

# **Home and Beyond - The Struggle of Women in Post-Partition Bengal as Portrayed by Narendranath Mitra**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper follows the change in the social and psychological paradigms of the woman hailing from low middle class Bengali families in post-partition Bengal as portrayed by Narendranath Mitra. Mitra hails from an immigrant low middle class family and drawing from his struggles against dire economic realities and those around him, he provides a sort of unique perspective into the thinking and behaviour of this section of the society. The study reviews four of his famous short stories, viz. Setar (Sitar, 1945), Abataranika (The Prelude, 1949), Cheque (1948) and Bandhabi (The Girl-Friend, 1963) to trace the evolution of women's thinking and their struggles towards emancipation from a predominantly patriarchal family and its boundaries.*

*From a life of compromise, subjugation and sacrifice, the author traces the gradual emergence of the self identity and the determination to challenge the odds and succeed, attempting to crystallize a potent perspective of the archaic nature of middle class value and the hypocrisy of the male ego as it swings between acceptance and derogation of women's rights, based on their economic realities. But Mitra's women are able to gradually break the psychological and social barriers to emerge as independent entities.*

*Even written in the mid-90s, his stories bear a remarkable and strong similarity to the status of women in low middle class Bengal and significant parts of India today. The gradual emergence of women from the backgrounds to the foreground, participating more actively in pursuing extraneous aspirations that shatter the opportunistic values and morals of a society that still lingers in the fossilized traditions of yesteryears, follows very similar progress as we see portrayed in Mitra's characters. This paper tries to crystallize this journey in light of Mitra's chronicles of the society*

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## **Introduction**

Narendranath Mitra is one of the great literary figures of the pre and post independence era, also popularly called the “King of Short Stories” in Bengal. His writings provide a very unique perspective to the Bengali society of pre-independence rural Bangladesh and the post independence urban Bengal (of 1940s through 60s) that draws from his own experiences and interactions. It is this perspective that presents us with the opportunity to study characters in his writings, often having been drawn from real life, in a social perspective that even today is very relevant in the State and parts of urban and semi-urban India.

(One of the) specific interest to the author is the journey of emancipation of women who hailed from the low middle class families and their evolution into a self-identity through a keen struggle with the opposing forces of traditionalism and the dire financial needs. He was an immigrant who lived under extreme economic stress of constant moving , struggle through narrow minded neighborhoods and extreme disasters in his own family and of those around. As a witness to the low middle class way of life through his young days, he captures in his writings the struggle and how it negatively affects behavior in people and sometimes strengthens their characters in rare reflections of honesty, integrity, friendship and humility.

In Satyajit Ray’s words “... The field was narrow, appears to be familiar and even humdrum, and yet the yield was unusually rich and varied. Only a high degree of sensitivity and observation could achieve this...” (Source: introduction to the English translation of Mahanagar, 1968)

## **Introduction to Narendranath Mitra**

He was born at Sadardi, in the District of Faridpur, (now in Bangladesh) to a very limited income family. Having lost his mother early, he was brought up by his step-mother. His father, worked as a lawyer’s clerk in nearby Vanga. After completion of high school in Vanga, Narendranath studied for the Intermediate in the Rajendra College in Faridpur from where he graduated with a first class and then went to Calcutta to obtain a B.A. Degree from Bangabasi College.

He belonged to the very dense population of immigrants from Bangladesh, characterized by large families that were dependant on one or two limited sources of income, struggling for survival through the late 1940s to early 1960s. He found employment at the Dumdum Ordnance Factory in Kolkata during Second World War. He worked at Kolkata National Bank for quite some time before joining Ananda Bazar Patrika, the leading Bengali Publishing House based in Kolkata, in 1951.

