



Research Paper

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's Shesh Prashan: A Modern Novel

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ABSTRACT: Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) was an eminent Bengali novelist of the early twentieth century. He was known for a realistic portrayal of social problems and a critical evaluation of societal norms. His works exposed the hypocrisy and exploitation rampant in the social and cultural setup of the twentieth century. He challenged the dominant discourse of the patriarchal society and voiced the concerns of the subalterns through his writings. The novel *Shesh Prashan* was published in 1931 and was path breaking as it featured an unconventional female protagonist. The novel questioned the social norms related to love and marriage and advocated cultural evolution. The novel's protagonist as well as the theme of the novel championed a modern take on the man-woman relationships and demolished orthodox ideas about women's role in the social hierarchy. The novel created a lot of controversy on its publication but received the support of its women readers. The novel was a feminist text and used a bold protagonist as a mouthpiece to forward its agenda of women emancipation.

Keywords: Culture, Evolution, Feminism, History, Marriage.

I. INTRODUCTION

The title of the novel is translated as 'The Final Question' and appropriately the text raises many philosophical, cultural and moral questions to be discussed openly with logic and reason and does not attempt to provide any universal or enduring answers. Jai Ratan states in *The Great Vagabond*, "On the publication of the novel Sarat was lambasted from all sides. There was no dearth of people who believed that if such books continued to be written it would mean the extinction of the Hindu society. There was a plethora of newspaper articles against Sarat and also cartoons. The attacks came in the form of a deluge. There was one redeeming feature: The women of Bengal had wholeheartedly approved of *Shesh Prashna*" (Prabhakar 262). The novel presents Kamal, as an unorthodox protagonist who challenges male chauvinism and becomes her own spokesperson and does not depend on any man for her needs. The novel is set in the town of Agra and narrates the Bengali community's introduction to a new point of view through Kamal's character. The text constantly destabilizes romanticism and domesticity and presents an independent woman's point of view on the subject of loyalty and devotion. "The Final Question is set in Agra. The image of the Taj Mahal, both as symbol and in the reality of its historical presence, is a constant element in the novel's structure. But what it represents is open to the novel's chosen mode of questioning, just as the reminders of its presence are drawn into the structural pattern of repetition with difference" (Chaudhari 284). Kamal is the culmination of all of Sarat's rebellious heroines: in terms of her personal and social identity, in her refusal to acknowledge the sacredness of marriage ceremony and her open-ended ideas on love and companionship. Her liberal views on love not only challenges the accepted opinion of Taj Mahal as the ultimate symbol of love, but also the morals of the traditional Bengali community of Agra.

The central theme of the novel is the re-imagination of various kinds of man-woman relationships. The novel questions the patriarchal biases present in these relations and highlights the importance of a woman's right to her body and life. The first relationship introduced in the novel is a father-daughter relationship. The relationship between Ashu Babu and Manorama is not like a normal father-daughter relation. Manorama is more of a mother to Ashu Babu and he also depends on Manorama for all his needs. Their relation is modern in the sense that it is based on mutual love and respect and not the traditional status quo: "Manorama was not only Ashu Babu's daughter; she was his friend, companion and adviser all rolled into one. Thus she often could not maintain the deferential distance that Bengali society enjoins on a child to protect paternal dignity. They often discussed matters that would jar on many fathers' ears, but not on theirs" (25). The relationship between Ashu Babu and Kamal is also a paternal one. The 'bhadrlok' Bengali society of Agra treats Kamal as a social pariah

