



Vol. 10, No. 1

CLRI February
2023

Page 82-115

Bengali Middle Class Urban Women in the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty First Centuries through the Lens of the Writings of Suchitra Bhattacharya

Dr. Monmayee Basu

Associate Professor, Department of History, Hansraj
College, University of Delhi. She lives in Gurgaon,
NCR.

Abstract: Suchitra Bhattacharya (1950-2015) was a well-known fiction writer in Bengali language in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Her works reflect the problems and pains, happiness and sorrows, sentiments and beliefs of urban middle-class women. This essay endeavours to portray the issues women face in their day to day lives in the urban middle class setting of Bengali society of late 20th and early 21st centuries as captured by Suchitra Bhattacharya in her fictions. The paper ends with the author's own critique of relevant issues.

Keywords: Suchitra Bhattacharya, Suchitra Bhattacharya's fiction, Bengali middle class, Bengali literature, Bengali urban middle class, 20th and early 21st centuries, Bengali Indian society.

While travelling on vacation in the summer of 2015, cut off from newspapers and news channels, suddenly one morning, probably of 14th May, I heard from a co-tourist the news of the sudden and unexpected demise of author Suchitra Bhattacharya two days earlier. I was shocked. It broke my heart to realise that no new fictions would come from her

again; the special Durga Puja editions of the leading magazines and periodicals will never carry her fascinating stories, which for decades had brought incredible joy to millions of Bengali households. Her thoughts, ideas and the way she presented them were so familiar to any Bengali middle class family, that they immediately felt connected with the characters she portrayed and fell in love with her work. No wonder, many of her novels were developed into movies by highly acclaimed directors.

I was an ardent admirer of her writings for several reasons. Firstly, she concentrated mainly on issues faced by women of our times. It is amazing to note the diversity of the problems in the lives of women she dealt with. Her writings leave a deep impact on the readers' minds and overwhelm them with the enormity and intensity of the wide-ranging issues addressed. Secondly, she wrote mostly about a certain section of Bengali women, -- those belonging to the middle class in urban and suburban settings. Being a middle class Bengali woman myself, and having lived all my life in cities, the issues Suchitra explored struck a chord in me. I could identify myself at once with her characters and their emotions and aspirations, desires and expectations, pain and joy. In fact, it is a wonderful experience to go through such a wide range of emotions and reactions, many of which we may not have even pondered over. Thirdly, her free-flowing and captivating style and her vivid and intense depiction of a middle class home and life-pattern, including occasional delving into the details of cooking a typically Bengali dish, makes her narration so real,

natural and interesting. Fourthly, a characteristic feature of her work was the realistic as well as touching portrayal of human relationships. She took out from the deep crevices of the human heart the innermost emotions that were skilfully reflected in her entire work through her compelling story-telling flair.

Suchitra Bhattacharya wrote about women of all ages -- from teenager to octogenarian. Naturally the desires and expectations from life of women from such wide-ranging age-group varied vastly. The expression of their emotions differed. But Suchitra was equally at home in depicting the actions and reactions of human beings of every age in general and women in particular. This essay aims at delving into the lives of urban, middle class Bengali women as depicted in the works of Suchitra Bhattacharya with a view to analysing the various issues faced by this category of women. For this purpose, I aim at classifying her women characters in three broad categories; young, middle-aged and elderly.

The young

This section deals with the variety of issues that in general, as reflected in the writings of Suchitra Bhattacharya, inflict the lives of young women. I start with her novel *Aami Raikishori* (I am Raikishori)¹ that depicts the problems -- emotional and otherwise -- of a young divorcee from a middle class family. In her marriage arranged by her family she faces domestic violence and comes back to her parental home, -- a suburban town in West Bengal. Moderately educated, Raikishori sets out

on an independent life of her own in the city. She takes up a modest job with the help of a distant aunt and ensconces herself in a women's hostel that houses women of varying ages with diverse problems and issues of their own. The daily saga of Raikishori's new life shows, firstly, the problems of adjustment in a new environment; secondly, the personal security issues of a young girl in an alien city and a new workplace; thirdly, the emotional vacuum and worry for the future that appears uncertain, monotonous and bleak; relatives looking askance at the movements of a divorcee young woman, and their inquisitive comments often transgressing the borders of decency.

Paromita, a young married woman in Bhattacharya's novel *Ardhek Akaash* (Half the sky),² teaches in a college and is extremely committed to her own profession. Her husband holds a high position in a corporate firm. She lives in a joint family with her husband Rajarshi, her little son, parents-in-law and unmarried brother-in-law. She is the only child and, therefore, the responsibility of looking after her elderly and ailing parents also devolves upon her. Problem starts when Rajarshi gets transferred to Bangalore on promotion. Paromita does not want to give up her career as getting a permanent academic position is by itself a stupendous achievement. So she decides to join Rajarshi from time to time during her vacations. However, her decision meets stiff resistance from everybody around -- from Rajarshi himself to Paromita's in-laws and even her own mother (her ailing father has died in the meanwhile). They all expect that her role as a wife and

mother should take precedence over her profession. Her primary interest and responsibility in life should revolve round her family, not her career. Her family should not suffer in anyway at the altar of her own occupation. Paromita tries to convince her mother at least of her predicament, and says that it is an unending process, as Rajarshi in near future may again relocate to another city with a better opportunity, and that Rajarshi's job and that of Paromita are two completely different phenomena that cannot be intertwined. Paromita is astounded at the hurtful attitude and behaviour of her own people, including her husband. She finds it extremely discriminatory. While Rajarshi's career and professional excellence are of highest priority, Paromita's hard-earned precious job gets entirely marginalised. Her hurt turns into resentment. Why is it that the woman always has to bear the brunt? Why should a woman's career get a secondary status?