Though his first published writing was a poem called 'Muk'(Dumb)in 1936,Narendranath soon turned to prose. A kabyagrantha (compilation of poems)called 'Jonaki'(Firefly)was published in 1939 which featured his works alongside his two writer friends, Narayan Gangopadhyay and Bishnupada Bhattacharya. He has another book of verses to his credit which was published in 1953. His first published story was 'Mrityu o Jibon'(Death and Life) appeared in 1936 in Desh Patrika, a leading Bengali literary journal till date.'Asamatal'(asymmetrical) was the first published collection(1945) of Short Stories. Narendranath became known to literary circle mostly because of his short stories. He was a prolific writer and has some 500 stories to his credit.

Many of his short stories and novels were adapted to movies and inspired television shows. Among the most prominent, his story, 'Abataranika'(1949) (A Prelude) was adopted into 'Mahanagar' (The Big City) by Satyajit Ray in 1963-4, Bilambita Loy in 1970 (The Delayed Tune) was adopted from Mitra's story BY Agragami and 'Ras' (1947) (Exudation) was adopted into Hindi film 'Saudagar in 1973 by Subhendu Roy. Among others, Phera (The Return) was adopted from his story by Buddhadev Dasgupta in 1988,'Headmaster'(1949)was adapted by Agragami and 'Palanka'(The Royal bed)(1959)was adopted by Rajen Tarafdar. Few more short stories have been adopted for T.V. serials for which screen plays were written by Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.

Mitra's story 'Dehaman'(The Body and Mind)(1952) was translated into Hindi and Marathi. 'Headmaster' was translated into French and published in a book on contemporary India. It was the only one to represent Indian short stories.

Selected short stories were compiled and translated in English by Amitava Ray and published by Sahitya Academy in 1988.The book contains eleven short stories with a glossary of Bengali words.

Shawl and Other Stories by Narendra Nath Mitra were compiled and translated in English by freelance translator Pamela Datta and published by Rupa in 2003.

Mahanagar was translated in English by Chatterjee and Franda in 1968 with an introduction by Satyajit Ray.

Recipient of the prestigious Ananda Puraskar in 1962, Narendranath Mitra died at an early age of 59 in 1975 leaving behind a legacy of storytelling that is widely acclaimed and has even made it into the curriculum of the study of Bengali literature across levels in Bangladesh today.

In the words of Santosh Kumar Ghosh, another literary star of Bengal "...Mitra could tell story like a story, keeping the art of storytelling as transparent as a dew drop on the grass top and that was the power and magic of the stories of Narendranath..." Ghosh adds "...in this regard Mitra shares similar space with Maupassant, O-Henry, Chekov and Tagore..."

Prior to his untimely demise, his writings were published in a large number of Bengali literary publications and festival issues, many of which are too scattered now to be gathered together to be compiled in volumes. Subsequent to his death, this difficult task has been undertaken up by his younger son, Abhijit, whose efforts resulted in seven volumes called Galpomala (garland of stories) having been published by Ananda Publisher, Kolkata. Also, his novels have been published in four volumes. Among the novels, 'Dweeppunja'(The Archipelago), 'Chena Mahal'(The Known Castle), 'Tindin Tinratri (Three days and three nights) and 'Suryasakshi (In Witness of The Sun) are popular from the first day of their publication.

### **Critical Study of Selected Stories**

The author (of this paper) filters her study to the narrow perspective in her attempt to understand the journey of the woman from one of humble obedience and servitude to the extremes of family traditionalism, to the woman who challenges the status quo and blooms to autograph her own identity. To best study this perspective, the paper critically studies four short stories written about women hailing from very similar backgrounds of economic struggle and charts the evolution of the woman as she steps outside her domestic boundaries to earn sustenance and respect.

The four stories, I have selected for this presentation, were written and published between (1936 and 1945) 1945 and 1963. Mitra locates the struggle of women who is trying to balance her different roles within and outside the household, as an essentially lonely one. Mitra also makes the clash between the older generation and newer ones run throughout the narratives.