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because of her 'shaivite' marriage to Shibnath. It is only Ashu Babu who praises Kamal profusely and her polite manners to other characters in the novel. He does not look at her with disdain and he develops an instant liking for Kamal. During the course of the narrative, Ashu Babu and Kamal's relation will further blossom and Ashu Babu will stand by Kamal's side through thick and thin. The character of Ashu Babu is the connecting vital link of the narrative and he only emits love and warmth through his behaviour and refrains from harsh judgement. As I. N. Madan states, "Ashubabu is the only person in the novel who understands the conflicting people about him. As his mind has been mellowed by a rich and varied experience of life, he can appreciate men of diverse temper and character" (Madan 90). Ashu Babu worships the idea of traditional long lasting love for one person and he is symbolic of that single-minded devotion. On a visit to Taj Mahal the idea of eternal love and Taj Mahal as a symbol of that love is appreciated by Ashu Babu and his friends. But Kamal rejects this accepted version of Taj Mahal's meaning and insists that the emperor had many begums. The architectural figure for her only stands as a reflection of the emperor's whim and not of his one true love. She demolishes this 'discursive' version of Taj Mahal and replaces it with an unorthodox version of an emperor's wish to build a beautiful object. She does not see love as an inert and stagnant emotion and claims that it is affected by the ravages of time. Banani Mukhia observes, "Kamal in *Sheshprashan* in her own way and in what she thought was a rational and pragmatic fashion, challenged all the 'time honoured' and 'tradition bound' formats of hierarchical human relationships and tried to put them in a somewhat feminist perspective. She very openly questioned the wisdom of accepting everything received and did so in the face of stiff male opposition. While admiring the beauty of the Taj Mahal, she remained unimpressed by the theory of Shah Jahan's single-minded devotion to his wife" (Mukhia 71). The relationship of Ashu Babu and Kamal is a representation of an unconditional paternal love. It is with criticism of Ashu Babu's opinions about love and marriage that Kamal invites the ire of all the group members and yet it is Ashu Babu who develops a strong fondness for her. After this meeting with Kamal and Shibnath is over, they all head back home and discuss Kamal's modern ideas. Akshay considers Kamal's views as immoral and obscene and Manorama accuses her of disrespecting Ashu Babu. Amidst the violent attack on Kamal, Ashu Babu comes to her defence. He says that he has lived abroad and travelled to many places. Because of vivid experiences in life, his mind has been left blank and innocent. He does not agree with Kamal's view but he does not condemn and deride her for having differing and opposing opinions about certain delicate issues. In a short span of time, Ashu Babu understands Kamal's point of view and loves and respects her for standing by her views. "Kamal's defence of change is not simply rehearsed; it is a necessary part of the novel's engagement with its setting, its willingness to confront the problems of history and open them up to further questioning" (Chaudhari 284).

Kamal is a sexually liberated woman and claims Shibnath on the basis of their mutual love and not a marriage ceremony. She questions the concept of renunciation, asceticism and replaces them with the zeal to live life to its fullest. She refuses to be called Mrs. by Ajit and insists to be called as Kamal or Shibani (the name Shibnath has given her). "Kamal's idea of love, a love that does not require validation through the legal bond of marriage, is a notion which even Ajit has to struggle to understand. But it is this notion that informs her assertion of an independent sexual choice" (Chaudhari 297). Kamal's social class and her marital status seems a threat to their elite culture and she is hounded by them to cave and admit defeat. She is socially ostracized for no fault of hers and ironically her husband is included as an integral part of the social group. Shibnath had deserted his ailing wife but is easily forgiven. But Kamal's honesty about her marriage and her feminist ideals are a threat to the patriarchal ego. In the eyes of society she is a fallen woman and is thus, excluded from respectable society. "The fallen woman was a new and important figure in both English and Indian fiction. As a socially displaced individual, she aroused considerable anxiety and guilt among the middle class, compelling them to probe the causes of her displacement and the possibility of her rehabilitation" (Sogani 123). But Kamal is not a weakling and is proud of her life and her choices. She is not looking to be pitied or reformed and thus, is a mystery to the male chauvinism. It is only Ashu Babu who considers her as his second daughter and loves her in the midst of dominant emotion of hatred. She does not wish to bound herself into categories and rejoices in her hybridity. Kamal detests compartmentalization and final truths and throughout the novel advocates the acceptance of evolving and fluid social norms.

