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## Gender Nonconformity and Casting around Individuality, Free Will and Survival: Sharat Chandra's Women in His Novel "Srikanta"

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper is a sincere effort to explore the image of Indian women in the early 19th century social context as depicted in Sharat Chandra's novel Srikanta. In this novel Sharat Chandra's portrayal of women characters-Rajlaksmii, Annada, Abhaya, and Kamal Lata assert their individuality, self-worth and deliverances boldly in the then male-controlled and traditional society. These characters are unwavering and resolute enough to cast around an emancipated futuristic outlook. They are all precursors to the later day women characters depicted by the feminist writers. Sharat chandra is not a feminist in the traditional sense nor does he take the side of forceful assertion of women rights but he shows a significant understanding of woman psyche and to a great extent, protests against social and religious double standard that ultimately results in gender nonconformity. He values humanity more than chastity and raises his voice against traditional morality and religious dogmatism in depicting illicit love relationship and in disclosing the deceptions underlying the established marriage custom. To all female characters, Rajlaksmi, Annada, Kamal Lata, and Abhay, marriage fails to provide congenial atmosphere to love and value each other; rather to them, marriage is nothing but religious and social yolk that come up with patriarchal applaud but result in self-deception. This paper is an attempt to elucidate Sharat Chandra's unconventional idea of chastity and reversed roles of women going deep into the female characters of this novel who fearlessly look down on the patriarchal impediments.

**Keywords:** Androgyni, Binary Oppositions, Chastity, Marriage, Patriarchy.

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### 1. Introduction

পুরুষ মানুষ যত মন্দই হয়ে যাক, ডাল হ'তে চাইলে তাতে ত কেউ মানা করে না; কিন্তু  
আমাদের বেলায় সব পথ বন্ধ কেন? অজ্ঞানে, অভাবে পড়ে একদিন যা করেছি,  
চিরকাল আমাকে তাই করতে হবে কেন? কেন আমাদের তোমরা ডাল হতে দেবে না?

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[If a man wants to be redeemed, nobody questions his attempt; but in our case why are all the ways closed? Once the forbidden thing that I have done being unaware and victim to the society, cannot be removed from my lot. Why won't you let me be purified?]

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, a famous novelist in the Indian sub-continent is well known for portraying female characters and placing them in different dimensions. He explored many radical topics that comprised social consciousness and turbulent societal traditions and turned them into appealing tales. For this reason a large number of his works were found to be suitable for successful screen and stage adaptations, in several Indian languages. Like his novel *Srikanta*, the most of his works are the combinations of personal experience and artistic imagination. No other writer before has portrayed the deprivation, negligence, and rude picture poverty of rural people sensitively. He has thrown away the patriarchal narrative that has clogged women's lives with worn out tradition for long. He has also shown that chastity and single-minded devotion are not the same. He has roamed throughout his life and observed woman emancipation in Barma and enriched his experience.

“Be it *Srikanta*, *Devdas* or *Sabyasachi*, most of his male protagonists resemble his own bohemian self — the *Awara Mashasaha*, a name rightly given to him by the late Hindi litterateur Vishnu Prabhakar who wrote his biography by that name”.(Mazumder) He devoted himself to writing and established himself as one of India's major novelist and story writer. He was involved in India's freedom struggle and served as the president of Howrah district branch of Indian National Congress (1921-1936). University of Calcutta awarded him the prestigious Jagattarini medal. University of Dacca awarded him an honorary doctorate (D.Litt.). On 15 January 1938 he died, from cancer of the liver.

Besides being compassionate and ardent to women, Sharat Chandra has presented them as androgynous, to some extent and thus his attitude toward women, is not always in keeping with the prevalent concern demonstrated in the works of several prominent writers of his age. Though Sharat Chandra has not dealt with the feminist issues in the traditional sense and failed to turn the male-controlled society upside down, he has successfully penetrated the hollow and irrational rigidity of Hindu society that has been the cause of the suffering inflicting upon women. But Sharat's greatness lies not only in presenting the suffering of women sympathetically but also in exposing the latent power of women that is really conflicting with the traditional and socially constructed female characteristics. The role of male characters is relatively minor in his works. In most stories, the males have been used as a foil to the females. Though they have some redeeming features, to some extent, they lack their identity. They are, in most cases passive indolent, and narrow-minded. But his portrayal of woman shows the fact that though they are the prey to male-dominated society, they are confident of their own personality, secure in their own professions and unashamed of their work and they have endowment for constant struggle to survive and epigrammatic terseness to speak for themselves defeating the masculinity and its hypocrisy.

