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FROM PERIPHERY TO CENTRE: EXPLORING GENDERED NARRATIVES IN SELECT FICTIONS OF SUCHITRA BHATTACHARYA

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Abstract:

The issue of women empowerment breaking the boundaries of patriarchy is the locus of the narrative based on the female experience. The representation of the female perspective in a narrative constructs an alternative discursive narrative, different from that of the male narrative. And once, when the perspective is changed, the whole narrative got changed. Suchitra Bhattacharya's lady detective fiction based on detective Mitin aka Pragyaparamita Mukherjee introduces detective literature from female experience, quite unlike the conventional detective genre, exploring gendered experience in terms of intelligence and its relation with the discourse of power. These fictions encode female experience within the web of the narrative, opening the door of a new prospect towards detective literature. The lady detective literature, as it was developed, was resistance against the male narrative of the detective literature and the subverted female presentation of it. It brings forward the women agency that was previously denied by patriarchy and reconstitutes the ways of interpreting a text incorporating women in the center. The narrative establishes and celebrates the thinking capability of women negated in the male narrative. Henceforth, the argument is how and to what extent the female narrative achieves its hold over discursive power, and succeeds in bringing up a whole new thread by subverting the discursive narrative of the androgenous stratum.

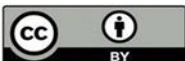
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The growing conception of women's rights and women's power in the late nineteenth century is the bedrock of the development of feminism in Bengal. The absolute abnegation of women's cultural roles and achievements is the matrix which calls forth lady detective fiction as a counter study. This kind of complete negation, found in the canonical detective fiction further establishes and perpetuates the dominance of men and subjugation of women. The disacknowledgement of women's rights and dominant stereotyping of women characters are blatantly displayed in fictions like - Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi, Satyajit Ray's Feluda, and Dr. Nihar Ranjan Gupta's Kiriti Roy. In the fiction Byomkesh Bakshi, Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay configures the female character Satyabati as a submissive sexual object, thereby highlighting domesticity in her character, with the negation of her rights. Though Satyabati is a well-educated woman, instead of being defined as a powerful character like Byomkesh Bakshi, she is presented as a helpless secondary character, concerned only with domestic life. Therefore, this given role of Satyabati is not something chosen, rather imposed on her. Besides, the disacknowledgement of her intellectual

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identity in helping Byomkesh Bakshi in solving cases heightens this deliberate injustice done to women. In Satyajit Ray's 'Feluda' series, there is an absolute absence of women characters in major roles, except for a few minor characters encountered during some investigations. Either their entities are as admirers of Feluda, or as damsels in distress. The dominant configuration of women as someone fragile, helpless, easily perturbed by problems, and unremittingly dependent on their male peers to save them ascertain the discrimination. Dr. Nihar Ranjan Gupta's Kiriti Roy is no exception to this patriarchal detective fiction. The ingrained male instinct in giving women characters limited vocabulary and characteristics of the oppressed establishes this derogatory stereotyping succinctly. The character Krishna, wife of Kiriti Roy is discriminated like the character Satyabati with her insignificant appearances. This deliberate scheme to give the limelight to the male characters is part of the operating matrix, against which lady detective fiction was developed. Although at that time lady detective fiction grew as resistance against male detective fiction, it was only a guide to women about how to escape from a dangerous situation if they encounter a criminal or a venturesome situation. Prabhavati Devi Saraswati- the first writer of lady detective fiction in Bengali- her '*Krishna Series*' is an evident example of it. However, as they tried to experience this subgenre that was thoroughly possessed by male writers, the writers of female detective fiction were unable to break through it, as it eventually led to patriarchy. But in the 20th century, a new movement was generated to break through patriarchy. Suchitra Bhattacharya's lady detective series shatters the glass ceiling of patriarchy by bringing in a new narrative. This narrative, as it is called female narrative, breaks apart the norms through the embodiment of powerful woman character in search of truth, and on a narrative based on women's experiences. In the novels, short stories, and detective fiction of Suchitra Bhattacharya, there is the emergence of women emancipation negating the social decorums. Her detective fiction as a genre has emerged as a counter emergence to the popular literature, addressing various issues like gender, identity, and social oppressions. It brought a new narration through the narratives of women, as it explores the previously unexplored experiences and emotions. Suchitra Bhattacharya's selected fictions - '*Bish*' (*Poison*), '*Maron Batash*' (*Deadly Air*), '*Sarandai Shaitan*' (*The Devil in Saranda*), '*Megher Pore Megh*' (*Clouds upon Clouds*), and '*Trishna Mara Gache*' (*Trishna is Dead*) re-address the operating discourse and deconstruct the strategies involved in the configuration of women. These fictions are not only exceptional in exceeding representational paradigms, but also displace and alter previous discourses with women occupying identity, rights, and more of a presence in social and cultural life.