A young unmarried girl Tiya is one of the central characters of Bhattacharya's fiction *Chaar Dewal*³ (Four Walls). She is a modern young girl who on completion of her studies, works as an executive in a car company. She is in love with Surya, a dynamic, energetic young man. Tiya likes his open, helpful, warm-hearted, amiable nature and the tying of future marital knot between them is almost a foregone conclusion. In the end, however, Tiya slowly realises that although very friendly and affable, Surya has in him a strong element of dominance and male chauvinism. He expects a certain amount of obedience and subservience from his partner. This reminds Tiya of her own over-bearing, patriarchal father who never

allowed the blossoming of her mother's potentials. This we will discuss below. She realises that her independent existence as an individual would never be able to find its fruition with a man like Surya; that she would never get the respect that she expected as an equal partner. This comprehension eventually breaks the relationship between the two.

Kancher Dewal^A (The Glass Wall) is another very significant novel of Suchitra Bhattacharya. Like many of her works, *Kancher Dewal* also portrays the conflicts and agony of two women belonging to two different generations -- a mother and a daughter. Since I have devoted this section to young women, I will discuss here the inner friction and pain of the younger woman -- Brishti. She is an eighteen year old daughter of estranged parents -- Jaya and Subir. Brishti symbolises the challenges of children of separated parents. Brishti wants undivided attention from both her parents. She can never get it as her mother Jaya is a well-reputed painter and is extremely busy with her work. So Brishti was mostly raised by her grandparents (Jaya's parents) after Jaya and Subir separated. Subir loves his daughter very dearly, meets her occasionally and showers her with lavish gifts, but can give her limited time, not only because he is busy with work, but also because he has remarried and has a six year old son. Now, after crossing eighteen, she can decide legitimately with whom to stay -- father or mother. Brishti tells her father clearly that she wants to move in with him, but without his second wife and son, -- a very tough situation for Subir indeed. Brishti can never handle her parents' separation that deeply impacts

her psyche and personality. By the time she is in college, she goes through intense psychological trauma which pushes her towards bad company and turns her into a drug addict. Deeply excruciating is the agony of her parents. Subir, totally at a loss what to do, suffers a massive heart attack. *Kancher Dewal* is a lesson for all couples who are undergoing a rough marriage and are contemplating to split up.

One of the most highly acclaimed novel of Suchitra Bhattacharya is *Dahon* (Burning)⁵. It involves two young women with completely opposite characteristic traits. One of them is Romita, a newly married young housewife, while the other is Sravana *alias* Jhinuk. Romita is molested and her abduction is attempted by a group of hoodlums at the Metro station. Romita's husband is badly injured and just at the time when the boys are abducting her forcefully, Sravana, who fortunately happens to arrive there, comes running without thinking of her own safety, and attacks the boys in full force. No other passer-by comes forward to Romita's rescue or to Sravana's help. Because of her sudden and unexpected attack, the miscreants lose their grip over Romita, panick and escape. Sravana not only puts up a valiant fight all alone, but also persuades the couple, and accompanies them, to the police station to file a case. She pursues the case doggedly, against the wishes of her parents, relatives, fiancée, and attends all the hearings as she sincerely wishes that the criminals should be adequately punished. Only her septuagenarian grandmother Mrinalini (to be discussed below) stands beside her. However, neither Romita's husband nor her in-laws want to pursue the

case out of fear of social stigma, and Romita, despite her ardent urge to see the criminals punished, fails to muster the courage to go against family wishes and refuses to identify the miscreants at the court. Sravana fights alone, faces the questioning of the defence lawyer boldly, but unfortunately, the influential fathers of the culprits and the well-known defence lawyer manage to get them acquitted on the ground of inadequate evidence. Sravana's bravery is an unparalleled case of uprightness and honesty. Suchitra Bhattacharya received several awards for this novel. On the one hand, this novel portrays the vulnerability of women, and on the other, shows her immense strength and potential to fight against extreme adversity. It reveals her weakness as well as her courage and fortitude. Sravana is a symbol of *narishakti* (women's power), -- a force that is worshipped in the form of Goddesses Durga and Kali in India in general, and in Bengal in Particular.

It is not very uncommon among young students to develop infatuation for much older teachers. Generally, however, such attraction withers away with the passage of time. However, there are occasions when such fatal attraction persists giving rise to serious complications. *Neel Ghurni* (Blue Tornado) ⁶ is such a story. It is a unique saga of the undercurrent of happiness, pain, disappointment and agony of a twenty-three year old young woman as well as of a middle-aged woman of fifty. Here I will discuss the ordeal faced by the young woman, Dayeeta, who falls in love with her 56 year old professor -- a brilliant scientist. Dayeeta, blinded by the brilliance of

Professor Bodhisatva Majumdar, loses her discretion and rationality completely and lands herself and a lot others in incalculable misery. All advice, warnings and pleas by friends and parents fall upon deaf ears. The collateral damage, especially on the professor's family and Dayeeta's parents leaves them shattered beyond redemption.