The early 19th century Hindu society characterized by subjugation of women has hardly any impact upon Sharat Chandra's intention to deliver some of the most powerful women through his works. In early 19<sup>th</sup> century the women had no voice and any freedom in remarriage, economic factors and decision making but Sharat's women are eloquent and bold enough to defy any social prejudice and rationalize any truth. Also for their freedom and survival they have overcome socially-constructed femininity—submissiveness, silence, passivity, irrationality and so on. Sharat's women are portrayed in such a way that their behavioral characteristics and psychological experience deviate from conventional norms for womanliness and thus they show gender non-conformity. All the female characters assume the role of mentor, guardian, deliverer and protector and they are unusually dauntless to break the social customs and indulge in their free will. More importantly, they cast-off the strong social institution, marriage. Rajlaksmi's love for *Srikanta* undergoes acclivity and declivity and at the end both have realized that they are meant for each other and love is the basis of their relation. They do not feel the need to consecrate their relation through marriage. The same happens to *Abhaya* and *Rohini*. In both cases, *Rajlaksmi* and *Abhaya* endeavors to blunder the social law and fulfill their dream. *Annada* betrays her parents and society and marry a Muslim snake charmer. And *Kamal Lata*, a *Baishnobi* (the follower of the god *Bishnu*), having a troubled past and being exploited by patriarchal brutality is very straight-forward, unyielding and hasty in exposing her feelings, belief and decision. According to our social structure women are economically dependent on male. In early nineteenth

century it was quite unusual for women to work outside and having economic independence. However, this novel shows reversal of gender role in the depiction of Rajlaksmi, a dancing girl, business holder, land lady and social reformer. Surprisingly, she does not inherit this wealth rather she earns. However, Kamal Lata sings and begs as a part of her profession but she is independent in financial matters, and having religious salvation. Likewise, Rajlaksmi in third part of the novel makes a quest for religious perfection. Here she also employs her free will and though Srikanta cannot agree with her new mission, she does not care. In her new undertaking, Shunanda, another minor character, instills into her mind rebellious zeal. Moreover, Abhaya is somewhat different as she is not involved with outward world or religious activities. But she has emerged as the most rebellious character leaving the oppressor husband, avoiding traditional patriarchy and marriage custom. She is spiritually gallant enough to grow up her child without social approval. Both Sunanda and Abhaya are minor characters but their philosophy, mental makeup, sense of freedom, capability of penetrating the dark social barrier to see the reality and truth have moved Srikanta's conscious perception. Annada's character is not flourished, and we know her troubled past from a letter she wrote to Srikanta. Srikanta as an embodiment of patriarchy highlights only her sense of chastity, and devotion to her scoundrel husband. However, if we go deep into the character, we find her as indulgent, courageous, dignified and heroic. She has lost society, religion, so called honour and everything as she has left home for the sake of her Muslim husband. Regretfully, when her husband has betrayed her and died, she has not sought out shelter from her former society or parents. Rather she has paid the loan of her husband and refused to take help that Srikanta has offered. Srikanta cannot meet this mysterious lady throughout his life. However, he always remembers her sense of dignity, chastity and compassionate nature. It is really unusual for a woman to discard society and give free reign to his free will.

## 2. Rajlaksmi, abhaya and kamallata: Androgyny

According to Virginia Woolf as stated in the *A Room of his One's Own* explains the idea of the androgynous mind where Woolf continues "to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man". In this novel Rajlaksmi represents "the union between male and female principles as the normal state of the individual psyche" that Woolf destabilizes the prevailing gender ideology of her day that polarizes male and female behavior into biological essentialism with crucial binary categories of unequal social statuses". (quid in Ahmed). She is the embodiment of feminine beauty, carefulness, tenderness, flexibility on the one hand, and on the other hand, she epitomizes courage, rationality, free spirit and professionalism.

Woman's advancement in love in patriarchal society is rare. However, Rajlaksmi seems very possessive and progressive in offering love to Srikanta. Rajlaksmi is a socially outcast, child-widow and dancing girl. But her power of love and sacrifice, courage and devotion has made her idol.

When Srikanta has joined his king-friend at a safari, he happens to meet Rajlaksmi who was his childhood friend and supposed dead in the society. Rajlaksmi who is dead in the eye of prejudiced Hindu society, overcoming all the obstacles, has formed her career as dancing girl and emerged as famous business personality; however, still unknown to Srikanta, she does not forget her childhood love. When Srikanta has decided to spend a night in crematorium out of curiosity, Pyari tries her best to stop this adventure. It is quite unusual for an unknown lady:

কিন্তু সময় নেই, আমি চললুম। পিয়ারি বিদ্যুৎগতিতে পথ আগলাইয়া দাড়াইয়া কহিল, যদি যেতে না দিই জোর করে যেতে পার? (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 60)

[But I have no time, I am just leaving. Pyari making my way, says if I does not let you go, can you insist on going?]

