

women of the lower classes of Bengali society, “the maid servants, washerwomen, barbers, pedlars, procuress’s, prostitute” (Chatterjee 2006:244), who I refer to as the ‘*dasi*’ following Charkravorty (2006). Thus the *bhadramahila* emerged as the “Sati-savitri-sita’ constructed to both establish the identity of the emerging class of *bhadralok* as separate from the working class and lower caste masses and to assert the nationalist superiority of the Aryan culture. The lower class and specifically working women were the *dasis*, who were both exploited and considered exploitable.

Sarat Chandra managed to break the stereotype and the clear dichotomy between the *devis* and the *dasis* in his creation of women, who perhaps like him, were marginal in society. This is not to say that we do not find the distinctions based on caste in his work. In fact all his heroines appear to be of higher caste though driven by fate to occupy marginal class positions in society. His emphasis on caste at the expense of class puts the emphasis on innate rather than acquired characters in defining qualities of ‘refinement’. Thus a woman or even a man, like himself, though forced into circumstances that were not representative of elite life conditions would still remain pure and unsullied inside and not be corrupted by the external situation. Thus he truly contributes to the concept of spiritual essence in defining ‘*bhadra*’ as against the more materialist explanation we find in sociological writings.

For sake of manageable length of this paper, I have selected only a few examples from the myriads of female and male characters created by him, focusing largely on the four parts of Srikanta and to some extent on Charitraheen. The selection is purely arbitrary directed by my own subjectivity. The first character that comes to mind on the very edge of liminality is Annada didi, the snake charmer’s wife, who appears in the first part of Srikanta, as a fallen woman, a girl who ran away from home with a lowly Muslim snake charmer. Discarded by society, she lives in the forest, surrounded by snakes and an abusive husband. However to the young boys, Indranath and Srikanta, she appears as a most loving and superior being. Indranath fiercely defends her against her husband but when angry also abuses her as a fallen woman who has run away with a lowly Muslim. The very young Srikanta is able to recognize that she must be from a good Hindu family. Even when she herself admits to be a Muslim, the young boy cannot believe that she is not a Hindu lady. And at the death of her husband, Indranath insists that she is a

Hindu and requests her to come to his house to stay with his mother. When she takes on the dress of a Hindu widow, after the death of her husband, she reveals that not only she but the man she was reputedly living with was actually a Hindu Brahmin and her ritual husband. She says, “When he became a Muslim I automatically became one, being his *sahadharmini*. Yet I have never broken any norms or done anything to violate my caste”. The fact of her inner glow and behaviour that of a devoted wife and loving elder sister, to the two boys, is proof enough that she must be from an upper caste Hindu family. This underlying association is consciously or unconsciously present in most of Sarat Chandra’s works. Goodness may be found anywhere but the particular *devi* like virtues are located only in the body of a *bhadramahila*.

Thus we see in Annada didi, what we see later in characters like RajLokkhi, Savitri and even Kamal Lata, that in spite of appearing in various lowly and disreputable roles, the true Hindu upper caste woman retains all her superior norms and is indeed the *devi* and not the *dasi*. And Sarat Chandra illustrates what Chatterjee( 1993) has clearly pointed out, that caste and class values in terms of ritual and moral superiority are vested in the woman far more rigidly than in the men. Thus Annada’s husband, in spite of being a Brahmin, has no qualities that qualify him as a *bhadralok*, he is a base, inferior human being and so is Abhaya’s husband and Kamallata’s too.

But the women, like Annada have never broken their caste norms or transgressed the values of upper castes; thus we soon find that Piyari Baiji, does not touch any non-vegetarian food, observes strict taboos as befitting a upper caste widow and observes extreme abstinence in her personal life. In fact all the upper caste women, take to suffering and sacrifice as the core of their being, they are pure and unsullied by any base desires of the flesh, including that of food. Thus these women cook and feed men, the true image of Annapoorna, but live on practically air and water themselves. In Charitraheen, Kiranmoyee defines such a woman by saying, “Whether related or unrelated, if a Bengali woman learns that a man is hungry, she will get up from her death bed to feed him” In the same novel Savitri depicts a woman who while she works as a maid in a men’s mess, is still unsullied and pure and she too comes from a Brahmin family.

