

**Self, Religion and Transgression in Rabindranath Tagore's
*Chaturanga***

Astitva Singh, Research Scholar, Postgraduate student Hansraj College, University of Delhi

Article Received: 02/04/2024

Article Accepted: 09/05/2024

Published Online: 10/05/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.5.43

Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chaturanga* (1916) is a Bengali literary text portraying the journey of its characters in a world full of religious actions and social realities. This paper explores the binaries between Self and Religion, traditional and modern, and womanhood and transgression. Characters in the novella have attempted to keep distinct identities for themselves without much getting into the spiritual discipline. The essay argues that the presence of multiple voices is a way to assert many social perspectives through which multiple acts of transgression happen. Tagore is very concerned with the abstract ideas linked with religion, which leads to continuous conflict between oneself and society. *Chaturanga* is remarkable in lucidly portraying this very idea. The essay concludes by discussing the self and religion with the help of two characters who are poles apart in their progress and interpretation of life.

Keywords: Self, Transgression, Novella, Religion, Identities

Introduction:

Considered to be a landmark in Bengali literature, Rabindranath Tagore's *Chaturanga* (1916) is a vivid portrayal of spiritual enlightenment and the notion of religion and reality binaries. Sribilas, the narrator, extensively delves into the journey of religion, philosophy, reality and religious dogmas. 'Chaturanga,' a Bengali word, means "four parts" or "a quarter," and so is the novella, divided into four distinct chapters, each named after the four characters. Rabindranath Tagore wrote the novella when the nationalist movement in India was upsurging and expanding nationwide. However, Tagore prefers to write about the religious notions surrounding the country and how it can affect everyone differently. There is no mention of a nationalistic voice or action throughout the novella, which reduces it away from being

called nationalistic literature. The novella is short, around 90 pages¹ Moreover, it deals with only four major characters influencing our narrator's life.

Translation And Structure

The translation by Asok Mitra is very realistic and organic². He refused to translate a few Bengali terms into the English language and kept the word as it is in the novella, supplementing the text with a Glossary at the end. The words related to Calendar (Chaitra, Sravana), religion and tradition (Pandas, Puja specials), are not translated into English. Even the title is not translated, rather kept in its original name to maintain the authenticity of the Bengali text.

Many believe the novella is written in poetry with an 'underlying musical form'(Mitra). William Radice observes that "Tagore uses the older *sadhu bhasa*, with its lengthier verb endings and pronouns, but stylistically the novella is not a reversion of the nineteenth century expansiveness". The novella is explicit in its structuring of chapters, which starts from Jagmohan, who is not the protagonist and soon dies, without performing much action. The novel is segregated into four chapters, yet each chapter influences all the characters and is not solely based on contextualizing only one character on whom the chapter is titled. In the first chapter, titled "Uncle," the narrator introduces Sachis at the very spears only after a distinct introduction about Sachis. The narrator acknowledges this fact:

"I have set down all such aspects of Sachis's conduct and ideas as brought the others down on his head."

The fact that one chapter is named after the narrator "Sribilas," at the very least in the novella, is a reversal of conventional norms, particularly of the nineteenth century when the protagonist or narrator asserted much space in the literary texts. Further the inclusion of "Epilogue" (66) at the end of the third chapter and just before starting of the fourth chapter is unique and not conventional. Usually, epilogues are at the end of the text, discussing what happened after the story. However, Tagore does not provide a resolution to the novella and terminates the story at the end of the third chapter, and the beginning of the fourth chapter can be said to be a narration of a story with no actions, the aftermath of Damini-Sribilas marriage and Sachis enlightenment.

Protagonist Hero: Sachis Or Sribilas

Alexander Welsh's definition of "Hero" is:

"The hero can be a thing never acting but perfectly acted upon. However, he is nevertheless the protagonist. He stands at the center of the struggle. He may not move, but his chances and fortunes are at stake. He is a victim at the mercy of good and bad agents alike. He never aspires to prosperity nor actively courts the heroine but does not remain a victim and receives the heroine and the prosperity at the end."

As readers, it can be conflicting to analyse while reading, the real hero in the text. Is the protagonist (hero) Sachis or Sribilas? We are given an in-depth account of

both the characters. From our narrator's point of view, "When I saw Sachis, I felt as though I saw into his innermost soul, and I loved him at once." Our narrator admires Sachis, which allows few readers to interpret Sachis as the novella's protagonist or hero. Sachis conducts acts of transgression along with his uncle Jagmohan as an atheist by reversing the religious traditions of committing actions that disturb Harimohan, his father. Throughout the novella, Sachis is influenced by Jagmohan (chapter one), Lilananda Swami (chapters two and three), and his independent self in chapter four. Readers see him through the lens of religion and philosophy and not as a "hero" as such, even though most of the novella is about him. Sribilas, the narrator, is a friend and companion to Sachis, yet he can make a distinct identity for himself. He accompanies Sachis everywhere, and follows the "spiritual discipline" in congruence with religious values and does not transgress at all. His ultimate marriage to Damini, the widow, cannot be considered an act of transgression; instead, this action aligns with the religious teachings of humanity and equality. It is not easy to consider the protagonist of the novella. Both the characters are given space into the text and both of them fit into the notion of protagonist. However, Tagore distinguishes Sachis from Sribilas by providing a chapter that succeeds in the epilogue, allowing a differentiation in narrative structure. Probably for Tagore, Sribilas is both the protagonist, narrator, and hero.