Deya, the central character of Suchitra's novel *Uro Megh* (Floating cloud)⁷, is a journalist in an upcoming newspaper. Her husband Shaumya is a well-qualified young man in the corporate sector with bright future prospects. They are married for three years and present a picture of a happy couple in a neat comfortable household managed by a mature elderly help Lakshmi, an excellent caretaker of Deya's domestic needs. Deya, getting a lead from her old college friend Ritam, interviews a teenaged daughter of a domestic part-time help in Ritam's aunt's house. The teenager (of about eighteen) Shiuli had eloped with a man who had enticed her with promise of marriage, had taken her to Mumbai with the sole intention of selling her off for prostitution. Somehow she was rescued and brought back. Deya interviews her with the intention of making a story for her newspaper, although the identity of the girl is deliberately kept a secret. However, the people of the locality guess the entire thing and their inquisitiveness, especially indecent gestures and proposals of local ruffians make the lives of the mother and daughter unbearable, eventually leading to the mother's suicide. Deya feels herself partially responsible for everything and brings home a devastated and orphaned Shiuli. That is how she

wants to secure her vulnerable position, and simultaneously keeps on searching for a safe home for destitute, helpless orphans. But finding a vacancy in a safe haven proves far more difficult than Deya had comprehended. Her husband Shaumya is vehemently against the entire arrangement and admonishes Shiuli on flimsy issues. He pressurises Deya to get rid of her immediately. Deya's friends and relatives, including her parents, express their intense disapproval of keeping Shiuli at home. In their eyes Shiuli is a fallen girl who has to be shunned. Even some of Deya's friends, who understand that Shiuli is a victim of her circumstances and sympathize with her, feel that she needs to be handed over to a home as soon as possible. Ritam alone stands by Deya and helpless, miserable Shiuli. Shaumya creates violent ruckus that leaves Deya shocked and heart-broken. The insensitive, heartless side of Shaumya's character is now revealed to her at a cost of acute agony and disappointment. She also becomes aware of society's typical patriarchy which pops up its ugly face at the earliest occasion. Deya's decision, likes and dislikes mean nothing for her patriarchal husband. A defenceless, traumatised, pathetic young girl has no protection or mercy in our cruel society. The marriage of Deya and Shaumya breaks down. Human relationships are so fragile!

Suchitra's writings put a mirror before the harsh realities of life. Being cheated in marriage is a common problem in the lives of men and women of all ages. It is an eternal truth. Here in this essay, however, I will discuss this issue from the point of view of women only. Suchitra portrays many such cases. One

such novel, *Chena mukh, achena mukh*, (Known face, unknown face) ⁸ centres round Ratna, a young woman married for five years to a man Shekhar, -- 12 years her older. They also have a baby girl. Shekhar is a self-made man, well-settled, extremely helpful and of an amiable nature. He has no connection with his family as they have, according to Shekhar, ill-treated him and have deprived him of his family inheritance. Ratna has never met them except once when Shekhar's brothers came for a short while during their wedding. One Sunday Shekhar suddenly falls dead while having lunch due to a massive cerebral stroke. Ratna's world crashes down in a minute. After Shekhar's death, his office colleagues endeavour sincerely to arrange all his dues to be handed over to his family and are in constant touch with Ratna. They even think of offering a job to her on compassionate grounds. At this juncture a letter comes to the office written by a lady Tapashi Chakravorty, who claims to be Shekhar's divorced wife and places a claim on Shekhar's financial dues on behalf of herself and Shekhar's college going son. The news came as a bolt from the blue for Ratna and her family -- her parents and younger sister. They were totally unaware of such a thing. However, on deeper probe, the claim turns out to be a bitter truth.

Similarly, *Bhanga Ayena*⁹ (Broken Mirror) is a saga of Jayanti and Surajit and their little child Bublu. Surajit is involved in an extra-marital affair with Tithi, and sometimes in the name of office tour goes on a trip with her for two-three days. Jayanti comes to know about it but says nothing to her husband and carries on as usual. But she secretly takes up a job in a school.

Before joining, Jayanti suggests that they go on a family trip. She says that this time she will make all the arrangements and give Surajit a pleasant surprise. It turns out to be the very resort that is frequented by Tithi and Surajit. Surajit is in a tremendously awkward situation as the staff of the resort are all known to him and they know Tithi to be his wife. However, he has no choice. There Jayanti tells him clearly that she has found a job and that she is leaving him permanently. It is heartening to see in this novel how a woman silently and boldly takes her own decision and through a cold-blooded, predetermined plan checkmates her unfaithful partner.

Such admirable strength of mind that Jayanti demonstrates can also be seen in Suchitra's character Bhaswati in her work *Dhushar Bishad*. (Bleak Despair) ¹⁰ Here Suchitra portrays the agony of a youngish working wife due to the outrageous misbehaviour, unholy suspicion of her husband, and his addiction to alcohol. Unreasonable suspicion is a common disease that destroys umpteen families. Many end in separation and then divorce, many drag on. Bhaswati's husband Ronojoy's suspicion and jealousy keep on shifting from person to person, often the target being an imaginary character. Eventually, Bhaswati decides to put an end to her sufferings and shifts to her brother's house (where her mother also stays) with her two small children. She is warmly received in her brother's house, but as time moves on, Bhaswati begins to feel a subtle change. She senses that her mother and sister-in-law are in favour of her reconciliation with her husband. After a long time Ronojoy comes for reconciliation, but

Bhaswati discovers that his inherent habit of suspicion lingers on in full force. Bhaswati resolves to divorce him and live on her own along with her children in a separate accommodation, and to make the upbringing of her children the primary motto of her life. The author conveys through such writings that women should not feel helpless before oppressive partners and lead endlessly unhappy lives; rather they should be strong enough to end that deplorable chapter from her life like a gangrened amputated limb, and move on. Bhaswati has the advantage of a stable job to lean upon, but Jayanti of *Bhanga Ayena* (see above) is just a home maker. Yet she revolts and finds a job according to her ability, and separates.

