



Rebel Women and Love in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's Srikanta

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ABSTRACT: The novel *Srikanta* is divided into four parts and was published in four instalments. The novel is episodic in nature and the four parts of the novel delve deep into various cultural and philosophical interrogations. The majority narratives are of women as victims of patriarchy and their struggle to be living in a society which has rejected them. In all the four parts of the novel, each part has one major female protagonist who is challenging and rewriting patriarchal discourse. The Bengal Renaissance movement witnessed a number of women centric reforms which aimed to upgrade the position of women in society. Sarat goes a step further in *Srikanta* and chooses his female protagonists who are considered outside the social circle. The women in *Srikanta* question the society's concept of caste, class, gender, marriage, love, chastity and honour. The dominant discourses are looked at from the perspective of women and they question their ostracism and exploitation. The paper studies how these ostracized women negotiate the realm of love and relationships and reclaim their forgotten desires and identities.

KEYWORDS: Love, Identity, Rebellion, Morality, Hypocrisy, Feminism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Srikanta* symbolizes the journey of every human being who navigates the physical reality for a smooth sailing to the spiritual world. The novel is not just a social commentary but raises deep intellectual and philosophical questions through the narratives of supposedly real people. The protagonist *Srikanta* is a rover and a vagabond and the novel narrates the various journeys he undertakes. *Srikanta's* life journey and two rebellious women he encounters during this journey destabilizes his and readers notions about love and relationships.

The first female protagonist who becomes an inseparable part of *Srikanta's* life is *Rajlakshmi*, but he meets her as *Pyari Baiji* (a courtesan) as part of a prince's retinue. *Pyari* pays special attention to *Srikanta* and asks him intimate details about his life. She claims to have wept for him a lot but he is not able to remember her real identity. The novel is full of meta-narratives of suffering women who have been robbed off their innocence and happiness by the patriarchal society and are left to suffer in silent agony. These narratives challenge the orthodoxy of a stagnant society, which refuses to forgive women and punishes them harshly for minor transgressions. "Sarat protested against the hollow sense of fidelity and injunctions associated with widowhood" (Biswas 262). The justice of the male dominated society is only reserved for women and men go scot-free to ruin more lives. The story of *Pyari Baiji* is another testament to social hypocrisy. When *Srikanta* finally recognizes her, he is shocked at this transformation: "She was *Rajlakshmi*- a young Brahmin widow of our village. She had accompanied her mother on a pilgrimage and never returned. She had died of cholera in *Kashi*- so her mother had announced after coming back alone. Now I knew that the prostitute, *Pyari*, was the *Kulin* widow *Rajlakshmi*. I stared at her in mute horror" (296). *Srikanta* is astounded by this change of fate for *Rajlakshmi* and is filled with respect for her childhood love for him:

How strange and incomprehensible was the female psyche! And how wonderfully superior to the male! Years ago, a little girl with thin arms and legs and a stomach like a drum had offered me her infant adoration in the form of *bainchi* garlands. And I had been totally unaware. I had ignored her and later forgotten her. But she, through all the bitter battles of her life and all the degradation of her profession, had kept my image burning bright and clear within her. She had professed many a false love but had cherished and preserved her true love. The more I thought of it, the more it overwhelmed me. (298)

Through all the turbulent times, the love and devotion of *Rajlakshmi* has remained steadfast and has not been tainted by her misfortunes. "In his novels, Sarat Chandra took care to emphasize that material circumstances and harsh social conventions rather than an inherent moral depravity were the main reasons for driving a widow to concubinage. Hence, she deserved sympathetic understanding and compassion rather than

punitive judgement" (Sogani 130). He is full of admiration for her unwavering affection for him. The relationship of Rajlakshmi and Srikanta begins after this chance meeting and their relation is symbolic of the transitional nature of society that they inhabit. Their feelings for each other are tested by the traditional ideas they imbibe and their relationship questions the conventional ideals of love and marriage.

