

## Women Characters in Sarat Chandra Chattterjee's Arakkhaniya

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***Abstract:** Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was a Bengali writer of the early twentieth century. He was known for creating a realistic portrayal of the intricacies of domestic lives and focussed on the emotional turmoil of his characters. His works bore a mark of commentary on the social issues of his time. He was a champion of women rights and his representation of women from all walks of life etched his mark over multitude of readers in India and abroad. The present novel deals with the dichotomy of physical beauty and inner beauty. The various women characters play an important role in the journey of the protagonist Gyanada from invisibility and ridicule to acceptance and love. Her story restores the faith in the power of love and her victory disintegrates the value of cosmetic beauty. Gyanada's narrative is emboldened by the message of a support system of women which operates silently in the core zone of patriarchy and slowly destabilizes it through female bonds of a shared history and the struggle to change and rewrite it.*

**Key words – Bengal Renaissance, Physical Beauty, Inner Beauty, Female Sphere, Empowerment.**

The novel Arakkhaniya is a tale of love struggling to survive in a traditional culture setup. The protagonist Gyanada inhabits a society which values the perishable physical beauty of a woman more than her inherent inner values. It is a narrative of victory of inner character over artificial beauty. In Gyanada's story, the mutual love between various women characters give it a feminist touch. The novel gives a glimpse of a female sphere in the midst of a core patriarchal zone and acts as a bold adversary to dominant forces. The women in the novel are true representatives of Sarat Chandra's preference for strong women- "strong in character, endurance and personal faith" (Chatterjee, 1996).

The novel is a scathing criticism of the feudal and patriarchal village society where the marriage of a grown up daughter becomes an instrument of social ostracization of the parents. I.N. Madan in his book *Saratchandra Chatterjee: His Mind and Art* rightly summarizes the gist of the novel - "Arakshniya describes how difficult a problem it is to marry a grown-up daughter ordinarily but a tragedy when the parents are poor and the girl is of a dark complexion."

The protagonist Gyanada is not like the fairy tale beauties. She is dark and ugly. She does not belong to a rich family. The society has no reason to show mercy to her and her parents. The society only values the cosmetic beauty of a woman and Gyanada's lack of it only makes her fit for old, gaudy and lecherous men. Many girls like Gyanada commit suicide or elope in order to escape imminent widowhood. Their future inside and outside a marriage is sealed with a stamp of agony and despair. "The story is a ruthless indictment of the social order that sanctions and perpetuates this

tyranny in the name of religion and social morality. Gyanada represents the mute tragedy of Indian girlhood and her silent suffering has been vividly expressed in the story (Madan, 1944)."

Gyanada is a mere child who is left to fend for herself after her father's death. She is the sole caretaker of her mother and takes decisions for the both of them. Though she is not financially independent, she rises up to the situations and survives in a hostile environment. Banani Mukhia's views about feminine power closely relate to Gyanada's character:-

"This is how I intend to deal with the question of feminine power, not in absolute terms, not in its masculine incarnation but how even peripheral influences lend vigor to women's sense of identity, of their personal worth. This sense of identity or personal worth, their self-assertion, sometimes muted, at others overtly articulated, took a definite form, a form of protest, denial, resistance. The eloquence of silence as resistance can be very moving, depending on the context, and mute non-cooperation could be a strong weapon in women's armory."

The qualities like compassion, forbearance, patience and empathy are her biggest weapons.

Gyanada's mother Durgamoni is the author's mouthpiece for exposing the double standards of society. Being the poor mother of a grown up dark complexioned girl, she knows the ways of the society. In her we find a "peculiar emotional clash between the mother's feelings of affection and her sense of social obligation (Mukhia, 2002)." She is on the verge of becoming a social outcaste but sees no hope either. Her helplessness is documented in

her words of despair, "Almighty, if bearing a girl was my fate, why couldn't you have made her fair? She is so dark that nobody wants to marry her. Everybody is looking for a beautiful girl! What kind of society does not look at lineage or character- only because she has a dark complexion, you refuse to shelter her in a marriage! If such is your decision, why trouble her parents? (210)."

She suffers the double blows of patriarchy after her husband's death. Her rank and pride in the hierarchy of patriarchy turns into dust with her widowhood. A penniless widow like her is reduced to the ranks of a maid and forced to go to her brother's house uninvited. No relative is ready to take responsibility for her daughter's marriage. Her selfish brother-in-law very clearly states his position, "I am not reluctant to feed you, no matter how badly my elder brother might have behaved. But it is impossible for me to bear the responsibility of such a grown-up girl (214)." Her husband's unfulfilled wish of getting Gyanada married is her imperative now. "The insecurity and anxiety of a poor widow with a dependent grown up daughter is well documented through her character (Sogani, 2002)."