I must not leave it to be inferred here that Suchitra was partisan towards her own gender. She was not. In many of her stories she has shown vulnerability of men before ruthless women. One such story is *hathat ekdin* (Oneday suddenly)¹¹ that depicts a woman who has deserted her trusting, loving husband to start a new life with a backstabbing close friend of her husband. *Gahin Hriday* (Deep in the heart)¹² again, is a story of an unchaste wife's illicit affair with a friend of her devoted husband.

A reprehensible crime to which women of all ages, especially young women, are vulnerable is rape. Suchitra took up this issue as well in her novel *Adbhut andhar ek* (Bizarre Darkness).¹³ It shows the mental and psychological trauma of the aggrieved party. In *Dahon* we have seen a glimpse of molestation. It is more poignantly elaborated in this novel. It centres round the main character Sutapa who falls victim to

gang rape by some local goons. The story is to arouse awareness of society towards a known agonising crime and the problems surrounding the victim and her near ones apart from her indelible mental and psychological torment and excruciating physical pain. The greatest problem comes from constant threat from the culprits of dire consequences if the victim discloses their identity. People often start suspecting the character of the victim herself. The hapless victim gets doubly crushed -- once by the brutal physical attack, and then by character assassination. The novel unfolds poignantly this cruel, dark aspect of society. It is a heart-rending story of overnight ruination of a decent happy family.

The middle-aged

The challenges of women in their middle age are no less intriguing in the sense that they face most of the difficulties of the young, and, in addition, are also beset with the whims and problems of grown up children as well as mid-life crises of gradually ageing husbands. Suchitra, in her discerning manner, has painted such umpteen issues in her voluminous works.

Let's take the example of Aditi, the main character of Suchitra's much-acclaimed novel *Hemanter Pakhi* (Autumn Bird)¹⁴ that has also been developed into a movie. It depicts the difficulty married women often face while endeavouring to pursue their passion. Forty-six year old Aditi is a competent homemaker whose world revolves round her dear household, her husband and her two sons. Everything was fine till the day

Hemen mama (Aditi's maternal uncle's friend) turns up. He runs a newspaper and is deeply involved in literary circles with unbounded passion for literature. He knows Aditi since her childhood and is aware of the fact that she was a talented writer in her student days, and her works used to be published regularly in school and college magazines. He enthralls her to start writing again. Aditi hesitates in the beginning, but after a lot of persuasion from Hemen mama writes a story which is published in a newspaper and is highly appreciated. Aditi's elation knows no bounds. Hemen mama introduces her to his literary circles which she starts attending. Quickly more of her writings begin to get published. She succeeds in creating a niche for herself in the literary world. Sometimes literary discussion groups are arranged at Aditi's own house. The problem erupts with the objection of Aditi's husband Supratim. Initially he had encouraged Aditi in her endeavours, but as her involvement increases, Supratim's patriarchal instinct awakens in full measure. On the second get-together at their place, Supratim makes it a point to leave the house. He tells Hemen mama clearly that this cannot continue. When Aditi comes to know of this, she is thunder-struck. All on a sudden it dawns on her what position she holds in her matrimonial home. At the same time she also comes to know that her elder son is silently preparing for his studies abroad without even bothering to discuss it with his mother. Aditi feels her position to be like her own caged pet parrot. What a delusory world she was living in all these years! She decides to give up writing and sits down to write a letter to Hemen mama asking for his forgiveness. At the same time, she now

decides to free her pet parrot. She is uncertain if it would be able to fly. But to her utter astonishment it does fly. This brings about a complete transformation in her. She resolves to break her own shackles and continue her pursuits dauntlessly. She tears apart the letter that she was writing to Hemen mama and sets herself free from all bondages and obstacles.

We can see the same frustration in Dola of *Chaar Dewal*¹⁵ (already discussed above, see. p. 3). In the section on young women I have dealt with the mental conflicts of Dola's daughter Tiya who suddenly discovers the patriarchal traits of her fiancée's nature. It reminds her of the similar characteristics of her father who never allowed the talents of his wife to flourish. Dola, Tiya's mother, had a talent for acting for which she had won acclaim, and was a part of a theatre group in her young days. It was a passion she wanted to continue after marriage. But her husband has a stereo-type concept of a wife whose primary concern would be taking care of the household, husband and children. Dedication to acting will certainly hamper the smooth conduct of homely chores. Dola's every sincere attempt and endeavour to balance the two is not tolerated. Finally Dola gives up her passion to save domestic peace. Undoubtedly, this is a very common problem of modern day women. Traditional values and reactionary ideas clash with fulfilment of women's dreams and ambitions. Mostly women have to sacrifice their goals and fervour at the altar of domestic needs. Friction occurs where they refuse to do so. A tale of such friction I will take up in the following discussion on *Phire Dekha* (Looking Back).¹⁶

