“It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.” 1

“Man like other animals, is filled with impulses and passions which, on the whole, ministered to survival while man was emerging. But his intelligence has shown him that the passions are often self-defeating, and that his desires could be more satisfied, and his happiness more complete, if certain of his passions were given less scope and others more…….Between the poles of impulse and and control and ethic by which man can live happily must find a middle point. It is through this conflict in the inmost nature of man that the need of ethics arises.” 2

“All human beings desire to be happy. This basic and natural urge for happiness is deep-rooted in the being of every man. Without it man would have no good reason for doing anything. It is the original stimulus for human actions….. Certainly it is not the work of ethics to establish a rigid and fixed pattern of individual actions which man must perform mechanically and necessarily, in order to achieve personal happiness. Every human being is a distinct person, living under contingent circumstances, peculiar to himself.” 3

Morality is that code of conduct that is put forward by the society and that provides a guide for the behaviour of the people, that has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal. Our judgment reflects a set of values that may be called morality. Again question may be asked, ‘What is the value?’ Absolute power of anything to support life may be called
value. Philosophers think—"The combination of ability to reason and morality against which reason can be applied is the essential requirement for perception. Morality and reason are like ‘lever and a fulcrum’. They can function only if they are both present. 4 All living things must have an understanding as philosopher Renee Descartes (1596-1650) stated——‘I think therefore I am.’

The combination of unchangeable values and reason are the mechanism of understanding for that is the way we recognize good and bad.

"So that when you pronounce any action or character to be virtuous or vicious, you mean nothing but that from the constitution of your values you have a feeling or sentiment of approval or blame from the contemplation of it."5

"Morality and religion are both fundamental to the way of life of an individual of a society. It would be useless to define strictly either of them because each of them covers a very large and ill-defined area of life.

"Popular and unreflective morality is inclined to lay more emphasis on rules than ideals. The need of morality arises because men are social animals, they need mutual help, support and co-operation, but at the same time man has the basic tendency to disrupt society for his personal happiness and desires. To avoid this intolerable condition, men have devised the systems of rules which we know as law and morality. All moral codes condemn aggression, injustice and deceit."6

"The Christian Churches have been the main instrument in shaping, propagating and maintaining moral ideals and standards. Hope of salvation and fear of damnations, reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience. This ‘Stick and Carrot’ approach has been one of the most frequent among religious moralists.7

The middle ages are often referred to as the age of faith. The popular mind was entertained by the literal and lively belief of heaven and hell."Through allegorical devices,
we remember the mystery and miracle and morality plays where the characters were personified vices and virtues. Literature was used as a medium of preaching and teaching throughout the ages.

For philosophers like Aristotle, “Ethics is a very intelligent and sincere body of doctrine. It is limited by the pagan beliefs of its authors. Aristotle was not certain of the spirituality and consequent personal immortality of the human soul, he did not see man as a part temporal creation, but as a rational animal in an eternal world, he failed to understand the relation of human freedom to Divine law, because he viewed God as an impersonal non-providential identity.”

But thinkers like John Stuart Mill think in a different way. In his essay, ‘Utility of Religion’, he expressed his view that it is authority, education and public opinion that really shape our moral beliefs, though he did not discourage the role of religion in shaping moral beliefs.

“In ethics, we consider man in relation to his moral problems, but always with a view to reaching rational conclusions of some universality. Moral rules must be general and universal, moral actions are individual concrete events.”

For centuries all moral authorities were in the hands of the church or other religious institutions. It is difficult to say to what extent men owed their morality. The change in the climate was largely the work of the 18th century enlightenment. In the age of reason, man became skeptical about the established religious dogmas. Some of them totally rejected them. The age long authority of the church became shaky. Modern man began to get his new moral vision where morality was not dependent on religion, but it was shaking hands with the ideas of the newly born modern society.

The word ‘renaissance’ or ‘rebirth’ means the whole period of transition from Middle Ages to modern times. The new learning was attended by ‘humanism’.
“Anyone who would recapture and hold the greatest charm in life must not prize the supernatural, the theological or the ascetical above the natural, the human and the sensual. Satisfaction is better than sacrifice and self gratification, than self denial. One should not look more to God than to one’s self and one’s fellows.”

There can be no doubt that a kind of assertive individualism was admired and practised by humanists in sharp contrast with the self abnegation of the medieval times”.

“The departure of God from ordinary social thinking is the starting point for many twentieth century writers—that theology and Metaphysics belonged to earlier phase of human thought and the new positive age, the age of pragmatism and sociology would study all moral and social questions without reference to and without assumptions concerning religious belief. ‘God is dead’ meant of course not that God is really dead and required an obituary but that the idea of God was dead as a social power.”

Novel emerges as a major literary genre in the 19th century. The rise of the bourgeoisie, the rapid development of industry and growth of middle class reading public, all contributed to a new concept of novel form that is realism.

“The nineteenth century realist novel is preeminently concerned with the present. The contemporary man is firmly structured with the political, economic and social forces. Following the line of the 19th century novel, the modern novel form is ‘preeminently a meditation on the problematic nature of human life and social existence….a telling of the complex moral, political and social fate of man in modern society as it strives to affirm his freedom and autonomy in a world to his purposes and will.”

Unlike the 19th century, modern novelists are no more interested to depict the outer formal reality. The progress of character, the development of plot all changed with the change of the vision of the author. As a result, “the modern novel underwent radical changes in form; its instabilities were not merely matters of literary tradition and technique. The
sudden instabilities were psychological and sociological, epistemological and cosmological. The private self alert at the centre of the cobweb of the new novel busily generating fiction from within its own tissues implied a new and implacable mistrust of the public outer world ... The mirroring surface of the novel slowly departed from objective realism.” 13

“And so to define the uniqueness of the Twentieth Century we can point to the growth of the mass media, the importance of machines, the decline of Christian belief, the loss of classical heritage, the cult of the irrational in the arts. Modern writers continually express their sense of the age in images of fragmentation, the outsider, the refugee, the alien, the exile.” 14

Those who have significantly contributed to the change of thinking of the present times are evolution scientist Darwin (1809), social scientist and economist Karl Marx (1818) and also psycho-analyst Sigmund Freud (1856). Darwin established the animal ancestry of man as opposed to divine ancestry of man and proved that biological evolution is the truth that controls our body and mind.