The relationship between Gyanada and Durgamoni is a very complex and multi layered one. Their roles interchange constantly and both are each other's pillar of strength. She persuades her mother to live in Haripal at her brother's place when she is insulted and asked to leave by her eldest sister-in-law Swarnamanjari. She protects her mother's self-respect and pride by sacrificing the prospect of her happy future. She is a self-sufficient and strong girl and takes the role of a mother to Durga as the story progresses. She is even ready to feed her mother if need arises: "This is not my Kaka's house, Mother, it belonged to my father. If he refuses to feed us, there need no longer be any shame - somehow or other I will be able to take care of you (237)." Her life and status is transformed after her father's death. She no longer remains the loved child but a burden on her relatives. And yet she rises like a phoenix from this tragedy and bravely faces the humiliations in her way.

Durga is the first witness of Atul and Gyanada's love. Atul made his promise of taking all responsibility for Gyanada in front of her and her dying husband. She knows that her daughter put her life at stake to save Atul and is sure about Atul's promise. Her trust on Atul gives her the courage to go to Haripal and bear the pressure of her brother by refusing Gyanada's marriage to someone else. She beams with pride to see her daughter as the personification of Savitri:

"But none of us forget even for a day that it was you who saved him from death. That year people said it was beriberi. No matter what the disease, there were ugly and unseemly pus-filled wounds. It was his mother first, followed by Atul. There was absolutely no hope for Atul.

When the sheer stench drove people away from their house, you- a mere child- battled alone against death and saved him. Can he possibly forget that? Just like we read in the scriptures about Savitri bringing back her husband from the veritable jaws of death, you too brought him back. Can the Almighty possibly allow him to belong to another? If this is not dharma, can there be still stars and sun in the sky? (216)."

The mother-daughter relation suffers a setback when Atul stops writing or replying to Gyanada's letters. When her hopes for Gyanada are dashed to the ground she feels dejected. Her anger is directed at Gyanada and she curses herself for producing an ugly owl. Her health starts failing and she suffers from bouts of hatred and love for her daughter. "The relation between Gyanada and Durgamoni, daughter and mother is that of a very deep and silent understanding- each could see the agony the other was going through (Mukhia, 2002)." All the insults and taunts about her daughter pain her heart and yet she is helpless amidst unfriendly and scheming relatives. She succumbs to societal pressure and agrees for any match for Gyanada but even such desperate offers fall through. No matter where and no matter in what household, just see that she is married off (241)." There is a constant note of bitterness and sarcasm in Durga's outbursts against the hypocrisy and fraud of the feudal village society. She reprimands Atul in front of people for his deceit and ungratefulness.

Saratchandra marks a contrast between Gyanada and Anath's daughter Madhuri. Madhuri is the epitome of feminine beauty and intellectually accomplished. Atul had himself shown interest in marrying her. Gyanada is dark complexioned, uneducated and only proficient in household chores. She was the witch, the ugly owl and only fit for an old man. Gyanada may not be beautiful in the conventional sense but her loving nature masks everything "Saratchandra is known for his consistent championship of the underdog. He does not evaluate the worth of an individual in terms of categorical imperatives (Naravane, 1996)." She embodies the constitutive forces of society in her person i.e. compassion, nobility, acceptance, honesty and unconditional love. "She nursed the ailing with tenderness, bore everything in silence and was unique in her qualities (230)."

The play between the Outer Image and the Inner Self is carried forward through the character of Bhamini. She is Gyanada's Mami (her maternal uncle Shambhu's second wife). She is very dark and tall and has a very volatile and overbearing personality. She represents the Shakti principle and emerges out as the force protecting Gyanada against the devil incarnated as her husband. Shambhu wants to settle his monetary debt through Gyanada's marriage to a drunkard. Bhamini stands tall against this hypocrisy and injustice.

"What! I a wretch! The next time I hear such abuse, if I do not force a burning ember into your mouth, I cannot be called Panchu Ghosal's daughter. You will coerce her to get married? Who are you to do so! She has come to rest for a few days with her mother-why do you persist in terrifying her all the while? Have you seen this knife in my possession? I will slaughter you if required! Keep in mind that I am Bhamini (227)."

She offers an audacious rebuke at her husband's twisted sense of authority. "In the sphere of mundane domestic matters women from within their secluded and sheltered existence often subvert male authority, sometimes openly, at other times by subterfuge and carve out a living space for themselves (Mukhia, 2002)."

Anath's wife is the second ally of Gyanada. She subverts the female patriarch Swarna's authority through her compassion. She understands the pain of the mother-daughter duo. She does not reject any authority out rightly but helps from behind closed curtains. "She empathized with other's misery: but to actually make the effort to do something to wipe out the problem was beyond her (230)." She acts as a second mother to Gyanada and fills the cup of love and sympathy that the young girl so desperately requires. S.C. Sengupta opines about these two characters: "The greatness of Saratchandra's art lies in the way in which he discovers unsuspected depths of tenderness not only in Anath's lazy wife but also in the unpleasant Bhamini: this ugly, boorish woman who has a soft heart behind a forbidding exterior."