Another female character of the novel is a young widow Nilima. She manages the household of her brother-in-law Abinash and interacts freely with the male characters of the novel. She defies the image of a greaving and exploited widow. But the novel demands more freedom for widows like her. Kamal dismisses Nilima's role in Abinash's household as a shadow of domesticity and not the real thing. She states, "Where's the good in it? Perhaps there's no such instance in the world of being the selfless mistress of someone else's house and a selfless mother to someone else's son. Its uniqueness might make it strange or rare, but how can it make it good? However people might glorify it with splendid words and clever epithets, nobody can respect this playacting of a housewife's part. It's better to abandon such glory. But this household is not her own. Had it been, I wouldn't have offered such advice" (121). For Kamal, Nilima has no actual claim or right to this household and can be rendered shelter less any day. This unconditional sacrifice cannot ensure a lifelong bliss and this setting has no happiness and comfort of a married life but all the responsibilities only. As the novel progresses, the irony of the ideals of womanhood is revealed when Harendra informs her that due to illness,

Abinash has gone to live with his cousin but owing to her position Nilima couldn't be taken with him. Despite running his household, she was rendered homeless and found shelter in Ashu Babu's home and is nursing him back to health. Kamal asks Harendra about the history of Nilima and he is full of praises for her chastity and austerity. But Nilima's good character does not protect her from patriarchal injustice and she is left to fend for herself. The novel criticizes the sexualization of the female body by the male gaze. Kamal exposes the hypocrisy of idealisation of Nilima when Harendra is embarrassed by Kamal's invitation to sleep in the same room as her for one night. She says, "My mistake, Haren Babu. Go home. This is why Nilima, the object of your infinite reverence, couldn't find shelter in your ashram but only at Ashu Babu's place. You know of only one kind of encounter between an unrelated man and woman in a lonely house; you have yet to learn that to a man, a woman can be anything but a woman. And you a brahmachari!" (211). She exposes the crude mentality of patriarchy which only sees women in their sexual roles and stigmatizes an innocent relation and defames a woman as fallen. An ascetic like Harendra could not give shelter to Nilima for fear of public opinion. Even after living according to societal norms, Nilima becomes a burden on the man whose house she managed. Her chastity does not offer her any social security. Kamal asserts that her fake marriage gave her the better deal of the bargain and she has an escape route which women in traditional roles are denied. Supriya Chaudhari states, "Kamal is a deliberate attempt on the novelist's part to conflate East and West, a colonial hybrid more impure but less self-denying" (Chaudhari 286). Kamal is unapologetic about her dissent with the orthodox forces and this unabashed acceptance of her hybridity and the freedom which it gives to her is a threat for the other mainstream characters of the novel.

The theme of national identity and culture is debated in the novel from an evolutionary point of view. Sarat introduces Harendra's ashram which is run by his friend Satish. The ashram is a reestablishment of the ancient Brahmacharya ashrams in the setting of a modern city and aims to recapture the essence of the ancient way of life and prepare young boys to rebuild their nation on the time-tested ideals of self-sacrifice. Harendra is very excited to show his ashram to his friends and they all visit on a Sunday. Nilima is saddened to see the harsh conditions in which the young boys live and Kamal out rightly rejects this facade of an ashram: "Haren Babu, do you call this fruitless exercise in poverty, carried out with such ostentation among such small children, a way to bring up true human beings? They are brahmacharis, I suppose? If you want to bring them up, do it the easy, natural way- don't bow them down prematurely with the burden of false privations" (135). She rejects this forced poverty on the young bodies and minds of the boys and says that this will only stunt their physical and mental growth. She does not see the base of the nation being made up of malnourished bodies and minds. The novel challenges the fascination with everything ancient and Kamal is the mouthpiece for this desire for change and reformation. According to L. Strizhevskaya, "The main problem of *Ses Prasna* was the possibility and practical feasibility of preserving, under modern conditions, the traditional, spiritual and ethical values. Formerly often holding a dual position in this question, the writer now replies to it in the sharp negative. This position is prompted by his deep concern for the welfare of his country" (Strizhevskaya 347). Kamal reflects these views in her continuous championship of change, progress and moving forward. She asserts that norms are time bound and cannot hold their places throughout history. Kamal stands resolutely against all other characters and offers defence of a dynamic social order and not a static historical truth. As the novel concludes, it is revealed that Harendra has decided to close the ashram. Satish blames Kamal for Harendra's decision and denigrating the sacred heritage of India. Kamal refutes his claim by saying that she only saw the hardships of the ashram and no sign of those hardships doing any good. She asserts that no civilization can be assured of its ideals remaining viable through all ages. She uses the example of dinosaurs to reflect on the transient and evolving nature of history and how no ideal can be justified in every phase of historical transformation of a society. She does not glorify the West also and states that it will be subjected to the same rule of decomposition and destabilization as the East is going through. Kamal does not criticize Indian tradition for the sake of it but for its stagnant and dead nature. She is a supporter of continual change for the betterment of society and not a blind adherence to archaic traditions. She asserts that the ashram is not producing revolutionaries but intellectually dead robots who can neither revive nor reform society. "Kamal's presence in the novel disrupts the comfortable middle-class assumptions about sex, morality, marriage, domestic peace and filial obedience to which other characters have grown accustomed to, it is also destructive of the nationalist ideology preached by Satish and Harendra" (Chaudhari 298).