According to Sumanta Bannerjee, although the Bhadramahila was a product of the colonial times, she was carefully constructed out of

patriarchal norms held by the Bengali society of that time( 2006:128) Sarat Chandra's relationship to patriarchy is more complex and nuanced. At the surface he does not subscribe to the suffocating patriarchal values that deny agency or identity to women. He is especially critical of the way upper class *bhadralok* treat women, as in the episode in Srikanta part two, where he finds repugnant the manner in which a Bengali gentleman treats his Burmese partner, who he does not recognize as wife even though he has taken every advantage of her.

His women are powerful, intelligent and have agency and control over their own lives. Abhaya takes a major decision to go against all norms of her society and upbringing to take as husband a man to whom she is not married according to the *shashtras*. Her claim to mother hood is based not on the chanting of mantras but on the immense purity and depth of the love that she and Rohini have for each other. She is sure that the purity of their love will give birth to children who will be truly human, (*shottikarer manush*). Srikanta does not hesitate to tell her that with a mother like her, the children are bound to be exceptional.

Sarat Chandra's *devi's* are superior because in the last instance they can control men like puppets in their hands. Thus we have Rohini , who leaves everything to follow Abhaya to a foreign land. In fact Srikanta's approval of Abhaya is not a result of his own thinking but because of Raj Lokkhi's approval. On his own Srikanta admits that he does not have the courage to rise beyond his own times and upbringing but Raj Lokkhi has no such hesitation. She tells him that the fire burning inside Abhaya will burn away all sins. This is not the fire of education or upbringing that Abhaya has, but the fire of courage and love by which she unhesitatingly takes in a sick Srikanta into her house when the entire city is stricken with plague.

Sarat Chandra's patriarchy reflects the true nature of Hindu patriarchy where women are not inferior, a radical departure from western patriarchy where women are trivialized and considered inferior. The Hindus do worship the mother goddess but as I have discussed elsewhere, only some women, depending upon caste and class fit the model. Thus towards the end of Srikanta part 3, we have the protagonist suddenly realize that Raj Lokkhi is a goddess in the true sense. "Her power is unlimited and with this infinite power she is engaged in play only with herself in the centre. Till now she needed me as a plaything in this play and I did not have the strength to resist

the attraction of her intense desire; I had stooped in front of her, she had not glorified me. I had thought that she had made many sacrifices for me but now I realize that this is not so, for I did not realize the focus of her selfishness. She had discarded many things like wealth, status and money but was it for me? Did these things not form obstacles for her inner self? The difference between *me* and *possessing me* became clear as an immense truth in front of my eyes. Today her inner being wants to proceed on its onward journey and I have no power to obstruct that journey. Therefore like other inessentials in her life I too stand discarded on the road side" (translation mine).

We find throughout the four volumes of Srikanta that all agency lies with Raj Lokkhi and not with her man. The male protagonist is like a dry leaf, being blown in any direction but she has full control and makes her own choices. He needs to take permission from her to get married ( and is denied this permission) but she appears before him in the dress of a widow thus completely denying her relationship with him, acknowledging only that of a husband she has never known. She assumes and discards roles at her own whims and fancy while he waits quite literally at the margins. The author thus subscribes to the Hindu philosophy of woman as Sakti, the active principle of the universe while Purusa is passive. It is Sakti's own choice to surrender or not to surrender to the man. Thus Raj Lokkhi returns when she wants to and again she puts on whatever role that she thinks she wants to play.