After ten or fifteen years in their sudden encounter, Rajlaksmi's feeling of anxiety for unknown Srikanta and her offering love seem quite unusual to Srikanta who at this point fails to recognize this famous Piyary.

আমাকে চিনতে পারনা, আমার মুখের 'পরে বলে তুমি পৌরুষি করে গেলে, কিন্তু আমার মেয়ে মাতৃম্বের মনতো। বিপদের সময় তো আর বলতে পারব না ----একে চিনি না। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 62)

(You have failed to identify me and demonstrated your manhood; however, it is after all female sensibility! During difficult time we cannot say such.)

Here Piari's reversed role in the amorous advancement astounds Srikanta, who is traditional and functioning as foil to Rajlaksmi. Srikanta is not state-of-the-art enough to accept her past and present career as a dancing girl. Despite knowing the uncertain consequence of her love, she confidently continues her devotion, worship and adoration for Srikanta. The same happens in the case of Abhaya and Annada. Annada has recognized her husband who is in disguise as a snake charmer and it has been only Annada's decision to elope with her rascal husband. Likewise, Abhaya, being a woman, has assumed the role of a rebel and abandoned hollow social norms. She has not only left her cruel husband, but got the truth in nourishing her love for Rohini and shattered the illusions of conservative Srikanta. After leaving husband's house, Abhaya in Rohini's house feels embarrassed to face him:

হঠাত অভয়া ঘর খুলিয়া সুমুখে আসিয়া দাড়াইল, কহিল, জন্ম-জন্মান্তরের অন্ধ সংস্কারের  
ধাক্কাটা প্রথমে সামলাতে পারিনি বলেই পালিয়েছিলুম শ্রীকান্তবাবু, নইলে ওটা আমার সত্যি  
কারের লজ্জা বলে ভাববেন না যেন। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 143)

(Opening the door, Abhaya, suddenly stood before Srikanta and said I had escaped as I could not overcome the long and blind tradition, however, never believe it to be my real shame.)

Abhaya has never wanted to be clapped with the cheap sentimentality of deceitful patriarchal society. She has not only exhibited her ardent love for Rohini rather she has courageously rationalized her decision to leave her rascal husband and to live with her lover without being sanctified through marriage. She has not been ashamed of the fact as she has attained truth and genuineness in her relationship. Here gender non-conformity is found in the harmony of male and female characteristics. She incarnates passionate love and feminine piety on the one hand, on the other, she displays epigrammatic outpouring of her philosophy that comprises socially constructed maleness like courage, novelty and steadfastness.

Another dimension of courage to reveal truth in the midst of hostile atmosphere is found in Kamal Lata, the embodiment of free spirit, and unremittingness. Despite being a recluse, she has fallen in love with Srikanta as she has overheard his name. When she has seen him she has named him Natungoshai and exposed her troubled past and offered love. It is really unintelligible to Srikanta how a woman can wholeheartedly and rapidly disclose her secret. After hearing Kamal Lata's disturbed past, Rajlaksmi for the first time has perceived her limitation that has created a gap between her and Srikanta. She has learnt from her to be forthright and frank in revealing truth and to be quick-witted and unyielding. However, after being informed of Kamal Lata's amorous feeling for her, Srikanta's reaction is as usual passive, apathetic and indisposed. To his utter surprise, Srikanta says:

এত অল্পকালে এমন স্পষ্ট ও প্রাজ্ঞ ভাষায় রমণীর প্রণয় নিবেদনের কাহিনী ইহার পূর্বে  
কখনও পড়ি নাই লোকের মুখও শুনি নাই। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 318)

(I have hardly heard before such type story of offering love that is clear and lucid, nor have I read or heard from somebody.)

The feminine characteristics are found in Srikanta as he appears introvert, shy and reluctant whereas the female characters reverse their roles being self-assured and sensible:

এদিকে বয়স তো যৌবনের সিমানে ডীসাইতেছে, এই সময় অযাচিত নারী প্রেমের বন্যা নামিল  
নাকি, কোথায় পলাইয়া যে আশ্রয়লা করি (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 318)

[I feel like escaping from the inappropriate indulgence of feminine love as I am just crossing over my youth.]

