sexuality, which she confronts in reality for the first time. Ghosh is unusual in her portrayal of the powerful emotion that Shanta experiences in her body even as she tries to understand and counter that, unsuccessfully. Shanta's expression of this love is tortured because she does not want to be swept away by this emotion. Sotyokam is nearly Shanta's age and an educated pleasant young man, who is the relation of a neighbour. Hence the interaction between Shanta and Sotyokam is easy and unhindered. So it is difficult for Shanta to push away Sotyokam as she had pushed Oporesh away. But she resists giving in to his obvious attraction, his emotions and her own feeling as she does not know the impact this would have on her own 'making'. Shanta does not know what she *could* be or *should* be, but she knows fairly clearly what she does not wish to be. Heterosexual love, which Shanta suddenly becomes aware of, has to be negotiated during this process of 'becoming', exploring the unknown possibilities of the self. Her sexuality is a part of her 'being' but Shanta refuses to allow it to consume her entire being so that her evolution is damaged or jeopardised. Yet it is something that has a force that she cannot deny or ignore. Hence, the relationship with Sotyokam operates on alternate waves of

attraction and repulsion. There are certainly two factors at play here: though Shanta realises the force of her feelings for Sotyokam, she is wary of the power dynamics that seem to govern the heterosexual relationships that she witnesses around her in the family. Secondly, her concern may also be about her public and private roles. A heterosexual relationship that leads to marriage is likely to thrust on a woman a familial identity and exclude participatory, public roles. In the normal cycle of a woman's life in the nineteenth and early twentieth century the period that corresponds to sexual activity was often perceived as problematic and oppressive. As Tanika Sarkar remarks with reference to Rassundari Dasi's autobiography, the termination of the fertile period was received with a sense of relief, enabling the woman to engage in activities outside her regular chores.[7] A woman's sexuality could thus be perceived as being at odds with the development of other non-familial subjectivities. Even though Shanta is not confident about what public role she should assume, direct participation in nationalist activities is pivotal to her sense of self-worth and identity. 'Belonging' is important to Shanta as well but this belonging must be to an entity greater than the family or community; it is this greater entity, the nation that will significantly inform Shanta's identity as a new woman even as she experiences, what she perceives to be the contrary pull of 'romantic' love. This is one of the mazes of *Golokdhādha* that Shanta has to negotiate if she is to proceed further in her exploration of her 'self' and it's 'becoming'.

Barin is a friend who is fondly received in Shanta's family. There is an easy camaraderie between Shanta and him. Towards the end of the novel Barin reveals his love for Shanta. Even as she is trying to resolve her emotions with regard to Sotyokam, Barin's emotions take her by surprise but it causes no unease. Though he has discovered the truth of his feelings for Shanta, Barin does not seek to be anything other than her friend, and to keep steady the precarious balance of their friendship he decides to move out of the orbit of her presence. Shanta is deeply impressed by Barin's honest and sincere feelings. She values his friendship and the effort he has put in to preserve this friendship. Shanta wishes that she could emulate Barin with regard to her love for Sotyokam. The generosity of Barin's love, its unobtrusiveness, the freedom it allows both Barin and Shanta appeals to her because it allows her to grow into that image that she is finding so difficult to construct. In effect what Barin is offering is

love without the trappings of power and possession that is masked in the play of passion. This is something that Shanta probably comprehends instinctively without quite articulating why this love should appeal to her *vis-à-vis* her relationship with Sotyokam. The conclusion of *Golokdhādha* is open-ended; the maze remains as does Shanta's struggle to find her way out of this labyrinth.