Archita Ghatak's article 'Detective Mitin Mashi, not middle-class tales, might be Suchitra Bhattacharya's lasting legacy' ponders on the powerful characterization of detective Mitin and her search for the truth. The article concisely addresses the issue of the subversion of male hegemony through the achievement of intellectual identity by detective Mitin. Though it reinforces the intellectual identity issue, it failed to address how these fictions deconstruct the stereotypes behind the discourse in the configuration of women, and how women re-addressing the issue seize their power back. This paper aims to reassess the concept by showcasing how women struggle to alter the patriarchal discourse and bring in a new paradigm of narrative celebrating the previously undervalued life, experience, and emotions of women.

Lady detective fiction, a venture on the male zone, is very much alive and thriving, especially for its narrative and presenting women as intellectually powerful figure instead of only as a sexual object. The narrative is presented from a female point of view; so characteristics of an androgenous narrative- like seeing a woman as a sexual object, denying her rights-are transformed into women as powerful figures in the social stratum. In the fiction '*Bish*' (*Poison*), Labanya Mukherjee, a woman who comes to detective Mitin for help is seen through the eyes of a female. She is seen through the eyes of Mitin only as a woman who needs help. But she is not only the character who

is observing Labanya. Male characters view her as a desperate over-sexualized woman and are depicted as someone not normal, from the point of view of patriarchal social discourse, so the violence done to her is justified, without any proper investigation. It is this female perception that gives us another layer of that same case. In a male narrative, the woman who is subjected to violence is introduced as a sexual object, or a female criminal is presented as a *femme fatale*, someone who denied and transgressed the boundary of social norms, and therefore a violent, brutal punishment to her is justified. But the character Mitin changes the viewpoint, she regards them as humans and vehemently protests against violence done to them.

Throughout the fiction '*Bish*' (*Poison*), the police inspector Subir Halder claims that the crime happened due to adultery, along with commenting sexist remarks on Labanya Mukherjee. Though this fiction deals with the murder of a woman called Labanya Mukherjee, through it, a mystery is woven with various curious perceptions on the reason behind committing the murder. In the beginning, she is seen coming to detective Mitin as she was suspecting someone of giving her poison. Later, after the murder, various stories are woven regarding her murder, incorporating her lifestyle, of course, coloured with the imagination of the characters. From detective Mitin to police inspector Subir Halder, everyone is seen weaving their stories around the incident. For Partha, Mitin Mukherjee's husband, she was killed because of her illegal affair with her son-in-law Ranajoy Chaudhury. According to Partha, Ranajoy murdered his mother-in-law Labanya because he wanted to get rid of her and the affair, but since Labanya Mukherjee was insisting on carrying on the affair, so, to get rid of her, he murdered her. In short, Labanya Mukherjee was murdered for her infamous character. In Partha's words, "Before marriage, he had an affair with his mother-in-law. Even after marriage, they kept on the affair. He was continuing both relations... 'Partha laughed, 'he has taught his mother-in-law a good lesson" (*Bish*, p.33).

