CHAPTER – 5

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5.1 Background

Sri Ramananda Chatterjee and his wife Manorama Devi gave birth to five sons and two daughters. Santa Devi was born in the year 1893 and was the second in the line of her brothers and sisters. While Sita Devi was born in the year 1895 and was the third in the line of her brother and sisters. Since their age difference is very little they were very close and all of their childhood memories and their educational as well as literary development progressed together. It is noticed from the very early start that their life revolved around three places – Bankura, Allahabad and Calcutta (at present Kolkata) respectively. The nature of these places was also reflected in both of their writings. Though their father lived in Allahabad due to his profession yet he never forgot Bankura and as a result of that he used to visit Bankura every summer along with his family. He used to stay for two to three months during summer time. Since he bought a dwelling house in Bankura his daughters Shanta and Sita knew the surroundings and the nature of the common people of Bankura. On the one hand they were accustomed with the culture and environment of that place and on the other hand they used to enjoy the lovely natural surrounding of that place.

Santa Devi and Sita Devi spend their childhood days mainly in Allahabad and Bankura. Infact they used to stay at their grandfather’s place. They had good relations with her aunt also who was a widow. This widowed aunt’s character was portrayed in Santa
Devi’s story “Alokjhara” in Bengali. In both of their novels there were certain characters which had similarity in their real life relations in Bankura. Formally both Shanta Devi and Sita Devi never went to school as their father did not like the convent education method during those days.

Santa Devi was very much affectionate. She always wanted to help her brothers and sisters in their every aspect of life. Infact this was reflected very much in her works also. Starting from her small brothers and sisters education, she always were at their service. She used to teach them “Charupath”, “Barnaparichay”, “Kathamala” and “Bodhodai”. (All the above books were written in Bengali).

On the other hand mention must be made that both the sisters used to read “Prabasi” Bengali magazine edited by their father and so there were lot of scope for her to educate herself. All the books they needed were at a stone’s throw because of the vast library of the affectionate father who always encouraged her to study. They also got to read “Encyclopaedia” and “Royal Natural History”. Since Shanta Devi being the older, she used to teach each of her brothers and sister, so that they became learned in subjects like English, Mathematics, Sanskrit and Literature.

Since childhood due to the guidance of their illustrious father they have learnt how to translate from Bengali to English. During that time their place of stay was at Allahabad. Though it was not purely a Bengali city yet the environment was very much Bengali. It must be said that Santa Devi as well as Sita Devi became at ease with writing at a very young age. They both used to read Bengali magazine which were very popular during that time. Mention must be made of “Sanjibani”, “Bamabodini” and other magazines. Their father Sri Ramananda Chatterjee not only edited the “Prabasi” magazine but he also wrote in that magazine his viewpoints as well. As due to that she also helped her father as well. It must be
mentioned that Ramananda Chattopadhyay had a soft corner for her daughters and contrary to the viewpoint in those days, he gave equal importance both to his sons as well as his daughters. He was a very loving and affectionate father. In the year 1908 they shifted their place of stay from Allahabad to Calcutta(at present Kolkata) and hence a new life started for the young Shanta as well as Sita.

Shanta Devi and Sita Devi started their school and their college life at Bethune College, Calcutta. During that time they came in contact with many lady poets like Priyambada Devi, Lady Abala Bose and Kadambini Ganguly etc. They passed their graduation with distinction from Calcutta University.

5.2 Observations from the writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi

Thus it is witnessed from both of their novels that Shanta Devi and Sita Devi had immense influence of the Bethune College. Infact many of their short stories has reflections of their college life. That is why Shanta Devi and Sita Devi, jointly wrote a novel “Uddyanlata”(The Garden Creeper) where one gets a glimpse of their college life in various instances. Other than that the novel “Rajanigandha” too in Bengali, “Alokjhara” etc. and other works one can see various instances of their college life reflection. For instance in Shanta Devi’s story “Uddyanlata” the protagonist Mukti’s first day in school, her excitement seeing her classmates is one instance. In another instance found in her story “Mayurpuccha” the description of the school building which is very much common to Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s educational institutions where they went to study.