Sribilas is also much attracted to Sachis, which can be argued from the perspective of homosexuality. The first chapter tells us that the narrator is in "love(d) him at once ."Sribilas is a constant companion to Sachis, and the relation between them is much more than friendship and a silent, passive love of Sribilas for Sachis, which never culminates and gets more eradicated by the end of the novella when Sribilas confronts the institution of marriage by marrying a woman, knowing probably that the same sex love can never be transformed into the reality. Sribilas was also aware of the changing behaviour and attitude of Sachis after the death of his uncle Jagmohan:

"I realized that Sachis and I were now in wholly different worlds. It was not me, Sribilas, whom Sachis had clasped to his breast when we were united; it was me as the universe, as an idea". (33)

Polyphony

Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of Polyphony, which asserts that multiple voices are present in the novel and the author's voice, can be interpreted in this text. Tagore's *Chaturanga* to some extent presents the subconscious voices of characters along with the voice of Tagore himself at the background of the narrative. Sribilas, on encountering Sachis being serving Lilananda Swami, felt a behavioural change in Sachis nature; Damini's "transgression" against religious notions but at the same time his saying "I shall not ever transgress" (62), is the dual conflicting voice of her character; Sachis helping Jagmohan in humanitarian work but later serving the Swami and then ultimately realising the god as "freedom" without "the shadow of a doubt" (79). Further the repeated critique of religion by Damini is probably Tagore's own voice, who believe in a unity of nation which is not divided by violence of religion. Religion is the hunger for unity and joy and an aspect of human spirit which is devoted

of disintegration and communism. Jagmohan's act of allowing Muslims and 'chamars' to have a feast in a 'Hindu' household is an idea dependent on the social aspect of religion which confers that religion means human equality and brotherhood. Tagore's voice is present when Jagmohan justifies his actions:

"Yes, these chamars and Muslims of mine are the gods. You will soon see with your own eyes their amazing potency."

The voice of Tagore is in the very background of the text, which is not segregated and does not trace an individuality of its own.

Damini And Nanibala

There are only two women characters in the novella, both opposite in their portrayal. Nanibala is the vulnerable, deprived, and the sufferer of patriarchal actions. She is constantly paying attention to the male gaze and is pregnant, a baby to be born out of wedlock. She is thus a whore in the eyes of society, a misfit.³ However, to Jagmohan, Nanibala is "the little mother," a god-like figure:

"Wasn't she a fallen woman! However, it so happened that Jagmohan would not eat except what she prepared; indeed, he made it a point not to sit down to a meal unless she had cooked and served it herself."

Her ultimate suicide is her submission to the patriarchal society, which has reduced her to nothingness.

Damini, on the other hand, is a counter character to Nanibala, which is agreed by Sachis as we readers have access to his diary excerpt:

"In Nanibala, I saw one archetype of womanhood, the woman who took upon herself the stain of impurity, who gave her life for a sinner... In Damini, I have seen another archetype of womanhood, one who refuses to have any truck with death. She is soaked in the sap of life. She is vibrant and forever filling herself with grace and fragrance like flowers in the spring. She is anxious to miss nothing, reluctant to admit the hermit in her home, stubbornly denying the smallest tithe to the north wind." (37)

Sachis's views on Nanibala and Damini are only his sole interpretation, and they are incomplete. They are based on his spiritual viewpoint and do not mention the emotional 'self' of either of the female characters.

Further, Sachis's description is incomplete because we readers see Damini's emotional and psychological identity in a larger purview of womanhood. Damini is a widow who has experienced society's behavior towards widows. She is the one who rebels and questions the idea of religion and self:

"You people will give me peace? You are working up wave upon wave within yourself night and day and driving yourselves crazy. Where is your peace?" (50)

Further,

"Why am I here?... Haven't you people put chains round my feet and flung this woman without faith into the prison of devotion?" (56)

This statement is followed by Damini demanding books from Sribilas, and she rebels against the Swami to gain the books. The books are the medium through which she has access to education, freedom of thought and expression, and an attempt to subvert conventional norms. However, we readers are never shown Damini reading a book; instead, Sribilas is reciting the story. We are told that she has already read the novel.