**SETAR (the musical instrument Sitar), published in 1945** in the annual issue of 'Basumati', a leading Bengali literary daily in those days, outlines the journey of a woman's aspiration commence from desperate economic need, rise to professional success and finally get stifled in the quagmire of a patriarchal egotism, placed in the perspective of a struggling lower middle class immigrant family, bordering on poverty. The protagonist of this tale, Nilima, starts as a housewife married to Shubimal, who is currently undergoing extensive and expensive treatment for pulmonary tuberculosis. Supporting an extended family of his parents and six siblings combined with the expenses of his own medical treatment leads the family to the brink of poverty, having borrowed to the limit from ornaments and friends and friend of friends.

This economic downslide leads Nilima to seek out her long lost talents in music and try and supplement the almost non-existent income from her father-in-law. Shibumal is uncertain if his parents would allow or enable her to pursue a passion outside the home but it is a challenge that she takes on to support her husband and his family. What starts as music lessons to isolated students, soon turns to be something enjoyable and leads to a steady source of income in addition to gradual fame as she moves to learning and performing Sitar recitals. Her fame gradually percolates to music lovers as she silently struggles against disparaging and sarcastic in-laws, who enjoy the financial laurels of her newfound passion and yet at every opportunity sound their disapproval.

Confident and strong against all disapproval and resistance of her parents-in-law and reluctant support of her husband who has lost his ability to provide for the family, Nilima accepts an invitation to perform on stage to an audience, quite beyond her expectations of outcomes.

On the day she is supposed to perform, her husband recovers from his long ailment and returns home amidst much welcome, joy and love. Amidst the joy, Nilima also expresses her eagerness to proceed with her scheduled performance. Back from the helplessness of physical disablement by his illness, Shibumal is unwilling to let her perform for an audience and forces her to stay back. Broken, betrayed and saddened at her husband's unreasonableness, she succumbs to his wishes at the cost of her creative freedom.

Mitra's narration shows how the woman was expected to remain only in a complimentary role in the family and bound by the ego of the patriarchal tradition bound values. It portrays a subdued Nilima's obedience and acceptance of the unreasonable expectations of the family.

The second story **'Abataranika' (The Prelude)**, written and published in **Anandan Bazar Patrika Autumn Festival Issue in 1949** (made into a brilliant film, *Mahanager*, by Satyajit Ray in 1963), portrays the bloom of Arati from being a subdued housewife in a lower middle income family to a successful professional with a strong sense of identity and conviction in her own self much greater than her counterpart in SETAR – she speaks up for what she believes in and is more defiant of resistance and disparaging attitude meted out by her family.

Arati is married to Subrata, who is supporting a family of seven including his parents and four siblings. Stretched thin by a limited income he insists Arati to search for a job, convinces her with examples from his peer group, defends the decision from a strong onslaught of disapproval from his parents and supports her through filling and filing of applications. In the end, Arati lands herself a job of a door-to-door salesperson with a commission-based remuneration for selling sewing machines.

Arati is a hardworking and sincere employee who gradually learns the ropes and gets good at her job allowing even for the hiring of domestic help to support the realignment of household chores to support her schedule. The demands of a sales job stretched her hours at work with frequent late-evenings, which were met with increased disapproval of her in-laws and her husband,

enjoying the benefits of the added and increasing pay. By then however Arati has found her niche and handles the acute tension of her family with outspoken aplomb. The tension at home comes to a crossroads when Subrata goes on the offensive fretting to Arati's parents and threatening of separation unless she quit. Arati holds on defying all retaliation from her family.

At this juncture, Subrata loses his employment due to a bankruptcy of his employer and here is portrayed with great dexterity the selfish attitude of her family with a change of their tune to one appreciative of her job as she becomes now the sole earning member.

Arati's boss at office, Mr. Mukherjee makes a derogatory comment about her colleague and friend Edith, with strong racially targeted colour for no fault on her part. This affects Arati's sense of self-consciousness and dignity leading to an altercation with Mr. Mukherjee and finally her resignation from the job in protest. In spite of little or no support from her colleagues, she decides to walk the path alone to quit.