It is mentionworthy that both the sisters spent a considerable amount of time after their graduation in Santiniketan for two years. They were in direct contact with Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore in those two years. They learnt a lot from Kabiguru and were very much influenced by him. There were a lot of instance where the influence of Rabindranath
Tagore’s works were witnessed in their writings. Their influence was not limited to Kabiguru but reflections of Ramananda Chatterjee in some of their literary works are observed. It must be mentioned that all the works of Santa and Sita Devi which highlight women emancipation as well as women education are very much in line with the then, social and educational aspects of the Indian society.

5.3. The analysis of the novels of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi depicting the transitional phase of the new educated women

As discussed in the above chapters the transitional period saw a lot of changes. One of them were, women were expected to help their male relatives cope with the outside world. Hence the men wanted women to receive Western education so that together they, if needed, could cope with the public sphere dominated by the British. This construction of womanhood can be seen in contemporary nineteenth-century literature. The same notion continued on at least till the mid-twentieth century and even in the 21st century as can be traced in many emancipated works during that time.

This chapter will analyse some of the major writings of Santa Devi and Sita Devi. The objective is to show how their perception of womanhood, blended with the concept of middle-class nationalism defended their feminism and sets its agenda for themselves and for other bhadramahila (educated wives and daughters of the bhadralok). The writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi relate to women's lives and experiences in the domestic sphere and the construction of feminism. Santa Devi and Sita Devi were daughters of Ramananda Chatterji, editor of both Prabasi, a journal for Bengalis living outside of Bengal, and the Modern Review, an English periodical published in Calcutta. The two sisters were educated at Bethune School and College in Calcutta and received their B.A. degrees with distinction at
Cover Page of “Prabasi” Patrika

IMAGE 6(a)

Inside Page of “Prabasi” Patrika (In Bengali)

IMAGE 6(b)

Calcutta University. In 1918. Santa Devi and Sita Devi collectively took a pen name of Sanjukta Devi and wrote a novel, Uddyanlata (The Garden Creeper), which was serialized in Prabasi. This was immensely popular among the younger generation of Bengali students as previously very little had been written about the younger generation. In 1919, Sita Devi's “Cage of Gold” appeared as another serial in Prabasi.

In 1920, the two sisters jointly published the Tales of Bengal written in English. In the early 1960’s. Sita Devi published “Sabar Uparay” (Above All). Their writings generally focused on the traditional Bengali domestic world. The researcher will analyse the ways the authors projected, in these writings, the many ills of the traditional Bengali society and challenged the stereotypical images of women in society. The authors not only tried to create a mindset among their readers to rebel against social ills, but also introduced the concept of modernity. All the writings discussed in this paper focus on women's education and marriage and married women's status in their family and society. Some of these themes, especially the oppression of women by the dowry system which has even culminated in murder, are still important agendas for Indian feminists today.

To fully comprehend the significance of their writings as part of feminist literary works, one needs to situate them in their proper historical context. Their father Ramananda Chatterji, the son of a brahmin, came under the influence of a Brahmo mathematics teacher when he was in high school. In 1866, he married a girl of twelve. After receiving his B.A. degree in English literature in 1888, he was offered a post as Assistant Professor of English at the City College where he received his B.A. Ramananda also became assistant editor at the Bramho newspaper Indian Messenger. Because of his position as an editor of a newspaper he became acquainted with the progressive leaders who were deeply involved in the Congress movement. Being influenced by these leaders, he took a leading role as a Brahmo reformer.