When Srikanta falls ill, Rajlakshmi takes him to her home in Patna and starts nursing him with a cautious love. Rajlakshmi puts Srikanta in her own room and arranges the room herself to make his stay comfortable. Without any prior knowledge, Srikanta instinctively knows it to be her room. The room is in total contrast to her whole house and is simple and decorated in pristine white colour. The minimal décor of the room does not match Pyari's ostentatious persona and is a reflection of her inner soul. She might be living as Pyari but she is still the Rajlakshmi of his childhood:

As I walked the upstairs gallery, I came upon a room that I instantly recognized as Pyari's bedroom even though it was completely different from what I had imagined. The floor was of milky marble, the walls pure and shining white. A narrow bed with a spotless cover was placed against one wall. A wooden rack with some clothes hanging from it stood at the other. A third item of furniture was an iron safe. That was all. The stark simplicity of the room was like a blow to my unprepared senses. A strange reluctance to put down a shod foot on that polished marble made me stop at the threshold and take my shoes off. (317)

The white colour is associated with purity and cleanliness. The predominance of white colour and defining her room as pure and spotless is a trope used for foregrounding Rajlakshmi's inner purity. "In Srikanta, Sarat Chandra uses the image of the fallen woman's room as an island of purity in an atmosphere of general squalor. In this way, he symbolizes her essential virtue and integrity which has survived even in adverse circumstances" (Sogani 132). The persona of Pyari symbolizes a mask worn by Rajlakshmi and her room reflects the unadulterated reality of her inner being. The act of Srikanta taking off his shoes is also symbolic as in Hindu culture sacred places demand that kind of reverence. The profession of Rajlakshmi is a result of certain dire circumstances and does not reflect her true self. Through this act, Srikanta pays homage to the real Rajlakshmi and distinguishes between her two selves.

Even after recognizing Rajlakshmi's two selves, he is not able to shed his traditional viewpoints and refuses to marry her. But a way out of this impasse awaits Rajlakshmi and when Srikanta goes to his ancestral house he falls ill again. To his surprise and horror, Rajlakshmi comes to rescue him in the village where she is presumed dead: "And then my eyes beheld something that was beyond my wildest imaginings. Rajlakshmi was stepping out of the carriage. She had come, in broad daylight, to the very village in which her mother had announced her death only a few years ago" (401). She declares to him that she is giving up all her property and worldly possessions. This decision is symbolic of her truly making an effort to pacify Srikanta's fears and she places the responsibility of her protection in his hands. When Srikanta's relatives start recognizing her, the moment of decision falls upon Srikanta. He ends his and Rajlakshmi's dilemma: "You have come to your husband, Rajlakshmi. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Go make your pronams to Thakurdada and Doctor Babu. I saw the elderly gentlemen exchange glances as Rajlakshmi rose and pulled her veil over her face. Then, kneeling before them, she touched her brow to the ground at their feet" (402). Srikanta realizes that she has forsaken everything for him and his declaration symbolizes a moral victory for Rajlakshmi and her love. The second part of the novel ends with Rajlakshmi being accepted as a wife by Srikanta and, thus, their relationship is named and proclaimed.

Rajlakshmi has stripped herself of Pyari Bai's persona by giving up her accumulated wealth and has surrendered herself to Srikanta. She has taken the initiative to remove his doubts about her devotion to him and their future. Srikanta's doubts about accepting her love and looking for justifications symbolizes his inherent patriarchal bias. He is still not ready to marry her and give her love social credibility. "I thought of the many ways I had tried to escape her. I had left her after a violent quarrel believing, quite honestly, that I'd seen the last of her. I had become a sanyasi. I had even left my country, voluntarily embracing exile so as never to see her again. And all I had done was go round and round in a circle that led me back, unfaillingly, to her. I hated myself for my weakness. Yet I succumbed to it over and over again" (408). Srikanta's perception of her is divided between her two opposing selves "Rajlakshmi in Shrikanta could extend her power quite successfully in different spheres and directions in her diverse incarnations as Pyaribaiji, a reputed courtesan, as Shrikanta's beloved Rajlakshmi, as a surrogate mother to her stepchildren and as an affluent householder" (Mukhia 86). But he finally decides to let go of this dichotomy and accept Rajlakshmi as herself only and in the role of his beloved:

I didn't know the whole of Pyari's history- or Rajlakshmi's for that matter. All I knew was that they had nothing in common, that they flowed out in opposite direction from a secret old source. Pyari is dead. But was Pyari only a beautiful body sullied by time and tide? Shall I judge her by that alone? And Rajlakshmi? She who had burned herself to ashes in the fire of sorrow and degradation and emerged pure gold- shall I turn my face away from her? Shall I judge man by the animal in him that snarls and bites, and knows not its Maker or shall I seek out the hidden angel that suffers and surrenders in silence? It was not so long ago that I had given myself up-

weak, exhausted and vanquished- to Rajlakshmi. The humiliation of defeat was still upon me. But, now, a strange peace descended on my soul. Let Pyari, whom you do not know, lie buried in oblivion. Rajlakshmi was yours and is yours. Put out your arms and draw her to your heart. That is all that lies in your power. Leave the rest to Him who sees and knows and cares. (409)

Srikanta has witnessed Rajlakshmi in multiple roles and she has excelled in all of them. The different images of Rajlakshmi fuse into one wholesome for him and now he is ready to embark on a new journey with her.

But the relationship of Rajlakshmi and Srikanta undergoes a breakdown when they set up a household together. Rajlakshmi evolves her spiritual side and desperately aims to wash her sins. Though Srikanta had declared her as his wife, she is aware of the hollowness of this word. As a widow and a courtesan, she cannot fully claim Srikanta as her own and nor can he submit to this love. Their nameless love which existed between them has been burdened by this fake domesticity and is reduced to a mere mockery. In spite of setting up a home in Gangamati, they live like strangers. Rajlakshmi and Srikanta both have bid goodbye to their past affiliations and yet cannot accept the present and strive for a bright future. "Rajlakshmi in Srikanta has the potential for becoming excellent wife and homemaker. She is loving and compassionate, and can bring order and beauty into any household she enters. Above all, she longs for a proper marriage and an honourable place in society. However, this option is ruled out for her because it would create a scandal and lower the prestige of her partner" (Sogani 57). They are entrenched in their own insecurities and as a result, their love becomes a farce and only creates tragedy for both of them. They are both stifled in this made up domesticity which has no religious or social sanction. They decide to go their separate ways. This separation highlights the dilemma which Rajlakshmi faces and her inability to forego traditional rules regarding marriage.

The on-off narrative of Srikanta and Rajlakshmi reaches a closure in the final part of the novel. Rajlakshmi comes to Calcutta and reunites with Srikanta. Her search for God through prayers only lead her to a void and Srikanta's letter showed her the path to her salvation:

I was the lowliest of sinners but God didn't forsake me. He gave you to me out of His great goodness. And what did I do? I threw away His gift in the belief that, in rejecting it, I was being purified. Not content with abandoning you, I turned you away from my door when you came again to me. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. Doubts and fears beset me from all sides. Gurudev tied an amulet on my arm and commanded me to chant the name of God ten thousand times a day. I sat in my prayer room for hours on end but God was not with me. Then your letter arrived and the disease was diagnosed. (536)

This separation has finally reconciled them to each other and dissolved their old baggage. The shadow of the burdened domesticity of Gangamati vanishes into the night, when Srikanta and Rajlakshmi embrace their relationship and spend the night together. When Srikanta wakes up, he finds Rajlakshmi in a new avatar: "Rajlakshmi stood in the middle of the room. The rich folds of a vermilion Benarasi sari glowed like flames around her freshly bathed body and the red and white sandal paste on her brow gave her face an unearthly beauty. A beam of golden light, slanting in from the eastern window, fell on her face and neck. Her cheeks glowed with embarrassment but the familiar dimple twinkled mischievously and the rosy mouth curved upwards in a saucy smile. Her eyes, too, were bright with laughter" (537). The imagery of red Benarasi sari and vermilion is a coy symbolization of the sexual nature of their renewed relationship. "Symbols of marriage relating to the Hindu wedding ceremony such as the exchange of garlands, the blessings of elderly relatives, the bridal attire, the sindoor and the mangalsutra are frequently used by Indian writers to legitimize a relationship outside marriage. Rajlakshmi wears a red Benarasi sari, the traditional wedding dress, after spending a night with Srikanta in Srikanta" (Sogani 81). The colour red is symbolic of marriage and this union legitimizes their relationship and it is not a 'forbidden fruit' anymore. Their relationship flowers into a greater understanding of their needs and wishes and resurges from the dark past into a new dawn of greater warmth. Srikanta also gives up the struggle for an imaginary freedom and asserts his wishes on Rajlakshmi like a true companion. They are on an equal standing now and Rajlakshmi even agrees to go to Burma with him if he takes up a job there.