Meghna Podma is a trilogy, and compared to *Golokdhādha* operates on a large social and geographical landscape. For this discussion I will limit myself primarily to the love that Bonya experiences and expresses. In this text Sabitri Roy creates and juxtaposes the real world, and for little Bonya a loveless world, and an imaginary and imagined world of colours and of love. One of the most important emotions that Bonya experiences as a young girl is the lack of her mother's love. The text shows her acute awareness of Torulota's indifference. No one takes any interest in her education either as it is assumed that she will be married off early. Soon after her arrival in the village, the narrative portrays Bonya immersed in colours. She goes to the potters' quarters to watch them make figures and colour them. The potters are her first art teachers. She creates an alternate world where she can express her love for the people, the landscape and the various elements. This in turn is associated with her love for herself in the absence of her mother's love. This is a love that is continually challenged and Bonya finds that society continually makes it difficult for her to love herself; this love is always equated to selfishness and opposed to the unquestioning love that one must have for one's family. This is a secret love that Bonya nourishes that must be buried whenever duty to the family calls her. But she continues to love herself to the end of the novel and imagines herself as a small child tender like the flowers that is being buried gradually, relentlessly. Bonya imagines this self as a being that no one knows about or recognises, and thinks that if her mother had known this self and loved it she would have been free from her pain and torment. In effect Bonya is fragmented and there seems to be no continuum between the Bonya who must take care of her mother, brother and nieces and nephew after the death of her father and the artist Bonya who creates newer worlds. In the case of both Bonya and Shanta their identities are what Du Bois would term as internally contestory or hyphenated, causing a different kind of trauma.[8] However, it is Bonya's love for herself and the world that emerges out of her love that leads her on to other loves that

contribute to her making.

If we follow the chronology of the novel, Bonya comes across Meghjit as a young girl in the village. She is lonely after her friend and ally, cousin Uma is married off and she seeks refuge in her world of colours as often and when she can. Meghjit is an artist who has been trained abroad and on witnessing Bonya's paintings he offers to teach her. Bonya grows close to Meghjit as he takes her deeper into this alternate world. Bonya is deeply shocked when, Meghjit comes back from Dhaka with his newly-wed bride Uttora. A baffled and hurt Bonya leaves for Kolkata soon afterwards to continue her education. Later when Bonya comes back to the village for her holidays and is invited to visit Meghjit's family as Uma is a daughter-in-law of the family, she meets Uttora. It is then that she realises that Uttora knows about her and that while Uttora is Meghjit's wife, both Meghjit and Uttora understand that Bonya is Meghjit's muse. Their relationship cannot be lived or sustained in the mundane world of families, food and rituals. In this relationship Roy has imagined an unfettered love that can be sustained and fulfilled only at the level of ideas. It is reality that this love must be saved from and by providing a partner for Meghjit, Roy has shielded Bonya's love from the taint of the mundane, mediocre and petty. It may also be the fear of the author that should Bonya succumb to the social structure that seeks to tame and legitimise love, the 'becoming' of Bonya would be arrested. In her novels Roy has frequently explored the nature of love, permitting married women too to experience different sorts of love outside the regulated sphere of marital-love. Frequently these unnamed, undefined relationships enrich and help the growth of the women and Roy has scrupulously avoided trying to justify or explain these relationships and let them be.

Bonojyotsna comes into Bonya's life like a sudden burst of sunshine at a time when Bonya was becoming claustrophobic in the house of a relation. She moves out of the relation's house to share with Bonojyotsna a house with a sun-lit terrace, which they both share with a couple of birds. Bonojyotsna is a poet and a dear friend who helps Bonya to acquire that freedom that she sought but did not believe she could get. She takes up work and for the first time in her life Bonya becomes independent of her parents, relations and friends. This is a love between two artists, two women, two friends that is enabling and creative, supportive and enjoyable, without creating a sense of either hierarchy or dependence. The space that they accord

each other is remarkable and when contrasted with Bonya's other relationships with the various men, this relationship is remarkably free from a sense of stress. As I have said earlier in the case of Barin and Shanta, this relationship between these two women is free from the trappings of power and possession which enables them to live apart when Bonojyotsna marries without any feeling of grief. Bonojyotsna also introduces Bonya to the realm of political activism and Bonya starts painting for the political movements.