In Suchitra's thought-provoking novel *Phire Dekha* Sreemoyee is a 55 year old lady who teaches in a college in Delhi. She is divorced from her husband Somnath long ago. The reason for divorce was the suppression imposed by a highly patriarchal family of conservative values compounded by the exalted ego of an overbearing husband, perpetually fanned by a dominating, aggressive mother-in-law. She wanted to pursue an academic career that obviously she was not allowed to do. This is where, in contrast to Dola, (see above) Sreemoyee stuck to her ground. She came away with her little daughter to her parental home in Delhi, took up an academic job and moved out to an accommodation of her own. Many years later when Somnath falls seriously ill, Sreemoyee, at the request of her daughter who is now married and well-settled and is in touch with both her parents, visits Somnath in Kolkata. Somnath asks her earnestly whether she has forgotten and forgiven everything. Sreemoyee comes back to Delhi two days later with a transformed heart where there is no love, no hatred, no mercy. All pent-up emotions have been wiped off at one stroke.

It is clear from Sreemoyee's case that every women needs to be educated. Education is her power, it is her strength. However, education alone is not enough. One has to utilise one's acquired knowledge to be independent. Every person needs an independent source of income. Dependency becomes very costly for Rakhi in *Neel Ghurni*.¹⁷ In this novel the crazed infatuation of a young girl Dayeeta with her elderly professor and its consequences have already been analysed

above. (Please see p.4) It not only impacts Dayeeta and her parents badly, but destroys completely the professor's peaceful family life. Professor Bodhisatva Majumdar's fifty year old wife Rakhi is a graduate in Philosophy with honours, but ever since her marriage she has never ventured to pursue anything and is contented with looking after her family and household. And undoubtedly she is a very competent home maker. But her academic attainment is totally wasted. This happens with many women who can be broadly divided into three categories. One who becomes too contented and loses completely the urge to take up anything outside the precincts of the four walls of her house; the others are those who want to accomplish something, but are victims of their unfavourable circumstances. They are vehemently dissuaded by their family members and lack the will power and courage to put up a resistance. The third category are women like Sreemoyee (see above) who fight for their rights and win. Rakhi belongs to the first category of women. She pays a heavy price for living her life under the shadow of her successful husband when, one day the latter, under the spell of attraction for his young student, humiliates Rakhi so badly that it becomes impossible for her to carry on with him. A devastated Rakhi leaves for her parental home where her brother and his family reside. They welcome her, but her twenty year old son Babua gives up his studies and takes up an ordinary job with the intention of setting up an independent establishment for his mother and himself. Had Rakhi pursued a career of her own, she could have been a support for herself and her college-going son.

Such mid-life crisis as faced by Rakhi is not uncommon in our society. Suchitra wrote several stories on this issue. Another such fiction is *Shaheli*.¹⁸ Shaheli is the name of a middle aged woman whose husband leaves her for another married woman who has a grown up daughter. Shaheli herself has a grown up son who, like Babua in *Neel Ghurni*, is deeply sympathetic towards his mother and hates his father from the core of his heart. But fortunately, Shaheli, unlike Rakhi, is a professional lady and is fully capable of taking financial care of herself and her son. However, intense mental agony and psychological trauma are the same in both the cases. The author has very deftly portrayed the crippling pain that goes on screaming throughout Shaheli's heart. In case of Rakhi, it becomes a double whammy -- financial crisis as well as mental injury.

A similar tale is that of *Shyamali*.¹⁹ Shyamali is a divorcee woman who works in a government office and stays in her own small apartment with her ageing mother. Shyamali symbolises an extremely discontented, frustrated lady. In fact, harshness of her life has made her so. She has paid a heavy price for not being beautiful. She was humiliated in the extreme by her husband and his family members. The husband also got involved in an extra-marital affair. The mental and physical torture was too much for her to bear. She had a little daughter and was carrying on somehow for her daughter's sake. But when their daughter was five years old, her husband Himanshu filed a divorce suit. He proved that Shyamali is not mentally stable and is not in a position to take care of the daughter. A devastated Shyamali is divorced, and

also forfeits the custody of the child. The story, however, ends with the development of an emotional bond growing up between the mother and the daughter who at the age of seventeen comes to stay with her mother for a few days for the sake of an examination. While leaving, Jhumur (the daughter) hugs her mother and bursts out into tears. The author writes that for this expression of affection from one's own child, a mother can live for thousand years. Her daughter's tears wash away all her sufferings and agony of all these years.

The novels *Neel Ghurni*, *Shaheli* and *Shyamali* bring one significant message -- the role of grown up children in assuaging the sorrows of their agonised mothers. That is why I observed above that children make a remarkable difference in the lives of middle-aged people. Young people have small children who cannot comprehend the distress of their parents. But by the time one reaches the middle age, children grow up, they become sensitive to their parents problems and are in a position to judge. They, in many cases, as we have seen, stand as a rock of strong support for the parents who are wronged. This solace in their lives becomes a boon. However, many people do not have this piece of good luck. Dayeeta's mother, (in *Neel Ghurni*) for example, suffers from acute depression because of her daughter's action, and a psychiatrist is consulted. (See above).