The question that rightly arose in the mind of the modern novelist was whether the elementary animosity still persists in us. With the slightest provocation, will the ‘animal’ in us come out? Some may argue that man has left behind his original animal instinct and that he has transformed himself into his rational identity. But Freud totally put paid to this ray of hope. He opined that our conscious mind is not all. The human mind, according to him, is controlled by its sub-conscious part. The main source of the ‘sub-consciousness’ is sex. Sex is the main spring of our unconscious life.

“By making the subconscious an operational concept, Freud justifies the romantic conviction that the rationalists had left man only a portion of his mind.” 15

Whereas Marx worked for human emancipation, for him history is the struggle of men to create their own freedom in societies.
“History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends.”

For both Marx and Engels, revolutionary activity was human activity (Praxis) through which the individual changed both his world and himself. Thus Marxist theory celebrates man’s potential freedom from an arbitrary world.

The two world wars left human values in a disarray. Man lost his age-old glorious status, his position dwindled in the socio-economic set up of the post war society. There was no ray of hope anywhere. Decay and depravation ruled supreme in a society that had no respect for values. Life lost its poetic rhythm, as it were. A strange sense of immobility and numbness gripped man and good senses and good thinking were in short supply.

“From this disillusionment we get that terrible spate of novels now current in which man is seen specifically and instantly as an iconic biological accident, inadequate, aimless, meaningless, isolated, inherently evil, thwarted, self-corrupting, morally answerable to no one, clasped in the vice of determinisms, economic or biological. His uniqueness as person is denied or suppressed. He inhabits a hostile universe which is the creation of irrational and possibly malignant forces. ... Unlike the great tradition of man as individual responsible, guilty but redeemable, this despairing disillusionment sees man as collectively irresponsible, morally neuter and beyond help.”

Man is more complex in his impulses and desires. Some of his impulses and desires are social and some are solitary. The moralist is tempted to ignore the claims of human nature and if he does so, it is likely that human nature will ignore the claims of the moralist.

“The business of art is to reveal the relations between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment. As mankind is always struggling in the toils of old relationships, the art is always ahead of the ‘times’, which themselves are far in the rear of the living moment.”

In literature we find that though the writers are conscious of the social and moral
realities around them more often than not, they also peep into the psyche of their characters to see if there is any latent desire in them. Novel as a genre of literature reflects the realities, inner as well as outer. Right from the advent of the Bengali novel, the pioneers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhay focused on the eternal conflicts of human desires and moral values. The various social norms came in for criticism by Bankim Chandra, though he was alive to the demands of various desires that were but the offshoots of an independent mind. Ultimately, though, he advised against disobeying the rules of the society. In the context of his novels, questions about the complexities of male-female relationship, specially with reference to the subtler human instincts that exist in the deepest recesses of their minds came alive beautifully.

Though the characters of his historical and romantic novels, sometimes, do not seem real, still their conflicts, desires and envies have contemporaneous relevance, the overt ornamentality of his themes, notwithstanding.

His open outlook did not derecognize the individual’s importance. His characters, that are why, were free from superstition. In the nineteenth century, the advent of Hindu revivalism impeded the progress of renaissance. On one hand, there was a strong stream of new ideas, influenced by western culture and on the other hand, the roots of orientalism refused to be dislodged. This explains why, Bankim Chandra could not shake his mind off traditionalism. In spite of recognizing individuality, he never wanted individuals to rule the roost over social and ethical norms.

With the coming of the twentieth century, called Tagore’s era by popular consensus, arrived a new age, characterized by new ideas. That heart and desires can not be trampled over by the society-imposed norms and rules was the theme tune of this era. Tagore was a firm believer of an individual’s inherent innocence. The traditions enunciated by the Upanishad kept alive his belief in the purity of the soul.
Tagore saw a woman as an individual. To him, this individuality and emancipation from the tentacles of societal restrictions are not the same thing. That is why he was always clear about the basic existence of his male and female characters. In ‘Ghare Baire’, Nikhilesh did not want to subjugate Bimala through the exercise of his right as a husband. He wanted her individuality to blossom and through it, her spontaneous love. In, the ‘love triangle’ among Nikhilesh, Sandip and Bimala, the clash of personalities rather than love was the main issue. Tagore did not judge Bimala’s love in the yardstick of conventional chastity. Neither did he criticize her. Her growth to a matured woman through her inner conflicts, her split personality, her struggle within, were captured by his pen vividly.

The story of Caturanga’s Damini, Sachin and Shribilaash is not only about the illicit love of a widow and her remarriage. The development of her personality in the company of four males, namely, her husband Shibatoash, her mentor Nilananda, besides Sachin and Shribilaash, in the face of the restricting influence of the social rules and norms, is the novel’s main theme.

In ‘Cokher Bali’, there was an attempt at exploring the innermost recesses of male-female relationship, but it can not be called a psychological novel in the true sense. Pains and inner churnings suffered through the relationship with these women, the development of self are what this novel is all about.

‘It may be said Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated Indian women, who are no longer prepared to be down-trodden by society, but fight to assert their rights.’

In ‘Yogāyog’, the question of virginity acquired a different dimension at Tagore’s hands. To Kumudini, the ‘husband’ is an utopian idea. But in reality, she with her cultured upbringing, aesthetic sensibility and a definite philosophy of life, had nothing in common with her domineering and patriarchal husband Madhusudan. Added to this, was the conflict
between the age-old definition of virginity and the modern woman's revolt. Kumu's revolt, though, tragically, fizzled out in her getting pregnant with Madhusudan's child. In Tagore's era, her revolt could not, possibly, be stretched any further. The heroes and heroines of Tagore's novels are not run-of-the-mill characters. They symbolize a complex range of various personalities and mindsets. Their (His heroines) uncommonness has kept them apart from the other Bengali women around them, more in their inner thought process and self-introspection than in outward appearance, culture and education. They all believe in themselves and are truly modern.

Tagore never viewed man and life with a conservative's myopic eye. His was an amoral outlook which took into account the wider perspective of a humanist. However, it must be remembered that despite his relative openness about raising moral questions, he could not ignore the existence of the society around him.

"The world war of 1939 to 1945 marks watershed to all the literatures of the west. Indian literature also could not escape the far reaching impact. "A transition into a new aesthetic as well as a new historical face. It is not hard to see why the post war arts have a new flavour. Why the tradition seems now to shift. It created not only a new political, social, and ideological environment but inevitably a new intellectual and artistic environment as well..." 20

Altogether we have come in many ways to see the world differently less locally, less patriotically, less morally with a greater degree of neo-scientific rationalism and impersonality.