But Sarat Chandra does not rebel against social norms when she finally decides to take on the permanent role of spouse. Then we are told that she was indeed married to Srikanta, even though in the garb of child's play, that her marriage was never solemnized to the old Brahmin and she was never married to anyone else thereby legitimizing the childhood choice of mate. Further even her wealth came from honest business and was not the earnings of a *Baiji*( Coutesan) . Thus all qualities of being a *bhadramahila* are fulfilled when the time comes for her to take up that role. Srikanta as a *bhadralok* himself could not have settled for less and this is evident when he compares her to Kamal Lata , who leaves him free but loves him more than anyone else. Unlike Raj Lokkhi, Kamal Lata's love is unselfish, she is a pure giver and takes nothing. Moved by her unsurpassed devotion, Srikanta performs the only act of servitude he has ever performed for a woman, he makes her bed in the train. Yet

he is reminded at every point of comparison that Kamal Lata is not Raj Lokkhi, she can never be and although caste is not an overt consideration for the author or for the protagonist yet we find subversive caste values at play here. KamalLata is a is a Sonar Beney, not a Kulin Brahmin like Raj Lokkhi and then there are the number of other women in the Vishnavaite ashram, the Boshtomi, whom Raj Lokkhi dismisses as *kheda naki* (blunt nosed) and dirty.

The class and caste factors become overt when Raj Lokkhi arrives at the ashram with her retinue of luggage and servants. Everyone recognizes her as elitist and *bhadramahila*. She is not even expected to eat the food prepared by the Boshtomi and even though she shares a bed with Kamal Lata, she does not eat from her hands. In his writings Bannerjee (2006:134) describes these ashrams as places that gave shelter to, “Bengali women from different segments of society” that consisted of the category of the social discards. But more importantly he mentions that, “Here religious norms allowed them a freedom of movement, an access to all corners of society, both high and low, and a certain liberty in their relations with men-privileges which were out of reach for rich and middle class Bengali women of the time” (ibid), meaning of course the *bhadramahila*. The Boshtomi, who transgressed patriarchal norms of *sombhrranto* (respectable) Bengali society, were thus among those weeded out, when the new women were being constructed. Thus even Sarat Chandra, with his liberal ideas could have nothing much to say about the common Boshtomi, from whose class he carefully rescues Kamal Lata, giving her a privileged position, which she fulfils by finally leaving the ashram life forever.

Srikanta is heard querying Kamal Lata about her sexual relationship with the ashrama head, but he is a true sanyasi, here in this novel. But Kamal lata in spite of her purity and innocence has to take to the road and never comes back into Srikanta's life. For all said and done she is not worth belonging to a *bhadralok* like Raj Lokkhi.

This same pattern repeats itself in Charitraheen. We find that the creation of the *bhadramahila* as a true partner to the *bhadralok* repeats itself. Just like in real life men of the elite sections of society, made all efforts to educate and cultivate the women in their *andar mahal* into being true partners of educated and upper class men, so also the author painstakingly carves his female characters to be worthy of the *bhadralok*, who are the central characters of his stories.

Thus Satish is convinced of the dignity and purity of Savitri, even though she works as a maid servant. The reason? None other than he likes her or loves her. How could a *bhadralok* like Satish fall for a woman who is not worthy of him? Thus Savitri again is self sacrificing, has no base needs like hunger and sex, devotes herself selflessly to the welfare of others and is caring like a mother goddess, another Annapoorna. But she too has agency, cannot be shaken out of a resolve and charts the directions of her life according to her own inner being. The very spirituality of the women in these works is their agency, their independence. Savitri pushes away Satish by rebuking him, saying he; a *bhadralok* could not sully his inner self by touching a base woman like her. What Satish takes as a rejection is understood by Kiranmoyee as a great and unconditional love. When Satish narrates Savitri's words to him, Kiran moyee is stunned by the extent of this love and tells Satish that he could have no great well wisher in his life than Savitri