Partners with loose morals and adultery have been amply discussed above. The novel *Arpita* by Suchitra ²⁰ while portraying adultery on the one hand, depicts a unique

psychological complexity on the other. Arpita is a working woman with two grown up children. She is separated from her husband long ago (although no formal divorce has taken place). She left her matrimonial home with two young children due to perversion of her husband, Shubhendu, who not only is a habitual womaniser, but an alcoholic too. He indulges in sexual relationship indiscriminately with any woman, especially with women belonging to lower classes. However, an unanticipated crisis erupts many years later in middle age when Shubhendu falls ill at his workplace in Asansol, and on humanitarian considerations Arpita has to bring him to her house in Kolkata. The children are very resentful in the beginning, but slowly their dislike mellows down and a bond develops between them and their father. Shubhendu encourages his children to take up any professional course they like and offers his utmost financial support.

The transformation of the children disturbs Arpita tremendously. She takes it as her own defeat. Shubhendu, she thinks, wins everything in the end. He has destroyed so many precious years of the lives of his wife and children, and yet now wins back everything at the time of his need. And Arpita? After years of anguish and suffering she has reconciled to a life with her children whom she wants to bring up as successful human beings. That is the only motto of her life. She is determined to show the world that a single woman, without any help, can accomplish all that a male does. Now, notwithstanding all the damage that he has inflicted, if Shubhendu gets accepted so easily, then what will be his

retribution? He is about to rob Arpita even of the fruits and credits of her unmitigated struggle. How can Arpita now allow such a thing to happen when she has already lost so much? Even at the cost of better financial prospects, Arpita decides to send Shubhendu back to Asansol despite the fact that his office is ready to give him a posting in Kolkata.

The Elderly

The most important concern in an advanced age is security -- financial as well as physical. People generally have no income in old age except one's pension and savings. Many people become dependent on children financially and physically. Moreover, health problems aggravate as age advances. More physical care is needed. Apart from these, people start losing their partners. Loneliness sets in. In her works Suchitra Bhattacharya has endeavoured to touch upon these issues.

Gabhir Ashukh (Severe Illness) ²¹ revolves round the emotions of Kalyani, wife of Amalkanti. The latter started his life as a lower division clerk in the Writers' Building and was finally promoted to the rank of Assistant Secretary before his retirement. With lot of difficulty he raised his three children (two sons and a daughter), gave them proper education, got them married and built a small house on a small plot of land in a humble locality. At the age of sixty-six he was detected with a frightful lung disease that the doctors apprehend to be cancer. Their eldest son Abhijit, who is a lecturer of Economics in a college, and his family live with the parents. So also does the younger son Indrajit, an Engineer and a bachelor, although

he is soon to relocate to Mumbai on a prospective better job. The daughter Anasuya, after whose marriage all of Amalkanti's meagre savings and Kalyani's paltry jewellery were gone, live with her family in the same city. The burden of Amalkanti's huge medical expenses, therefore, falls mainly upon his sons, especially the eldest son Abhijit. As a result, his dream of owning an apartment of his own for which he has joined the housing cooperative of his college teachers, is slowly evaporating. The savings in his Provident Fund are almost depleted. In the end a bitter fight breaks out among the siblings on the issue of how much each one has contributed towards the payment of their father's medical expenses. Each blames the other for not doing enough. Ultimately Kalyani comes out and affirms that she will sell the house and bear all the expenses out of it. In the end the good news is that Amalkanti's ailment turns out to be not cancer, but some other curable disease. Regrettably, however, by that time the dissensions within the family are exposed that brings to light a bitter truth. At one stroke the author deftly handles three serious problems of old age -- financial insecurity, severe sickness and dependence on one's children. The novel depicts the pain and frustration, humiliation and emotional conflicts of a helpless mother who has no other option but to depend on her children for the life of her ailing husband. Not that these issues do not emerge in young or middle age. But at that age one is much better equipped to manage such problems. Helplessness enhances manifold as age progresses.

The death of the partner often leaves a woman dependent and helpless, especially if she is not financially strong or educated enough to take care of herself. This is a perennial problem in the lives of elderly women. I would like to elaborate a little upon Suchitra's subtle and passing references in novel *Jalchhobi* (Water Picture)²² to the position of an old lady Shefali. She is a widow who spends her life like a shuttlecock between her two sons -- the elder one in Baharampur and younger one in Kolkata. Very artfully and delicately, Suchitra Bhattacharya paints the position of an entirely dependent old mother. It is quite revolting to note Tutul's (Shefali's younger daughter-in-law) treatment of her mother-in-law. But Shefali never protests or retorts. May be her state of dependence has robbed her of all confidence. Even her younger son Prateek often replies rudely to simple questions of his 73 year old mother -- a pathetic sight indeed. This shows how self-reliance is a prerequisite for dignity. However, the fact is that it is not always possible for everybody to be self-reliant in old age. Financial dependence is a common problem in advanced age in middle class homes.

However, a symbol of independent spirit and detachment is the character of Mrinalini in *Dahon*.²³ I have already narrated above the extra-ordinary bravery of the young woman, Sravana (Jhinuk) in Suchitra Bhattacharya's exceedingly popular novel *Dahon*. (See pp. 4). Mrinalini (Jhinuk's paternal grandmother) does a unique thing after her husband's death. She, in order to detach herself from family ties, hands over her home that was built by her husband, and where she had spent

the major portion of life, to her two sons and their families and takes shelter in a room in an old age home that is also involved in social work and devotes herself in serving the downtrodden in the society. It gives her immense satisfaction. In this way she also transcends the likes and dislikes, criticism and scorn of her family members. It is indeed a difficult decision, especially at her age, but she is a person of enormous spirit and strength of character.