The post world war poverty took centre stage and went on to erode the edifice of society and religion thereby impacting everybody's mental and physical well being in the society. The foundation of the joint family weakened with the tendency to be self dependent becoming more and more pronounced amongst people. A certain disillusionment crept into the Bengali mindset.
They lost faith in the prevalent social values, became skeptical and negative in their outlook and tended to break all that was ‘old’ with a rebellious bent of mind.

On the other hand, driven by senseless romanticism, they embraced uncertainty. In the midst of all pervading despair, the Bengali youths wanted to nurture this romantic dream in them. They were torn between negativism on the one hand and the urge to start a life revolving around new values on the other. The well-entranced values of the 19th century got a big jolt in the early part of the next century and that perhaps triggered a necessity for a fresh ‘look in’ at them. The opportunity to debate upon their efficacy and relevance in the changed national context arrived like never before. Nietzsche termed this change as ‘Trans-valuation’ of values. These not so subtle tendencies to subject the ‘values’ of society to constant review in the context of an ever changing social backdrop where the prominent sign of this new ‘phenomenon’ was, romantic humanism.

The youths were caught with an irresistible desperation to know the unraveled mystery of mind and body. Simultaneously, they saw an opportunity to know the human identity in a realistic board-based manner through the answers of those sex related mysteries. Traverse as it did, through many subtle complexities, the form of love now not only became strange but also realistic.

They culled many materials from various aspects of life for their writings. They were made into a wide spectrum of stories and characters, a parallel of which had never been found in the Bengali literature. They wrote about a complex admixture of a platonic love on one hand and an uninhibited physical desire on the other. They also looked at the confusion and struggle of a lower middle class life from a psychoanalytical angle. The wild, elementary human instincts were brought alive in their bare form. In a way, they brought in a twist to the conventional style of prose-writing.
"The modern novelist has been faced by two major problems, one moral and one psychological. The moral one concerns the value of experience and how can one show that it is so? As the psychological problem concerns the nature of consciousness\(^\text{22}\).

Love is the pivot around which a male-female relationship derives its strength. It is therefore natural that love is and has always been the most sought after raw material for any literature. The new generation writers try to open new vistas of life through their relentless analysis and dissection of the various meanings of the body-centric definition of love. This experimentation by the neo-litterateur dealt a severe blow to the established values. The stress on morality and ethics during the 19th century was based on a conscious conduct of men. But with the discovery of sub-conscious, the old values underwent a drastic change.

The post First World War writers of ‘Kollol’ breed found themselves entangled in a complex web of thoughts on love. Their thinking was totally at variance with Rabindranath Tagore’s and Saratchandra’s and this difference, in a way, was the launching pad. Among the kollolites, Manindralal’s literature is a celebration of youthful romance. He has woven a dreamy land of love around all round decay and despair. This is the reason why he has been branded as an ‘escapist’. His hero is not burdened by the drudgery of life. He is an artiste, poet and lover. "Woman has always remained a mystery to me. I did not want to understand them. I rather led alive enlivened by the touch of their love."(Ashok: Raktakamal)

The works of Dinesh Ranjan Das and Gokul Chandra Nag has vividly captured the ‘Kollolite’ undertone, which is the angst and restlessness of the young mind.
with a maniacal desire to tread a new path in the midst of all pervading decay and despair amongst the youth of the post World War I Bengal. Dinesh Ranjan has tried to feel the world from a poet’s viewpoint, has brought alive an ideal that is not vitiated by the worldly meanness, he cannot be called the ultimate creator but is definitely a harbringer of ‘Kollol’ sensibility. The futility and frustration of youth have found positive expression in the skyscape of his imagination.

Gokul Chandra’s philosophy of life was marked by a streak of rebellion. His literature has portrayed the pangs of youth equally effectively.

Achinta Kumar introduced an acerbic and piercing ‘rebellious’ personality through his writings. Limitless romanticism and imagination, coupled with the skepticism about the prevalent mores and values tempered the character in his hero in ‘Bede’. The abundance of sexual awareness in novels was attributed to the Norwegian influence of the novel of Hamsun. That was not all. His novels wanted to break free from the morass of depression, failure and deprivation of that age and also from the stranglehold of outdated values.

The picture that we get in the writings of a bohemian traveler unrestrained by the moral bindings of a family life is, perhaps incomplete if ‘sex’ does not find a place in that lifestyle.

“The Bohemian would carry on a continual excursion without coming home. He is the exile on principle…….They (Bohemians) made sex into a substance and tried to find communication through it, only to discover that their preoccupation led to an intensified individualism.” 23

The Bohemian attitude towards life acquired appreciable currency amongst the post First World War Bengali youths who were influenced by intensified individualism. The above mentioned sexual awareness did not recognize the beauty of a ‘platonic’ love, did not peep into the heart. It was very body centric. In this ‘preference’, the individual’s
antagonism towards the society was visible. According to Dr. Sukumar Sen... this attitude has been borne out of an extreme sense of 'modernism'.

The decaying, despairing young mind of that age wove a dream around the woman. He was fighting the vicissitudes of life, was being battered over and over again in life’s struggles. As a panacea of those pains and failures, came the woman —— a burning symbol of satiation of life’s dreams and aspirations, to rule the roost in his romantic mind. That woman defied a clear definition or a concrete image. Still the youths of that era set sail to a mind’s voyage in search of that illusive, ‘mysterious woman.

The mutinous and unrestrained desires of youth came alive in the novel ‘Kak Jyotsna’. The premature widowhood and the artificial celibacy were the reasons for Ajoy and Pradip to launch fusillades against the prevalent societal norms. they brought a fresh whiff of a new independent life to Namita. Though they did not ultimately break free of the society, their efforts definitely brought a change in her barren life. She took courage to free herself off the moorings of a restrictive society and to develop an ‘individuality’. Though, this display of rebellion had an exaggerated tinge in it, it nevertheless, was imbued with a glow, hitherto unseen. In the novel ‘Kāk Jyotsnā’, towards the end, Namita was telling Uma: “I can see how this tendency of yours to become ‘Sati’ impedes the development of your personality! I am certain to surmount such impediments through my own individuality.”

