

The “Becoming” Of The Writer As A Young Wife In *Nastanirh*

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Abstract

The early Indian fiction was greatly influenced by the Bengal Renaissance. The likes of Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra, and Rabindranath created some timeless characters to bring out the prevailing social issues- education for women, extermination of child marriage: all through their focus was on women's emancipation. Female protagonists like Sultana, Prafulla and Charulata delineated these issues. Some of them either had to leave their in-laws' or could only dream. However, Charulata at last endeavors to free herself from the harness and move beyond. Autodidactic Charu showed her intense passion for reading the greats of her time which allowed her to be the nexus amongst all the early Indian female protagonists. Her "becoming" of a self-possessed woman from a child-bride; her zeal to indite stories helped her to connect to the world she desired to live. She wrote only because she wanted to create and not to be published. In this she demonstrated her moral and intellectual growth. Charu thrived apolitically, in aloneness - being a rebellious lover. Eventually when Charu's psyche bridged the gap of her "being" and "becoming" through her engagement with literature, her husband and paramour both feared to accept it. Hence, my paper seeks to explore how Charulata despite her status as a wife in a bhadralok family was able to construct the bridge between her home and the world.

Keywords: renaissance, education, autodidactic, indite, nexus, intellectual

Early Indian fiction is a consequence of what Franz Fanon designates as the “national culture”, which thrived under the British reign. The struggle for freedom and the growth of a nation’s literature were inextricably bound. This sparked the “national consciousness” in the writers of the pre-independence era. It is they who brought the European form of writing fiction – the novel. They effortlessly merged the Indian reality in a European form of writing. And this is well reflected in the body of work produced by the Shantiniketan artists. R. Siva Kumar maintains,

They reviewed traditional antecedents in relation to the new avenues opened up by cross-cultural contacts. They also saw it as a historical imperative. Cultural insularity, they realised, had to give way to eclecticism and cultural impurity. (Kumar, Shantiniketan: Making of a Contextual Modernism)

Though this statement shows Tagore’s revolutionary attempt in the sphere of painting, it can also be used for his art of writing. The writers shifted their position from storytellers to story writers. The rise of fiction in India was in large measure due to the sustained work by the Hindi, Odia, Bengali, Malayali and Urdu writers.

The temper of science started to shake the “darkness” which was visible, but was not being checked. All the prevailing ideas and practices which kept the woman separated from the mainstream such as illiteracy, child marriage etc. were still dominant. It was left to the likes of Premchand, Vidya Sagar,

Bankim Chandra, Fakir Mohan, Chandu Menon, Krupabai Sattianadhan, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to wield their pen against these scourges. They made fiction the medium of emancipation and liberation of women. All that was dark was brought into the light of reading and writing. The fictionists created rebellious characters and revolutionary plots to remedy these wrongs. Though the literacy rate of the time was not very high, still people who were able to read, understood the need of education for women. Therefore, the coming of the new woman was inevitable.

The early Indian fiction was deeply influenced by the Bengal Renaissance. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar pioneered the movement and later Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Rabindranath took it to its height. Rabindranath was the youngest of all these great reformers. He was influenced by these predecessors. His art of fiction writing was an amalgamation of his own experiences with his meditation on culture. He perfected the short story genre in the Bengali language. In 1877 he wrote his first story 'Bhikarini' (The Beggar Woman) when he was only sixteen. The most celebrated anthology of stories was *Galpaguccha* (A Bunch of Short Stories) which was published in Tagore's *Sabuja Patra* (Green Paper) during the time period 1914 to 1917. His tales skillfully draw the irony and pathos of human life in his inimitable delineation of human relationships in bhadralok families. A representative work is his famous novella *Nastanirh* (1901). It was first serially published in 1901, then got its place in Tagore's short story collection in 1909. It has been translated as *The Broken Home*. This story is supposed to be partly autobiographical. Charulata might be the fictitious delineation of Kadambari Debi (Rabindranath's sister-in-law) who consistently supported the literary practices of Tagore.

