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Rabindranath and Sharatchandra as novelists: a comparative study

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Rabindranath Tagore and Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay were contemporaries, the former being senior to the latter by fifteen years. They were arguably the most popular poet and novelist in India, especially Bengal. However, there are marked contrasts between these two literary luminaries of late colonial India, in respect of their family, society, upbringing, status, personality, gender and caste consciousness, religious-spiritual sensibilities, and worldviews. Despite such discrepancies, and some personality conflicts, both Rabindranath and Sharatchandra did share some core values in respect of sexuality and sensuality, albeit with different perspectives.

I

Rabindranath Tagore (born Thakur, 1861-1941), the celebrated *Biśvakabi* [Poet laureate of the world], was also a novelist of high calibre as Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938), the *Aparājeya Kathāśilpī* [Invincible wordsmith], arguably, was. Both were influenced in their youth by the works of their illustrious predecessor Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) the *Sāhityasamrāt* [Emperor of literature]. While Bankim had highlighted tradition and heroism, Tagore celebrated truthfulness, tolerance, and selflessness. Tagore's *magnum opus* among the prose writings of his mature youth, *Cokher bāli* [Eyesore 1903], 'ushered in a new horizon in the history of Bengali novel writing' (Mukhopadhyay 2002: 16). This novel is based on the odyssey of its female protagonist, the young widow Binodini, and her irrepressible urge to conquer man's heart. Transcending the bounds of morals, the author delves into the mysteries of the human heart, thus heralding the free expression of a revolutionary self-consciousness in Bengali novel. At the same time, Rabindranath's poetic sensibilities could never deflect or detract from the realism of his novels. This amazing amalgam of realism and romanticism has been further accentuated by Rabindranath's rebellious disregard for hallowed traditions or morals. He provides an

acute and minute analysis of our familial life and portrays realistic characters for his stories composed during the later years of his life, especially *Śeṣer kabitā* [Terminal lyric 1929],[1] *Mālaṅca* [Flower-garden 1934] and *Cār adhyāy* [Four chapters 1934], that heralded a new genre in Bengali novels of the post-Bankim era (Sengupta 1974: 12-20).

Sharatchandra, too, was deeply, if not altogether positively, influenced by Bankim early in life. He was so overwhelmed by Bankim's novels that he literally committed them to memory and even tried to imitate his prose style. Especially, the *Sāhityasamrāt's Kṛṣṇakānter will* [Krishnakanta's will] 'was at once appealing and appalling to young Sharat who loved the novel but castigated its author for having ruined the character of the protagonist Rohini' (Sil 2012a 93). Thus, Sharat's novels *Caritrahīn* [Libertine, 1917), *Gṛhadāha* [The blazing home 1920] or, as we shall see later, *Śeṣ praśna* [The final question 1931], deal with illicit or irregular romantic liaison and its problematic *vis-à-vis* the hallowed but gradually harried morals and mores of society. In these novels the ordinary episodes of quotidian life are dramatized into poetic imaginary. The men and women in these novels are no extraordinary human beings nor are their lives touched by miracle, but they are often depicted as sentimental harboring socially subversive secret desires and yet somewhat rational and practical. This essay includes a critical comparison between the two literary luminaries of the late Bengal Renaissance through their two novels written in their maturer years—Rabindranath's *Śeṣer kabitā* and Sharatchandra's *Śeṣ praśna*--by way of exploring their different perspectives on almost similar human predicament.

II

Sharatchandra made a public profession of his unalloyed admiration for Tagore's poetry and prose. As an adolescent he was overwhelmed with emotion on hearing a recitation of Rabindranath's 'Prakṛtir pratiśodh' [Nature's revenge 1883]. Sometime later, he read Tagore's novel 'Cokher bāli' serialized in *Baṅgadarśan* [View of Bengal] and subsequently savored the 'memory of his unprecedented deeply penetrating and poignant bliss [*gabhīr o sutikṣṇa ānander sṁṛti*].' In Burma, he used to read Tagore's *oeuvres* over and over again with the unshakable conviction that 'there are no better creations either in lyrics or in prose literature than these' (Chattopadhyay, 1338 BE [1931] in Chattopadhyay, 2009, 961). He in fact made an unabashed confession to his obsession with Rabindranath's works when he admitted that he had underscored every page of 'Cokher bāli' twenty-four times and read 'Naṣṭanīḍ' ten times (Ray 1975: 13-14). 'No one is a greater devotee of [Rabindranath] than me,' Sharat declared in his letter to Amal Hom (Ray, 2009: 201: letter of Pouṣ 28, 1338 BE [December 1931]). He wrote his friend of Muzaffarpur Pramathanath Bhattacharya admiringly of his two great predecessors: 'Look at the writing style of Bankimbābu and Rabibābu, it's "something" to start with!' (Ray 2009: 33: letter of 25 July 1913).

Nevertheless, as a distinguished literary critic and long-time associate has it, Sharat was not an intellectual like Bankim or Rabindranath (Sengupta, 1962). He once confessed to Upendranath Gangopadhyay, his uncle of Bhagalpur (*c*.1894-1938): 'Did I lie when I called myself an ignoramus? Am I so stupid as

[1] I translate the title not in the traditional meaning of Labanya's 'last poem' but as the poem to end (*śeṣ*) or terminate her relationship with Amit. All Bengali citations in this eassay appear in the author's translation, unless otherwise noted.