Police inspector Subir Halder is a character in this fiction agreeing with Partha on the reason behind the murder. He too attacks Labanya Mukherjee misogynistically for her lifestyle. Without even investigating, he concludes that since she was infamous for her lifestyle, denying the decorums of patriarchy - like going to clubs, joining parties, too much drinking, returning home drunk at midnight, her weakness for boys and intelligence- so all these led to her murder. For him these things are offensive, and the question arises that if it was a male figure, would he dare to accuse similarly?

Another character attacking misogynistically alongside police inspector Subir Halder is Labanya Mukherjee's husband, Animesh Mukherjee. He gives another reason. He is a workaholic businessman, busy in earning money but denying to spend time with his wife. As a result, she indulged in drinking and partying. It is because he denied love and time to Labanya Mukherjee, she tried to get it from outside, but without even admitting his faults, he accused his wife of being mad. It is similar to Mr. Rochester in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where to hide his wrongdoings done to and to get rid of Bertha Mason, after taking control of her assets, Mr. Rochester declares her mad, and so the human rights are denied to her. Here too, Animesh Mukherjee characterises his wife as mad, alcoholic, and suffering from mental depression. Therefore, she can kill herself out of depression.

In a nutshell, analysing all the narratives, it can be said that there is a layer of misogynist narrative present throughout the narratives of some of the characters in this fiction, and with the appearance of an alternative feminist narrative, another story is revealed that otherwise would have lied buried throughout the misogynist narratives. Detective Mitin discloses the situation that leads to Labanya Mukherjee becoming mentally depressed and alcoholic alongside identifying the real culprit.

In the fiction '*Maron Batash*' (*Deadly Air*), D.C. of Lalbazar, Anishchoy Majumder accuses Chitrlekha, wife of Soumyaroop Chaudhury of killing her husband, and as a proof points towards her ambitious job together with her affair with a college professor. We find the D.C. saying "Doesn't matter. These days Chitrlekha was having an affair, and her parents were unable to disagree with it. That clue is enough for us" (*Maron Batash*, p.111).

He even justifies violence on her for transgressing the decorum of society. Here, Mitin protests against it, justifying Chitrlekha's doing a job and her second marriage as her personal matter and not a clue to personify her as a criminal. Actually, it is patriarchy that is continuously in operation to dominate women, their emotions, job aspirations, hopes, and desires with their concept of 'angel in the house'. So, when characters like Chitrlekha breaks through it, they become the victim in the name of social decorum. We need to remember that Soumyaroop was actually murdered by his mother, who killed him to get revenge on Chitrlekha. Here, Soumyaroop's mother may also be discussed as an agent of patriarchy, because the reason for which she tries to entrap Chitrlekha is the latter's ambitious life, as she crossed the threshold of patriarchy by joining a job and deciding to get married again, divorcing her first husband. Soumyaroop's mother, like her husband, can not tolerate this for their rigorous belief in decorum. They try to bar her from her job, failure of which hurts their patriarchal mindset and thus she hatches a plan to trap her and to punish her for transgressing. Again patriarchy tries to suppress the voice of empowerment of women, and it would have succeeded but for powerful characters like detective Mitin, because of whom this scheme of patriarchy was revealed.

Since lady detective fiction was written as a protest against androgenous narrative so, the writer has chosen a humanitarian point of view. Though there are sensational experiences the focus is not on sensation as is the case with male narratives. Here, the human and social issues lie at the core. Cases in such novels resonate with contemporary issues like violence against women, children, animals, and nature. Many of the detective Mitin fictions are based on these themes. Through it, Mitin protests against all these violence done by patriarchal figures, who try to dominate and subjugate nature and women alike. There is a note of eco-feminism too in some fictions of Suchitra Bhattacharya. It denotes how women and nature are alike subjugated and exploited by patriarchy. Women, especially in the domestic sphere, are considered to belong to the informal economy, i.e, their labours are not paid. They are blatantly exploited by the family, without even considering their toils. Similarly, Nature is exploited too; growing deforestation, thieving resources, killing animals for economically instigated motives. The fiction '*Sarandai Shaitan*' (*The Devil in Saranda*), resonates with this issue, through the depiction of the destruction of trees, poaching animals, especially elephants for ivory and cutting down hills at Saranda, Jharkhand for acquiring irons, and thus destroying the nature and topographical diversity of the area. How civilization conspicuously is the reason behind the destruction of nature is the crux of the text, presented in the speech of detective Mitin, in her empathy for nature and anguish, "what can be done? Curse of civilization." (*Sarandai Shaitan*, p.89) The leading character Mitin not only protests against violence on the hills but also violence done to animals too. Here she helps the police to arrest the perpetrators and ensures justice to the dead elephant.