In our society usually women have no voice and courage to be indulgent in free will. However, Kamal Lata instead of her troubled past, has expressed her love and devotion to Srikanta unhesitatingly and nurses Gohor, a Muslim, sidestepping all the impediments that society has imposed on her. Not only that when she has to leave the Monastery as a consequence of false scandal, still she remains resolute. After the death of Gohor, Srikanta feels hesitant and shy to ask Nabin whether Kamal Lata has nursed Gohor in his death bed whereas Kamal in spite of knowing the consequence of helping

somebody belonging to different religion, has nursed him. Consequently, she has to leave Asram but has denied to take GOHOR's donation and decided to go to Brindaban being confident about spiritual salvation. At this point Srikanta really feels upset for her tragic departure; realizing his disappointment, Kamal Lata has assured Srikanta. Once while she was deserted by the society, decided to be Boishnobi (the follower of Bishnu) in the Monastery. Now though this Abbey has forsaken her in spite of her innocence, she does not give up hope and belief in God:

আজ বিশ্বাস করে আমাকে তুমি তার পাদপদ্মে সপে দিয়ে নিশ্চিত হও—নির্ভয় হও।

(Chatterjy, 2015, p. 391)

[Be secure and intrepid laying down me of God's arms and believe me.]

During her departure Srikanta discovers her actual worth, individuality and sense of dignity and places her above ordinary human being because in spite of being deserted by her husband, parents, society, and even religion, still she has the power to struggle and continue her quest for survival and deliverance. Srikanta now concedes his inability to support her and exalts her:

তোমার পথ, তোমার সাধনা নিরাপদ হোক—আমার ব'লে আর তোমাকে আমি অসম্মান

করব না। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 391)

[May your way, your devotion, be safe---I will no longer disgrace you claiming that you are mine.]

Traditionally, women are reluctant to take bold steps against patriarchal subjugation. But Kamal Lata seems very firm, dauntless and prompt in doing what she believes true and humane. Her unusual courage and facility, thought, deconstruct gender binary, her tenderness, sacrifice, passion and other feminine virtues make her a perfect androgyny.

These afore-mentioned women are capable of thinking and acting beyond patriarchal narrative because they know it very well that though their activities appear rebellious in male-dominated society, their thinking and acting are grounded on rationality. They are definitely different from the usual feminine sensibility constructed by the society as they assail the prevailing binary gender hierarchy based on pre-existing notion of dualism including active/passive, dominant/submissive, protector/protected, rational/irrational, and aggressive/peaceful where male are always privileged and female are marginal and are of lesser value. The binary opposition's protector /protected, dominant/submissive are totally reversed in the case of Rajlaksmi and Srikanta as throughout their relationship Rajlaksmi has remained dominant and played leading role in offering love, influencing him in decision making and supporting him financially. When Srikanta wrote a letter to Rajlaksmi asking for permission to marry Putu, Rajlaksmi has denied allowing him to marry her. After having the letter that Rajlaksmi wrote to Srikanta explaining the reasons for which he should not marry Putu, Srikanta feels relieved and assured.

সুনিশ্চিত অনুশাসনের চরম লিপি পাঠাইয়া একটা দিকে আমাকে সে একেবারে নিশ্চিত

করিয়া দিল। এ জীবনে ও ব্যপার লইয়া আর ডাবিবার কিছু রহিল না। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 295)

[She has absolutely made me secure sending me an extreme letter with fixed directions. For my life nothing is left to worry.]

At the beginning of fourth part of this novel when Rajlaksmi has decided that they would live together, Srikanta does not disagree and even Srikanta does not get permission to search for a job in Barma as Rajlaksmi is financially well off. Obviously, Sharat Chandra through the portrayal of Rajlaksmi, tends to show us that a woman can take up the role of a protector; she can be dominant and active.

### 3. Deconstructing binary and women's intellectual superiority

The cultural tradition has through its use of binary opposition, helps assure male rule. Men are associated with reason, objectivity, logic and the like, while women are linked to the body, matter, emotions, an absence of logic and reason, and the like. An important feminist reading of the Western philosophical tradition was conducted in France in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of Luce Irigaray who argues that the subject of knowledge and reason is always defined as masculine. It comes into being

through the subordination of the feminine which is associated with the inchoate, undifferentiated, and formless..... (Ryan102)

However, Sharatchandra deconstructs the patriarchal binary and Women are presented as intellectually superior in this novel. The women characters with their intellectual power, courage and epigrammatic abruptness shake the basis of patriarchal obstacle whereas Srikanta, the embodiment of patriarchal society is presented as fainthearted, mentally vulnerable and inconsistent. By contrast, Rajlaksmi is presented as strong-willed, independent and unflinching. Throughout her career as dancing girl, she has achieved financial solvency and as she came into contact with Sunanda she has undertaken a quest for religious perfection