to make myself appear as a scholar to folks like you? I may be able to spin a tale and write it, but what has scholarship got to do with it?' (Ray 2009: 49: letter of 10 May 1913). Even though, reportedly, he was a book lover—he told his neighbour at Bājé Shibpur (his residence in the western suburbs of Calcutta since his relocation from Burma in 1916), Balaichand Bandyopadhyay, that 'one who is able to befriend books, can easily lighten life's concerns' (Mukhopadhyay 2001: 87) and read some philosophy, science, history, economics, sociology, psychology and the like—his work does not reflect any insights based on his readings. His characters are *menu people* with their petty problems the extent and influence of which hardly cross beyond the portals of the home.[2] Beyond the mundane and familiar social problems of Bengal such as those pertaining to the joint family, caste, daughter's marriage, conjugal incompatibility, and early widowhood, and, above all endemic penury, Sharat appears to be innocent of any larger and wider complexities and considerations of life. He does not seem to possess the experiential or educational acumen to delineate any philosophical or ideological outlook on life. Hence, he takes recourse to vacuous imagination and excessive sentimentalism. Consequently, all the men of his novels and stories turn up, sadly, as unmanly, and the women loquacious [*puruṣrā tāṅr sabāi niṣpouruṣ, nārīrā sabāi bagīśvarī*"] (Sengupta 1962).

III

Apparently, the relationship between Rabindranath and Sharatchandra was one of *guru* and *celā*—one of respect and love—to quote the latter's public profession: '*sāhitye gurubād āmi māni*' [I believe in literary mentorship] (Sharat's address at Tagore's 70th birth anniversary printed *in extenso* in Ghosh 2002: 95-98, here at 97). However, beneath the surface, these two literary giants stood poles apart from each other and it is Sharat who often revealed an anxiety and ambivalence in his dealings with a man who was older, socially and intellectually far superior, and as a human being far more cultivated and cosmopolitan. Rabindranath first came in contact with Sharat's work in 1907 when he read the latter's 'Baḍadidi' in the two issues of *Bhāratī*, edited by his niece Sarala Debi Chaudhurani (1872-1945). Even though Sharat's name was not printed in the byeline of the story, Tagore considered the anonymous author a potentially powerful writer. Sharat, on his part, had been an ardent admirer of the poet since his boyhood.

Yet, unfortunately, the two, after they had come to know each other, had a misunderstanding, first on some political differences and subsequently on some literary issues, though in the end both were reconciled to each other. On 23 July 1921, Sharat as the president of the Howrah branch of the Congress Party, met the poet at his home (Rabindranath had just returned from his Western travels three days earlier) and asked him to support Mohandas Gandhi's (1869-1948) non-cooperation movement. Tagore had earlier made his attitude to this movement known to Gandhi and now he declined Sharat's solicitation to the latter's chagrin and disappointment. In his essay 'Śikṣar birodh' [Disputes of Education] read at the Gauḍīya Sarbabidyāyatan and published in the literary journal *Nārāyaṇ* (Agrahāyṇ-Pauṣ 1328 [December 1921]), Sharat countered Tagore's

[2] Sharat left his shelter in Calcutta for Rangoon, Burma in 1903 in search of employment and stayed there till 1916 when he had to come back due to deteriorating health reasons.

lecture 'Śikṣār milan' [Unity of Education] critiquing Gandhi's non-cooperation philosophy and movement (read at the University Institute, Calcutta, on 15 August 15 and published in *Prabāsī*, Āśvin 1328 [September 1921).[3] Sharat's abrasive tone in his rebuttal reveals his rage rather than rigorous ratiocination, but he promptly tried to make amends by sending his apology to the Master in a letter to Tagore dated 26 Baiśākh 1329 BE (May 1922):

> I have sorely offended you but please forgive me for this first instance. I never get to visit rich and famous people's homes [*baḍaloker bāḍī*] on my own and I am very sorry for having blocked my future access [to you] by my own indiscretion (Ray 2009: 130; see also Ghosh 2002: 10-11).[4]

It is indeed amazing to ponder the most obvious but the most overlooked reality of the radical disparity between the two men. Sharat possibly adored as well as envied Rabindranath because the latter was everything he was not. Tagore was extraordinarily handsome, deeply self-taught, scion of one of the most respected aristocratic and cultured families of Bengal, and a Nobel laureate to boot. He wrote Amal Hom:

> I saw Rabindranath in [your] marriage ceremony after a long time. How astonishingly handsome—no one can turn his gaze from him. The more he ages, the more beautiful he looks. No, not just beauty—but charm. I know no greater mystery in this world (Ray 2009: 200: letter of 30 December 1927).

By contrast Sharat was homely, though possessing a soft and serene appearance (Gangopadhyay 1956: 52), Radharani Debi (1904-89) observes that he indeed 'looked quite ordinary' (Debi 1982: 117). Even he himself was quite self-conscious about his appearance and mildly admonished his publisher Haridas Chattopadhyay for having printed his photo in the *Bhāratbarṣa*: 'You should not have printed my photo. I feel quite embarrassed the way I look!' (Ray, 2009: 76: undated letter). He in fact considered himself an old man at forty plus age who looked like a dark-skinned aging Muslim (Ray 2009: 75: undated letter to Haridas; 161: letter of 31 October 1919 to Sarojkumar Gangopadhyay).

IV

Sharat never had any lasting interaction with the rich and famous of his society, except his temporary friendship with the local landholder Satishchandra, son of *Rājā* Shibchandra Bandyopadhyay of Khaṅjarpallī, Bhagalpur, and another landlord Mahadev Sahu of Muzaffarpur. Son of an indigent and irresponsible father though hailing from a respectable caste Brāhmaṇ family, and though an autodidact as per his own protestations and possessed of limited urban social experience, all his insights into the problems of a joint family were derived from his first-hand experience at his maternal uncles' home in Bhagalpur (Gangopadhyay 1959). His experience at the Bhabanipur (Calcutta) home of his maternal uncle Lalmohan Gangopadhyay (1902-1903) was harrowing and humiliating.