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In 1892, the Age of Consent controversy intensified the debate between the members of Sadharan Brahma Samaj and the orthodox Hindus. Ramananda, a member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, was on the forefront of this controversy. As an editor of Indian Messenger, Ramananda Chatterji interpreted the facts to champion the government bill. In 1895, he left Calcutta for Allahabad to become principal of Kayastha College. There, in April 1901 he started Prabasi. In 1906, Ramananda Chatterji resigned his principalship in Allahabad and returned to Calcutta, where he took up residence at the Sadharan Brahma Samaj mission quarters. In January 1907, he began to publish a new English journal, “The Modern Review”. Ramanada Chatterji found stifling the nationalism created by Hindu orthodoxy: "We shall never have a liberal national and international mentality unless we can shake off the authority of priests, dogmatists and theologians. We can never achieve dynamic national growth in India," he continued. by adhering to "sectarian orthodoxy." but only through a "liberal national education" for all (Kopf, 153). Ramananda Chatterji also rejected caste system and untouchability which he thought was weakening the Hindu social order and had to be uprooted (Kopf, 153). Because of his anti—British nationalistic views, Rarnananda's home, which housed his journals, was often searched by the police (Purba Smriti,66). His house was a meeting point for Bengali intellectuals. A strong wave of education for women began during the 1890s as many leaders of Sadharan Brahma Samaj including Ramananda Chatterji, began an intensive campaign. They believed that education would make women versatile individuals, enabling them to discharge their obligations as wives and mothers, better than their traditional grandmothers and also better than the women from the lower classes (Chatterjee, 246). These women would modernize the family structure by being able to work outside the home if necessary and would be able to maintain the groups' self-identity (Karlekar,157). In 1891, the Brahma Girls School was considered by the government as the "best boarding girls' high school in the Bengal Presidency"and the Sadharan
Bramhos, exceedingly proud of their record in providing higher education for women, founded by Bethune College. This then was the home environment of Santa Devi and Sita Devi. Influenced by their father's nationalistic ideas, they tried to inculcate the same feelings of nationalism among the middle and upper middle-class women. Like Malavika Karlekar, the researcher have used the term "middle class" to include mainly white-collar salaried persons as well as some sections of landed gentry. The two sisters chose literature as their metier to spread their ideas. In their novels and short stories, they rejected or challenged most of the traditional beliefs and systems of Bengali society which they felt are not conducive to educate women to cope either with the public sphere or with the private sphere successfully. In their writings they tried to assure their readers that it is acceptable to stand up against the traditions which stifled women's self-growth and ambition. Shanta Devi and Sita Devi wrote about the domestic world with which their women readers were familiar. In their writings the main characters were women with the supporting roles filled by men. To understand the domestic world and its inhabitants created by these two authors, one needs to outline the conditions of the early twentieth century which were not much different from that of the previous century. The dowry system remained in existence. However, with the progression of time, the daughters were forced to be married off by the time they reached the age of fifteen or sixteen, instead of ten. The authors charted upper and middle-class Bengali women's lives from birth to old age. Capturing the perception that it was a curse for a woman to give birth to a female child, one of Shanta Devi's short stories "Ugly Bride," portrayed a female character who felt vindicated by her motherhood as she stated: "After giving birth to five daughters, I prayed and prayed and the Gods favored me (with a son)." One of her listeners responded. "You must have been born under an evil star, or why should you meet with so much misfortune and bring forth daughters by the dozen". In their novel “The Garden Creeper”, newly born Mukti's grandmother commented: "Nearly all the world has been inside it (lying-
in room. And after all this fuss, your wife brings forth a girl!” Mukti’s father replied: "Does it matter? I can not see any sense of your antiquated prejudices. Is a girl less valuable than a boy? Is she less important in the scheme of creation? I don't see any difference." Many Bengali families, especially the higher caste Hindus, considered the birth of a girl child as an unfortunate event. Birth of a male child usually enhanced the wife’s standing in family and social circles.