Throughout their relationship, Srikanta cannot circumvent social and religious hindrances, and fails to accept Rajlaksmi unambiguously. When he falls seriously ill and becomes absolutely depressed and penniless, he sends for Rajlaksmi who takes him to her house in Patna. During his stay in Patna's house, several unknown things are disclosed to him and some new dimensions of her character like selflessness, kindness, magnanimity, reformatory zeal, motherhood, make him realize the new light of love and sacrifice:

বড় প্রেম শুধু কাছেই টানেনা ইহা দুরেও ঠেলিয়া দেয়...কীছ যে জীবন  
তুমি দান করিলে, সে জীবনের অপব্যবহার করিয়া আর না তোমায় অপমান  
করি... (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 92)

Great love not only draws somebody near but also dispels him far away... but the new life that you gave to me, I would never waste it so that I can value you.

Rajlaksmi is a widow and she has a past. Srikanta lacks courage and power; he can love her, respect her, but cannot avoid the socio-religious value that is actual barrier in their relationship as he says:

তোমার জন্য সব ত্যাগ করতে পারি, কিন্ত সস্ত্রম ত্যাগ করি কি  
ক'রে? (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 173)

(I can sacrifice everything for you; but how can I sacrifice my honour?)

However, Srikanta's traditional outlook regarding chastity falls apart as he encounters Abhya, a progressive woman in BARMA. Srikanta is compelled to accept Abhya's logic and gradually keeps away from rigidity. At this point her intellectual superiority shatters Srikanta's all illusions

তাহার চিন্তার স্বাধীনতা, তাহার আচরণের নিষ্ঠীক সত্যতা, তাহাদেররের অপরূপ ও অসাধারণ  
শ্লেহ আমার বুদ্ধিকে সেই দিকে নিরন্তর আকর্ষণ করিত ইহা ঠিক; কিন্ত তবুও আমার আজম  
সংস্কার কিছুতেই সেদিকে পা বাড়াইতে চাহিতনা। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 150)

Definitely her freedom of thought, unflinching honesty of her conduct, amazing and rare affection would attract me incessantly, yet I could not overcome my prejudice and agree with her whole-heartedly.

She continues that suffering has great charm. And some are infatuated with the sense of pathos because they are prejudiced by the fact that success, greatness or fame can only be achieved through suffering. Patriarchal society uses the charm of suffering that has already been instilled into women's mind. This charm will persuade them to adhere to the strict rules of widowhood, and other forms of sufferings:

এজনাই সম্যাসী যখন নিরুপায় শীতে আকণ্ঠ জলমগ্ন হইয়া, এবং ভীষণ গ্রীষ্মের দিনে বোত্ৰের মধ্যে আয়িকুন্ড করিয়া মাটিতে মাথা এবং আকাশে পা করিয়া বসিয়া থাকে তখন তার দুঃখ-ভোগের কঠোরতা দেখিয়া দর্শকের দলে শুধু যে দুঃখই ভোগ করেনা, তাহা নয়, একেবারে মুগ্ধ হইয়া যায়।... শ্রীকান্তবাবু সুখের জন্য দুঃখ স্বীকার করিতে হয় একথা সত্যঃ কিন্তু তাই বলিয়া এহাকে উলটাইয়া লইয়া যেমন করিয়া হোক কতগুলো দুঃখ ভোগ করিয়া গেলেই যে সুখ আসিয়া স্বস্তে ভর করে ইহা স্বতঃসিদ্ধ নয়। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 150)

When a devotee sat submerging his body into water during shivering chillness and during Extreme hot summer day sat beside enclosed fireplace, observing the firmness of suffering the audience not only are filled up with the Sense of pathos but also become amazed. Srikanta Babu, it is true that suffering may be undergone for the sake of happiness. But the happiness will not come if anybody suffers fruitlessly.

Abhya's husband gave her only deprivation, insult and disgrace. On the contrary Rohini loves her selflessly and truly. Now Abhya poses an intellectual question- in spite of her innocence why she has to bear such pain throughout her life and sacrifice true love of Rohini. And she answers her rhetoric question saying

“এমন লোকের সমস্ত জীবনটা পঙ্গু করে দিয়ে আমি সতী নাম কিনতে চাই না”

Srikanta remains unanswered and she continued that this type of illusive chastity is valueless to her. Then Srikanta tries to convince her saying that society's rule is equal for all and it should not be modified for the individual.