Here I make an interjection in terms of how we are to understand patriarchy in the Indian context. Unlike in the west, women in India are neither viewed as inferior nor in practical terms demeaned. Those women who occupy the status of 'devis' are vested with qualities that definitely make them superior to men and who are also openly acknowledge as such by the men. But these are women of the domestic domain, upper class and caste women. Even these women may in practice be subjected to hardship and sacrifice but not in the name of being 'inferior' but 'superior'; examples of which are numerous in the pages of Sarat Chandra's works. Kiranmoyee the outstandingly intelligent woman tells Satish, “Have you ever heard that a woman has died because of neglect and denial?”

Secondly not all women, even, cognitively are recognized as 'devis' a fact brought out so beautifully by Sarat Chandra in his story, Abhagi's Swarga. Not every woman can aspire to the Sati Savitri pedestal that is reserved for the *bhadramahila*. Sarat Chandra has an ambivalent attitude towards the *dasi*, sometimes sketching them with a lot of sympathy, like the Burmese girl swindled by a Bengali babu in Srikanta, sometimes like Malati, in Srikanta part 3, with a dash of humour and hidden sympathy. The case of Malati, a dom(untouchable) woman is interesting. She is attractive and knows how to make use of her physical attributes. Her husband is jealous and beats her up mercilessly. According to the custom of their *jati* she divorces her husband in front of everyone by his

declaring her a widow by breaking her *noa* and *shankha*. She is to remarry another man of her choice but her estranged husband waylays her and beats her up terribly, saying he will disfigure her for life. The offending husband is jailed and here comes the twist to the story. At night Malati comes and begs Raj Lokkhi, like a devoted wife to give her money to release her husband. She pretends eternal love for her husband and says she will stay with him and no other. Raj Lokkhi is moved by what appear to her to be very legitimate emotions, something that she as an upper caste woman relates to. She is moved to observe that all women at heart are the same, noble and devoted to one man in their life. However, Malati is no devi, she is the stuff that the dasi, or lower caste women are made of. She absconds to join her lover with the money that Raj Lokkhi so generously gives her and leaves her erring husband to rot in jail.

However no bitterness is expressed by Srikanta towards Malati for this conduct, rather when they are leaving this place he still looks forward to meeting her with her new husband. No doubt the earlier one was a lout and to be condemned in any case. But more importantly Malati was not expected to conform to the kind of actions that one would expect from a high caste woman, like Annada Didi for instance. More stereotypical sketches of the *dasi* are drawn in Charitraheen in the characters of Mokkhada Mashi and her companions, the maidservants who look for patrons among the *babus* they serve, to buy them '*dhakai*' sarees. The characterizations of these women, who drink, eat forbidden foods like eggs and prawns and also accept money from well to do men is done also to contrast them with the '*bhadra nok*' (in Bihari's language) character of Savitri, who does not touch non-vegetarian food, eats only once in a day and performs *Ahnmik* like a high born woman. She keeps all fasts and her house is clean and pure.

This brings us to the *bhadralok*; how is he to be understood. The immense richness of Sarat Chandra's text does not draw people with a single coloured brush. His characters are living they are not caricatures. One has to read a lot into a *bhadralok*'s construction. He may be a pure, ascetic and unconcerned being, like Srikanta, almost above desire and base things of life. The western liberal principles, the values of universal humanity and truth that were borrowed to construct the *bhadralok* are manifest most significantly in this character. There is less of tradition in him. He is not shown as particularly religious, happily shares food with Muslims and

Boshtoms, has little respect for the caste system and is bitten by a spirit of adventure like many of his western counterparts. The most ideal and conventional Bengali *bhadralok* is seen in the character of Upendra( of Charitraheen), a man who respects women, sees beyond physical beauty into the inner qualities and yet who lives the life of a householder conforming to all its bindings and dictates; is blameless and pure. But he too is really like a western man, like when Satish lightly makes fun of him saying, "How would you know anything about books written in Bengali, all that you have ever read has been written in English". He respects and loves his wife, devotedly nurses her in her illness, a trait considered alien to average Bengali householders of that time. Also unlike Satish, he does not believe in any ritualistic Hindu customs and is comfortable with the Brahmosamaji, Sarojini and her brother.