“আমি বুঝেছি তোমাদের এ সত্যিকারের বায়ুয়ের বায়ুরের বায়ুরের পরে পরে একটা বাধা, সে বাধা আমি খণ্ডন করব আপন শক্তিতে, আপন যাত্রায়।” 24

Again the same Namita was saying to Ajoy: “I do not care for character. To me my mind is everything.”

“চরিত্র আমি মাঝাই। মাঝি আমার মনকে!” 25

In fact the questions of love and sexuality in the above novel blended beautifully with the innermost aspirations of the individual’s concern to lend to it a new depth and dimension.
For example the trace of desires in an otherwise Bohemian life of the hero in the novel 'Bede' or the taste of different experiences inherent in the womanly love and not to speak of the attainment of fulfillment through the individuals' self introspection in the novel 'Amudra'. A man's social identity is sometimes his partial identity. That is why Banani said “In the river of society, we sometimes float aimlessly like separate flowers. But in the darkest recess of our inner self, we are as mysterious as the most hidden of the underground plant roots.”

"সমাজের ঝুঁকোতে আমরা কতোগুলো ভাসা-ভাসা মুল মার, কিন্তু নিজের অভিজ্ঞতায় আমরা মাটির ডালার প্রায় শিকড়ের মতো রহস্যময়।" 26

We find that women such as Banani started questioning about some new perspectives of life that were so long buried under the carpet.

Beyond the confines of societal restrictions, the individuality of the woman gets a chance to manifest itself. An easy relationship develops between the two opposite sexes. An attitude that is borne out of a freedom from the societal bondage and sexual liberation, characterizes the writhings of Achinta Kumar in the aforementioned novels.

But he was traditional enough not to deny the woman that ultimate fulfillment that motherhood brings her. “The relationship of a woman with a man has an end, has its share of fatigues and wear and tear. But to her child she gives her all. Motherhood broadens the scope of her individual self.”

"পুর্কের কাহা নয়ীর শেন আছে, রাজি আছে, জরা আছে। কিন্তু সমাদের কাহা সে নিজের নিরঘন।
বতীতে অবতির প্রতীতি।" 27

Poetry in its true sense permeates the novels of Achintya Kumar and Buddhadev Basu. Their perspectives and methods of analysis carry an unmistakably poetic tenor. Lyricism, rather than psychological dissection characterizes the flow of happenings in their novels. Psychological analysis is like a gold-rimmed border of a saree, is like a coastline of
a sea to control the waves of poetic ebullience The kollolites, with all their new concepts were, it seems, not that daring to become total iconoclasts

In the background of a society that was in flux modern writers thus found themselves entangled in a complex web of thoughts on love. Unlike their predecessors, they were far more conscious about the physicality of love. Love so far had been confined to the play with dolls, now it was injected with a life. Transfixed between ambivalence and assurance, doubt and dependence, that were the influence of the World War, the new writers became skeptical about love. This uncertainty has been amply reflected in the bitterness and cynicism which marked their writings about love. Some of them sought refuge in the ‘inner mind’ fail as they did to get necessary dependence in the outer practical world. But that mental domain was also not free from grim and guilt.

This new found definition of love was more strong in expression and was more inward looking and psychological. It was caught in the complex knots of human awakening that were intrinsically linked to spiritual crisis. The love between a young man and a woman was not all but merely represents a fraction of many aspects of life. Con temporaneous with the World War II, the moth laden foundation that got built around the relationship between man and woman, the futility and disillusionment that went with the mindless capitulation to the bodily pleasures —— all these brought about more and more despondency. The alienation that resulted in became all consuming. In that era the great souls were no longer the subjects of literature. Common people with their little joys and sorrows, virtues and vices, ups and downs in the bumpy journey of life were what the ingredients of life were
now composed of. The respect for individuality was slowly growing.

The world war of 1939 to 1945 marks a watershed to all the literatures of the west. The Indian literature also could not escape the far reaching impact.

"A transition into a new aesthetic as well as a new historical phase. It is not hard to see why the post war arts have a new flavour. Why the tradition seems now to shift." 29

"It created not only a new political, social and ideological environment, but inevitably a new intellectual and artistic environment as well.....All together we have come in many ways to see the world differently, less locally, less patriotically, less morally with a greater degree of neo-scientific rationalism and impersonality."30

Modern society owes its origin to two great upheavals in the eighteenth century—one, political, the other, economic. American and French revolutions were seen as the necessary political transformation that sooner or later accompanied other movements towards an industrial society. Modernity must be understood in the backdrop of that industrial society where emphasis was more on the individual than on the agrarian or peasant society, the group or the community, as it were. Political and social philosophy stressed on individual freedom that new born individualism involved a value system that were man-centered and were experienced by human beings. The individual was an end in himself, society was seen as only a collection of individuals. This individualism focused on self-reliance, privacy and also opposition to authority.

"The rise of middle class accompanied the growth of an industrial society. In a sense, they acted as yeast to economic activity serving to break down old traditional loyalties and gaining for themselves the privileges of groups of higher social standing, through a thrusting and aggressive spirit of economic enterprise."31

This individualism grew more after the industrial revolution which gave middle class a new identity to reject the older values of aristocracy. This independence of the industrial
society was not only financial but also psychological. The industrial society had made a new ethic for them through internationalization of values. The old set of values changed giving way to the new social liberalisation.

“In India chastity runs like a constant thread in all social relationships, a woman is legitimately involved, daughter, sister, wife, mother, aunt, mother-in-law, friend. Anything beyond this realm is unthinkable.... For thousands of years adultery has been considered a male monopoly just as much as monogamous sexual desire is interpreted as being a female one.’ all religions insist that a woman must be purer than purity itself.” 32

“In colonial Bengal, the political and cultural movements that emerged in the nineteenth century and encompassed half of the twentieth century were intimately connected with the question of women’s social liberation from the traditionally prescribed roles and values. This is not to suggest that post-independence Bengali women are totally alienated from past tradition, or that all women are equally aware of social exploitation or eager for social liberation. Traditional norms still continue to exert pulls and pressures on the minds of even the most liberated women, thereby giving rise to peculiar contradictions and inconsistencies.” 33

A section of women had begun to question the nature of existing male female, especially conjugal relationships. Consequently there evolved a contradiction in the middle class woman of Bengal, the desire to collaborate with men together with the urge to protest against the dominant male culture. Contemporary literature thus shaped the newly emerging values of women.