Sacrifice is not always fruitful as chastity and widowhood are the hollow concepts. Meaningless sacrifice and its unrewarding applause, result in failure and emptiness, thus Abhya. Another spirited character Kamal Lata has overpowered Srikanta with her intelligence, playfulness, and courage. Srikanta is startled with her promptness in asserting her love and her facility and in confessing her indelible stain of her scandalous past. Rajlaksmi is also inspired by her and has freed herself from self-deceiving hesitation. She has learnt from Kamal Lata to be simplistic and inexorable enough to reveal her shameful past to Srikanta. In this novel it is obvious that women's individuality and craving for free will do not result from their intuition or impulsiveness rather from piled up sorrow and deprivation that they have been undergoing for long.

#### 4. Progressive women and their sense of averseness in marriage custom

Family life or conjugal life based on religious rigidity and social customs cannot provide congenial atmosphere for love and contentment. The women are just accustomed to accept all deprivations only due to religious prejudice and patriarchal dominance. Only the suffering women can sometimes perceive that their lives are fragile as they stand upon self-deception and desolation. Sheila Rowbotham in *Women, Resistance and Revolution* uses the term “colonized” to show the oppressed status of women in the society. She cites “economic dependence”, “cultural takeover”, and “the identification of dignity with resemblance to the oppressor” as some of the “similarities that exist between the colonization of the underdeveloped country and female oppression”. (quid. in Ahmed). In Sharat's novels marriage is depicted as tyrannical institution for women. When these suffering people are compelled to sacrifice their happiness and rights for the sake of tradition, society is saved but individual loses everything. All the female characters of this novel make every effort to get rid of the traps of such self-deception. Thus marriage fails to provide the women with appeasement and captivates them in perpetual slavery. The novelist revolts against not only subjugation and conservativeness but social value and traditional framework.

If we go deep into the flustered past of Annada, Rajlaksmi, Abhya and Kamal Lata, we realize the writer's message clearly. He unfolds the empty and hollow basis of marriage that fails to provide security, happiness and survival. When Rajlaksmi and his sister Surlaksmi were married to a same person, an old Brammon, it is clear that they were just sacrificed on the altar of cruel caste system.

After the death of the old man Rajlaksmi was sold to a prince and the news was spread that she died in Kashi. Sharat chandra revolts against such society that fails to secure survival for the innocent. After being deserted by her husband, Avaya has returned to him only for economic security and social pressure; regrettably, instead of getting security and happiness, she has welcomed with severe physical abuse, and compelled to leave her husband's house at midnight. At this point, Abhya has revolted against such hollow marriage. Chastity does not mean to be devoted to somebody who has deserted her, deceived her and married another woman.

আমাকে যিনি বিয়ে করেছেন, তার কাছে না এসেও আমার উপায় ছিলনা, আর এসেও উপায় হলনা। এখন তার স্ত্রী তার ছেলেপুলে, তার ডালবাসা কিছুই আমার নিজের নয়। তবুও তারই কাছে তার একটা গণিকার মত পড়ে থাকতেই কি আমার জীবন ফুলে ফলে ভরে উঠে সার্থক হতা, শ্রীকান্ত বাবু? আর সেই নিষ্পলতার দুঃখটাই সারা জীবন বয়ে বেড়ানই কি আমার নারীজন্মের বড় সাধনা? (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 146)

I could find any means when my husband deserted me and even my condition remained the same as I came to him for support. Now he has wife and children and nothing belongs to my own. yet Srikanta Babu how can my life be fruitful to be with him like a whore? Is it women's yearning to bear such fruitless pain throughout my life?

It is obvious that being devoted to husband is nothing but committing suicide. Abhya has perceived this hollowness of patriarchal applause and consequently implacably thrown away this trap of self-deception.

একটা রাত্রির বিবাহ অনুষ্ঠান যা স্বামী-স্ত্রী উভয়ের কাছেই স্বপ্নের মত মিথ্যে হয়ে গেছে, তাকে জোর করে সারাজীবন সত্য বলে খাড়া রাখবার জন্য এই এত বড় ডালবাসাটা একেবারে ব্যর্থ করে দেব। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 146-47)

The marriage ceremony of one night that became marriage to both husband and wife, should not be considered truth and abandon such great and true love.

She boldly accepts her lover and their basis of relation is unswerving belief on truth that has the capacity to penetrate false and capricious social framework. This indomitable courage to embrace truth gave them power and freedom by which they would grow up their child.