[3] The two essays by Rabindranath and Sharatchandra are printed *in extenso* in Ghosh 2002: 12-38. Tagore presented another lecture titled 'Satyer āhabān' [Call for the truth] at the University Institute on 29 August 1921 (Kārtik 1328 BE). It was not only directed at the non-cooperation movement but also at the violent agitation against the British and their supporters. See ibid.: 38-53.

[4] Sharat's referring to Rabindranath as '*baḍalok*' is interesting. This word usually designates 'rich' as well as 'rich and famous.' It is usually the parlance of the lower social classes who use it either respectfully or ruefully.

Later, upon his return from Burma April 1916), his social life in Shibpur, Howrah, Samtabed, Howrah, and Calcutta was restricted to some members of the literati and his publishers. Naturally overwhelmed by Rabindranath's social standing, not to mention his literary brilliance and recognition (Yash 2011: 32-61, especially 60-61), Sharat considered Tagore as a '*baḍalok*.' As a defense mechanism against an inevitable inferiority complex, he disliked rich people and always avoided them. Asamanja Mukhopadhyay (1882-1967) writes that Sharat would often insist that 'the history of Bengal is all about the middle class and the poor' (Mukhopadhyay 1956: 2). He impressed several visitors and acquaintances with his 'open rusticity' (Poddar, 2003: 27). It is noteworthy how he addressed younger women as '*didi*'' [elder sister] and made some of the male characters in his stories do the same. Such a mode of address, generally used by the servants of Bengali households, came to him spontaneously. The storyline of some of his blockbusters revolves around sentimentally incestuous relationships between '*didi*' and '*dādā*' [elder brother] or '*bouṭhān*' [sister-in-law, i.e., elder brother's wife] and '*ṭhākurpo*' [brother-in-law, i.e., younger brother of husband], the latter being, incidentally, also the theme of Tagore's famous short story 'Naṣṭanīḍ.'

Yet even with all his reputed antipathy toward the rich, and love of 'plain, humble, and homely lifestyle…[and his] defiance of artificiality, atrocity, and inhumanity' (Poddar 2003: 27), Sharat reportedly had little qualms dressing up in silk, or in expensive white outfit, together with fancy walking stick. He also smoked cigars or hubble-bubble from richly decorated and polished bowls and dishes and tumblers made of sterling silver (Ray 2003: 281). His other luxuries included collecting imported fountain pens. Radharani Debi in fact observed Sharat to be a well-dressed man of good taste (Debi 1982: 109). In his life style and in his social life since his return from Rangoon, one notices some unspoken but often unconsciously expressed anxiety on the part of an outsider—both social and literary—to prove equal or occasionally distinct and even superior (see Sil 2012a: ch. 6).

V

The odyssey of Rabindra-Sharat conundrum shows how Sharat, despite his untiring protestations that he was a disciple and admirer of Tagore, often insinuated or directly hurled abrasive comments on his older contemporary. Interestingly, Sharatchandra also revealed his reflexivity at times. He admitted that in his younger days he had sometimes criticized Rabindranath perversely, though, as he hastened to add, that was not his genuine feeling. He confessed to Amal Hom:

> It indeed is true that I sometimes badmouthed the poet angrily, but it is also a fact that no one is a greater devotee of his than I. No one recognizes him as mentor [*guru*] more than I do and no one read him thoroughly more than I. I owe him a lot for my popularity as an author (Ray, 2009: 201: letter of 28 Pouṣ 1338 BE [January 1932].

Both Radharani Debi and the distinguished poet and literary critic Pramatha Chaudhury (1868-1946) observed Sharat's social behavior in Calcutta. Radharani wrote: 'Sharatchandra harbored a peculiarly low opinion about himself. I've never come across anyone so casually condemning and ridiculing himself. What caused his self-disparagement?' The answer to her query was supplied by Pramatha who was quite familiar with Sharatchandra's family background. As he confided to Radharani:

> I suspect he [Śarat] led a life he hated as it was contrary to his taste. His transition from childhood to youth occurred via wrong path. When he realized this he was so disappointed with his own failure that he could never forgive himself. It's because of self-hate that he could talk about his addictions and his experiences of the red-light districts with such poignancy as to render them contemptible.

According to Chaudhury, this was a psychological reaction. Sharat was never his own self in penury in which he had to grow up. Though quite sensitive about self-respect, he had to watch his parents lead a degrading life in the home of his maternal uncles. Sharat's dishonorable upbringing generated his self-hate (Debi 1982: 183). Sharat's acquaintance Sarojranjan Chattopadhyay observes:

> I noticed that Śaratcandra was somewhat 'shy' by nature. He could not look up while speaking. He would often look down or elsewhere while speaking. This resident of Bājé Shibpur has not quite rubbed off the rustic smell. Naturally, the neighborhood folks did not express much interest in socializing with this stranger [*nāmgotrahīn*] tenant (cited in Mukhopadhyay 1981: 87).

VI

However, despite his inferiority complex or precisely because of it, Sharat could never countenance any critique of his output with equanimity. As a matter of fact, he considered criticism downright abusive (Mukhopadhyay 1959: 59). He thus felt demeaned by Rabindranath's critique of his *Pather dābī* (Right of passage, 1926). Tagore had declined Sharat's request for endorsing his *Pather dābī* banned by the colonial government for its rebellious tone and his request to the poet to supply a few lyrics for his *Ṣoḍaśī*. Tagore also advised Sharat against appealing to the authorities to lift the ban on *Pather dābī* and reminded the author that the ban on his book was an indirect but sure recognition of this talent as an influential writer and that he ought to be prepared for the legitimate consequences of his conduct. He thus asked him not to stir the hornet's nest and remain inactive against the ban calmly but conscientiously. Sharat took umbrage at Rabindranath's negative appraisal and non-compliance with his request and sent him a rebuttal on both occasions, though he reconciled at the end (Ghosh, 2002: 55-89; Ray 2009: 129-131, 180-182, 195-198). Radharani Debi's father came to know of Sharat's remonstrance against Tagore in respect of *Pather dābī* and observed: 'The poet's verdict, like that of a judge, was neutral. Rabindranath had not pleaded either for the British or for the Indians. Śaratbābu sought to make the poet his advocate and the latter responded as a judge' (Debi 1982: 169).