“One comes face to face with the reinterpretation of conjugal relations by women...... There was a protest against the double standards of morality” Women became aware of a wife’s rights, and insisted on mutual obligation, there emerged a demand for redefinition of roles.” 34
In this backdrop Sunil Gangopadhyay entered in the field of literature.

Sunil’s identity as an artiste actually owes its origin to romanticism. He has loved man in both his shades—good and bad, in his glories as well as in ignominies. He believes in human goodness, but at the same time is not an idealist. According to him, no one has achieved the ultimate perfection, though; he may have aspirations to reach for it. He may not show the outward strive to prove his super-human glories, but in the trial of life and faced with challenging situations, he is there to prove his mettle. In the process, he did wrong, because he is a normal human being. The mistake, though helps him progress further, gather varied experience. This is where, Sunil, the writer, who holds positive beliefs, meets his triumphs. Novels of Sunil Gangopadhyay are free from didacticism. He disregards the role of an author as an omniscient moral preacher. He never tries to preach and teach lessons.

We find that there is a distinct similarity of his thought with that of D.H. Lawrence, a highly controversial novelist, yet one of the best thinkers of modern times. Lawrence was also against the didactic role of a novelist and he thought (Just as Sunil does) that a novel must not be a didactic scripture. Writers like them redefine morality in a wider, modern perspective.

"If a novel reveals true and vivid relationships, it is a moral work, no matter what the relationship may consist in. If the novelist honours the relationship in itself, it will be great novel. . . . .The great relationship for humanity will always be the relation between man and woman and the relation will change for ever and will forever be the new central clue to human life. . . . .It is no use thinking you can put a stamp on the relation. It is an absurdity to say that men and women must love. Men and women will be forever subtly and changingly related to one another. No need to yoke them with any bond at all. The only morality is to have man true to his manhood, woman to her womanhood and let the relationship form of
itself in all honour. For it is, to each life itself... The novel is a perfect medium for revealing to us the changing rainbow of our living relationship.”

“Is truth to human nature aesthetically relevant? ... The novelist does not have to be true to geography or history or astronomy, but he must be as the nineteenth century U.S. author, Nathaniel Hawthorne said to all literary artistes, true to the human hearts. A literary artist may tamper with other truths with impunity, but not this one, his characters must be convincing and they will not be convincing if they are depicted as having anger, love, jealousy and other human emotions that real people have.”

Sunil’s characters did not follow the society -determined definitions. They invented their own definitions according to their needs and intellect, which, though, may be ahead of their times. The researcher asked the writer that, why his characters have a tendency to cross the society-demarcated norms? In reply, he said — “Poets and writers have far-sight to see the future. Their writings bear the hints of how the future society will look like. This may not have any present day relevance. The societal norms are dynamic. For example, does marriage, as an institution, have the same respect and sanctity as it did in earlier times, when it was called a bond of several births.”

“Marriage is, perhaps, one of the oldest institutions of the world. A lifelong relationship between two individuals who vow to care and share their joys. When we trace our footsteps back in time, we discover that marriage is a sacrament which unfolds the latent capacities of man and woman and brings about an union of two for the purpose of social proliferation and for upliftment by self-restraint, self-sacrifice and mutual co-operation. But like all human relationships, the concept of marriage too has changed down the ages. The sexual revolution, women’s liberation, concepts of feminism has redefined marriage and husband-wife stereotypes.”
"No doubt, the industrial revolution has had and will have a profound influence upon sexual morals, but conversely the sexual virtue of the puritans was psychologically necessary as a part cause of the industrial revolution." 40

"...uninhibited civilized people, whether man or woman, are generally polygamous in their instinct. They may fall deeply in love and be for some years entirely absorbed in one person, but sooner or later, sexual familiarity dulls the edge of passion and they begin to look elsewhere for a revival of the old thrill. It is of course, possible to control this impulse in the interest of morality, but it is very difficult to prevent the impulse from existing. With the growth of women's freedom, there has come a much greater opportunity for conjugal infidelity than that existed in former times. The opportunity gives rise to the thought, the thought gives rise to the desire and in the absence of religious scruples, the desire gives rise to the act. Women's emancipation has, in various ways made marriage a difficult one. While man still hankers after old tradition of masculine domination, woman with her individuality finds it difficult to adjust always with the old set of values which were so longer imposed on them only." 41

Marriage is a socially recognized institution to which Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra and Rabindra Nath Tagore pledged due allegiance in their times. But the same can not be said about the writers from the Kollol or post-Kollol period and certainly not about Sunil Gangopadhay. In his earlier novels such as ‘Ātmaprakāśa’ or ‘Yubak Yubatirā’, marriage did not come across as a very important thing. There was even a hint of a lack of faith in
that institution. He did not link marriage with love. Marriage, to him, was for the society
and love for the mind. The romantic in him looked for the actual definition of love in the
company of a wide cross-section of women. ‘Atmaprakas’ characterized that youthful
restlessness of Gangopadhyay to a great degree. Even to this date, he is devoid of any
conservative attitude about marriage. The end result of love may be the bond of marriage,
but that does not mean that the ‘burden’ should be carried throughout life, even till after the
death of love. Gangopadhyay’s characters, both male and female, that is why, do not cling
to the futility of a loveless relationship. Society may brand them ‘iconoclast’, even
‘characterless’, but Gangopadhyay could not care less. To him, the truth of heart always
prevails over the truth of society. His personal life, that is why, bore reflection of that
independent thinking. The characters he created were naturally imbued with that
‘unshackled’ mindset. On the path towards realization of life’s meaning, marriage sometimes
is a resting retreat, sometimes even a challenge. In fact all his characters are very lonely.
They live in society, yet they live off it. They have their own mental world where their
original and individualistic thoughts have precedence over everything else. In marriage ,
there is lust , but it does not and can not outweigh what is pure love. That is what has been
increasingly noticeable in his novels——the triumph of heart over body. Marriage is
successful with the coming together of two hearts, not merely two bodies. In this meeting
of minds, Gangopadhyay does not want to put any age-related bar . That is why just as
there is youthful love in his novels; there is love amongst unequal age-groups in equal
measure.

In none of his novels, Gangopadhyay has spoken either in favour of or against
marriage. Many of his novels have captured marital conflicts, but they were personal rather
than social. It can not be said which is more important in a marriage—a mind or a body?
But Gangopadhyay never undermined the role of body. Just as bodies act as a bridge in a
marriage, they are equally, if not more, responsible in breaking it.