There are two other loves that Bonya experiences. Jyotirmoy is also an artist and when Bonya sees him for the first time he appears like a monk to her. Like Meghjit he also becomes Bonya's teacher and gradually Bonya gets drawn to this reclusive and reticent personality. She nurses him when he is ill to the great disgust of her mother Torulota who considers the close proximity that Bonya and Jyotirmoy share to be inappropriate and scandalous. Bonya knows Jyotirmoy has a son and also that his wife is alive but suffers from mental instability. Their social and familial trappings make the love that Bonya and Jyotirmoy share difficult and troublesome but for Bonya it constitutes a huge leap as a person. She grows and strengthens herself not only as an artist but also as a social being and an individual. She draws posters and travels with a theatre group to raise money for the people ravaged by the famine. She lives on her own and earns her own living, helping her family along the way. This is also a relationship that does not demand any labelling or definition, that does not survive on any expectation, promises or commitment. Roy creates a strong undercurrent of warm feelings between Bonya and Jyotirmoy but there is nothing by way of a conventional 'romantic' relationship. There is no mention of 'love' in Bonya and Jyotirmoy's conversations. Conventionally of course love would be taboo between the married Jyotirmoy and Bonya but the love that has been imagined here is not tainted by the conventional. Hence it need not follow the conventional structure. Here too the relationship is fostered by the resonance in the artistic temperament of the two individuals, and their political and social belief system. Bonya and Jyotirmoy are both part of the troop that performs for famine relief and travels far into rural areas.

Bonya is introduced to Omlan at almost the same time as she meets Jyotirmoy. She repulsed Omlan as he tried to kiss her and subsequently though they moved around in similar social and geographical spaces Bonya kept away from Omlan. She had been

initially intrigued by Omlan's personality but did not permit him to invade her emotional space. She would not suffer someone thrusting his love, if that was what it was, down her throat without her consent. Bonya and Omlan then grew along different trajectories, coming to know more about themselves and life, enriched by their varied experiences. In the third part of the novel Omlan and Bonya meet once again. Roy's narrative seems to convey that both Bonya and Omlan have walked through fire and are now ready to make a journey walking alongside each other. In the end they both go to witness the setting up of a new colony for the homeless refugees who are trying to build up their lives after losing everything in partition. For both of them it is a new partnership.

Meghna Podma explores love in its myriad shades of light and darkness. Love is not necessarily followed by marriage in the case of men and women and neither does it seem to be desirable because not all loves fit any single definition. Their context varies, the subjects vary, the nature of the emotion varies and the understanding of what constitutes fulfilment of love also varies. Bonya's brother Kripan who was a revolutionary in his youth was loved by two different women, his cousin Uma and a weaver's daughter Prosadi. He meets them once again late in his life when he has lost everything and his wife has left him. Uma was an orphan who was brought up in Kripan's family and shared her growing-up years with Kripan reading the revolutionary literature that he brought her and protecting him from the wrath of his father. When Kripan meets her after many years, Uma is married and the mother of a daughter. Prosadi is also married but she has been deserted by her husband in the wake of the famine and she has become a prostitute to feed her children. In their own way both Uma and Prosadi try to support Kripan with their love and try to get him back on his feet. The narrative does not make any overt mention of any love and the narrator does not even try to explain the emotional dynamics between these two women and Kripan. Any kind of classification eludes. However the emotional bond exists because Kripan seeks them out and they seek Kripan out in his hour of darkness. Prosadi refuses to entertain Kripan as a prostitute and when she thinks that she poses a danger to Kripan's wellbeing, she disappears without a trace.

In these texts the love between men and women is imagined to be something that cannot be expressed entirely within the structure of marriage nor is marriage perceived as the necessary fruition of love.