Rabindranath similarly critiqued Sharat's anachronistic, and hence unrealistic, portrayal of a *bhairabī's* character in *Ṣoḍaśī* [The Teenager], a play based on the story of *Denā pāonā* (Assets and liabilities, 1339 BE [1932]). He pointed out to Sharat that in his characterization of the *bhairabī* he lost perspective and depicted her inauthentic persona that was "fabricated custom-tailored to suit modern taste" [*ekhankār kāler pharmāser mangaḍā jiniṣ*] (Ray 2009: 348: Tagore's letter of 4 Phālgun 1334 BE [February 1927]). Indeed, the diction, behavior, and attitude of Sodashi are artificial at best and inappropriate at worst. Tagore rightly pointed out the utter unreality of the *bhairabī's* character. Sharat's remonstrance that his *bhairabī* knows how to love runs athwart the well-known belief and behavior of *bhairabīs* who are adept at ritual love-making without falling in romantic love

and who do not pass their times in the domestic sanctum [*ṭhākurghar*] arranging for the daily rituals at home. Sharat was actually way out of sync with reality about the lifestyle of a professional *bhairabī* (see Bhattacharya 1977: 310-324, 359-365, and 385-397).

VII

We have a dubious (but partly plausible) 'eyewitness' account of Tagore's surprise visit to Bājé Shibpur authored by Sekhar Sen based on his acquaintance Dr. Kalidas Nag's (1891-1966) deposition. This account describes Rabindranath and his younger associate Dr. Nag's visit in 1926 (no specific date is given) to Shibpur to see the ailing Sharat. Sharatchandra had stopped paying visit to Tagore's home at Jorashanko following Rabindranath's remarks on the circumscribed canvas of Sharat's stories. However, when Sharat saw the great poet at his home, he literally jumped out of his sickbed, forgetting his swollen feet, raced down the stairs, and prostrated on the floor at Tagore's feet. The poet, who himself was unwell at the time, lifted and hugged him, Sharat weeping uncontrollably (Sen 2003: 32-42).[5]

Sharat was upset enough to compose a rather caustic and rhetorical rejoinder to Tagore's provocative essay 'Sāhityer dharma' [Rules of literature] (*Bicitrā*, Śrābaṇ, 1334 BE [July 1927]) on the burgeoning new type of literature (the *Kallol* group) that seemed to the author to have transgressed the bounds of decency. Sharat's rejoinder ('Sāhityer rīti o nīi' [Literary protocols], *Baṅgabāṇī*, Āśvin 1334 BE [September 1927]) to Tagore's essay made some witty but willfully caustic remarks verging on hitting 'below the belt' (to borrow Narayan Chaudhury's expression '*komarbandher nimnāṅga*')[6] on Tagore's arguments, but he later recanted his invective penitently in a letter to Radharani Debi (Ray, 2009: 255: letter dated 10 October 1927).

Reportedly, Sharatchandra and Rabindranath resolved their differences eventually and restored amity and cordiality between themselves. Sharat wrote an unabashedly egregious critique of Rabindranath's letter to Dilipkumar Ray (1897-1980) published as an article titled 'Sāhityer mātrā' [Measure of literature] in *Paricay* (Śrābaṇ 1340 [July 1933]). Sharat's critique first appeared in a letter to Atulananda Ray, editor of *Pracārak* (undated) and subsequently published in *Svadeś* and in *Pracārak* simultaneously (*c*. 1340 [1933]). In his letter of 16 Āśvin 1340 (October 1933) to Sharat, Tagore reacted with offensive leniency to his benighted correspondent:

> You have repeatedly attacked me in abrasive tone, but I have never sent you a rebuttal nor attempted to retaliate by slandering you, publicly or in private. You now added one more [attack] in my list. Please accept my *Bijayā* greetings (Ray 2009: 313-315, 37).

Sharat penned a magnificent felicitation for Tagore on his seventieth birth anniversary:

> We never cease to wonder when we look at you…We all have received a lot from this world but have also given it back a lot through you. O the Sovereign Poet, we salute you on this auspicious day. We bow

[5] This dramatic scene, quite imaginable as Sharat's wonted lachrymose outburst, is difficult to connect with Rabindranath, who is not known to have betrayed such emotion openly. Moreover, Sen does not even bother to ascertain the date of this incident or provide some corroborative evidence except that he related it to Pratapchandra Chandra (1919-2008), son of Sharat's lawyer Nirmalchandra Chandra.

[6] Chaudhury 1382 BE [1975], 92. For Sharat's article in *Baṅgabāṇī* see Sen 2002, II: 1986-1991.

> again and again to the supreme expression of your beatitude (Ghosh 2002: 94).

A couple of years earlier, Rabindranath had sent his unstinted blessings to Sharatchandra on his fifty-third birth anniversary: 'Let your powerful pen clear the path of progress and I bless you wishing for your long life.' On that occasion the poet also sent him a personal letter hailing his literary contributions:

> You have conquered the heart of your country by your genius and thus earned the right to fathom its very depths. Your pen has touched the chord of the Bengali psyche in newer and deeper sensibilities of laughter and tears (Ray, 2009: 350-351: Tagore's letter of benediction read *in absentia* on 31 Bhādra 1339 BE [September 1932] and his letter on the same day).