At home the reaction was one of extreme derogation and criticism and her husband too finds and expresses her decision as a foolish one. Here, Mitra portrays an extreme sense of betrayal and loneliness in Arati at the loss of her husband's support at the close of the story. He portrays the patriarchal family in a self-serving light treating the wife's freedom of actions bound by economic ends and demands of the family thereby harshly questioning the foundation and rigid binds of middle-class morality. It is interesting to see though that Arati, has taken a stride ahead from Nilima towards a certain degree of freedom of speech, expression and will.

In the next story, ***Cheque***, written around the same time, published in the Autumn festival issue of **Diganta**, (a popular Bengali literary journal in those days) in 1948, portrays Sarashi's struggle from very humble beginnings to extreme self realization and determination. Sarashi, hailing from an economically strained family, has grown through an exploitative society and has developed through her struggles to be a determined woman.

At home she has to support a family of six including an ailing father, a divorced sister and her son. In spite of his reluctance and apprehension, her father allows her to search for a job to sustain the family. Sharashi is recommended for a job at a Merchant Office by a contact where she settles in as a typist and a lonely only woman in an office surrounded by men who alienate her with the exception of Subimol, accountant and office-assistant at the firm.

Sharashi and Subimol develop a close friendship inside and more so outside of the office. He was senior and well respected in the firm and would very often help Sharashi with her work. Sharashi was a mediocre typist but worked diligently, driven by her determination to be accepted, respected and grow out of her financial constraints. This determination and firmness of character was endearing to Subimol as their friendship grew.

After awhile, triggered by the absence of her name on the annual increment list that was drafted and finalized by Subimol, Sharashi feels insulted and hurt. Driven by humiliation, she accuses

Subimol, against all office protocol and decorum, of ignoring her interests. Subimol fails at any attempt at redressing her sense of betrayal and Sharashi ends up walking in on the GM at the firm to confront him.

Being exploitative, the GM proceeds to placate her and take advantage of her misplaced trust. Gradually rumors spread of a relationship between the GM and Sharashi as she is seen progressing faster than usual in the ranks and even gets an extraordinary increment in addition to perks at office. While she drowns herself in her work and her relationship with the GM; all the while, the rift between Sharashi and Subimol widens.

Sometime following this phase, Sharashi stops coming to office even as the GM decides to get married to a lady from his equal in social standing. Driven by determination, Sharashi, moving against all her middle class values and morals, pursues the GM to make the most of the exploitation that was meted out to her over the past. Through an out of court settlement, the GM ends up paying a large sum of money to avoid embarrassment.

The short story ends with Sharashi relating to Subimol of all that she did and confessing that he was, in the end, the only trustworthy friend she had and that she had wronged him. But she had fought against restrictive circumstances and come out a winner. In his portrayal of Sharashi, we see the woman emerging from the cocoons of moral dilemma enforced on her by the social boundaries instituted by her middle class origin.

From the docile Nilima and the gradually blooming into her own of Arati, here emerges a character who, driven by determination to fight against circumstances at odds with her, emerges as a strong willed and undaunted career woman for whom the ends justify her means to break free from the shackles of the economic restraints of the lower middle class.

The fourth and the last quarter of the transformation is seen in the story **‘Bandhabi’ (The Girlfriend)** written and published in the July-August number of **Bharatbarsha** in 1963 as we witness Shila break the shackles of traditional morality as she struggles through life and responsibilities passed on to her at an early age of seventeen when her father passes away.

Shila has to support a low middle class family, of similar origins that we see in other of Mitra’s portrayals, comprising of her mother, a brother and two sisters. She works two jobs, one of a low paid clerk at the Postal Office and supplementing it’s meager earnings by undertaking tuition assignments. Living amongst refugees from East Pakistan in a colony in North Kolkata, life is hard to sustain. In course of this struggle Shila meets and befriends Bibhupada, a platonic friendship, the kind of which often carries some degree of taboo.