Suchitra Bhattacharya's detective *Mitin* series opens up a new perspective towards women's experiences in the face of patriarchal systems of both crime and justice. Crime, from the point of view of patriarchy, is disobedience of patriarchy. From ancient times patriarchy is conspicuously trying to subjugate women. They consider women as an object and do not even recognize their right on their own body. Patriarchy keeps women in the informal economy, i.e, doing household works without any pay. In Uttar Pradesh, almost 80% of women need their husbands' permission to visit health centers and 60% of women need their husbands' permission to go outside their

homes. They develop decorum and impose it on the women. Whether it is '*Maron Batash*' (*Deadly Air*), or '*Bish*' (*Poison*), although there is progress in the status of women but for their rights, they have to fight to snatch it away from the clutches of patriarchy. In '*Maron Batash*' (*Deadly Air*), Chitrlekha, a well-educated woman gets married to Soumyaroop, but after her husband's accident when she joins a college lecturer job, both her in-laws and husband oppose it. Here, Suchitra Bhattacharya, through detective Mitin addresses these issues. Whether it is a notion of patriarchal crime or justice, it is always about the interest of the patriarchy. Henceforth, including the female gender brings a change into these views of crime and justice since we start addressing the text through the eyes of a female narrator, so, her view regarding crime and justice becomes significant. What was a crime in the eyes of patriarchy becomes liberation for women. There are strong female characters in the fictions of Suchitra Bhattacharya, be it Mitin the professional detective, Chitrlekha, a college lecturer, Sukanya an independent call center worker; with them Suchitra Bhattacharya brings forth a new narrative questioning the validity of the definition of crime and justice. Here Mitin challenged the sexualized portrayal of crime and justice.

Redefining crime and justice in a patriarchal society where inequality is inherent is highly challenging. In '*Megher Pore Megh*' (*Clouds Upon Clouds*), the murder of Pinaki Basu by his wife Tamalika Basu raises some pertinent questions regarding violence done to women and the resultant crime. At the conclusion of this text, detective Mitin raises some questions that resonate and complicate the idea of crime and justice. There are some major characters around whom the story revolves- Tamalika Basu, Tapati Basu, mother of Pinaki Basu, and Rina, whom Pinaki wants to marry. Rina, a bar singer struggling for her family, is considered a bad woman by the society, marrying her is socially disrespectful and also a crime in the eye of the society, as it does not recognise her struggling and scornful way of life she has had to embrace for survival. So, in the view of society, she being an outsider is the culprit in destroying Pinaki Basu, but in reality, Pinaki and Rina loved each other and wanted to get married. This prevalent prejudiced opinion of society is revealed by Tapati Basu. Pinaki Basu had to pay with his life for divorcing his wife and his proposal to marry Rina. On the other hand, there is Tamalika Basu, they had a love marriage but with time Pinaki fell in love with Rina, and that made Tamalika Basu to commit the crime. From society's point of view, she committed a crime but Mitin tries to understand the reason behind this crime as a woman, who was betrayed by her husband. Mitin not only reveals the conspiracy of murdering Pinaki Basu but also empathetically tries to understand the layers of reasons behind it and empathizes with Rina's struggles.