Ananth's wife is fundamentally good hearted and her maternal instinct is not limited to her own children only. She offers a refreshing contrast to the childless Swarna who is hell bent on getting rid of Gyanada. Anath's wife sarcastically comments on Atul's fickle mindedness and shows him his true face. She puts Gyanada's right over her own daughter's marriage. She stands up to her husband for Gyanada's sake and makes her opinion of him clear to him: "On hearing of the plans to get rid of Gyanada, Chhoto Bou called her husband aside and spoke to him. Have you lost all sense that on your sister-in-law's advice you went and advised a mother and her daughter to be separated in these circumstances? Even butchers, whose profession is slaughtering, have more pity and kindness than you? (237)."

Saratchanandra has portrayed a female sphere in the novel which acts as a source of encouragement to the oppressed sex. "In the whole scheme of interpersonal relationships within a family and outside it, what strikes one most forcefully is the perpetually present feeling of mutual empathy between two female characters (Mukhia, 2002)."

The various women in the novel weave a web of inter-dependence and empathy in their relationship

to each other. This ensures security to them in times when patriarchy overpowers them and this safety net keeps the fight going. Naravane rightly observes: "In Sarat's work women are not tame or submissive, although they are portrayed within a framework of traditional Indian values." The women in the novel are simple, realistic portrayals and expose the hypocrisy without any political outcry. Theirs is the muted protest and the success of this protest is the sympathy of the reader.

The true voice of the feudal order in the novel is Swarnamanjari. She is a childless widow and is the female patriarch of the house. She is a shrewd, harsh and quarrelsome woman and the reason for the split of the joint family. She constantly abuses and insults Gyanada and leaves no stone unturned to push her towards death or dishonor. She is the "cruel natured woman with harsh tongue" of Sarat literature (Sankrityayan, 1977). Her poisonous words throw light on the plight of girls like Gyanada and their position in an unequal society. Her following utterance bespeaks of the 'sacrificial lamb' status of women: "Mejo Bou: considering what your daughter looks like, go across to Haripal and accost some lout of a farmer and be done with it. I believe the people there do not care about the looks of the girl- it suffices that she is female (215)."

She is the force standing between Gyanada and Atul. She hinders any interaction between them and belittles Gyanada in front of him by calling her ugly names: clown, ape, witch. She is one of the few true villains of Sarat literature. She is bitter in nature and has a selfish heart. She is focused on destroying Gyanada's happiness. And the author has critically portrayed her character. Gyanada fights this toxic and venomous presence in the absence of any savior and her fight is to protect her sanity, her self-esteem and her desire to keep living.

Gyanada is an embodiment of selfless, unconditional love. It is not a passion for the flesh but a passion to serve and take care of those you love. She treats her loved ones with tenderness and respect. She faces all vile attempts to weaken her with courage and a calm dignity. Against the tirades of society and her relatives, her power lies in her firmness of character and conviction. She is a representative of Indian womanhood and its virtues. O N V Kurup states in his analysis of Saratchandra-"They saw in his novels the picture of the Indian woman-grief stricken and writhing under the intolerable ordeals imposed upon by a tradition-bound custom-ridden society. They saw there her face in the glory of total self-denial, patient like Mother Earth, and like her all suffering." Her affectionate nature is not her Achilles's heel but her weapon to safeguard her rightful share. Gyanada does not detest Madhuri who is about to be married to Atul. Madhuri being the intellectually accomplished girl, is no different than her. She is

also a victim of patriarchy and is being used against her wishes to torture her cousin. It is Gyanada's innate goodness that Anath's wife nurtures her like a mother. The love which Gyanada radiates silently through her humility comes back to her in the form of interpersonal female bonds created between neglected and negligible housewives. All these victims of gendered power deprivation help Gyanada in one way or other to sail through the humiliating circumstances.

The love of various women towards Gyanada gives potency to her self-esteem and prevents her from committing suicide. She rejects the choice which many girls are forced to opt because she has a shoulder to cry on. These women understand her helplessness but never doubt her worth. She is not ugly to them and the purity of her soul is visible to them. Their faith in her beauty gives Gyanada the courage to reject Atul's gift and disassociate him from her life in the climactic scene.

Her lack of 'beauty' destabilizes the societal emphasis on cosmetic and artificial judgements about women. Atul's guilt and his asking for forgiveness is her moment of glory against this fight with the claustrophobic social order. The

forces of patriarchy fail to emasculate her spirit and she emerges as a warrior and an example of fortitude. Her quality of 'love' conquers her opponents and her beauty becomes evident to everyone.

Saratchandra has depicted women of various hues and shades in this novel. These women have been marginalized by the society and enclosed within the four walls of the house. But this limited area is politicized by them and converted into an arena of challenging the patriarchal authority and pushing forward the empowerment of women. Though the women occupy traditional positions in the household, yet they navigate through these positions to carve out spaces for themselves.

Gyanada's narrative is not just the victory of inner beauty but also of women's right over their own bodies. By establishing the superiority of her character and nature over mere physical appeal, she takes women rights forward. The women characters in the novel are not always the outspoken rebels, but they dismantle patriarchy in their own way and ensure a space of respect and acceptance for themselves.

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