Korobi in Suchitra's *Bishad Perije* (Transcending sorrow) ²⁴ adopts a novel way of overcoming the sadness emerging from missing her two pre-occupied well-placed sons who have settled in Australia and Bangalore respectively, and are too engrossed in their work and their lives to come and spend time with their forlorn aged parents in Kolkata. Korobi lets out one of her rooms to two girls -- one a student and the other a working one -- as paying guests. They turn out to be very nice and helpful girls who slowly become parts of the family. They prove to be of enormous help in the time of a crisis arising out of Anubroto's (Korobi's husband) health condition.

This, however, does not mean that children are generally negligent of their old parents. There are innumerable instances in Bhattacharya's various writings showing the extent of children's love and care for their parents. The case of Sushmita and Monotosh in *Rang Badlay* (Colour changes) ²⁵ is a classic example. Sushmita is happily married to Neelanjan since two years. She is the only child of Monotosh, a retired person and a widower, who lives in a joint family with his only brother in a house owned jointly by them. The brother

Shibotosh is totally devoted to his elder brother Monotosh, and he, along with his wife and son take very good care of him. Sushmita is like a daughter to them. Monotosh suffers a heart attack after which Sushmita takes him, for some time, to her own home for recuperation after his long treatment in the hospital. Her concern for her father creates a rift in the relationship between Neelanjan and Sushmita. At the very outset, Sushmita's decision of bringing in Monotosh, even temporarily, is not appreciated by Neelanjan who believes in a complete nucleus existence with his wife and children alone. Finally, their marriage breaks apart mostly on this issue, even though Monotosh, sensing trouble in his daughter's marital life, quickly leaves after a short stay. Care and concern for one's parents are poignantly reflected in Suchitra's another novel *Ardhek Akash*²⁶ (see p.2) where Paromita's involvement with her parents is remarkable. In Bhattacharya's novel *Shunyo theke Shunyo* (From vacuum to vacuum)²⁷ Vandana is an elderly mother whose well placed son loves her intensely and is too eager to shower her with happiness. After all in *Gabhir Ashukh* (see pp. 14-15) Abhijit was certainly a devoted son whose sole concern was to help his father to recover.

Even so, in advanced age people often suffer helplessly due to problems in their children's lives. After all, human emotions are inextricably intertwined with the happiness and sorrows of their near and dear ones. When children reach adulthood, parents have little control over them. They lead independent lives, face many problems, sometimes very serious ones, which eventually impact the parents as well. The tumultuous

relationship of the children with their partners, their job problems, extra-marital affairs of children, excessive drinking habits, getting involved in serious legal problems including criminal charges, diseases etc., become a perennial problem in the lives of the elderly parents and is a relentless source of intense pain. *Bhangankaal* (Time of collapse),²⁸ *Roopkatha Noi* (Not a Fairytale),²⁹ *Dahon, Aborto* (Whirlpool),³⁰ *Shikhar Thikana* (Shikha's Address),³¹ *Dhushar Bishad, Shunyo theke Shunyo, Ayenamahal*,³² *Neel Ghurni, Rang Badlay* and many others reflect this distress. In each of these novels, the recklessness of the children, their misfortunes, illnesses etc. become sources of ceaseless torment for the elderly parents.

Grandchildren add fragrance of joy in the lives of the elderly. Many times grandchildren, under many circumstances, live with the grandparents. The most common situation is the joint family system where three, and sometimes four generations, live together under the same roof. However, there are other situations also--- for example when the parents are posted in remote areas where congenial educational facilities are unavailable, or the parents are too pre-occupied with their professions -- when grandchildren live with their grandparents who are situated in advantageous locations. But there are circumstances where children stay with their grandparents due to some adversities that have befallen them or their parents. The latter case we see in Suchitra's *Roopkatha Noi* where Shubha and her husband Debesh have their two grandchildren staying with them, but under extra-ordinary circumstances. Phool is the 13 year old granddaughter

(daughter of Shubha's elder daughter) who has been raised by her grandmother as she had lost her mother at birth. The other grandchild, 6 year old Kutush (son of Subha's younger daughter) is being brought up in his grandparents' house as his mother Chikur has revolted against her patriarchal matrimonial home and has shifted with her parents. Under circumstances such as these, naturally Shubha feels unhappy for her daughters, but at the same time, is strongly attached to the grandchildren and enjoys their company thoroughly -- a strange mixed feeling.

Epilogue

From the discussion above, a few analytical points emerge. As it appears from Suchitra Bhattacharya's writings, notwithstanding the progress in women's education, profession or economic condition, women are still lagging behind in society in many respects. Firstly, in the case of married women, work of the husband gets preference over that of the wife. Even now, the man is looked upon as the primary bread earner, while the wife's work is complimentary. If the man gets a transfer, the wife, in the long run, is expected to follow suit. In other words, it is still a man's world, -- a patriarchal society. Such is the storyline of *Ardhek Akash* (Please see p.2) and *Rang Badlay* (Please see p.13). Patriarchy is distinctly evident in day to day domestic life as well. The women, despite a challenging profession, are expected to take responsibility of running the household, and, if necessary, to do the household chores. The divide between man and

woman in the sphere of domestic work, according to Suchitra, is still clear and wide. Here, however, I would like to note that society has changed substantially in the last few decades, and many men have realised how crucial their contribution in the domestic sphere is, especially in the perspective of today's modern world where both men and women are working equally hard. Even so, further change remains to be accomplished.