Sharat acknowledged Rabindranath's blessings as his 'greatest reward.' In his response to the poet on Āśvin 29 he wrote: "I accept with honor this gift from someone whose minutest charity is a prized treasure for any writer (Ray 2009: 197: letter of 29 Āśvin 1339 BE [October 1932]).

VIII

Admirers of Sharatchandra egregiously misinterpreted Rabindranath's remark on his personal reputation as a poet *vis-à-vis* Sharat's as a novelist to conclude that the poet was jealous of his younger contemporary. Tagore in his letter of Baiśākh 3, 1333 (April 1926) to Dilipkumar Ray explains his disappointment at the misunderstanding between him and Sharatchandra:

> Many deem Śarat a better novelist than me, but this is no cause for my worry because not even the most scurrilous critic of mine would ever deny my superiority to Śarat as a poet. If it is desirable to leave for posterity some evidence of one's lasting achievements, then is not one such evidence enough? Everyone says you have a much better voice than me. Instead of lamenting over this I say that my handwriting is better than Manṭu's [Dilipkumar's nickname]. Even if I lacked any evidence for the future generation or if all my claims [to fame] were good only for my life, I would still have proudly proclaimed that I was not stupid enough to say that I hated Śarat's stories because I could not write as well as he. If I lack equal excellence in everything, my butting the heads of those who possess it would only crack my own skull further. The glory of my countryman is my glory too. I will deprive myself of glory by refusing to recognize his merit (printed *in extenso* in Ray 2009: 335-356, here at 356).

An intelligent and patient reading of the above letter would at once reveal Tagore's expansive heart, liberal mind, and genuine admiration for Sharatchandra. In fact, Sharatchandra himself admitted in his letter to Dilipkumar Ray that 'Buddhadev Basu (1908-1974) had made a true statement when he remarked that Rabindranath is a greater novelist than me. I myself am fully aware that this is the ultimate truth.' (Ray 2009, 247: letter dated 3 Māgh 1342 BE [February 1935]).

Even if Sharat could be faulted as a novelist—his narrative is often disparate, disjointed, or rambling—his prose is almost flawless, it being elegant, simple, and entirely delicious. Arun Mukhopadhyay provides an erudite and elegant analysis of Sharatchandra's prose style and diction as a writer of superlative excellence, his lack of intellectual depth and breadth of vision notwithstanding. He achieves his excellence as a prose writer by being disciplined in the choice of words and expressions, by his careful use of metaphor, simile, and simple *sādhubhāṣā* in verbs and

calitbhāṣā in idiomatic expressions and dialogues (Mukhopadhyay 2001: 128-166). Above all, his own unique prose style and the manner of constructing the saga of common people enmeshed in their stagnant and sterile beliefs and behaviours brought him closer to his readers in Bengal as well as India at large. Starting from his composition of *Baḍadidi* through the next quarter century Sharat maintained his reputation as the greatest prose writer of Bengal after Bankimchandra and Rabindranath. Perhaps his self-estimate as a novelist is not far off the mark as we note in his letter to Pramatha: 'Please forgive me if I brag, with your permission, that no one other than Rabibābu [Rabindranath Tagore] can compose a story better than me' (Ray 2009: 9: letter of 4 April 1913). Sharat was acutely aware of Tagore's literary mastery as well as his own pride of place as a writer next to the Poet Laureate of the World.

IX

In order to demonstrate the difference between them as writers of women's odyssey in their romantic conundrum, it is imperative that we need to compare and contrast two select novellas from their literary repertoire mentioned earlier in this study. Let me begin with an overview of Sharatchandra's controversial novel *Śeṣ praśna* which appears as a romantic novel but is actually what the author intended it to be an intellectual novel or a kind of social and cultural discourse within the framework of a story of extramarital and illicit love. Since his return from Burma in 1916, Sharat had been buffeted by multiple social, political, and economic problems he was seeking to comprehend, and this book laid some shrewd questions on them. He was moving away from soft and mushy sentimental gunk that had characterized his earlier critique of social ills as he perceived them to a more intellectual and ideological discourse by articulating some serious issues or questions on love and life in the sunset years of his literary life. In *Śeṣ praśna* he sought to demonstrate what the new literature of his time (the interwar years) ought to be like. As he wrote Dilipkumar Ray, he had endeavored to provide some directions to the younger generation of authors as to how to conceive and construct modern novel. 'I have sought to provide some hints to what our ultra-modern literature ought to be like. The "central pivot" of modern literature is not the attitude of making noise about the legitimacy of pornography,' he observed (Ray 2009 231: letter of 30 Baiśākh 1338 BE [May 1931]). Similarly, he wrote Radharani on the same day: 'I have tried to provide a small hint to the talented younger *litterateurs* about what the ultra-modern *bell letters* ought to look like' (Ray 2009, 263: letter of 30 Baiśākh 1338 BE [May 1931])

Śeṣ praśna first appeared serially in the *Bhāratbarṣa* in seventeen installments during Śrābaṇ 1334 BE through Baiśākh 1338 BE (1927-1931) before being published as a discrete book with corrections, modifications, and slight addition on May 2, 1931. It is typical of Sharatchandra's woman-centered stories, and although described as a novel, it is so only structurally, not substantially or qualitatively. It's more like a debate or a discourse through dialogues on various questions of social life. Unfortunately, this piece loaded with conversations among various characters lacks any significant development of either the plot or the speakers themselves. Nevertheless, there is a leitmotif that runs tirelessly through the symphony (often degenerating into cacophony) of conversations: it is the familiar philosophical conundrum over the question of eternal truths or traditions as contested repeatedly by the protagonists, an aging corpulent millionaire

named Ashutosh Gupta, aka Ashubābu or Ashubaddi [Gupta's preferred nickname][7] and a beautiful and intelligent young woman named Shibani (aka Kamal).