The reason for the suicide of Trishna in the fiction '*Trishna Mara Gache*' (*Trishna is Dead*), is the domination of patriarchy on women. To subjugate women, patriarchy uses divide and rule plans. It first divides women between an arbitrary division between good women and bad women. By recognizing some women as good they impose some limitations on them, like curtailing their rights, and when those women protest against it, patriarchy identifies those women as bad. Once those women have been termed as 'bad', patriarchal norms can easily deny any rights to her and can advocate punishment for any transgression. It is the nature of controlling women by abusing which is portrayed in this fiction with a resistance. Trishna, a call center girl was emotionally forced to commit suicide. She was sexually abused by her third cousin Prashanta Sen, and even after leaving Berhampore and starting a new life at Kolkata, she was continuously blackmailed by him. Trishna and Koushik were about to marry but she knew if Koushik comes to know about her past, he would certainly leave her, as he would never accept a woman who has a murky past. The society which knew her punished her for transgressing the social decorum, and at Kolkata, she was afraid of this social exclusion she has already suffered. Though Prashanta Sen, the culprit was not punished, as a victim, she was punished by society for being a woman. Trishna was dominated by social prejudice and decorum and her suicide was the only way to escape it, to escape being

marked as a bad woman. It has already been discussed how patriarchy creates decorum to subjugate women overtly or covertly. In this fiction patriarchy dominates woman but there is a vivid resistance too. Sukanya, a friend and a colleague of Trishna takes the responsibility of doing justice. She protests against the domination of patriarchy on Trishna and tries to punish those responsible by trapping them.

It is really hard to determine the place of women in the power structure of the society in a diverse country like India, where inequality lies at its core. The concept of gender itself was conceptualized by society and was changed according to its needs. There is deep inequality in the distribution of power between men and women, as women are made less able to take decisions, whether it is household or political participation. Women taking care of families with their unaccounted labours are completely unrecognized when it comes to decision making. They are maltreated and that is the reason behind their early death. This is explained by Amartya Sen as the concept of 'missing women'. Women empowerment is possible only by creating an environment for them to realise their full potential, letting them enjoy human rights, fundamental freedoms in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. Suchitra Bhattacharya's fictions show the way of empowering women through some powerful characters having power in their hands. If having economic power is among the most important pertinent factor in the empowerment of women, then the character Mitin is an empowered woman. Independent, economically empowered, enjoying her rights, she is empowered in every aspect, socially, politically, economically and culturally. She earns money and bears her necessities along with the necessities of her family, taking decisions on household matters, on her professional job. She is not only empowered economically but also draws respect from the police, whether it is D.C. Anishchoy Majumder or police inspector Subir Halder and even from some authoritative administrators. She is appreciated for her dedication regarding cases and penchant for finding out truth along with giving justice to the people who become the victim of violence. Her intelligence is another factor to reckon with as she solves tenacious cases, which even the police are unable to solve, sometimes, without even taking any fee, if it is for a poor man. This poses a powerful humanitarian aspect of the character Mitin, during a time, in a society where inequality is inherent.

In Suchitra Bhattacharya's detective fiction, there are constant clashes between the women characters and the patriarchal social discourse. The society continuously tries to subvert the women, who are trying to achieve a place in the power structure of the society, overtly or covertly. Sometimes, patriarchy tries to subjugate women with the discourse of decorum, structured with discourses to fulfill their intentions, or sometimes, by abusing overtly for being women. This is not something new; patriarchy has been using this method to tame those women who openly revolt against it. But this conspiracy was always revealed by the women revolutionaries, who break the glass ceiling of patriarchy and usher in a new narrative, a new hope by bringing out their own experiences. The stubborn women characters of Suchitra Bhattacharya defy patriarchy to bring justice to the victim. They remain stubborn at the face of attack by the patriarchy and eventually defeat it with the defiance of the patriarchal symbolization of the women as a sexual object. They challenge the idea and seize their share of rights. This perception brings in another story, another narrative from those people who previously were made subaltern figures in the society. This subaltern narrative changes the power structure in society, making the women enjoying equal rights, holding possibilities in their life. In this paper, I have tried to present these socio-political changes in the power structure of the society, and the birth of a new narrative that will open a new arena with the prospect of ushering a world of women experience, feelings and treating women as a human being.

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