আমার গর্ভে জন্ম গ্রহণ করাটা তারা দুর্ভাগ্য বলে মনে করবে না। তাদের দিয়ে যাবার মত জিনিস তাদের বাপ-মায়ের হাত কিছুই থাকবে না; কিন্তু তাদের মা তাদের এই বিশ্বাস টুকু দিয়ে যাবে যে তারা সত্যের মধ্যে জন্মেছে, সত্যের সঙ্কল সংসারে তাদের আর কিছু নেই। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 147)

Do not consider it unfortunate to born the baby in my womb. Probably, the parents of the upcoming baby will have nothing to give them; but their mother instills into their minds that they were born in truth and nothing is greater than this truth in this world.

Srikanta seems overwhelmed and has failed to embrace truth but feels irradiated observing her logic, spiritual purity and sense of liberty

চিত্তের শুচিতায়, বুদ্ধির নির্ভর তায় ও আত্মার স্বাধীনতায় সে যেন আমার সমস্ত দুঃখ আবৃত্ত করিয়া উদ্ভাসিত হইয়া উঠিল। (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 280)

Eliminating all my sorrow with her purity of mind, dependence on intelligence, and freedom of spirit, she appears illuminated to me.

True love has nothing to do with social institution like marriage that fails to provide happiness and security except validity. Rajlaksmi being a child widow, and being dead to the villagers, did not escape from life. Rather she has faced life boldly. She has been apprenticed as dancer and emerged as business holder, achieved financial freedom and attempted to do many reformative works in her village. The bondage between Rajlaksmi and Srikanta is not institutional marriage, but they decided to

live as married couple. In the last part of the novel in Muraripur AKHRA Baragoshi has offered Rajlaksmi an opportunity to sanctify their relationship, however, she denies to do that.

### 5. Resistance for survival

In Patna when Piyary being gorgeously dressed up has participated in a dancing performance, it hurts Srikanta's manhood and he determines to leave her as she, though loves him truly, cannot give up this infatuation and would hanker after fame, wealth and dominance. Srikanta reminds repeatedly her duality as he cannot solve the riddle and ambiguity. He loves Rajlaksmi but to the society she is famous Pyari, a public figure. Srikanta cannot avoid society and religious bar as he is not bold enough to penetrate the darkness of superstition, downsides and irrationality of Hindu society. Thus to him insult and offense by the patriarchal society mean a lot. However, Rajlaksmi hardly cares for that as her reaction appears facile and bold:

“তাকে ত সত্যি ছোট হওয়া বলে না”

(This is not real disgrace, p.178)

When Srikanta falls seriously ill in his village, nobody has come to help him. Finding no other way, he wrote a letter to Rajlaksmi asking for some money. However, she reached his village to nurse him disregarding all social obstacles.

Similarly, rebellious attitude against established social norms is found in Annada, Abhaya and Kamal Lata. When Kamal Lata has told about her troubled past to Srikanta, it becomes obvious that she had no place in the society because of her illegal child. Her tragedy is intensified as the scoundrel denied fatherhood and innocent Jotin was falsely accused and committed suicide. Like Rajlaksmi from then Kamal Lata has been dead in the eyes of society and has taken shelter in the Abbey. When Muslim Gohor has fallen ill in his death bed, Kamal Lata is warned against him. But she has served Gohor only for the sake of humanity as he does not have wife, mother or sister. She disregarding social and religious threat, continuously stays with Gohor and serves him and thus she has to leave the Abbey.

In disregarding social and religious prejudice, Abhaya is the most progressive and embodiment of new spirit that can destroy the patriarchal worm eating into vigor and vitality of man woman relationship. Through Abhaya's conversation with Srikanta, the futility of conservative Hindu society and favorable Muslim society become obvious. Here she acts as the mouthpiece of the writer. She has criticized the rigidity of Hindu society that does not allow remarriage or widow marriage. Thus Abhaya logically predicts that in future Muslim community would spread because of its liberal and all-encompassing nature.