One of the other major characters, Kamal's husband Shibnath, is a living embodiment of irony possessing an appealing persona (an amazingly handsome visage [*aścarya sundar mukh*] ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1281), but harboring appalling heart and habits—a chronic alcoholic and an incorrigible libertine—a veritable cultivated individual *manqué*. He is a seasoned singer but a disgraced college professor having lost his job because of his alcoholism. His second wife Kamal happens to be his maid servant's illegitimate and widowed daughter. She, however, discovers to her dismay, though she does not feel disturbed at all, that her husband is a sex crazed wretch who had ditched his homely and sickly wife to marry her merely for her sheer good looks. Theirs is not necessarily a love match but, for Kamal, it was possibly the only rational course of action of an indigent young widow under the circumstance. However, her Casanova spouse is also a shrewd man of the world. With a view to changing his fortune in view of his paltry income from a dubious business venture, Shibnath hooks Ashbābu's only daughter Manorama by virtue of his good looks and sweet voice, though interestingly enough, on her first meeting Shibnath, Manorama took him (rightly, alas!) for a 'depraved, debauch, and drunkard' [*durbṛtta, duścaritra, mātā*l] ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II:1272). However, presently the enamoured young woman unceremoniously dumps her betrothed would be husband Ajit.

The good looking [*suśrī*] Ajit, who has just arrived from overseas with an engineering degree, is the scion of a prosperous Baidya family based in Punjab. A few years ago, Manorama's arranged marriage with him had to be postponed half-way due to considerations of its improper inauspicious time of the day according to Hindu religious calendar. Thereafter, Ajit left for England for higher education with the understanding that his marriage will re-occur upon his return. He is reputed to be a *sātvik* [untainted soul] and a vegetarian, who reportedly had longed for the life of a renouncer. He is far from a macho male—he is feeble hearted, childlike, and prone to tears at the slightest provocation of sentiment even as a full-blooded young man of 32—just like Sharat's typical male characters, ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1278, 1317). He confesses to Kamal disarmingly: 'Truly I am a helplerss weakling inside. I am absolutely unable to exert myself in anything at all' ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1353). In fact, he is, as the author makes Kamal admonish him albeit affectionately, one of those who never grows up even when an octogenarian ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1382). Nevertheless, Manorama, a traditional, pious, and caste/class conscious Hindu woman who, ever since the postponement of her marriage to Ajit, followed the strict regimen of a *sādhvī* [faithful wife]. [8] After his return from abroad Ajit comes to reunite with his half-wed bride Manorama, but somehow both change their mind and, as said earlier, she chooses Shibnath the scoundrel.

[7] Ashubābu belongs to the caste of the Baidyas, an upper caste (a hybrid of Brahmaṇ and Kāyastha castes). *Baddi* is a corruption of Baidya (meaning belong to a caste of physician or kabirāj).

[8] Manorama contemptuously refused to treat Kamal as her equal. As the author writes, 'she could not figure how she would address her [Kamal] after she had heard about her family's status. She felt awkward greeting this low caste [*nīcajātīyā*] daughter of a maidservant [*dāsīkanyā*] in front of her father and detested the idea of inviting her respectfully ('*āsun*'[please come in]) or in a familiar tone ('*esa*' [come on in]) despite her great looks' ('Śeṣpraśna' in Sen II: 1273, also 1263).

Ajit, in turn, falls hook line and sinker in love with Shibnath's neglected wife Kamal—a curious case of a perfect *quid pro quo*.

Of the other significant supporting characters Abinash Mukhopadhyay is a college professor and a widower who lives with his son and his late wife's widowed sister Nilima, an attractive widow in her late thirties, and Akshay, another college professor and a cantankerous and pernickety stickler of propriety, to the extent of being extremely unsocial. There are other characters such as the young widow Bela, young men such Herendra, Satish, and Rajendra, the last named being a superfluous character—an inordinately fanatical and unmannerly young man reputed be a nationalist revolutionary—who impetuously sacrifices his life not as a martyr fighting for his homeland's independence but a victim of burns trying to rescue the sacred idols from a blazing temple, and receives his postmortem panegyric from Ashubābu: 'Yet I say, "O God, whatever you do please do not wipe out the likes of Rajen from your world"' [*Tabu bali,* "*Bhagabān,…tumi ār yāi karo, ei Rājener jāt-tāke tomā saṁsṛre yena bilupta karo nā"*] ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1388).

Of particular interest is the intriguing background of the principal female character of the novel Kamal. A half-cast Eurasian, she has neither formal education nor social standing (she being the illegitimate daughter of her low caste mother) but she appears to be a highly intelligent autodidact, and on her own deposition, she was mentored informally by her natural father (we are not told where, when, and how she learned to speak chaste Bengali fluently why she remained silent and smiled when Ajit asked innocently if she was versed in the English tongue) ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1297). She was married at first to an Assamese Christian and, following whose early demise, she was made to marry her mother's employer. As for Kamal, she is not just pretty as a "white lily washed in dews" [*śiśir-dhoyā padma*] ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1268), but, more; as she is told point blank by the enamored Ajit, she deserves the crown of a goddess in the world (*saṁsāre debīr āsan yadi kāro thāke se āpnār*) ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002 II: 1273, 1296). At the same time, she is a strict disciplinarian and an abnegating ascetic in her life style ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1296-97, 1300). She has no yearning for riches but stubbornly copes with her penurious condition and she is wonderfully upright and courageous in venting her deep conviction in the relativity of all the conventional absolutes and she glories in her existence as a conscientious human being and an upholder of what she believes the right way. By the same token, she is not a starry-eyed 'beyonder' aspiring to garner postmortem merits. Above all, she is fiercely contemptuous of hypocrisy. 'I have no patience to wait for a God-given pie in the sky in the next life. My greatest and noblest truth is my desire to understand life in simple commonsense,' she averred in a conversation with uncle Ashu ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1380).