Bibhupada also hails from a very low economic background and works to meet the day to day needs of his family. In spite of a wide age difference, there develops a strong bond of friendship that is nurtured through the time spent occasionally after office hours conversing on a wide variety of topics ranging from market prices and daily struggles to poetry. The friendship

presented to them an opportunity oasis outside the grind of existence and unbridled by social boundaries. Shila being Bibhupada's open space and Bibhupada being Shila's non-demanding psychological safe haven, their secret time with each other became something to look forward to and enjoy with each other.

Then one day Shila misses their appointment and left Bibhupada waiting for long before returning to his life in disappointment. But Shila turns up next day to explain that her marriage had been arranged and this had kept her away. She also tells him that her condition for marriage was her ability to retain her earnings till her sibling was able to earn. Bibhupada, grounded still by the middle class morals, is disappointed as he believes that this would effectively mean the end of the friendship that had come to mean so much to him. On hearing him express his disappointment, she is surprised and, quite to the contrary of accepted customary values that Bibhupada is trained to believe, rejects the idea that her marriage poses any conflict in their ongoing friendship and commits to its continuance, no matter what the circumstances.

Depicted through a very subtle expression of will as compared to *Cheque*, Mitra portrays in Shila a marked divergence from the fabric that traditionally held back women within the claws of a patriarchal and traditional family. She has grown past the trained inhibitions to be the woman who decides the fate and future of her own on her own.

### **The Questioning of "Middle Class Values"**

One of the keenest observations that we make from Mitra's storytelling is of the questioning of the Bengali Middle Class Value system that is instituted as a rigid set of norms and yet the fungible nature of these based on the occurrence of inconveniences. In all the four stories we meet the patriarchal male dominant force in the family that is regressive in terms of emancipation of the woman of the house and spares no stone unturned when it comes to voicing their opinion. And yet we see, especially in the first two stories, driven by economic circumstances, these attitudes change to restrained encouragement of the woman to earn.

In *Setar* we see that Nilima is allowed by her incapacitated husband to go seeking employment as a music teacher, much against the driving force of his own ego and the wishes of his parents. Driven by a situation that poses significant economic restraint on the family, Nilima ventures out into the world and to a great extent even manages to make a mark for herself as a Sitar player. However, on the return of her husband from his illness, the change of colour is marked as Shubimal exerts his rights as the man of the house, to which Nilima succumbs.

In *Abataranika*, we see Subrata allowing and even encouraging his wife Arati to seek employment to manage worsening economic circumstances. In his mind however, Subrata soon reached the limit of acceptability that refuses to tolerate late evenings and the reality of his wife becoming successful and involved in the job. He expresses this through his disapproval of her occupation and even takes the chariot of complaints to her parents. Arati was bending the rules



that defined her existence as a low middle class wife and mother. All the resistance and reluctance however change as soon as there is a turn for the worse in economic circumstances, once Subrata loses his employment. He once again becomes the encouraging and doting husband all for Arati's employment, throwing all his value driven criticism out of the window.

In Mitra's portrayal of his potent female protagonists, the traditional and archaic middle class values are exposed as essential derivative of economic constraints and exertion of male domination as against a definitive fabric that holds together the family as a unit of a coherent social entity. And, as we evolve into the realities of Cheque and Bandhabi, we see a woman who has broken from the traditional and conventional ethics to adopt her own definition of ethical conduct based on the circumstances of reality, as Sarashi and Shila move ahead to shatter the pillars of the acceptable. In Cheque we see a woman who makes mistakes and yet learns to exploit the situation biased against her to come out a winner in the end. In Shila we see a woman who puts her terms and paints her own life in a colour intolerant to the demands and dictates of society.

Even today we see many women faced with the same restraints of society dictating the path for their fate and future, and much like Arati, Sarashi and Shila, women are challenging the crux of traditional definitions and stereotypes to create their own identity and writing their own story. Driving a dramatic change in the social fabric, the modern woman is challenging every boundary and stigma as she struggles for emotional, economic and social independence.