The characters of Kamal, Nilima and Manorama reflect the position of different kinds of women occupy in society and the fruits meted out to them by society. The severest critic of Kamal is Manorama and she ends up falling in love with the rake Shibnath. Nilima lives her life according to social diktats and faces destitution. And Kamal breaks all social norms and chooses to live on her own terms. Though she is poor, she is not helpless and lives a guilt free and fearless life. The narrative of Kamal is a celebration of a life dictated by desire for happiness and not blind following of orthodox norms. Kamal is an amalgamation of modern and traditional and does not possess a fixed identity. Kamal breaks the dominant ideology of marriage by asserting that a fake marriage allowed her a better deal than a real marriage. This concept of freedom shakes the

foundation of the discourse of marriage and Haren is worried that it will uproot the social system. But Kamal is undisturbed by this prospect because the forces of history must bring change in the social system. She believes that like all social institutions, the rules of marriage cannot stay the same for all times to come and the society will be forced to reconsider the ancient rules. She says, "It can be conceived of, and you'll have to do so one day. That's because the last chapter of human history is yet to be written. If a day's ceremony were to bar one's way to freedom forever, it couldn't be accepted as a preferable system. There are precepts for mending every error in the world: no one sees anything wrong with that. So how can I admit that it's good to deliberately remove the means of correction where there's the greatest risk of error and the greatest need for remedy?" (192). Kamal as an empowered woman advocates freedom in love, marriage, and culture as a necessity for the proper development and advancement of a society. Kamal rewrites the history of women by taking her destiny in her own hands and accepting whatever her choices bring to her. She rejects any discourse as universal and eternal and vouches for living in the moment. She places present above past and future and thus, the title of the novel *The Final Question* is about this constant discovery of one's life. Kamal smashes the patriarchy by asserting a woman's right to her body and her life. She does not want to be defined or controlled by patriarchal norms of right and wrong. She sees the eternal and ephemeral as two versions of truth and asserts that the world has forced women to see only one reality and condemned the other side as false. She rejects the male gaze to define a woman's vision and asserts their right to ascertain the truth themselves. Kamal sees the doctrine of self-sacrifice prescribed for women as a discourse for dominating the life of women and denying them their share of happiness. This needless sacrifice only hollows a woman and cannot give true and lasting happiness. Kamal is not a hypocrite and lives by her philosophy. She does not live with regret but with hope for a better future: "I have to live on that hope, Ashu Babu. If today the sun sets prematurely behind clouds, should I say that darkness is the only truth? If tomorrow the sky is resplendent with light, should I cover my eyes and say it's not light but a lie? Shall I keep up this child's sport to the end of my days? When it comes I shall live through the night with faith in the dawn" (271). Kamal represents the spirit of Renaissance through her words and actions. She lives by the ideal of positivity and perseverance. In spite of all the hardships, she does not lose her spirit to love and live and she spreads this same hope wherever she goes.