Thus we can see that there is enough variation and nuances in these characters to justify the claim to literary mastery that Sarat Chandra certainly deserves. My attempt in this paper was only to think out loud what I felt after reading the sociological and historical analysis of his times and to contextualize the characters that had been familiar to me since a very young age. When I first read Sarat Chandra's books I had no idea of sociology or history, and I was spell bound by the drama and richness of his works. Only later when I started to put the characters into an analytical perspective a desire arose to understand them now in a different light.

The depth of the characters the sensitivity to existing social conditions and the recognition of the depths of a woman's soul are so typically a mark of Sarat Chandra's writings that they are almost a signature of his writings. The use of the autobiographical novel is itself a innovation under Western influence as in the Indian tradition too much emphasis on the self was not preferred, in fact even the author's names were quite often not mentioned in ancient Indian texts. Yet Sarat's Srikanta remains one of the major autobiographical novels of Bengali literature. The use of first person narratives abound and one is introduced into the inner realms of the protagonist's mind. However true to writing from a man's perspective, self reflections like that of Satish in Charitraheen are usually of the male characters. Being born at a time when gender differences were marked, Sarat did not take it on himself to think like a woman although he made the women express their thoughts quite openly. One may recall Kiranmoyee's musings in front of the mirror thinking that if she



herself was so influenced by her own beauty, what effect she must be having on others, especially men. Yet we see that Sarat's portrayal of the husband wife relationship was idealistic and not based upon any kind of reference to sexuality, perhaps a reflection of his own puritanical values imbibed under British influence. Kiranmoyee's husband for example is described as her teacher and a strict one at that, a person on whom his wife's immense physical attractiveness had no influence at all. It is the moral quality of women that has been upheld as their beauty, like that of Annada Didi and not their physical bodily charms although Sarat dwells lovingly on the beauty of Raj Lokkhi, with such romanticism that there was a great rumour in the Bengali society of that time that she was a real woman in his life. Be that as it may, we find that Sarat certainly contributes to the nationalist enterprise as Chatterjee (193) calls it of representing Indian women in terms of the moral superiority to not only show up men as weaker and less than their feminine counterparts but also to show the superiority of native culture over that of the west. Here he puts the concept of *bhadramahila* to the full use as it was used by elite men of that time, to show up the moral superiority of the Indian nation.

While he is certainly not above criticising the base qualities of men, selfishness, boorishness and baseness of every kind like the husband of Annada Didi and Kamal Lata, he portrays women as a species to be superior to men, even if they are of the category of *dasis*. The *devis* of course surpass all limits of virtue and are usually embodiments of selflessness and love, and to Sarat it is women's love and purity that raises men to greater heights. But at the same time a woman can be like Kali, destroying men like Devadas. Women do not need liberation according to his texts, it is they who liberate, they are the real source of power, containing within them the fire of spiritual love of which men are rarely capable.

### Endnotes :

Bannerjee, Sumanta 2006 (reprint) "Marginalization of Women's popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal" In Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds) *Recasting Women: Essays in India's Colonial History*: New Delhi, Kali For Women, pp 127-179

Chatterjee, Partha 1993 *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*, Princeton, Princeton University Press

Chakravorti, Uma 2006 (reprint) "Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past" In Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds) *Recasting Women: Essays in India's Colonial History*: New Delhi, Kali For Women,, pp 27-87

Sangari and Vaid 2006 (reprint) "Re-Casting Women: An Introduction" in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds) *Recasting Women: Essays in India's Colonial History*: New Delhi, Kali For Women, pp1-26.