This distance between Rajlakshmi and Srikanta gives her the courage to reject traditional mores and accept her happiness with open arms. She rebels against the concepts of chastity, purity, widowhood and embraces her relation with Srikanta with a stubborn defiance.

The sea voyage to Burma in the second part of the novel introduces Srikanta to Abhaya, who changes Srikanta's perceptions about love and marriage. Abhaya is going to Burma to look for her absent husband: "Do you blame me for what I have done? Would it have been better for me to spend the rest of my life in passive acceptance of my fate instead of making an effort to reclaim what is mine? A young woman without a male protector is so vulnerable in our society, there are so many ways in which she can be exploited" (343). Abhaya establishes herself as a rebel by simply undertaking this journey. She has come with a man Rohini to Burma to look for her husband who has stopped communication with her. She rejects the tradition of resigning to a life of wait and decides to fight for her marital rights. But in Burma, her husband has a family of his own and rejects her. He humiliates her and gives her the option of living with his new family. Abhaya does not accept this

shameful domestic situation and leaves him. She comes back to start a happy home with Rohini Babu in Burma. When Srikanta comes to meet them, he is shocked by these changed relationships. Abhaya also runs and hides in her room as she feels ashamed of her behaviour. But Abhaya comes out of her room and apologizes to Srikanta for her cowardly behaviour of hiding. "Abhaya represents the forces of instinct and revolt by completely breaking away from the influence of the dead past. She embodies the spirit of freedom against social conventions" (Madan, Saratchandra Chatterjee 40). She blames her hiding on her traditional upbringing and shows him the reward she received for her wifely devotion: "Forgive me for running away, Srikanta Babu. It was out of a false sense of disgrace, a momentary surrender to the conditioning of centuries. Do not make the mistake of thinking that it reflected my true feelings. And lifting her arms, she pointed to where the lash of a whip had cut deep into the flesh. Please don't imagine that this is the cause of my return. This is only a token of our relationship as master and slave- a small reward, you may say, for my years of wifely devotion" (370). Her words are reflective of the man-woman relationship in a patriarchal society. She has been treated like a disposable thing and she refuses to be disposed off like garbage. She has rejected her hollow social status of a wife and has returned to the man who treats her like a wife deserves to be treated. Srikanta agrees to her decision of leaving such a brute man and yet in his memory of Annada Didi, ends his approval with a but and shows his patriarchal doubt about her action. Abhaya is a personification of an intelligent and bold woman and she dismantles this but with fierce logic:

That is just what I want you to explain- that 'but' which stands in the way of all rational thinking. May my husband live happily with his Burmese wife. I grudge him nothing. Only one question, Srikanta Babu! Do vedic mantras have the power to command a wife's loyalty, even after her husband has stripped her of all her rights and drives her away by brute force into the streets? Rights and duties are inextricably linked, Srikanta Babu. There can be no question of one without the other. My husband took the marriage vows, as I did, but they have played no part in shaping his needs and desires. They are no more to him than a piece of rhetoric, uttered in an idle moment, to be blown away at will. Yet these same vows bind me to him with iron fetters simply because I'm a woman. You said you did not blame me for coming away and added a 'but'. Were you trying to tell me that it is my duty to atone for my husband's sins by voluntarily embracing a death-in-life? Why? Because once, long ago when I was still a child, I had involuntarily pronounced some words of which I knew not the meaning? Are those words, uttered in ignorance, all that is true and meaningful in my life? And the terrible injustices and affliction that has been heaped on my head- are they of no consequences? I am deprived of my rights as a wife and a mother. I am denied my legitimate place in society. Love, laughter and joy are not for me. Simply because I had the misfortune of being chained in a wedlock to a selfish, brutal, loathsome creature? And am I to be denied my womanhood because such an animal would have none of me? In no society other than the Hindu is the woman so crushed and crippled. (372)