In the novel ‘Sukh Ashukh’, Rajat, the husband thought (mistakenly) that the mind and body of his wife Malati were his for the asking, after what he had done with his care and love to make her recover from her illness. Malati herself did not know that her mind was still mortgaged to her laconic former lover Arun. Rajat brought her back to life from the jaws of death and for that she had a deep sense of gratitude, not love for him. Her so-called happiness was laced with dissatisfaction and malady. That is why when later she also happened to save Rajat from certain death, she felt free, not anymore encumbered by the burden of gratitude. She discovered herself all over again and felt no hesitation to admit before her husband not only to her weakness for Arun, but also to the fact that she all along had been pretending that she had forgotten Arun. She did not love her husband. The outward show of love was borne out of her gratitude for him. She was in a sense compelled to pretend loving. But when she tried to break free of the marriage-imposed restrictions, she discovered that she bore Rajat’s child in her womb. This signaled the end of the triangular love. The courage and conviction that she had shown earlier in confessing her old love, were no longer with her. Like Kumu of ‘Yogayog’, she also submitted herself to the loveless bindings, all for the sake of the would-be child. Though at times tension was shown building up in the relationship between Rajat and Malati, Gangopadhyay’s ultimate aim was not to deviate from the social values. A legitimate question can be asked as to whether Gangopadhyay is that conservative? However, compared to Malati, the female characters that came later in his other novels were more desperate and independent-minded. Otherwise also, the female characters in Gangopadhyay’s novels are very open and straightforward about male-female relationship. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, they all are the monarchs of their own mental world and they are not dependent on their male counterparts. Their intellect has given them a sense of self-identity, which is why they
have no obligation towards the institution called marriage. Marriage does not mean ‘letters’, it is a contract which is heart-bound and flexible. As Gangopadhyay himself went on record saying — “There is no need to love the one and the same person throughout life. This applies even to a love marriage” 42

His women control their own lives, do not hesitate to assert their physical desire. Here he seems to be leaning towards Feminism. His women are not the ones to silently suffer sexual indignities. They know how to give it back to their tormentors. The combination of head and heart has made them sufficiently sensitive. They are rooted to hard reality, yet possess certain imagination that has an unescapable tinge of mystery in it and this truly sets them apart from their peers. His male characters, in comparison, are much more helpless. They allow themselves to be burnt by the scorching heat of reality. Unable to come to terms with the situation which often gets the better of them, they inflict revenge on themselves like angry young men. In fact, his males are romantic like him. That explains why their sufferings from their shattered dreams linger that longer.

"স্নীহের উপন্যাসের মেয়েরা বেশিরভাগই একটি জাতীয়তার, এরা একজন যাদীন মানুষের মত, নিজের মত করে ফাঁকতে চায়। এই নিজের মত বাংলা মানে একাধিক পুরুষদের নির্বাচনের জেলা নয়। বরং এইসব নাযিকারা সকল মাত্র বিদ্যমান, সাধারণমানের শিক্ষিত, তবে এদের প্রায় প্রায়োজনই নিজের মত করে শিক্ষা বা নির্দেশার একটি প্রধান অংশ দেখা যায়। মাদ্রিদ ম্যাগাজিনের প্রথম সংখ্যায় তখন যে নামে বলা হয়েছিল "কবি" সুনীলের বসবাস। দীর্ঘ দৈনিক এইসব মেয়েরা হঠাৎ আলার কলগুলিতে একজনের জন্য মনোনীত হয়ে যায়। চরিত্রগুলোর এই ধরনের বিশিষ্টতায় পড়া কিছু খুব নির্মাণ সাবলীলতায় বহমান থাকে। কোথাও কোথাও নীরব করে দেখায় যে এই নাযিকারা নিয়ম হতে দেয় না.” 43

Most of Gangopadhyay’s female characters are independent-minded. They value their freedom and want to live their lives the way they want. This freedom does not automatically mean they are here to go after more than one male partner. Rather they mostly are from middle-class families and have been brought up in middle-class ethos.
What is striking about them is they, in most cases, wanted to be educated in their own way. If we scratch the recesses of these women’s hearts, we will surely find that, Gangopadhyay, the poet, inhabits somewhere there. Otherwise familiar and very much ones amongst us, these women briefly come across as the species from another world, the moment there is some dazzle or storm in their lives. Such facets of characterizations mostly lie embedded in unspoken spontaneity. There is no tendency here to discomfort the readers through over-expression. The most sensitive and conflictual of relationships is that of a husband and wife. Marriage, on one hand gives social security and on the other hand undermines one’s individuality. The boundaries in a marital relationship are not the same in the case of a husband and a wife. Though it can be said that Sunil does not swear allegiance to the institution of marriage, he has portrayed such female characters in his novels who are blissfully free from the society-imposed burden of a marriage and who love to live life on their own terms. These women have loved men who are not their husbands. For example, Mandira (‘Dhubilbasan’), Jhilli (‘Prabasi Pakhi’), Prarthana (‘Tān’) and so on... Sunil did not bind them with moralistic restrictions, did not give them any talisman to resist societal pressures. He simply let them free their wings to have a taste of life on a still bigger canvas. He did not condemn them, rather empathized with them. This symbolized a kind of deliverance from bondage.

The ancient ascetics did everything to sanctify a marriage, to make it full-proof. Still, we can see that towards the end of the last century, cracks had started appearing in this institution. Is marriage only a social, familial and physical exchange between a male and a female? Does not it build a bridge of mutual respect between two different individuals? Sunil continues to search for an answer to this oft-repeated question, specially in his contemporary novels.

His novels with marital themes have different layers of complexities and have a
certain psychological insight embedded in them. Comparatively, his pre-marital love stories are more one-dimensional and therefore are less complex. The young heroes of these novels do not appear to be overly concerned with what is there in their beloveds’ minds. Most often than not, the edifice of their romanticism has crumbled in the heat of ‘reality’.