What this enchantingly authentic woman lacks sadly and sorely is simple love and understanding. Since her natural father's death when she was nineteen, she has not experienced love filial or romantic. That is why she seeks it in her monumental *Kākābābu* [an honorific and endearing mode of address for an aging male not always a direct or indirect relation], that is uncle Ashu ['Śeṣ Praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1299). She also finds Ajit a sincere and loving companion, but she does not desire a ritual marital union with him believing marriage to a woman with a murky past, might compromise his social standing in the long run. She thus joins with her new love on her own terms declining his plea for a regular marriage and telling him in no uncertain terms:'You better

keep me tied to you with your weakness [i.e., love] only; I am not so heartless as to drown you in deep waters of worldly concerns' [*Baranca tomār durbalatā diyei āmāke bendhe rekho. Tomār mata mānuṣke saṁsāre bhāsiye diye yābo, ata niṣṭhur āmi nai*]. She, however, adds quickly: 'I do not believe in god, otherwise I would have asked him to let me die seeing you out of harm's way in life' [*Bhagabān ta mānine, naqile prārthanā kartām duniyār sakal āghāt theke tomāke āḍāl rekhei ekdin yena āmi marte pāri*] ('Śeṣ praśna in Sen 2002, II: 1387).

X

The genesis of Rabindranath's *Śeṣer kabitā*, the novel that is "almost half poetry," to borrow Krishna Kripalani's expression (Kripalani 2001, 194), is linked to the poet's aborted travel to England in January 1928. He had been invited by Oxford University to deliver the Hibbert Lectures (invited lectures on theology and religion by a trust founded by the Unitarian theologian Robert Hibbert) but he postponed his voyage due to illness in Madras and made a detour to Colombo for recovery but eventually returned to India and stayed in Bangalore for three weeks. Here he completed the manuscript of his novel *Śeṣer kabitā* that had begun in Colombo.

This full-blooded romantic love story sets out a lively encounter among Amit Ray, an amalgam of an innocently arrogant Westernized gadfly and an eloquent intellectual, Labanya, a sober, sincere, modernized Indian woman, Katie Mitter (Ketaki Mitra), a thoroughly Westernized Indian woman as the main characters—all three young and Bengali. The plot of this "novel which is almost half poetry" (Kripalani 2001: 194) is a *ménage à trois* comprising these characters that highlights Amit and Labanya's odyssey in poignantly ironical exigencies that unite them to their former friends—Amit with Katie and Labanya with her academician father's pupil, Shobhanlal, a shy, sincere, and a quasi-nerdish youth. When, after encountering Katie, Labanya comes to know of her previous liaison with Amit, she realizes that his love for her was in reality not for what she actually is as a person but for her idealized image in his fantasy. She thus 'releases him from his troth' (Kripalani 2001: 195) to her and returns to join her life with her silent but sincere admirer Shobhanlal whom she had unwittingly neglected and Amit returns to his first love Katie whom he had forgotten unwittingly. The novella ends with her poignant missive in poem that has won for Tagore well-deserved accolades from literary connoisseurs. Here is a part of Labanya's parting letter as farewell to her lover Amit:

> Tomār hayni kono kṣati.
> Marter mṛttikā mor, tāi diye amṛtamurati
> yadi sṛṣṭi kare thāka, tāhāri ārati
> hok taba sandhyabelā—
> pūjār se khelā
> byaghāt pābe nā mor pratyaher mlānsparśa lege.
> (Thakur 2003: 125-26)

> *No loss is yours in losing me,*
> *an image of clay.*
> *If of that mortal dust*
> *You have fashioned a goddess,*
> *let the goddess remain for you to adore*
> *with the evening star.*
> *No gross touch of the actual me*
> *shall disturb the play of your worship*
> *(translation by Kripalani 2001: 195).*

> Sabcheye satya mor, sei mṛtyṅjay—se āmār.
> Tāre āmi rākhiyā elem
> aparibartan arghya tomār uddeśe.
> paribartaner srote āmi yāi bhese
> kāler yātrāy.
> He bandhu bidāy
> (Thakur 2003. 125).

I dedicate to you
my eternal offering and
my highest truth--
my immortal love.
Let me be carried away
by the changing tide of time—
Farewell, my Friend.
(My translation).

XI

Evidently Sharatcandra wished to imitate Rabindranath's intellectually rich novella by composing one for the sake of purveying what he claimed as an "intellectual tonic" [*intellecter balakārak āharya*] in his story (Ray 2009: 304: Sharat's letter of 4 Jyaiṣṭha 1338 BE [May 1931] to Bhupendrakishore Rakshit Roy, editor of the literary journal *Beṇu* [The Flute]). But Sharat's 'intellectualism' in *Śeṣ praśna* lacks the idealism or aesthetic *gravitas* of Rabindranath's *Śeṣer kabitā*, though it arguably robustly, even aggressively, is ideological and fiercely individualistic (Chattopadhyay 1980: 122; see also 133-134). The calm grandeur of Labanya's character elicits the connoisseurs' admiration and fills their heart with aesthetic pleasure that is the hallmark of a true tragedy. By contrast Kamal, who responds to her admirer's overture by announcing her autonomy 'Kamal is nobody's property but of her own' and mocks at his unwillingness to steal the car borrowed from their common friend and well-wisher Ashubābu ('Śeṣ praśna' in Sen 2002, II: 1318-1319) and then tells him that he lacks the guts to appropriate other's possessions (a subtle hint at Ajit's inability to snatch Kamal away from Shibnath), appears awesome to readers. And yet, Sharat's *femme fatale* ultimately harbors an essentialized maternal persona that is the hallmark of all the female characters in his works.

Sharatchandra of course demonstrated his deep respect for Rabindranath when, in his article 'Satya o mithyā' [Truth and falsehood] in *Bāṁlār kathā* (1922), he expressed his disgust at Calcutta University's censoring of some "seditious" stanzas of Tagore's poem 'Ebār phirāo more' [Take me back now, 23 Phālgun 1300 BE (March 1893)] during a recitation contest. He wrote indignantly:

> It is seditious to recite publicly the poem that was composed for the good of the country by the greatest, the purest, and the most blameless poet of our nation! And our boys are being forced to learn this truth from the authorities! (Sen 2002, II: 2098-2100, here at 2100).

Rabindranath, too, did not hesitate to recognize his younger contemporary's talent. In his benediction read on the occasion of Sharat's sixtieth birthday celebration on 25 Āśvin 1343 BE (October 1936) at the Beliaghata retreat 'Prafulla Kānan' [Cheery grove] of Anilkumar De *Sāhityaratna* [Jewel of letters], editor of the literary journal *Udayan* [Dawn], the poet hailed Sharat's genius:

> The astronomer dives deep into the limitless firmament to discover numerous glittering worlds revolving in their orbits at various speeds. Likewise, Sharat's gaze has delved deep into the mysteries of the heart of the people of Bengal. His readers have been delighted to know who they actually are though his easy access makes him an object of our envy. . .The literary world values a creative writer much higher than a didact because it transcends polemics and pedantry. Literature apotheosizes imaginative vision. As a poet I offer Śaratcandra the creative visionary my garland [of honor]. May he be a centenarian and enrich the literature of Bengal, teach his readers to apprehend the truth about human beings, to depict them with all their worth

> and warts, to authenticate the eternal human experiences in his felicitous language (reproduced *in extenso* in Ray 2009: 384).

In fact, Tagore's greatest and sincerest comments on Sharatchandra as a writer as well as a person were expressed in a letter of January 26, 1938 to the novelist Prabodhkumar Sanyal (1907-1983):

> He [Sharatchandra] was completely of his country and of his times…[But] one had to know him intimately to understand him. I have suffered *that* loss. I have met him and conversed with him on several occasions but I realise now that it was not enough. We should have shared a deeper intimacy! Only then would the great fortune we shared of being contemporaries have been worthily utilized (cited in Chakravarti 1985: 131. Transliterations, orthography, and emphasis as in original).

XII

In the end, one must recognize the most significant difference between the poet and the novelist: the former is an aesthete and a philosopher possessing a deep spiritual understanding life—both individual and global (Sil 2007) and Sil 2014). Sharat's *oeuvre* is not marked by any aesthetic, philosophical, or spiritual concerns, although he reveals his personal faith in the *daiba* or the inscrutable but inexorable power of providence (see Sharatchandra's 'Śikṣār birodh' [Disputes of education] in Sen 2002: II: 1962-1269, here at 1965).[9] He was no cosmopolitan as Rabindranath. His worldview betrays little consciousness of any concept of the global, it being primarily parochial. For him '*deś*' designates his native 'country' or the village or the provincial town, and the metropolitan cities are regarded as '*bideś*' or foreign (other) land. That is why his idea of patriotism cannot comprehend Tagore's '*deśaprem*' or patriotism dovetailing into the concept of '*biśvajīban*' or world life or universal life (see Sil 2012: 127-140, here at 130).

Yet Sharat's renown as a popular *tusitala* [a Samoan term for what in Bengali would be '*galpadādu*'] was unshakable and hence undeniable among the younger generation of the literati of Bengal as well as a large lay readership.[10] His sensible admirers and fellow literati contrasted, rather than compared, him with the magisterial Tagore without, however, demeaning either the great poet or the great novelist. Thus Achintyakumar Sengupta (1903-1976), a representative author of the *Kallol* circle, hailed *śarat candra*, the 'autumnal moon' in *Kālikalam* (Bhādra 1335 BE [1928]):

> Yini Bhānu, amarta kṛśānu, tini thākun sonār siṁhāsane
> Kīrtimān! Tumi eso Gaṅgār māṅgalyaputa Baṅger aṅgane
> Sandhyāmallikār gandhe, ghanabanabetaser nibhṛta chāyāy,
> Namryamukhī-tulasīr śyāmaśrīte--eshecha nadīr geruyāy.
> Baṅger mātir mato suśītal citta taba, tabu anirbān
> Jvale sethā duhkha-śikhā se-āgune nijere karecha rūpabān.
>
> *Let the sun (Rabindranath), the fire of the heavens, reign from his golden throne,*
> *but you're welcome to the shades of the cane-plant grove, to the verdant and*
> *humble basils, to the fragrance of the evening jasmines,*
> *as well as to the saffron [colored] river waters of the land of Bengal.*

[9] Providence plays a major role in his stories. He accuses Tagore of disregarding the role of '*adṛṣṭa*' [invisible or destiny] as the root cause of Indians' misery.

[10] I have borrowed the Samoan word from Sen 2002, I: 'Śaratcandrikā' [compiler-editor's Introduction], n.p.

Your heart is as soft and serene as the soil of Bengal,
and yet within it, burns the flame of pain and suffering
that makes you so beautiful.
(Sengupta 1335 [1928] cited in Halder 2000: 40).

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