In fact there is a reticence about naming and labelling a feeling, an emotion because it immediately dams up and defines what is in essence a fluid emotion. Ghosh and Roy subtly explore the varied shades of love, often between men and women, both beautiful and complex, defying the conventional, supportive, enriching and sorrowful. What is exceptional in Ghosh and Roy's exploration of 'love' is their non-judgemental, sympathetic and nuanced treatment of the emotion and the varied characters, as they negotiate this emotion in their lives. While they do not forbear from discussion of female sexuality, their difference as novelists lies in being able to imagine love fraught with sexual urges and without. They do not present a simplistic image of love, quite firmly locating the presence of power play in an erotic frisson, but they also try to imagine and create relationships that are affectionate and nurturing without being subject to domination or dependence. Roy also portrays the changes in marriage as the younger couples are shown to be enjoying more companionate relationships. There is the section when Torulota, Bonya's mother looks at her husband Indronath, with distinct hatred in her eyes – she has just learnt that she has conceived once again. This is contrasted with the relationship between Uma and Obhijit or that between Meghjit and Uttora. Whereas their parents saw each other in the darkness of night, Meghjit displays marital intimacy in public when he takes Uttora out for walks in the village. However this change also makes the relationship fragile in a different way; marriages break down as that between Kripan and Irani when Irani realises that she does not love Kripan and does not seek the life she was living as his wife. She leaves her husband and children to follow an uncertain path with a fellow artist from a different religious community. Love remains a quest for Irani along with finding her 'self', not as someone's daughter or wife, or even mother. She explicitly rejects her mother and husband, and moves away from her children in a quest that she finds impossible to deny. Irani may be perceived as being selfish, particularly as she leaves her children behind, but the narrative suggests how claustrophobic Irani's role-playing could be and how compelling the urge to discover her subjecthood and a love that is liberating.

Santisudha Ghosh and Sabitri Roy lived in, what in hindsight we can term as 'interesting times'. It was quite clearly a time, the authors imagined, when the events of history were influencing the creation of a new woman and newer notions of love, understood,

experienced and expressed in different ways. There have always been relationships of love of numerous sorts that have eluded categorisation and classification. The texts are different in that they perceive a 'new' love in the context of the 'making' of the 'new woman' at a critical juncture in the history of the Bengali people.

Endnotes :

1 Santisudha Ghosh, *Golokdhādha* (Calcutta: Gurudas Chattopadhyay & Sons, 1938)

2 Sabitri Roy, *Meghna Podma* (Calcutta: Mitralaya, I-1964, II-1965), (Calcutta: Sarat Book House, III-1968)

3 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York; Bantam, 1989), p.1.

4 Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.7

5 Catherine Belsy, "Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, (eds) Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 597.

6 Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990)

7 Tanika Sarkar, "A Book of Her Own. A Life of Her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Woman", *History Workshop No. 36* (Autumn, 1993), p. 54.

8 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York; Bantam, 1989), p.1.

Department of English, Jadavpur University
sutanuka.ghosh@yahoo.com

Sarat Chandra's women: Devi or dasis?

Subhadra Mitra Channa

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhaya was born in the year 1876, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a century that was characterized by the emergence of what has been recognized by historians of Bengal as the rise of the British influenced middle class, the *bhadrolok*. Sarat Chandra himself was at the liminal edge of this class, being born a Brahmin, but a poor one; a person who travelled to Burma to work as a clerk, and who spent a large part of his life as an ascetic, and chose to remain unmarried. My paper is about how gender was constructed in the works of Sarat Chandra and to the extent such gender constructions were informed by the model of the *bhadralok* and *bhadra mahila* for which I have referred specifically to the work of Sumanta Chatterjee(1989, reprint 2006).

For a man who seemed to have had little intimate contact with women he is especially recognized to have dealt most sensitively with his women characters. At this time period the society at large was influenced by the stereotypical construct of the *devi*, the "saintly, virtuous and dutiful"(Bannerjee 2006:162) woman idealized in literature and popular culture. Also as Chatterjee(2006) has described, the construction of this '*devi*" image of middle class women was a necessary correlate of the nationalist enterprise that sought to defeat the west on moral grounds as it found itself defeated by the scientific and rational developments of the western civilization that had allowed it to colonize much of the world.

Thus the rising middle class *bhadrolok*, in forming a critique of the west, sought to do it in the realm of the spiritual. It challenged the western civilization by putting forth the claim that, "It had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the east, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture" and as pointed out by Bannerjee, the women were cultivated as refined and spiritual, goddess like as compared to both the western women and the

Channa, Mitra, Subhadra : **Depicting the Devi and the Dasi" : A Gendered and caste based inquiry into the female characters os Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's novels.**
International Journal of Bengal Studies, Vol. : 2-3, 2011-2012, PP 259-269