Another aspect of patriarchal power is exposed when the mild mannered Ashu Babu opposes Manorama's marriage and plan to threaten her with disinheritance. Ashu Babu's concern for Manorama's future with a man like Shibnath has a father's concern but his opposition has the authority of a patriarch. He asks Kamal for her help and to save him from this disgrace. According to Michel Foucault, "Power is omnipresent because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every pint, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (qtd. In Taylor 21). Ashu Babu's arguments about Manorama's future and the options open to her reflect this patriarchal power which manifests itself in a father-daughter relationship like theirs also. Kamal proves herself as Ashu Babu's daughter when she supports Manorama and Shibnath's marriage and requests Ashu Babu not to punish her in anger. Kamal comes to Manorama's aid even though they did not share a cordial relation. She supports Manorama's rights as a woman and leaves her personal issues behind. Ashu Babu's ideas about love and marriage are traditionally patriarchal and he sees no respectable place in society for his supposedly modern and educated daughter if she is abandoned in marriage. But Kamal supports Manorama's decision and requests Ashu Babu not to abandon his beloved daughter when he knows that she has a bleak future. She tells him to realize that a woman's destiny is not decided merely by a good or bad marriage and one cannot be infinitely punished for one mistake. She urges him to support his daughter and to strengthen her so that she can recover from the eventual heartbreak. Kamal challenges his patriarchal threats and tells him to see this as a golden chance to really empower his daughter so that she can protect herself even after he is gone. Kamal's idea of a woman's fulfilment is not dependent on love and marriage but on her ability to live her life with a daunting spirit.

Kamal and Ashu Babu represents the dichotomy between old and new, traditional and modern, stagnancy and evolution. They see truth from their own standpoint and personal experience and both cannot be charged with falsity or fraud. The novel does not demean the two view points present throughout the course of the novel. *The Final Question* aims to invite the reader to understand the conflicting ideologies and find a solution to this conflict. The novel reflects on the man-woman relationship in various forms in a modern, transitional society and is a study in their changing nature. Kamal only wants a bond of love between a couple with no hanging swords of societal approval on their heads. She says to Ashu Babu that her duty is to ring a revolution as it will ensure continued upliftment of social mores. Kamal is the reflection of the Renaissance movement as she wants to initiate change in the world that she inhabits and to destroy the past in order to create the future. In an age of national freedom, she questions the nation's history, culture and its methods to achieve liberation and glory for itself. When women are being motivated to produce and bring up children to fight for the nation, she condemns this ideal of motherhood and sacrifice as the only aim of a woman's life. According to Todd May, "Foucault emphasizes that a diagnosis of the nature of the present must characterize that present in such a way as to show its fragility, its fractures. History does not unfold according to a pre-given or

transcendental framework. It is largely the product of dispersed practices that intersect with and influence one another in ways that cannot be predicted in advance and that confirms to not transcendental pattern. The issue for one interested in one's freedom, then, is not the metaphysical question of who one is or where one's freedom lies, but rather the question of where one's particular history has deposited one, and how that history might be intervened upon"(May 83). Kamal's character is an example of recreating and rewriting history. She is introduced in the novel as Shibnath's wife from a fake marriage and the patriarchal society ostracizes her instead of Shibnath and his questionable behaviour. Yet Kamal makes her mark and claims a place of love, respect and dignity in that very society; even though she challenges their beliefs and values at every point. She does not celebrate anything for its historical value, but by its current place and utility in society. She emphasizes the hypocrisy and shallowness of dominant discourses regarding nation, culture, women, rituals and customs and projects it her duty and responsibility to revolutionize society for the betterment of human race.

Shesh Prashan is a modern novel as it portrayed a woman much ahead of her time. The issue of woman emancipation is debated upon by a woman in the novel and male egos have been set aside to let a woman reclaim her voice and identity. The novel supports the ideals of progress and development and rejects customs which hinder the advancement of society towards equality and justice. The novel is relevant in the contemporary time as the questions of women empowerment and cultural metamorphosis are still debated upon and Kamal's character is a vision by Sarat of what a modern, independent woman must fight against.

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