As we see in ‘Mā Bābā Bhai Bon’, the fifty two year old Kalyani gave her all to her family, loved her husband and even feared him. Yet, in one lonely afternoon, the words of her Guru-ma (Spiritual guide) rang in her like a harsh truth—‘You will not get back what you have lost!’ From then on, she started searching her heart in every nook and cranny and at last realized that she had indeed lost everything. She was a qualified lady, had even been a radio artist. Had she taken to singing seriously, she would have earned something. But that was not to be, as she was destined to be at the receiving end of her husband Priyanath’s oblique comments, such as——‘Being a non-earner, you will not know, what it takes to earn money?’ Kalyani tried to start her life afresh, but understood that it was no longer possible. As if to discover herself, in one afternoon, she found herself right on the busy main road past the compound of her house. She could not shed tears at home, lest everybody dubs her something of an insane. Apparently, she does not lack anything which can cause tears in her eyes. But who will know that deep within, she is in floods of tears?

She feels like screaming aloud hysterically——‘Oh, I have lost everything. I have nothing to hold on to. I will not get back what I have lost!’

‘তার পাগলের মতন চিত্তকার করে বলতে ইচ্ছে করছে, ওলো আমার সব কিছু হারিয়ে গেছে। আমার আর কিছু নেই, কিছু নেই, আমি আর কিছু করে পারে না।’ 44

To be spared this fate, Anuradha, the daughter-in-law of Kalyani, went to meet her pilot friend Biswajit in the absence of her husband Deb Kumar. This deed of Anuradha can have different interpretations—the urge to break the monotony of a predictable
relationship with her husband Deb Kumar or a fatal attraction that a thirty plus woman may feel towards another male or simply an irresistible desire to do something forbidden. But Sunil has an altogether different interpretation of Anuradha’s deviation——

‘Still Anuradha came back. She could not help coming back. This is something beyond what she wishes, what she does not, what she thinks right, what she does not. This is ‘deliverance’ in its true sense.’

A question that naturally begs answer in our minds is whether the definition of ‘deliverance’ is so narrow as to mean freedom from the restrictions of a marriage only? That deliverance is not for achieving any lofty ideological goal? Sunil, perhaps, sought answer to this question in his later novels.

In his novel ‘Hirak-Dipti’, Sunil tells us the story of Dipti, a married woman, who, in spite of being a mother and a house-wife, enters into a relationship with Hirak, a lecturer by profession. The latter brought in a fresh whiff of breeze in Dipti’s suffocated life. Dipti’s timid husband preferred to carry on with his life even though he knew about his wife’s dalliance. He chose a path of compromise, typical of a ‘middle class’ mindset. But Dipti was bold enough to leave behind a ‘patch-work’ relationship and start a new life with Hirak.

In this novel, Sunil spontaneously narrated Dipti’s story which was one of crossing bounds. Without bringing women’s liberation and things like that the novel deftly talked about a woman’s right to live her own life regardless of a ‘sacrosanct’ status the society imposes on the institution of ‘marriage’. Dipti did not find any virtue in dragging a monotonous and joyless married life. This 1973-written novel does not advocate free sex, nor does it aim to talk about the merits of a ‘live-in-relationship’. It is an honest account of a married woman’s speaking out her mind. Dipti did not want to betray her husband by carrying on
a meaningless married life. She believes that a married relationship exists on the foundation of trust.

“A different story we find in ‘Dhuli Basan’s Mandira’s life.

Calcutta’s Mandira Dutta ended up marrying Tom Brokoye, the son of the brother of the once famous India lover and labour party leader Fenar Brokoye within seven months of her arrival in London where she had gone to study political science. Once a fire-brand student leader of the socialist party, Tom leaned towards parliamentary democracy in later years. When Tom was the M.P. of the labour party, their marriage had crossed the twenty-fifth year. Their son was an America-based doctor, while their daughter had fallen for a poet-journalist whom she had a non-marital live-in relationship. At that point of time, Mandira suddenly encountered an inner crisis which prompted her to end her twenty six-year old marriage in favour of a new, lonely chapter in her life. What that ‘inner’ crisis is that caused upheaval in an otherwise settled life of a middle-aged woman?

The upheaval resulted in her returning to India. She chose a village near the Sunderbans to start a mass-awareness campaign. Her education stood her in good stead to wage a war against capitalism. But she soon fell victim to the dirty village politics which even culminated in her being raped on one night. The utterly humiliated Mandira decided to leave the village immediately, but ended up staying back when she realized that her rape...
had no political connotation and that her rapist had no profile to speak of. Actually this
dumb man who was a subject of everybody’s contempt and neglect thought that Mandira
represented that condescending, educated class. His liking for Mandira only drove him to
commit that revengeful act. Mandira wanted to win him over through punishment (Sunil
went on record saying that Mandira wanted to reform Javed through the touch of the
magic wand called ‘love’).

Mandira married the twenty year younger Javed and wanted to keep the ‘wild cat’
under her control.

This marriage may shock a conservative reader out of his wits, even, though it is not
difficult to understand that this marriage on the part of this forty-plus woman had nothing to
do with satisfying her carnal desires. Many males had felt attracted to her before (For
example, her former friend Biman, her brother-in-law, had sought her intimacy), but she
was tactful and indifferent enough to steer clear of all these honey-traps and to mainatain
her individuality and dignity.

So it is clear that this unusual marriage had no sexist side to it. Is a fiery brand of
feminism couched in this bold and independent stance of Mandira against the materialistic
and male-dominated society? Or is it a way to fulfill the aspiration of her womanhood?

When she became non-existent in her husband’s life, she did not allow herself to be
broken, even though it was a ‘crisis’ period for her, mentally. She, instead, tried to find
out the meaning of life. Her new relationship with Javed was, as if, a slap on her philander
husband’s cheeks. It was not unknown to her that she would not be able to keep this
young man under leash. It is totally natural for him to feel attracted to a girl of his age at a
later stage, but Mandira does not want to sacrifice her present thinking of that unpleasant
thing happening. The reader may feel disconcerted at the way Sunil has slighted all the
norms of the society while conceiving this unusual relationship which did not follow any
rule of age, class, religion and education. From a reading of this novel, it appears that the writer has not put any faith on the institution of marriage.

The male-female relationship — whether it is mental, intellectual, physical or social or something else? This is the question which he has kept open in this novel and which bags an answer.

In the context of the traditional Indian values, Mandira is a much maligned character, but the writer, by dint of his insight, has put more emphasis on human values than he has on social values, where the fulfillment of life lies in love and that love, even if sometimes dependent on the celebration of the body, is mostly ethereal. That love is the life-force that drove Mandira to come out of her cocoon to start a new life, a life of her own. There was enough scope for this controversial relationship to be portrayed crassly, but Sunil steered clear of doing that.