Some of the female protagonists became the timeless portrayals of art. They had developed great fondness towards reading and writing. The making of Prafulla, Saguna, Charulata, Sultana and Basanti was a movement in itself. They could attract as well as spark the spirit of reading in the readers. Chandras Choudhury claims that they could "validate the very existence of the novel itself."

Amongst all the above protagonists Charulata stands out as the strongest and specifically the most intellectual wife. She could show her brilliance within a patriarchal bhadralok family. *Nastanirh* explores the crisis of a marital relationship. The husband who attempted to epitomize the true spirit of the Bengal Renaissance was unable to understand the feelings of his own wife. Charu survived because she imagined, read and wrote.

By drawing parallels between Charu and the rest of the female protagonists we can understand that she is the nexus amongst all early Indian protagonists. Bankim Chandra's *Debi Choudhurani* (1884) brings a physically and emotionally strong Prafulla who professes literature, science and philosophy under the protection of Bhavani Thakur who is a dacoit. Now shifting our focus from Prafulla to Charu we can observe that Charu is autodidactic and she solely banks on her own reading. In fact, Prafulla is an Indian version of Robin Hood and has extraordinary qualities which are more than a woman can possess at the time. Charu's development as an artist is more normal and she is every woman of her time.

Talking about Rokeya Begum's *Sultana's Dream* will lead us to a world of dreams: a utopian society where everything can be achieved by machines and men are locked away from their world. She envisions through Sultana, creating a phantasmagoric, rebellious fiction. In her "feminist utopia" men are locked up in a process of role reversal (as Muslim women always remain under purdah). This can only be Sultana's dream. However, in the case of Charu, she has the power of imagination. It is reflected in her planning on renovating the garden:

And in that little corner tucked in the west, we will have a little hut, with a young deer, a fawn. And we will also have our quaint little lake, ducks will swim around it. (The Broken Home, Chapter 1)

It suggests that her imagination can be turned into reality contrary to Sultana's Dream and speculations.

Odia creations of that time were *Rebati* (1898) and *Basanti* (1931), had a broader voice to encourage education for the girl child. The former one was written by Fakir Mohan Senapati, which was considered to be a path breaking story, advocating for women's education against all the prevailing odds and superstitions. However, it has been criticized for being only "a cry against human fate":

The story is neither a justification of women's education (of western/English kind) nor the support of illiteracy and superstitions in the village of Partapur, where Rebati was born and died. (Mishra, Early Indian Fiction, P. 259)

If we compare Rebati's desire for education with Charu's, then we will see how the treatment of the theme is different in case of Rabindranath and Fakir Mohan. It is clear that Charu is interested in reading and writing. Rebati strives to get an education and her family was hit by the epidemic of cholera. Rebati dies making it unclear what the writer really wants to show. However, through Charulata we get a clear vision of reading and writing. Bringing Basanti within the purview of this discussion, first, we need to know about its composition. It is an unusual kind of fiction, written in the 1920s. It brought out the "new woman" in Odisha with a collaborative effort of nine Odia writers. Chandrachud Choudhury in his article maintains:

Basanti's dream of a world in which women may have their own identity, however, rings as clear as a bell long after one has put the book down – as does her idea that men and women may reshape their historical relationship by reading and reflection. (Choudhury, 'Basanti's Dream', 57)

It is obvious from this that Basanti has a broader vision than Charulata. Basanti demands autonomy which is political. Charulata seeks the comfort of reading and writing within a family structure – in privacy. Though both were rebellious characters, Charulata stood alone and apart. She wrote only because she wanted to create and not to be published. It is her enthusiasm which led her to indite stories as she could live in a world which she dreamt about.

Nastanirh can be read as a *Künstlerroman* (a German word used for the artist's novel). Charulata's life as a writer developed in three stages. The first phase is when Charu was an "imaginative reader". Then she becomes an "apprentice." In the third and last stage, she becomes the artist. She survived the life of a lonely wife through her dedication to imagination-reading-writing. Literature is the exclusive medium through which she can bridge the gap between her world and the world she desires to be in – mirroring her mind. Literature was not merely reflective of her thoughts and emotions; it was interrogative as well.