... আপনারা জায়গা নাই দিন আমার স্বত্ত্বনা এই যে, জগতে আর একটা বড় জাত আছে, যারা প্রকাশ্যে এবং স্বচ্ছন্দ স্থান দিতে পারে। ... পৃথিবীতে কোন অন্যায়ই বেশি দিন শ্রী বৃষ্টি লাভ করেনা। এই যদি সত্য হয়, তাহলে কি তারা অন্যায়টাকেই প্রশ্রয় দিয়ে দিনদিন বড় হয়ে উঠছে, আর আপনারা ন্যায় ধর্ম আশ্রয় করে প্রতিদিন ক্ষুদ্র এবং তুচ্ছ হয়ে যাচ্ছেন বলতে হবে? ... আজ সকালেই জাহাজ ঘাটে যে অন্যায় দেখে আপনার মন খারাপ হয়ে আছে, আপনিই বলুন ত, কোন মুসলমান বড় ভারবেরই কি ধর্ম এবং সমাজের ভয়ে এই স্বভয়, এই হীনতার আশ্রয় নিয়ে এমন একটা আনন্দের সংসার ছারখার করে দিয়ে পালাবার প্রয়োজন হতো? বরঞ্চ সে সবাইক দলে টেনে নিয়ে আশীর্বাদ করে ক'রে অগ্রজের সম্মান ও মর্যাদা নিয়ে বাড়ি ফিরে যেতো। কোনটাতে সত্যকার ধর্ম বজায় থাকতো শ্রীকান্তবাবু? (Chatterjy, 2015, p. 147-148)

If your society does not give me place, there remains consolation that there is another liberal community that can openly and willingly accommodate us....no oppression in this world can spread and flourish for a long time. if it is true, are they becoming great allowing the oppression and your community are becoming shallow centering round the so-called righteousness? Think

about the fact that you witnessed in the jahaj ghat in the morning and answer my question that does a Muslim brother for the shake of society and religion need to destroy such a joly family and become fugitive? Rather he would bless everybody and return home with value and honour as an elder brother.]

Srikanta cannot find any word to retort and defend his society rather his respect for this lady amplifies.

Portrayed as progressive woman, Abhaya tends to demonstrate courage to disregard the hollow religious obstacles and shown intellectual preeminence to present logic and substantial evidence of liberalism and humanity by which Muslim community judges human being; by contrast, cultivation and nourishment of mind and light of truth cannot be flourished in rigidity and irrationality of Hindu society. This inflexibility of Hindu religion cannot be purity incarnate as it fails to punish the criminal like Abhaya's husband who has deprived, insulted and oppressed an innocent. Abhaya has thrown away such socio-religious framework where innocent are accused and she confidently accepts Rohini's love that is grounded on the ample logic that there is no use of bearing pain throughout the life sacrificing true love. Srikanta gets overwhelmed but she continues that self-deceptive chastity is worthless to her. As the representative of patriarchal society Srikanta tries to convince her retorting that society and its rules are equal for all and it cannot be modified for the individual. Abhaya then appears confrontational as she asks:

“আমাকে বার করে দিলেই কি হিন্দু সমাজ বেশি পবিত্র হয়ে উঠবে?”

(Would the Hindu community be flawless if it forsakes me?, p.148)

At this point Srikanta fails to find counter-argument to speak against her. But as he is not innovative enough to embrace the truth, remains silent; but he is convinced by her level-headedness and prudence. However, when Rajlaxmi has been informed of Abhaya through Srikanta's letter, she instantly asserts her worth, saying

“তিনি শুধুমাত্র তেজের দ্বারাই আমাদের মত সামান্য রমণীর প্রণম্য।”

(She is worthy of worshipping only because of her indomitable spirit. p. 156)

It is very clear that Srikanta is lacking confidence, authoritativeness and resoluteness in every step of life. Annada, Rajlaxmi, Kamal lata and specially Abhaya lashes out gender hegemony that refers to according to Gramsci, dominant groups in society, that maintain dominance by securing the “spontaneous consent” of the subordinate groups, through negotiated construction of political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups. In feminist discourse, it is the patriarchy that as dominant group oppresses the women as the subordinate group. (qud. in Ahmed). In *Srikanta* all the female characters showing gender non-conformity deconstruct the gender hegemony. In traditional sense women are philosophically and intellectually subordinate and they are just willingly adapts with patriarchal construction. However, Sharat chandra's women turn their role upside down going against established social outline, and being rational and intellectually condescending.

The novelist finally figures out religious and social norms in the form of patriarchy as the main instrument that establishes double standard and makes women suffer. Sharat's women have no mouthpiece as they can speak for themselves; it is writers message conveyed through the female characters that religion and age-long customs that have failed to protect the innocent and punish the hypocrite, cannot stand for truth and humanity. Discarding such so-called religion, and social construction made by patriarchal narrative, Sharat Chandra breaks into the talent for survival that all the women characters embodies. All the characters have troubled past for which they are not to be blamed. Rather they are victim of widowhood, caste system, oppressor husband and religious rigidity and narrowness. For their survival they not only fight against all the stumbling blocks, but also prove the futility and worthlessness of so-called society. Gender nonconformity appears in their feminine psychology as they adopt the role of a protector and embody courage, rationality and intellectual superiority.

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