Secondly, patriarchy is very prominent not only in personal life, but also in office. As Suchitra Bhattacharya has pointed out in one of her interviews that women have to prove their capabilities relentlessly. Even when they are doing similar kind of work, men are preferred for staying back till late, or for going on tours. Further, sexual exploitation in workplace is rampant. It is manifest in many ways. We get glimpses of such problem in *Roopkatka Noi* and *Rang Badlay*. Chikur in *Roopkatha Noi* has to leave a job to escape such indecent proposals of her superior. Sushmita in *Rang Badlay* also faces a similar situation, though she is able to nip it in the bud. The issue of resigning from job does not arise in her case.

Another very interesting point I noted is regarding women's legal rights in property. Since the passing of the Hindu Women's Property Act in 1956 which is based upon the *Dayabhaga* school of Jimutvahana, daughters have equal rights in the property of their parents as the sons. However, in Suchitra Bhattacharya's writings I find this right is not mentioned adequately. Even where the women need protection and shelter in their parental home, they are

hesitant while the brothers take it to be their exclusive right. This problem is clearly portrayed in the case of Bhaswati in *Dhushar Bishad* (see pp.6-7), *Aborto*, *Hemanter Pakhi*, (See p. 7), *Neel Ghurni* (See p. 9) etc. I must note, however, that, in several middle class families daughters and widowed daughters-in-law are getting their due shares. It is not uncommon. Regrettably, this essential right that certainly empowers women, has not found due place in Suchitra's writings.

Curiously enough, dowry as a problem does not feature in any of Suchitra's fictions. That is perhaps because dowry in general, is practically nonexistent in urban middle class Bengali society. There is no acute demand for dowry in middle class urban Bengali homes. By and large, therefore, dowry is not a major issue in this echelon of society. This is the reason, I think, why it does not find any place in Suchitra's writings. All in all, her works are indeed a mirror of the middle-class women of urban society of Bengal.

References

1. Bhattacharya, Suchitra, *Aami Raikishori*, in *Dashti Upanyash* (Ten Novels), Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd, Kolkata, Fifth Edition, 2007.
2. Bhattacharya, Suchitra, *Ardhek Aakash*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2012
3. Bhattacharya, Suchitra, *Chaar Dewal*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2008

4. Bhattacharya, Suchitra, Kaancher Dewal, in *Suchitra Samagra*, Ananda Publishers, Vol.1
5. *Dahon*, Vol.1
6. *Neel Ghurni*, Vol.3
7. *Uro Megh*, Vol. 4
8. *Chena mukh Achena Mukh*, Vol. 2
9. *Bhanga Ayena*, Vol. 4
10. *Dhushar Bishad*, Vol. 2
11. *Hathat Ekdin*, Vol.4
12. *Gahin Hriday*, Vol.2
13. *Adbhut Aandhar Ek*, Vol. 1
14. *Hemanter Pakhi*, Vol.2
15. Hemanter Pakhi.
16. *Phire Dekha*, in *Suchitra Samagra*, Vol. 3
17. Phire Dekha.
18. *Saheli*, in *Suchitra Samagra*, Vol. 2
19. *Shyamali*, Vol.3
20. *Arpita*, Vol.3
21. *Gabhir Ashukh*, Vol. 2
22. *Jalchhobi*, Vol.4
23. *Dahon*, Vol.1
24. *Bishaad Periyee*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2014
25. *Rang Badlay*, in *Suchitra Samagra*, Vol.5
26. Rang Badlay.
27. *Shunyo Theke Shunyo* in *Suchitra Samagra*, Vol. 5.

28. *Bhangankaal*, Vol. 1
29. *Roopkatha Noi* in *Desh*, Special Puja issue, 2008, pp. 132-211
30. *Aborto* in *Suchitra Samagra*, Vol. 5
31. *Shikhar Thikana* in *Galpo Samagra*, Vol. 1, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2016, pp. 384-3
32. *Ayenamahal*, in *Suchitra Samagra*, Vol. 5



Dr Monmayee Basu

Dr Monmayee is an Associate Professor, Department of History, Hansraj College, University of Delhi. She was also involved in Master level courses in Delhi University from time to time.

She has several publications to her credit including *Hindu Women and Marriage Law : From Sacrament to Contract* (Oxford University Press, 2001), which developed into an omnibus, *Women and Law*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

is an authoritative study of the influence of legislative measures in addressing women's issues in India.

She has also co-authored textbooks in Bengali, which has been the standard history text for West Bengal School Board. Her treatise *Comprehensive History of Modern Europe* is soon to be published by Orient BlackSwan.

Her latest publications are the essays on the topic of Netaji's contribution towards empowerment of women in two separate books on Netaji and the INA published by the *Indian Council of Historical Research*, (ICHR) New Delhi and *Asiatic Society*, Kolkata, respectively in August 2021 on the occasion of the 125th Birth Anniversary of Subhas Chandra Bose.

[Get Your Book Reviewed](#)

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here.](#)

[Authors & Books](#)

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.