Examining it closely, we can trace the autobiographical elements of Tagore in *Nastanirh*. It shall not be wrong to claim that the Tagore we read today is Amal nurtured under Charulata's motherly surrogacy. In the first phase of the narrative, we see Charu as a reader. She is young and imaginative. She has literature to fill the emptiness of her conjugal life. Tagore captures,

Charulata had a natural affinity for reading and writing, and due to her literary leanings, her days seemed light to her. In a number of different ways, she had arranged for her own studies in the house. (Chapter 1, The Broken Home)

She sacrifices her individual self firmly to back Amal in writing. In chapter two, we see Charu going through Manmatha Dutta's work when Amal has just arrived. On the occasion of being published for the first time in *Saroruha* (a literary magazine) an excited Amal appeared in front of his 'bouthan' – sister-in-law – to show off his recent endeavour. Charu did not like it if strangers read Amal and remarked on his writings. She believed that their reading and writing were all confined to only themselves. At the end of chapter three, it is seen that Charulata has begun to take on an identity beyond her husband's. Here is Amal, "That is true. What I myself feel is she can write quite eloquently if she studies some more." To which Bhuapati replies, "I do not hope that much, but it is true she understands Bengali literature far better than I do" (Chapter 3, *The Broken Home*).

In this process, the sanctioned relationship of 'bouthanthakurpo' transcends the boundaries, as Clinton B. Seely observes in his essay.

The danger with this relationship is that it might evolve out of sneha and into prem, which is what happens to Charu in "The Fouled Nest." Neither Charu nor Amal and certainly not Bhupati, realize that the limits of Sneha have, unbeknownst to them, been transgressed. (Seely. 'Translating Between Media: Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray')

Charulata efficaciously passes the phase of "apprentice." The beginning of chapter six presents the first attempt of Charulata's writing.

The copious young clouds of the Bengali month of Asherah gathered in the sky. Inexplicable darkness crystallized in Charu's room. Near the open window, she bent over a notebook, scribbling in it, lonely, lost in her own furtive world. (Chapter 6, The Broken Home)

She kept Amal's writing with her. Those inscribed words were idealized by Charu. Eventually, Amal caught Charu in the act of writing. And in the end, after a funny and sound discussion, they decided to bring out their own monthly literary publication.

It is implausible that the growth of a writer's mind can happen without the experience of suffering. Despite her position as a wife in a bhadralok family, Charu kept going alone. If she had someone, then it was only Amal. However, Amal broke Charu's trust by publishing her stories which were meant to be a secret between the two. She was devastated by the betrayal and held it against Amal. To her own surprise, she was the "artist" which she never desired to be. She had been praised in an article published in *Bishwabondhu*, titled 'The Contemporary Bengali Writing Style.' Charulata was praised for her originality and spontaneity in writing while the critic debunked writers like Amal and Manmatha Dutta for their exaggerated and hyperbolic style of writing. Nevertheless, Charulata waited for her thakurpo – younger brother-in-law – to come so that she could show her new story. Amal didn't turn up and Charu tore up all she had written.

Charulata's intense passion for reading and writing helped her to survive solitude. Whenever she felt alone, she embraced literature – she grew more mature and artistic. She achieved the feat which scared and perturbed her own husband and paramour. To pacify the tension between her and Amal she took the help of writing. Deliberately she scribbled,

All the light of the moon in its sixteen phases is embedded in the fathomless dark of the day of the new moon and even a tiny ray of it is not lost. Therefore, the pitch dark is completer and more meaningful than the brilliance of the full moon. (Chapter 10, The Broken Home)

This signifies the great understanding of literature by Charu. She is an artist who never tries to get attention. And she expected the same from Amal. The creativity of an artist has its own sort of brilliance. Her exclusive desire is to construct a world where she can live. The end of the novella hints at a matured and strong artist who can survive anything – the departure of her lover – the distance of her husband.

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