Nanibala never transgressed nor rebelled. However, Damini's transgression in the novella is futile in the broader sense. Ultimately, she dies of "chest pain," which is because of the repressed love for Sachis and the unfulfilled desire to live a good life. She repeatedly confirms that she will not transgress, yet she can be seen rebelling against the 'male' ideas of submission. She has never adored the idea of religion and hence rebels against the Swami. However, Sachis, who attempted to teach Damini not to transgress, is ultimately promoting her transgression, and he is lost when Damini is humble in following his orders:

“Sachis saw her so vividly that the spell of contemplation was broken. He could no longer regard her as a symbol of devotional ecstasy. Damini did not lend beauty to the songs any more, it was now the songs that added beauty to her.” (63)

Thus, the transgression is more fruitful to Damini's self and wellbeing, allowing her to remain “beauty(full)”.

Uma Chakravarti has argued on widowhood in India as follows:

"The widow's institutionalized marginality, a liminal state between being physically alive and being socially dead, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the deprivation of her sexuality as well as of her personhood." (2248)

Damini, being a widow, is marginalized, which is why she wants to explore the world and the 'neighborhood.' She does not want to be a subaltern, a silent figure. Further, Tagore portrayed Damini's remarriage, a contemporary idea of widow remarriage advocated by many nationalistic figures like Rajaram Mohan Roy during the late 1800s. Damini is elevated socially and economically after her marriage and no longer remains a marginal woman, which is a triumph of Tagore

Jagmohan And Harimohan: Self And Religion

Jagmohan is a "well-known atheist of his time." (6). Jagmohan represents the self and humanity, bringing the true meaning of religion in terms of humanitarian actions. However, contrary to this, Harimohan is Jagmohan's younger brother. He represents the rigid religious dogmas, hypocrisy, and undertakings of religious endeavors. Harimohan is the voice of society, who is persistent in differentiating between good and bad actions. In order to safeguard his religious 'self,' Harimohan partitioned the house by building a wall that "went up through the middle of the family seat." (13) Further, we are told that "Harimohan believed in man's instinct for material interests, whatever his religious propensities might be" (14), showcasing his hypocritical nature.

Jagmohan is the 'modern' man who believes in the unity of soul and body through personal introspection and is ready to "sell off many of his books" (16). He is never seen assimilating himself into the religious "spiritual discipline." The English

education has helped him get into the very roots of Indian society and analyze the issues. He, as an extended person, very much acts like a sociologist and delves into practically uplifting the marginal people- Muslims, chamars, and women (Nanibala). It is through the identity of an "atheist" that Jagmohan was able to subvert religious notions without encountering violence from society. While cleverly placing himself as an atheist, Jagmohan criticizes the god, brahmins, and Hindu practices in their purest form and aligns with the pre-independent India social movement. His ultimate death due to the plague while treating a Muslim patient is a sacrifice to the nation's humanitarian unity, which is devoid of personal 'self.'

Conclusion

William Radice considered this novella as "avant-garde...its use of fiction as a vehicle more for ideas than for social mimesis." Tagore's remarkable portrayal of a world that continuously conflicts with religion and changing social scenarios. Through his rigid and lucid characters, Tagore critiques the idea of religion and its limitations in leading a fruitful, peaceful life. *Chaturanga* is a journey from unknown to known for all the characters influenced by the 1900s social scenario. Characters are truthful in their depiction and provide multiple voices, social as well as individual, which is the very act of transgression. The depiction of two kinds of women, both poles apart and their actions as submissive (Nanibala) and rebellious (Damini) is ultimately nullified by the death of both the women, which allows readers to think and question the women's status during the 1900s India. Tagore women are usually not submissive, somewhat transgressive, not conforming to society, and attempting to break dogmas. *Chaturanga* is an attempt to show this transgression. The novella is a nuanced exploration of the themes of society in 1900s India and simultaneously a reading that offers a distinction between self and religion, which need to be kept as two separate identities.

References:

- Chakravarti, Uma. "Gender, Caste and Labour-Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood." *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 36, 1995, <https://www.epw.in/journal/1995/36/special-articles/gender-caste-and-labour-ideological-and-material-structure>.
- Mitra, Asok. *Chaturanga*. Sahitya Akademi, 1963.
- "RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND RADHAKRISHNAN - A COMPARATIVE STUDY." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1905V97.pdf>. It was accessed on 4 February 2024. "Theory of polyphony | language." *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/theory-of-polyphony>. Accessed 4 February 2024.
- Venugopal, G., and L. Udayakumar. "Religious philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and Radhakrishnan- A Comparative Study." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2019, pp. 264-271,
-

Impact Factor:7.539(SJIF) SP Publications ;Vol-6, Issue-4(May), 2024

International Journal Of English and Studies(IJOES)

ISSN:2581-8333 An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

<https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1905V97.pdf>.

Welsh, Alexander. *The Hero of the Waverley Novels: With New Essays on Scott – Expanded Edition*. Princeton University Press, 2016.