Being influenced by the Westernized, middle-class concept of education, and also well-educated for their time period, both sisters promoted the benefits of women’s education in their writings. The principal young women characters in their writings long for education. All of them go to day school, boarding school or get educated through private tutors. Sumana, and her female cousins in “Sabara Uparay”, went to day school. Mukti, in “The Garden Creeper”, went to boarding school, and Urmila had a private tutor. Under the influence of the British domination of India, the curricula for both sexes were designed to make somewhat anglicized.” Although in Sahara Uparay and in Garden Creeper the authors did not describe the curriculum in detail, in Cage of Gold, Sita Devi embraced some degree of Anglicized education as she wrote:

“A middle—aged English lady, Miss Parker, used to come and teach her [Urmilal in various subjects for two or three hours a day. She [Urmila] used to spend her days somehow in reading, playing the piano, or copies of English pictures.” (14-15)

The female characters of Santa Devi and Sita Devi were well exposed to both British and Bengali literature: for instance, Urmila had read both Dickens' Martin Chuzzlewit and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s Durgesh Nandini. Mukti, Sumana, and Urmila were interested in formal education, but they also faced resistance in such a pursuit from their grandmother, mother, older females among the relatives and friends; at the same time, the
three women received encouragement from their fathers or male guardians who insisted that these young women should have education. Education set these women apart from the previous generations. Education introduces forces of modernity, but in each of these cases patriarchy is the carrier of modernity. The older women had the fear that schooling would postpone marriage for the young women, making them too old to be married off. Mukti's grandmother told Mukti's father:

The girl has passed eight already. Now you want to educate her, leaving the all important questions shelved. Then when she has become an old maid and completely Anglicised, you will think about her marriage. But no good orthodox Brahmin boy would touch such a girl. (The Garden Creeper, 25)

Some men from traditional backgrounds also did not want women to be educated lest educated women would refuse an arranged marriage. The fear of the breakdown of this custom was aired by an elderly gentleman in his remark to Urmila's guardian:

You have kept Urmila unmarried so long and have had her educated, she will certainly have developed independent views. Consider now, if she marries anyone else for any reason, you will have deprived her of anything. (Cage of Gold, 23)

The authors remind their readers that in twentieth-century Bengal the patriarchy maintained the traditionalism, but at the same time promoted modernity. In Sahara Uparay Sumana's older sister complained that while their father wanted them [the daughters] to go to college, their mother wanted them to get married as soon as possible. Sixteen-year-old Sumana was about to finish her high-school degree and she was very anxious to go to college. But since her mother wanted to get her married off, her parents started to arrange for her marriage. Sumana was upset with her father because her father always emphasized that sons and daughters should have equal education. But in reality, he did not object to his wife's
desire to get Sumana married off. Sumana resented the suppression of her own desires by her elders. She wanted to protest, but her cousin reminded her of the reprimand by her mother (Sabara Uparay 3, 11). These tensions between Muktī's father and grandmother, and between Sumana and her parents, illustrate a conflict between traditionalism and modernism. Encouragement for women's education by the nationalists did not suggest that women should compete against men or neglect their domestic duties and responsibilities. All young women in Shanta Devi and Sita Devi's work were proficient in household management. Many Bengali girls, irrespective of their castes and economic backgrounds went through the process of arranged marriage. As in any agricultural society, upper-class Bengali marriages were often considered a business negotiations between two families, and not a union between two partners. The traditional dowry system, requiring the bride's parents to pay dowry to groom's parents placed such a heavy economic burden on the bride's family that the parents began to see a daughter as an economic hardship and not a coveted economic support. In their writings, Santa Devi and Sita Devi often showed their disapproval of the dowry system. In Sabara Uparay, during Sumana's marriage negotiation, the groom's family came to see Sumana several times and demanded jewellery and cash from Sumana's parents. Sumana became very irritated with the groom's family and angry with the society in general. She felt that society, instead of recognizing the value of contributions the women are able to make, unjustly chose to lace judgment on the appearance of the bride and the amount of the money the bride's family could spend. In "The Cage of Gold" Muktī's guardian left a will indicating that after his death Muktī would inherit a considerable amount of wealth provided she married the man that he had selected for her. Muktī's guardian thus controlled her life even after his death. In "Ugly Bride," the mother of Kalo—the bride in the story—had been gradually dispossessed of all ornaments in the process of marrying off her four elder daughters. Both men and women from the groom's family take part in deciding how much
money and jewellery a bride's family would have to pay. Kalo's mother-in-law was a participant in these negotiations. When Kalo arrived at her husband's family home, her mother-in-law told her “Tell your sweet mama (a widow) when you go back home, that a black skin does not sell so easily. When she can send with you gold enough to balance your glory, she can send you hack to this house again. but not before. I can get a better bride.” (30)