Abhaya is unapologetic about her decision and blames the society for its unjust and unequal rules. "In his novels, Sarat Chandra demonstrates that the norms of sexual morality cannot be applied to every situation: an extra-marital relationship may be more gratifying than marriage while an incompatible marriage may oblige a woman to disregard her pativrata. In Srikanta, Abhaya leaves her cruel and depraved husband to live with a man who loves and needs her, boldly declaring that their relationship is in accordance with the principles of truth and humanity" (Sogani 98). Abhaya challenges the varying rules of sexual morality prescribed for men and women and claims freedom from a claustrophobic marriage. She asserts her right to be happy in marital bliss and questions the judgemental male gaze of Srikanta. She wants to restore the balance between rights and duties and contests her husband's right over her in his inability to fulfill his duty. She accepts the marital incompatibility with her husband but is not ready to accept the subjugation and humiliation of living like a concubine instead of a wedded wife. She does not crumble under the discourse of pativrata and chooses a dignified escape towards true marital bliss with Rohini. "In his masterpiece Srikanta, Sarat Chandra has sounded the fearless trumpet of rebellion against conventionality. Abhaya in Srikanta is a unique character that spurned the baseness of prevalent morality on the evidence of a lover's swelling heart" (Dilipkumar Roy 327). She does not want to deny herself and Rohini the happiness they deserve and takes pride in their relationship. Her words symbolize the angst of a woman who is denied her rightful place in society and is expected to silently bear the shame which is not hers to bear. She claims freedom from the faith which denies women their share of happiness and stands her ground and her decision: "Will Hindu society be the purer for rejecting me? Will it not suffer a loss? But I shall not run away, Srikanta Babu. I shall live among you and be part of you however much you dishonour and defame me. If I can rear even one of my children to become a man among men I shall have had my revenge. For I will have proved that man is exalted by his actions alone- not by the accident of his birth" (374). She rejects the imposed slavish chastity on women and accepts the life force of love and companionship. "Srikanta tries to build up a case in favour of traditional morality but it cannot stand the test of Abhaya's intelligent cross-questioning. Abhaya's fiery logic pulls it to pieces, for Sarat Chandra evolves the brilliant, new technique of making the woman demand her rights in her own voice. He ensures a complete victory for Abhaya's rebel-consciousness over that of her inherited one. There is a struggle but it is brief. Abhaya is the

only character in the novel who refuses to accept alienation as a way of life and boldly carves out her own destiny" (Chakravarti xiv). Her will to stay within the confines of society is symbolic of her defiance to accept social dishonour as her destiny and she asserts her will power over social morality. Abhaya rebels against the chains of a false marriage and creates a space of warmth and loyalty with Rohini. Srikanta cannot muster any logic to deny Abhaya her happiness and accepts her decision. He looks at her with reverence in his eyes: "Tell me Abhaya, from where did a simple village girl like you learn to speak as you do. I can say, quite truthfully, that knowledge and breadth of vision like yours is rare even among men. No child of yours need ever be ashamed to call you 'mother'"(374).

Srikanta and Abhaya had both been exiled from their old life and had come to Burma to start a new life. Abhaya finds Rohini as her mate and ends her exile in a foreign land.;

Abhaya could take that decision and resolved to make a meaningful beginning out of their dismal existence in an unfamiliar locale. The unfamiliar surroundings are clearly a metaphor for the setting up of a new life, unbounded by the familiar social inhibitions; here Abhaya could truly seek out a new identity. In the process, she managed to put forward quite a few cogent questions about the validity of the concept of a devoted wife, in life and in death; her search for self-identity in its essence sought out an equality of relationship between man and woman- in marriage or outside it where the sanctioned relationship had been heavily weighted in favour of men.(Mukhia 95).

Abhaya's rejection of her husband is symbolic of her rejection of the whole discourse about a woman's place in the marital equation. She refuses to accept his brutality as the elixir of married life and sees true fulfillment in another man's love. Her exile from social norms is her way towards liberation from hypocritical ideals and she accepts this exile with a bold defiance.

Thus, these narratives of rebel women in Srikanta highlight the duality and hypocrisy inherent in a man-woman relationship in a patriarchal society. Both the protagonists challenge the oppressing cultural mores regarding love and marriage and question the inequality of varying sexual mores for men and women. They are not bogged down by societal pressure and question their ostracism. They reject their victim status and their rebellion illuminates their life with love and happiness.

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