### **The Journey**

The key underlying characteristics of the woman in Mitra's portrayal in these four short stories we see are psychological strength and the willingness & ambition. All four women hail from similar humble beginnings with limited education, skill and exposure, and in their journey through the outside world, they learn and gain expertise that helps define their own identities that are independent from their classical role in a subjugated partnership.

The journey, as portrayed through these four stories representing their respective eons in the timeline, is essentially a measure of the distance travelled by the woman to demand respect and claim what is rightfully hers. The journey is also one that starts from a severe lack of confidence and self respect to challenging the male dominated status quo of the family and the workplace.

The first stage of this journey is depicted in Nilima, who is able to struggle against reluctant and discouraging parents-in-law to find a niche for her artistic talents and even achieve a level of recognition that is beyond her imaginations of success. Her journey is however cut short as she is not able to gather enough strength to defy the boundaries that her husband lay down for her.

In Abataranika and Cheque, we see Arati and Sarashi go further down the road towards actually taking the fight to the male barricades set up on their paths as they overcome odds not only at home but at work too. Arati comes of age as her identity is defined, marked with integrity, self respect and hard work. Struggling to fight her patriarchal and opportunistic family and an employer who is racially biased, she sticks to her conviction and makes decisions that are not driven by the needs of her husband and predominantly male peers, but by her own sense of self respect and for the first time we see the emergence of the counterforce of the female ego. Sarashi takes the war a step further when she walks the grey line of moral ambiguity watching out for self before others and even punishing an indiscreet employer for his exploitation. Through all this she however retains her humility and honesty to Subimol; this is one of the strongest undercurrents of the humanist in Mitra that portrays the emergence of a female ego that battles all odds and yet she retains the elements that give strength to her character.

In Bandhabi, we see Shila who is at the end of the journey as she defines her life on her own terms through having a male friend and committing to the relationship, and putting her conditions ahead of the expectations of her role in a marriage and family. It is a subtle seed to a future that is very common today where we see the woman choosing her own realms of existence, pursuing her desires and defining relationships that were once considered unorthodox and carried a socially defined taboo.

### **Relevance**

There are some specific pillars to Mitra's writings that find extreme relevance in the modern world. While the incidents are drawn from a past that is very far back in history, the modern Bengal and to a larger extent in India, we see similar emergence of the woman fighting the forces of the traditional to choose the direction of her own life.

One of the pillars of Mitra's portrayal of characters is the inherent strength and determination that is more circumstantial than genetic. All her female protagonists are ordinary women who are victims of a political and economic circumstance unwittingly inherited. We see hard work and determination drive each of them to define the present and the future (for Arati, Sarashi and Nilima), markedly divergent from the catacombs of traditionalism.

The other most significant pillar of character we see is in terms of them retaining their core character fabric through the harsh realities. We see Nilima's dedication to her family and husband, Arati's self respect, Sarashi's honesty and humility and Shila's conviction be retained through their struggle against the storms routed their way. In each of the tales, the women are able to uphold what is dear to them and yet succeed in a predominantly male dominated and dictated environment. In the world around us we see so many women who are successfully breaching newer heights in their professional and personal lives while being mothers, wives and daughters to the family they hail from. And this success is in no small part a derivative of the

seeds sown by women from the generation Mitra writes about. Even today, women face similar opposing forces of responsibilities, traditional ethical restraints that pull her back from being able to succeed.

The last (and by no means the least) is the hypocrisy of a value system that is defined to restrain progress of women and yet one that is very flexible when the situation demands. The author has spoken of this earlier but would like to underscore the fact that while the circumstantial demands may have changed from one only of economic survival to a more complex array that comprises of social, sexual and economic factors, the axiom underlying the value system that is cited as core to our moral fabric is very often farcical. A value system that denies the expression of the self with a bias is one that is built on unilateral domination.

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