Threats of insults or injury to a new bride from a greedy in-law have been very common and, hence, a young married girl from a poor family could anticipate many abuses from her future-in-laws:

“Kalo heard all this abuse with her head bowed at an obedient angle. That a woman is born to suffer was taught to her from her birth. So she did not find anything strange in this new misfortune.... Thus began Kalo's new life of happiness”. (30-31)

In this story, Santa Devi also highlighted the fact that women themselves often oppress other women: this becomes clearly evident in demands under dowry contract. In 'The Broken Lily", Sita Devi carried on the same theme of oppression generated by the dowry system and illustrated how a poor family unable to meet demands of a dowry contract was forced to marry off their daughter to a middle-aged. paralyzed, wealthy landlord. The minor wife in her husband's home was often regarded as a piece of property. She would be abused or humiliated by members of her husband's family for not bringing sufficient dowry. A young bride could be further mistreated for her domestic inefficiency. By painting the dowry system as an oppressive one to the bride's family and the bride, the authors tried to create a mindset among their readers, especially female readers, where women themselves would refuse to become a part of this prenuptial transaction by men, to oppress other men, their portrayals of women are similar to that of Judith M. Bennett, a medievalist scholar, who wrote:

Women have not been merely passive victims of patriarchy they have also colluded
in, undermined, and survived patriarchy. Women have a large pan to play in this historical study of patriarchy, not merely as victims but also as agents. Women's support has always been crucial to the endurance of patriarchy.

In short, Sita Devi and Santa Devi criticized the dowry system, arranged marriages, women's collusion with patriarchy, and women's inferior positioning in the hierarchical relationships between men and women. The writers promoted women's education and advocated that women should take an active role in choosing their husbands. Since the novels of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi are romantic stories with happy endings, they may create an impression among present day readers that these works are trivial. However, when these novels and short stories are read as a corpus, two themes became evident. Firstly, these two sisters followed the ideology of nationalism established by an educated westernized middle class. Secondly, Shanta Devi and Sita Devi followed their own feminist agenda to change the society. But what, specifically was their feminist agenda can be found out in the following discussions.

Shanta Devi and Sita Devi repeatedly stressed the hierarchical relationship between Bengali men and women. They pointed out that the marginalization of women is socially constructed and described their women characters as biological and social groups. By highlighting sex—based hierarchy and capturing the position of low status which women occupied in the society. Shanta Devi and Sita Devi painted the picture of social injustice towards women. In this respect, their writings contain feminist elements. Both Shanta Devi and Sita Devi favored opposition or rebellion to the traditional social values: for instance, they depict Urmila returning to Samarendra or Mukti running away from her ancestral home to avoid her marriage. The authors tried to convey to the readers their conviction that resistance to the social customs is not only acceptable but sometimes even desirable, in the
fight against the social conventions that victimize women. Expressions of their beliefs, as depicted in their writings, are comparable to Nancy Cott's definition of feminism. In “The Grounding of Feminism”, Nancy Cott defined feminism as an opposition to sex hierarchy, a belief that women's condition is socially constructed and not determined by God or nature, and that women constitute both a biological sex and a social grouping. It was Shanta Devi's and Sita Devi 's feminist agenda to make explicit pleas for reforming the institution of marriage and educating women. However, being influenced by Western and colonial ideals, the education system they promoted was a mixture of both Western and traditional Hindu society. Their feminist approach defined them as social feminists affirming the value of women's experiences.
References:


