"I believe that before all else I am as reasonable just as you are, a human being...
... At all events I must try and become one ... I must make up my mind which is right, society or I." 1

"Women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to man — a position comparable in many respects to vast minorities in spite of the fact that woman constitute numerically at least half of the human race and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural feminine 'characteristics' but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of man..... This has resulted in the general failure of women to take place of human dignity as free and independent existence, associated with man on place of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited her achievements in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils." 2

"...humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being....[woman] is simply what man decrees: thus she is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appeals essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex — absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her: she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is....the Absolute — she is the other." 3

The general myth about women is that they are parasites, disregarding the fact that they represent half of the humanity.

"Women were represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all human ills. She should be ashamed of the very thought that she is a woman. She should live in continual penance, on account of the curses she has brought upon the world." 4
The Christian ethics inevitably, through the emphasis laid upon sexual virtues did a great deal to degrade the position of women. Since the moralists were men, women appeared as the temptress since woman was the temptress; it was desirable to curtail all her opportunities.

"The gender construction has been crucial in the social reproduction of class in India. Women's role in species reproduction has rendered 'natural' a process that is deliberately constructed in order to dominate them."

Paternalism claims women for hearth and home, defines her as sentiment, inwardsness, immanence. Myth of women plays a considerable part in literature. The division of humanity into two classes is a static myth. The woman is other than man. Denying the multiple existences of actual women, myth portrays them as eternally feminine — unique and changeless. "This mythical idea found its expression in the poet's lines:

Not God alone has created you o maiden
Man has completed your being by giving you
Beauty and grace.
Again,
Your feminity is half your womanhood
Half is the imagination of man.
Women have always been misled by this imported ideal of womanhood."

She has always turned herself behind the mist of illusions fenced in all sides and forced away from the real world to seclusion. There is an aphoristic statement——'Man for the world and woman for man' even in the 'Genesis' story. Adam was directly created by God, Eve was an after-thought. The woman was the second to be created and first to fall.

The Bible picks out the qualities of men to bravery, prowess, wisdom, whereas it highlights women as weak, cowardly and sources of filth and sin.
Therefore, a woman exists on sufferance as second rate citizen. Her life is complete only when she fulfills the man’s needs.

“Woman herself recognizes that the world is masculine on the whole, those who fashioned it, ruled it, dominated it are all men. As for her, she does not consider herself responsible for it. It is understood that she is inferior and dependent, she has not learnt the lesson of violence, and she has never stood forth for to demand. ‘Shut up in her flesh, her home she sees herself as passive before Gods with human faces who set goals and established values for them.’ Not only is she ignorant of what constitutes a true action, capable of changing the face of the world but she is lost in the midst of the world as if she were at the heart of immense. The masculine world seems to her a transcendent reality, an absolute. As Frazer says: “Men make the Gods, women worship them.”

“The story of Hindu woman is a tragedy of gradual suppression. The position of the woman of the Aryan invaders of India was one of authority and honour. In the Rig Veda itself we find signs that women were coming to be regarded as inferior beings and unequal to man in intellect.”

However in ancient India there were instances of women who were different from the traditional docile type. There were tradition of woman being educated and having intellectual pursuits, formal and informal. We still remember the names of women scholars of ancient India as Apisala, Gargi, Sulabha, Atreyi, Lopamudra. “Maitreyi by her outright rejection of material wealth and acceptance of what he valued more added a new dimension to the concept of Indian womanhood for all time to come.”

Her quest of knowledge made her an extraordinary woman who emerged from the narrow confines of her home and at once took us to a world which lies beyond the mundane existence of human beings.

This tradition of enlightenment discontinued later. Woman came to have no formal
education and displayed no intellectual interests. Consequently neither her learning nor other qualities were taken care of. They were lost in the humdrum domesticity of married life.

In 'Arthashastra' and 'Manusmriti' attempts were made to curtail their independence and make them totally dependent on their male members in the family. Woman lost many of their social and economic rights.

"A virtuous wife should constantly serve husband like a god even if he behaves badly, freely indulges in his lust and is devoid of any good qualities. Again in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her Lord is dead, to her sons, a woman must never be independent." 11

"Herself a piece of property she could not give gifts but could be given in sacrifice, always lost and won in chess, bought or sold as goods, she had no right to property none over her own body, she was a man's absolute” 12

Scholars like J. B. Choudhury, B.S. Upadhyay, Shakuntala Rao Shastri and many more studied the reasons behind this transition of woman's position. There has been gradual decline from a position where woman enjoyed considerable degree of freedom to a state of dependence under the full control of their husbands. The reasons advanced for their downfall are many such as ———

(i) "The imposition of Brahanical austerities on society.

(ii) Foreign invasions of India affecting woman’s status adversely.

(iii) Discontinuance of Upanayana of girls.

(iv) Lack of educational facilities of woman.

(v) Caste system, Joint family System etc” 13

"The prohibition of Upanayana amounted to spiritual disenfranchisement of woman and produced a disastrous effect upon their general position in society.” 77
name of religion and other socio cultural practices have been denied opportunities of growth.” 14

To some extent, Vedic literature boosted the trend of co modification of woman in the literature of the subsequent period. Though some litterateurs of that period had taken some liberty in portraying woman with a colour of their imagination, but in reality women were very insignificant tools in the mainstream society and their position was shrinking day by day. Generation after generation looked upon women as a mother, housekeeper or a wife and her identity was judged by the efficiency with which she played those roles and her recognition in the society was largely dependent on her docility and service to her family but in literature and life her worth was judged by her beauty and youth. What she was not expected to be good at was independent thought, intellect and education in general which were not her adorable qualities in the eye of the society. This mind set about women was widely present in the various epics, the Puranas and the Vedanga-based literature with one or two exceptions. That is why Sita of the Ramayana is always a normative role model to Indian women, her life being a saga of sacrifice, whereas Draupadi of the Mahabharata is not that popular in spite of being intelligent and strong-willed.

If we analyse the synonyms of the term ‘woman’, we find that they have their origins traceable to some masculine gender word or the other with the only difference being in the inflection.
The woman has been victim of every imaginable kind of suppression, oppression, subordination and humiliation. Her role has almost always been clearly framed within shades of grey or scope for fluidity, interpretation, and question. Interestingly, her victimization has either been glorified as sacrifice or she has been condemned as being villainous. Though each human being is an individual to the extent he or she can be identified. But the stories of woman are designed to keep her away from free expression of her real feelings. Woman in our society rarely takes decisions or is permitted to express her opinion.

In the ‘Koran’, it is written that there are two reasons for male dominance over women—one, the Allah has empowered the males with requisite mental and physical prowess and second, they (the males) are capable of protecting the women’s dignity and looking after them. As per ‘Haadis Sharif’, if a ‘Sati’ (Virtuous) woman dies after satisfying her husband, she is sure to go to the heaven.

"কোরানের পাণ্ডুলিপি পার্য সৃষ্টি নেওয়ার সময় সত্য মুক্ত লেখা আছে পুরুষদের নারীদের ওপর প্রভাব বজায় রাখা চলার প্রবণতা দুইটি কারণ এই যে আল্লাহর কাছে পুরুষদের নারীদের ওপর প্রভাব বজায় রাখা চলার উপর শারীরিক ও মানসিক বল প্রদান করিয়াছেন। দুইতে এর পুরুষদের নারীদের ভরণ পেশাক্ষর ও মান ইত্যাদি বজায় রাখা চলার প্রবণতা দুইটি কারণ। হাদিস শরিফে আছে কোরানের বক্তা করায় পর নারীর মৃত্যু হিলে তাহার বোহেরের পথে কেনা বাসা থাকে না।" 17

Let us now see what place and position was assigned to women in Buddhism and Jainism. Both these were ascetic religions and they have not devoted much attention to the duties and ideals of lay women. The founder and leaders of both these movements shared the indifference to or contempt for women. The Buddha was reluctant to admit women to
his church and the Digamvara Jains hold that women can never get salvation except by first being born as men.

The condition of woman was not heavenly in the west

“All men desire to have in the woman ....... Not only a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely but a favourite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds ....... All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal or character is the very opposite of man, no self will and government by self control, but submission and yielding to the control of others.” 18

“In ancient Bengal as in the rest of India, a woman had hardly any independent legal or social status except as a member of the family of her father and husband..... The prevalence of polygamy must have made her life at home irksome...... The position of the widows in the society was not at all enviable. They were often looked upon as inauspicious and were very seldom allowed to take part in the different rites and ceremonies. They seem to have been encouraged by the people to immolate themselves in the funeral pyres of their husbands.” 19

That the status of women was not better than domesticated animals, the autobiography of first Bengali woman RasSundari Devi bears ample testimony to that.

“আমি সেই কাপড় পরিয়া বুক পর্যন্ত ঘোষা নিয়া সকল কাজ করিতাম। আর যে সকল লোক কাজ ও সে কথা করিতাম না। সে কাপড়ের মধ্য হইতে বাহিরে দৃষ্টি হইত না। যেন কুলু কাজ হত দুইটি চক্তু চাকা ঘাটিত। কি করিব আমি লিপির কিঞ্চি বিহিলা।” 20

“The peculiar disability attached to woman all over the world is based on religion. Woman’s basic disability originates in religion. Woman is temptress and is warned against in all the religions of the world. Political disability is also biologically defined and becomes the basis for economic and social disabilities. That is why even in the most expansive moments of the French revolution the revolutionaries thought it fit to reject the Declaration

80
of the Rights of Women. The popular slogan ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’, applied only to
men, because the religious prejudice against woman triumphed even when reason was
presumed to have replaced religion.” 21

“Barring a few exceptions, the ‘modernists’ or the ‘revivalists’ were not really
concerned with gender equality, women’s own desires or their perspectives on dignity and
justice. Nor were they aware of the inter relationships between patriarchal controls over
women’s freedom, roles and behaviour and the carefully preserved pluralist hierarchical
organization of Indian Society. Issues such As the radical restructuring of the social order
or of bridging the social gap between the social classes, castes, communities were very far
from most reformers’ aim.” 22

Engels retraces the history of woman in ‘Origins of the family ‘Private Property and
the State’ showing how women were equal in the Stone Age. Gradually through the discovery
of copper, bronze and iron, the appearance of the agriculture, man had recourse to the
labour of other man, whom he reduces to slavery. Private property appeared, thus man
became master and protector of every woman. This was the great historical defeat of the
feminine sex.

Thus “women have served all these centuries as looking glasses, possessing the
magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without
that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle.” 23

“The Industrial Revolution dealt a fatal blow to feudalism, in the upheaval which
followed; many new social factors raised their heads. Side by side democratic revolutions
, such as French Revolution initiated a new ideology and a new philosophy of life. Those,
whom tradition and religion had long oppressed, saw a ray of hope in the new message
and slowly the dumb grew articulate and soon the inert mass became convulsed into a
mighty tidal wave that nearly shook the western world from end to end. Equality, human
rights, new slogans filled the air. The long suppressed women found new champions to encourage and lead them.” 24

Bankim Chandra the first novelist of Bengali literature portrayed women with sympathy and highlighted their inner potentials. The progress of the artist in Bankim was stymied by the society. Bankim did not accept the whimsical variety of love. The dreams and disillusionments of the Bengali race were present in Bankim’s novels in parallel streams. The radiance that is emitted by his characters and the churnings that are experienced by them have been distinctly brought alive by his pen. Bankim blended his own emotions and conflicting thoughts in creating those characters.

“শিশী বরিষের হাতে ছেপে খাবে সমাজ। ভালোবাসার অনিয়মিত রূপ বক্তিম নালেকনী। বাঙালির শর এবং অপরতাপ সৃষ্টি সমাজের ভাব বজিম উপন্যাসে প্রবর্তিত। , তাহার দৃষ্টি চরিত্রগুলিতে যে ইতিম ও যাহা লক্ষিত হয় তাব মরণ করিমচন্দ্রের স্পষ্ট করেছেন। বর্ষপদের নিজের আকৃতিতের বর্ষ নজিবে যারা চরিত্র নির্মাণ করায়।” 25

There is an underlying suggestion of allegiance to the societal norms in the writings of Bankimchandra. It must be said that despite showing their humanitarian consideration towards woman even Tagore and Saratchandra fell short of giving woman equal status. Bankimchandra voiced his reservations against woman’s liberation through the mouths of his female characters

On one hand Bankimchandra gave his women liberty and independence of action, but on the other hand, he professed the old, traditional values through their words. Is not it an example of gender politics?

As Bankimchandra catapulted Devi Chaudhurani to the pinnacle of power, he also brought her back to her domestic moors with her having to perform her homemaker’s job, even to co-exist peacefully with her co-wives.

‘Come, Prafulla. Present yourself before us. Let us see you. Swear in front of the society that you belong not to the new, but to the old.’
But in Bankimchandra’s writings, we find a complex combination of romance (An influence of the western classics), reformation and Hindu revivalism.

Humanitarian writers like Sarat Chandra, who was known for conferring status and values on women, was not in favour of giving them complete freedom. In his essay ‘Nārīr Mulya’, Sarat Chandra precisely wrote that if absolute freedom is given to women, they may misuse it. That is why he himself demarcated the confines of women’s freedom in the context of his novels, like ‘Grihadāha’ and ‘Caritrahin’.

The common man has adored Annadadidi of ‘Srikānta’, Surubala of ‘Caritrahin’, or Mrinal of ‘Grihadāha’ for having played their role of an obedient wife to perfection. Just on the opposite spectrum, the characters like Achala, Kiranmoyee were handed down punishment only because they proved unsuccessful wives, despite being intellectually superior. Even when the husband is tyrannical and worthless, the virtuosity of the devoted wife was highlighted by Sarat Chandra as can be seen in the characters of Annadadidi and Biraj Bau.

Tagore portrayed the feelings of his female characters with rare sensitivity. We do not see such heart-rending account of a victimized woman’s travails in others’ writings, but he also did not consider women at par with men, intellectually.

Since all powers were vested with men, they determined what should be the ideology of women, what should they read, how should they be enlightened. Even those women,
who penned their conditions, did so under the dictates of male dominion following the ideals of ‘Sati-Lakshmi’ (Virtuous wives).

But this ideology discontinued in the ‘Kollol era. The kollolites totally changed the heither-to ‘stereo-typed’ image of the woman.

“The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity, they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways, but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage which still means practically subordination to man, for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid economic and social foundations.” 28

Social philosophers believed that “both the sexual division of labour and male domination are so long standing, it will be very difficult to eradicate them and impossible to eradicate the latter without the former. The two are now so inextricably intertwined that it is necessary to eradicate the sexual division of labour itself in order to end male domination.”

29

Though the Kollolites and the writers of modern era are greatly influenced by Freudian Psycho analysis but a greater part of feminist movement has identified Freud as the enemy.

“It is held the Psycho analysis claims, women are inferior and they can achieve true femininity as wives and mothers. Psycho analysis is seen as patriarchy and Freud is exemplifying these qualities. Having said that in understanding and challenging the oppression of women, we cannot afford to negate it.” 30

Freudian analysis of the Psychology of woman takes place within a concept that is neither socially or biologically dualistic. Femininity is imperfect masculinity; it is therefore in part a repressed condition that can only be secondarily acquired in a distorted form. In
fact it is very difficult to comprehend femininity within and without Psycho analytic investigation. Freud did not represent women as an autonomous individual but as a negative distorted imperfect form of man. However all these support the age old patriarchy. As Toril Mori very rightly said that feminist criticism is characterized by its political commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism, it follows that the very fact of being female does not necessarily guarantee a feminist approach.

On the other hand Sunil is a feminist without being a female himself as long he supports the cause. (The researcher asked him about feminism in one interview. He aptly replied that he supports the cause, though directly he is not associated with any of the isms.) Sunil supports Carol Vane that feminism should encourage women to resist not only coercion and victimization but also sexual ignorance deprivation and fear of difference. Feminism should support woman’s experiments and analysis, encouraging the acquisition of knowledge.

The education of woman, industrialization, urbanization, and widespread dissemination of information about the evils of patriarchy has brought a change in the society.

Sunil has written about those women who have fought it out in a male dominated society to carve out a place of their own without yielding to the various societal pressures, just as he has not forgotten about the travails of a common woman’s existence in society and life.

Sunil clearly knew where the place of women was in the society. His writings reflect the truth of the position of women in society. Romantic at heart, he presented women tenderly and even as a dreamy entity, though he did not lose sight of her tortured and neglected side. The women has been exploited, deprived everywhere, and at every stage, within religion and without, in love, in the economic dispensation and even in the political
chessboard. In a male dominated society, he has been clamouring for her right, but has she really got it?

"নারী নির্বিভাজিত পূর্বে পশ্চিমে উত্তরে দক্ষিণে
নারী নির্বিভাজিত যথে যথে বাইবে
নারী নির্বিভাজিত বুল তবে কল্যা বা চোখালী
চেন তাদ কুমারি বা তীর।
সে থেমে নির্বিভাজিত অথবা ও
সে বিশ্বাসী কি অবিশ্বাসী নির্বিভাজিত
সে সুন্দরী কি অনুষ্ঠানী নির্বিভাজিত
সে সং কি অসং নির্বিভাজিত।"

Woman is tortured everywhere,
In the east, west, north or south,
At home or outside home.
Tortured she is
Regardless of whether she has
Black or golden tresses,
Brown or blue eyes.
She is tortured
Within religion or without.
Believer or non-believer,
Beautiful or not beautiful,
Honest or dishonest,
She is tortured.

In the various novels, Sunil has portrayed the existence of women in society with utmost sympathy. In a novel, the societal context is of prime importance. Romance is
nothing but a fairy tale account of an aged person's wish fulfillment, but a novel follows the logic of life.

His major female characters are ideal but not real in most parts. In a country, where the 'Satis' are still made out of the Roop Konwars, (4th September, 1987), where a certain army officer called Shusmita Chakraborty, (2006) is forced to commit suicide to safeguard her self respect, where molestations be it of a six year old girl or a sixty years old woman feature daily in the newspaper headlines, the pitiable position of woman does not need to be overemphasized. A novelist, however imaginative he is, cannot afford to distance himself from reality. Sunil is very much alive to the real position of woman in the society and his writings through the years have borne ample testimony to that.

His comparatively less prominent female characters or the so called supporting among his female characters are life centric and real. They are battered by their day to day struggles, weighed down by male domination, are pushed to corners by the dictates of religion and society and cannot but look helplessly at the ever widening gulf between desire and fulfillment. These women lack brightness, romanticism is not their cup of tea. Not very talented they have not tasted success unlike most of Sunil's main female characters that are more complete in the true sense of the term. But the history of the real woman is nothing but the story of defeat despair and unfulfillment. Sunil's novel have not extensively explored those negative areas, have not really dwelt on those tire some chapters. The reason is that his sensitive poetic mind always tries to delve into the positive sources of his women's minds. Still, being an imaginative writer that he is who has a hand on the pulse of the society, he has tried to depict the torturous journey of the contemporary Indian woman in an objective and realistic manner without restoring to melodrama and subterfuge.

In his epical novel 'Sei Samay', other than the upper class women who had their root in history, there are many other female characters that represented the then society.
The conditions of women in Bengal during the nineteenth century are very well depicted in this novel.

In the wake of Bengali Renaissance that saw the legalization of widow remarriage, the ban on ‘sati’, the introduction of female education, improvement on the status of women thanks to the ‘Young Bengalites’, the society experienced winds of change. But that change did not seem to have touched the life of those women, traditionally confined to the four walls of their homes. I am picking up the stories of only a handful of the female characters from this epichal novel.

The burning example of how the male-dominated society used to torture the young widows of that age is Bindu Basini.

She got married at the age of eight, became a widow within a year and a half.

After becoming widow when she returned, she did not concentrate on playing with dolls. As usual, she was pushed to a bigger ‘doll’ room. In a voice, charged with emotion, Bidhu Shekhar said to her: ‘My mother, do not cry. From today I am vesting you with the responsibility of looking after our family deity. Remember that lord Janardan is your Master. We are all your children.

“বিধার হয়ে ফিরে আসার পর বিনুরানিস্তী আর পূজুল খেলায় মন দেবসিনি। যখন নিজেই তাকে প্রথমে ঠোঁটে দেওয়া হয়েছিল আরও কুঁট একটি পূজুল খেলায় মন। আজে নিয়ম গলায় বিকুঁটের কেদার বলছিলেন, আজ থেকে গুহেশ্বরার সেবার ভর তোর ওপরেই দিলাম, মন বিকুঁটের জনন্তী তোর কথা। আমারা সকলে তোর সম্মান।” 

But it was difficult for a nine year old girl to stay put in the puja room. She performed the puja but as briefly as possible.

She liked to read Sanskrit literature as also philosophy. “I read only for my own pleasure.” But the learned teacher says:that women are not to get education. It is against custom. Whatever Bindu has learnt is enough to equip her to read religious books on her own. This faulty argument got credence in Bidhu Shekhar’s aversion to see her daughter
The male-favoured society deprived this poor, ill-fated girl of the pleasure of getting whatever little knowledge she could through education.

Weighed down by a guilt-feeling of being born a woman, the otherwise cheerful and innocent Bindu withdrew herself to a shell. To add to this was the torture heaped upon her frail body in the form of frequent ritual-borne fasts and things like that.

Bindu Basini never gave importance to her widowhood. She sought happiness from small, little things. Her aggression had certain natural transparency about it, which is why nobody wanted to impose his or her authority on her.

But suddenly a realization dawned on her that she was no longer a girl, but a woman, whose world was confined to the four walls of her room and was not wide open any longer. She felt unwanted in this vast world. She wept and wept in the privacy of her puja room. She sought solace.

She could resist Ganganarayan’s love and desire for her by virtue of the strength she derived from the woman in her. She did not give him indulgence, was able not to allow any stigma touch her person. She took it as her destiny to keep Ganganarayan away from his desires, because she was a woman.

Still when Ganganarayan took advantage of the privacy of a lonely home to kiss her, she felt pained and could not accept being a party to such ‘sin’. She had every soft corner for her childhood mate Ganganarayan, had even some suppressed desires woven around him. But they were not body-centric or amoral. It was a pure feeling—bright and beautiful.

There was no shortage of good looking women for Ganganarayan. But he could not think beyond Bindu. Because, “Bindu is not only filling in the vacuum in his life, she is much more than that.” (Bindu Basini could have become his enlightened partner, more than a physical companion, as she was exceptional). After having gone through so much suffering
and deprivation, she dazzled in the light of her personality and self-respect.

She found her fate and not body shriveled by the fire of Ganganarayan’s desires (if she was embraced forcefully, her mother would point the accusatory finger at her only). Her father Bidhu Shekhar got Ganganarayan promise that he would leave her alone and to implement that promise, did even send Bindu off to Kashi to lead what had to be nothing but a colourless and cruel life of a widow.

Abducted by the hoodlums and once even wrongly declared dead, she saw fortune play havoc with her. The untold miseries culminated in her landing at the doorstep of a certain Debi Singh. Sensitive and perceptive, she took upon herself the extreme rigours associated with blind adherence to one-sided religion and customs. That same Bindu was exploited wantonly by those beastly souls, her innocent womanhood being smirched all over.

When Ganga overcame all hazards to meet Bindu in Debi Lal’s ‘Bazra’ (A luxury private ship) and urged her to start a life anew with him, she was found to be not totally in her senses, forced as she was to lead a far from normal life style. Still she was reasonable enough to have felt inadequate before him, rotten that she had already become. Still, she made an attempt to flee with him in a boat. With Ganganaryan by her side, her sense of loneliness was only accentuated and she could not help letting out a cry of agony: “There is Mother Ganga down here and the Gods up there in the sky. I am announcing if there is another birth; let me have him by my side. I have been a total loser in this birth, have only been deprived!”

“শীঘ্ৰে মা গঙ্গা, মাধ্যমে ওপরে আসি রয়েছেন কখনো কখনো চর্চা করিন যদি পরজগতে থাকে তবে তব জনক দেন তোকে আমি পাই। এ জন্য আমার সব নষ্ট হয়ে গেল রে। সব নষ্ট হয়ে গেল, আমার কেউ কিছু দিলে না।” 33

In this way, a male-centric society and a regimented religion have conspired to push
an innocent, talented girl to the depths of humiliation and deprivation. Unable to bear the pains of a burdened life, she committed suicide by drowning herself in the Ganges…

…But not before leaving the unanswered question: ‘Will she get her rights as a human being from society, God and nature in her next birth?’

Sunil has portrayed the travails of widowhood through the life of Bindubasini where her father himself is a living pillar of patriarchy. The person who does not hesitate to get physical with his friend’s wife, acted very cruel and strict with his own daughter when it came to preserving her chastity. Bidhusekhar represents that cruel side of patriarchy where morality is a tool to torture the woman, be it a wife, a sister, a daughter or a daughter-in-law.

The helplessness of Bimbabati, the widow of the zaminder Rajkamal Singha is graphically depicted. She had been constantly molested and pressurized by Bidhusekhar, her late husband’s friend and her family guardian, even in her late youth. Just to get rid of this constant mental humiliation, she decided to settle at Kashi. Still, the patriarch in Bidhusekhar threatened her with dire consequence. At this moment of extreme shame and helplessness, the woman in Bimbabati revolted and startled Bidhysekhar with the declaration that she would gulp the poison stuck to her ring, if he tried to dishonour her anymore.

While the unlucky Bindu surrendered herself to the vagaries of her fate, Durgamoni revolted, albeit in her limited capacity against the unfair norms of a male-centric society. Literate and capable of independent thinking, she was the third wife of rich Chandika Prasad. A hardened drunkard, given to unholy dalliances with prostitutes, the aged Chandika Prasad had tortured his first wife to a suicidal death. But Durgamoni was not to allow history repeat itself. If her husband beat her, she also did not hesitate to reciprocate in kind, so much so that when he lay senseless, she would even slap him. She hated the touch of her philanderer of a husband. In the background of a society, fed on a wrong notion
about a husband being synonymous with the almighty God, Durgamoni’s character seemed very strong and daring. She was so individualistic and fearless that she advised her niece-in-law Kusum Kumari to poison her violent and mentally deranged husband. “Should we have to live with these drunkards and lunatics? Can not we have any dream of our own?”

“Muster up courage Kusum Kumari, learn to live decently.”

“কুকি সাহস আন কুয়াম। ভালো করে বাঁচতে শেখ। মাতাল, পাগল এনে সারে কেন আমরা ঘর করবো? আমাদের সারে আলাদা নেই।” 34 (It is another matter that the society did not even let a self-reliant and competent woman like her to live).

She did not care much for the society-determined dos and don’ts. To teach her promiscuous and red-light area frequenter of a husband a stern lesson, she planned to become a ‘Nati’ (‘Dancer’ in a derogatory sense) herself. She asked—“Whether it is the responsibility of only the wife to keep a marriage going?” She adopted other means to attract a jealous Chandika Prasad towards her. She invited her younger brother-like Satya Prasad to share the bed with her. But Chandika Prasad, who had been livid seeing that Tabla player in a compromising position with his mistress, was surprisingly calm about another male sleeping with his wife.

Durgamoni wanted to accept what life ordained for her, but she could not come to terms with the insult on her womanhood. She went so far as to kill her husband to give vent to all her pent up anger.

Durgamoni might not be conversant with the nuances of modern feminist movement, but her identity as a ‘rebel’ was never in doubt. She wanted an independent, rightful existence, not burdened by the pressures of the society.

The courtesan Heera Bulbul’s character may be traced to History in some form or the other, but the writer himself has commented that the character as it appears in the novel, has been his own creation. The prevalent ‘Babu’ culture did not allow a courtesan’s son
getting admission in the prestigious Hindu college without creating controversy. The cruel society was again responsible for whatever she went through in life—her back-breaking struggle, the longing in her heart for her son who was not by her side, the loss of her mental composure which culminated in her tragic end and so on.

Besides this, the little dramas in Das Mahal, the vignettes such as the interchange of authorities between Sohagbala and Thakamoni and Divakar (the clerical employee who used to perform a whole host of duties to be able to be in the authority’s good books), moral corruption and the victimization of women prevailing in the lower strata of the society enlivened the pace of the whole novel.

Sunil’s heroines are cosmopolitan more often than not. They are not the victims of reality, rather they triumph reality with the strength of their inner self. In comparison, the lesser important female characters of his novels are more soaked in reality. In the novel ‘Arjun”, he gave Shukla, the main female protagonist, all sorts of independence, and a financial stability, but when it came to portraying the characters of Labanya or Purnima, who were Shukla’s age, he brought in struggle and suffering. Post partition, Labanya a girl of the refugee colony, tried to fight all existential adversities that came her way so as to lead an educated, self-reliant life, drawing inspiration from the brilliant Arjun, she dreamt of a life which she could call her own, but was raped by the goons of her locality. Her dignity and dream were of little concern to them. All they saw in her was her body. Her dream to become the extra-ordinary from the ordinary was dealt a shattering blow. The saga of Purnima who hailed from the same refugee colony as Labanya’s, was also one of struggle to keep afloat a family which was drowning. Only she chose a more direct method that, — that of selling her body to do that. Hard reality taught her that short cuts are the best option for a happy life, even if that brought dishonour on her person.

Sunil did not want to arouse any undue sympathy for Labanya in the reader’s mind;
neither did he try to condemn Purnima for transgressing the moral code and having a
distorted view of life. He only presented their story as they evolved as an independent
observer.

In ‘Kisore O Sanyāshī’, we see in an otherwise mysterious looking ‘Sanyasini’
(female monk), a society-deprived, battered woman. Childless even after ten years of
marriage, this helpless woman was driven out from home by her husband on the charge of
her being ‘infertile’, though it was actually he, who should have gone through necessary
medical tests. But since she was woman, all blame was unfairly put at her door-step. On a
rain-splashed, stormy night, she was left to fend for herself in the unkindest possible manner
by her in-laws. Since her priority then was to protect her ‘honour’ as much as to live in this
world, she put on saffron robes to deflect attention to her booming youth. A hermit first
gave her shelter, taught her the ‘mantra’ to stand on her own feet. Homeless and support
less, this family disowned woman discovered a strange similarity between herself and the
orphaned, shelter less Nada Kishore. In some respect, both shared the same fate. They
had no one to lean on in this vast world. That is why, the ‘mother’ in her forever yearning
for a child, bound him in affection, made him her disciple with a view to not only sermonize
him the ascetic virtues, but also the ways of struggle in life.

The socially established Mohinibabu insulted Bhairobi’s womanhood through his
arguments, though not physically. According to him women like wine and money is for
pleasure. Woman is a tool of ‘Tantiktantra’, so how can she become its performer herself?
Mohinibabu’s tone smacks of a certain patriarchal arrogance which is accustomed to
subjugating woman to a point where she cannot have a mind of her own, to seeing her exist
only for man’s needs. Through the character of Bhairobi, Sunil wanted to paint a picture of
a woman’s struggle in society.

. The saffron robes which were meant to guard her youth and beauty, could not
always protect her from the lure of male gaze. The humiliation of being born woman chased her like a hunting dog.

Growing in the midst of financial problems of her family with a frustrated elder brother sitting unemployed at home, Sutapa of ‘Pratidwandi’ (The second novel of Sunil filmed by Satyajit Ray), a young woman, portrayed the new ‘working’ woman of the late sixties who had tasted some financial independence and other freedoms that came with that, but in the bargain, had faced criticism at home and exploitation at her workplace. She wanted a smooth, hassle-free life. So when she got a job, her life style underwent rapid change. She lost her girlish innocence and became desperate. Her aged boss in office naturally tried to exploit her, even wanted to take her to his farm house for obvious reasons.

To taste the slice of a comfortable life, to embrace economic stability, she had to compromise a great deal. Torn between oblique glare and comments of her mother and brother on one hand and the attraction for a false, glamorous life style on the other, she was going nowhere. Her character was sliding downwards day by day so much so that she ultimately ended up as a mistress of a low-brow ruffian of the locality. Sutapa did not get mental support from anyone and nobody showed any semblance of love or affection towards her. That explained why there grew a resistance in her, a tendency to go astray. Sutapa’s distorted morality and her unemployed brother’s vain principles stood at two different poles—— ‘contrary’ to each other.

In ‘Elokeśi Āśram’, a short novel by Sunil, we see how a reclusive and detached woman fell prey to man’s greed and machinations. The Madhav Das built ashram which was nurtured by Elokesi or Dayamoyee with rare dedication and sanctity, fell into the hands of his scheming brother Tarakdas after his death, who wanted to possess her by any means. Since many souls were dependent on the ashram for their day to day livelihood and her twin brother Gyan’s dream of starting a new business could be realized only with
Tarakdas's promised financial help, Dayamoyee ultimately gave in to his (Tarakdas's) proposal. In the process she was ready to sacrifice her sanctity, cultivated through her many years' association with the ashram. She chose the route of compromise knowing well that it was a death——— a spiritual death for her. From this point, she stopped living for herself.

‘Bisakhār Janmadin’, a novel written by Sunil on the threshold of the twenty first century is about Bishakha Nandy, presently a lecturer of History, who hails from a good background but still her profile does not prevent her from being raped during her stint in that moffusil college. Insults got heaped on her, and this insult which was as much physical as it was mental, is a grim pointer to the status of women at large in a society, devoid of value and security. But her womanhood suffers the maximum insult not when she was raped but when her so called open-minded artist lover could not accept her whole-heartedly from the core of his heart for no fault of hers, though Prosit consoled her by telling her that a human body is not so cheap as to be treated as a left over. They got married, but the real problem started thereafter. He could accept her neither physically nor mentally. With every passing day he was seized with a strange obsession. That the rapist took the shape of a demon and started to engulf his sub-conscious mind so much so that he had to admit before Bishakha that he could no longer love her. His obsession was getting the better of his liberated mind. He soon started seeing in his future off-spring the shadow of that rapist. The artist in him gave into the demands of century-long male prejudices. Hurt and humiliated, Bishakha left for her parental house without taking Prosit’s permission. Her womanhood was faced with extreme humiliation, when her unfortunate accident in which she had no hand, created the undesirable rift in their relationship.

But Sunil showed the dawn of a new era. Prosit sought freedom from the dark obsession. His love for Bishakha ultimately freed his mind of his prejudice. The intensity of
his appeal, its warmth broke the ice in their relationship and Bishakha again became normal towards him. The modern society can accept a widow or divorcee but not a raped woman. That she can not be loved has but become an inevitable rule.

‘Aranyer Din Ratri’, a well-known novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay which was made into a film by legendary Satyajit Ray in 1969 (Sunil has expressed disapproval of the changes made by Ray in his film which according to him (Sunil), altered the very milieu of the characters in the novel), peeps into the inner recesses of the human psyche. The story is about four youths who ventured into a forest to enjoy holidays, away from the routine of a hackneyed urban life.

Though the novel revolves around the four male protagonists, yet the three women in this novel attract our attention no less. They are Aparna, a young, intelligent woman in her early twenties, her elder sister Jaya and the Santhal labour girl Duli. All these characters throw some light on the position and condition of women in different spheres of society.

Jaya, the elder sister of Aparna, a twenty seven years old widow of a respectable well-to-do family brings with her some subtle questions about the meaning of love and also some oblique question about the institution of marriage.

Her good health, beautiful features, lively interests in all aspects of life baffle us, as all these go against the conventional idea of widowhood of a Bengali upper middle class family. Apparently she shows no sadness in her behaviour at the loss of her young husband who left her with a child. She takes active interest in everything, playing tennis with her sister Aparna or entertaining her classmate Shekhar and his friends in her bungalow. She is a normal woman of flesh and blood, even when Shekhar slept on her lap she did not mind rather she combed his hair with her fingers. But she was never indulgent. Like her sister Aparna, she was also capable of natural resistance which is attributable to a sense of self-respect and good upbringing. She opens up but knows where to stop.
But that was Jaya’s superficial self. Inside she was enveloped by a deep cloud of sadness. The mystery of her husband’s death, who committed suicide in a small room of London, torments her day and night. Why had he done that? Her husband whom she had married out of her own choice with full love and loyalty, kept some chapters of his life undisclosed to her. That unknown chapter of her husband’s life which had led to his tragic death is still a mystery to her that burns her soul day and night. She feels insulted and humiliated. She understands that there was a vacuum in their relationship. Her love, loyalty and trust for her husband were returned unrewarded and unpaid. After three years of her husband’s death she is still engulfed in that vacuum of doubt. Whether her understanding of the meaning of love was incorrect? She was sad at her husband’s demise but at the same time she was more hurt and insulted.

She has no stereotyped prejudice that she will have to live her life in the colourless, loneliness of widowhood. Jaya stands for that eternal woman who was betrayed by her male counterpart throughout the ages after all her submission and sacrifice. She leads us to the burning question whether love bears the same meaning for man and woman? Before getting the answer to that question, she will not turn over a new leaf of her life.

The third woman character of ‘Aranyer Din Ratri’, a young dark but beautiful tribal woman of that class who are born to be exploited. The irony is that they do not consider it as exploitation; rather they think that it is their nemesis against which no protest can be raised. For two rupees as a daily wage she is ready to do anything and everything. Pulling water from the deep well, or carrying bricks, she even does not mind selling herself if the master is kind enough to pay her more. She is used to beating for no guilt of herself by her husband when he was alive; Gudambabu slapped her as his nephew had held her hand and tried to seduce her. Sometimes people used to deduct a portion of her negligible salary if her work was not up to the mark. She never grumbled for all this. She took all these odds
as a part of her life.

She is innocent like any other Santal girl, when Ravi had chosen her to satisfy his lust (thus to pacify his agonized soul left shattered after the betrayal of Tapati.), she considered herself lucky as the handsome ‘Kolikatar Babu’ has selected her among her mates. She enjoyed the sex game submitted her completely to the wish of Ravi and called him ‘Bhalobabu’ or ‘good master’ as he had given her fourteen rupees equal to her seven days’ wage.

She did not feel insulted or tortured, considered herself even happier than Phulman, who went to her dream city Kolkata with her Babu, Duli also wants to go to Kolkata to buy a ‘Lal blouse’ and ‘Chooler Jaal’ and to fulfill her dream she is ready to earn money anyhow even if it meant sleeping with the Kolkatababu.

The terrible truth of the position of the lower class working woman comes alive vividly with Duli. Innocent girls like Duli who dream of an insignificant ‘red blouse’ and ‘hair net’ and to materialize that dream is ready to be sold for a paltry two rupees everyday anywhere in India.

In his remarkable novel, ‘Jyosnakumāri’, behind the veil of myth and symbol, Sunil depicted the extremely pitiable condition of women in the country’s socio-political scenario. Bina alias Fatima is fatherless, husbandless and childless woman abandoned by her family and banished from her country. A woman, who was not even in a proper frame of mind, was repeatedly raped by her protectors.

Here, the wretched Bina (Jyosnakumāri) represents the eternal woman who has lost her identity, has crossed the boundary of her motherland, has forgotten her name, religion and caste. Her only identity is that she is a woman. Whether she is Bina or Fatima, she is tortured everywhere by everyone, raped again and again both in India and Bangladesh, physically abused and mentally tormented by her family members and outsiders. The agents
of flesh trade want to send her off to an Arab country in lieu of paltry commission. The rich businessmen from India barter ten cows for one girl whom they send to the rich and licentious Arabs. There remains no difference between an animal and a dumbed, tortured woman. Those beasts of men pounced on her flesh with the ferocity of wolves, as it were. The officer posed on the border, Captain Paramjit Singh, who seems to be sensible and sympathetic gave the excuse of a different country and a different religion to free himself from the pangs of conscience when it comes to the question of rescuing Bina alias Fatima from the clutches of the border forces. He performed the duties of a government officer, but was found wanting on the questions of humanity.

In comparison, Sunil infused humanitarian values in the character of Trilochan, the village rickshaw-puller and his friend Babaji, the village poet. They were conscientious and gave her shelter, treated her with care and saved her life when other villagers wanted to burn her, dubbing her a ‘witch’. Babaji even wanted to marry her out of love. Babaji, who sings self-composed songs in the village fair, has discovered Jyosnakumari in a ‘bruised’ Bina. Jyosnakumari is a stuff of myth to the villagers. The legend has it that an exquisitely beautiful woman sometimes made an appearance in the village and dazzled the malefolk by scorching their hearts with the fire of her beauty. But, through the words of Babaji, Sunil sings the story of helplessness of women in our society.

"লতারিণীকে কোলে লাগে পেলঙ্গ কেউলা গতী
 আর পুরুষে দের নর্তকীর বলি এ কর্ম নিয়তি
 নিদর্শনী যখ দূরারে বাচালেন নল রাজার
 পুরুষ মানুষ বউরে পেলঙ্গ, চম্ফাকর ডুগডুগী বাজার” 35

Sati Behula carried Lakhinder on her lap

Yet man sacrifices woman without any qualm.

Damayanti saved her husband Nal
From the jaws of death;

Yet man burns woman

And tears her flesh.

"From the jaws of death;
Yet man burns woman
And tears her flesh.

"মেয়ে সত্ত্ব জন্ম দিলে কানে বাপ আর না
মেয়ে জাতি না থাকিলে কেহই জন্মাইতে না
অসহায় এক মোহতীরে কুকুর বিজির লাহান
কোথায় নিল পার করিতে শাশ্ত পোরায়ন
আহা কুকুর বিজির লাহান’ 36

When a girl child is born, it is curse to the family.
But had there been no woman, would there be life?
The condition of a helpless woman
Is no better than a stray dog or a cat,
Deserted by one and everyone.

Thus Sunil portrays the vulnerability of women in a society where there is no place for innocence and righteousness.

In rich, capitalist countries too, the position of women is not equal to that of their male counterparts. The highly educated Mandira learnt about the hollowness of her existence amidst the English people. She found herself as a non-entity. Back to India, she struggled to establish herself, but in the process, became a victim of humiliation and rape in the cesspool of a dirty society and political establishment. The novel ‘Dhulibasan’, thus portrays a true picture of a real woman, who in spite of having education, financial independence and self-respect, has to face subjugation in front of an overly male-dominated society. Though, Sunil romanticized the end part of the novel, which may seem unrealistic, yet there is no ignoring his delicate observation and analysis of the humiliation and resistance a woman faces in every society despite having all the abilities. This alienation is social and
psychological that always gives the woman the status of the second sex.

"If Plato wrote that “as far as the state is concerned there is no difference between the natures of men and women” it was because of the unequal laws and customs then prevailing in Greece. His plea that women ought to be admitted to all the duties and rights of men and his warning regarding the loss to the state as a result of their restricted sphere of activity still remain unheard. We of course quote Plato, Mills and a dozen others in support of our plea for equality, but alas, human society has to march a long way before this dream of philosophers and this ideal of freedom can be realized fully in actual life.”

“Just as a tree draws its sustenance from beneath the infertile, hard soil, thereby making its living more meaningful, a human race or a class can not let itself be identified only by its saga of suffering, exploitation and humiliation. They are known to the society, to the outside world and even to the nature, not merely by being victims of exploitation. Their relationship with the oppressor or the tyrant is not their absolute and ultimate identity. Even the exploited classes have their own creative and meaningful selves, in spite of facing obstacles at every step. They have their own revolts, demands and dreams. If women had no self-identity, they would have ceased to exist, despite having trodden the path of torture and humiliation in a patriarchal society.

From the depths of their solitude, their isolation, women gain their sense of personal
bearing. They must reject the limitation of their situation. The salvation of women cannot be gained by solitary effort; liberation must be collective, irrespective of class. They should not only fight for their existence but they should justify their existence. This journey from servitude to sovereignty is never ending; Nevertheless Sunil’s women had set certain milestones on their way.
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