'My main satisfaction is that I do not hanker after comfort. I am happy with what I have. Neither past, nor future can bind me.'

"আমার প্রধান সুখ এই যে, আমি সুখের আলোক করি না। যা পেয়েছি, তাতে হু আমি ভুল, অন্তত কিছু ভিতরের সন্তানের আমাকে এখানে রাখতুম।........
আমি আশাপ্রলম্ব আছি। একজন পুরুষ গুরু আমাকেই চোখ এ কি কম পাওয়া ? আমি তার মাথা থেকে সব বিষয় গুঁড়ে নিয়েছি। এস কি কম? ... মানুষ হয় এইই সুখীন সুখীকুল না পেলে সারাজীবন দেখ বিকিত থেকে দেখে হতে।'' 47

I am happy. It is highly satisfying to know that a man needs me. It is equally satisfying that I have been able to rid his mind off all rancour. I feel that had I not tasted this slice of independent happiness, I would have felt deprived for life.' But Sunil could not give them a legitimate home on the soil of this society, even though he had married them off without much fuss. The idea of their making a home inside a boat sounds very nice, but is nothing but utopian, even limitlessly absurd. Naturally, a question rises in our minds———whether
this ‘unequal’ relationship is like a flowing river which can never enjoy rest on the real soil of a real world? Mandira’s daughter visited her mother’s household with her would-be husband and was elated. Her acceptance of her mother’s philosophy of life gives the impression that the writer wants to build a bridge between the two generations. ‘Dhulibasan’s Mandira is as much real, bold, self-reliant as she is incredible and imaginary as a character. But the ‘iconoclast’ in Sunil wanted to shake the very moral edifice of this ‘value’-obsessed society and to a certain extent, he has been successful.

The heroine of the novel ‘Shree, Prarthana is truly an exceptional lady who is prepared to accept any challenge in life. The strength of her character drove her towards the self-made business magnet Arindam.

She loved his mannish personality. Far elder to her in age, this middle-aged widower had never looked at her lustfully, rather had spurned her advances time and again. This rejection, even humiliation made her more resolute and she was all the more determined to make him tilt towards her and if that required her to sleep with him in a hotel room, she had no problem. But Arindam, her maternal aunt Jhunu’s once rejected lover, was in no mood to oblige her and she even thought that it was nothing but a dirty conspiracy, blind that he still was in Jhunu’s love.

To realize her aspiration, Prarthana was not hesitant to be bold even to the point that she was suspected to be behind the fire that had taken place in Arindam’s factory. Her beauty has been compared to the all-engaging fire, but does not she stand for creation rather than destruction or is it not her aim to bridge relationship rather than to breach it? As she herself said——

‘Does fire only burn? Can not it be a light? Can not it purify anything?’

“আগুন বুঝি তোহু পোহুয়া? তা আলো হতে পারে না? আগুন কিছুকে পুড়তে পারে না?”

She belongs to this generation, where holding forth one’s views openly and
Prarthana has the inclination to articulate herself in a very open, easy manner, which is why she is prone to be misunderstood quite often than not. But she did not cheat herself. When she failed to attract the person of her liking with the help of words, she tried to put into use the language of the body. For that she did not suffer any pang of conscience. Such was her straight-forwardness! She did not want to stretch the uneasy relationship with her professor husband unnecessarily. All she wanted was to win the battle of life, that too on her own terms. She may apparently lack the artistic sense, even the sense of reality. But there was no pretention in her. She truly loved the much older Arindam. Though she was aware that this one-sided relationship had no future, she never tried to hide her feeling. Even when Arindam's grown-up son Chandan fell to her charm and personality, she was not indulgent towards him, even though she gave her company. She even said that had Chandan ever proposed to her she would have made clean breast of her feeling for her father. This shows how clear she was in her mind and of course, how confident she was about herself? Her strength of characters truly impresses us. She is honest to her love and she has no hesitation to accept the existence of that love. This love is one-sided and has no ethical sanction and she knows that. Yet she does not care.

Sunil is never comfortable with the imaginary chastity of women. He never looks down upon those women who sell their bodies to earn a livelihood. Nor he tries to be extra-philanthropical towards them by showing false sympathy. There are characters of fallen women in many of his novels. In the recently written novel 'Manobhumi', the central character is that of a prostitute. Chandan, a middle class boy, who is introverted and subdued, suddenly marries Radha, a Muslim prostitute, who is also known by the name Hasu. In the bargain, Chandan became virtually ostracized from his family, friends and society. He even could not hold on to his job. The inimical clouds of a conservative society
further darkened over him, so much so that the somewhat whimsical Radha left him to spare him the worries of a greater crisis. Sitting beneath a tree by the riverside, Chandan kept on waiting for his beloved Radha to come back.

Here we are surprised to see how faithful Sunil is towards a married relationship! An ordinary boy who has lost everything, has suddenly become very extra-ordinary through a determined display of love. This mutual trust between a couples who belong to two diametrically opposite backgrounds, transcends all the questions of morality and acquires a human dimension beyond the typical societal identification. It is once again proved that feelings such as love, humanity, sympathy are beyond commodification and are immeasurable.

Like Prarthana of ‘Teen’, Mandira of ‘Dhulibasan’ and Raka of ‘Raka’, the life of Jhilli, the heroine of ‘Prabasi Pakhi’ is also characterized by the love for a person not her age.

Jhilli disregards the stereotypes of moral scruples. She lives life on her own terms. We have no doubt about her intellectual ability. She thinks about social problems, makes documentary films about the children of sex workers. In her personal life, she is a divorcée. Her husband of the same age could not adjust to her bohemian lifestyle. She became attracted to her father’s Nigeria-returned friend Nabakanta. The reader naturally gets a shock—what type of relationship is Sunil trying to weave here? Marriage with the friend of her father? But is not it that love does not see age difference? Two individuals may fall in love with each other regardless of significant age difference. That is why, neither Nabakanta nor Jhilli, both of whom are sufficiently modern, feels overly guilty or defensive about their relationship. But after the initial shock, the reader is slowly initiated to the eternal tune of tradition. He (The reader) also gets to know that Sunil has faith in certain relationships. That is why before he (Nabakanta) takes the final decision, Nabakanta, with his experience
and keen-eyed observation sees through the mind of Jhilli, who is actually searching for her father’s reflection in him, not her desired man. Her father was the beloved person in her life—a friend, philosopher and guide. But once he got married for the second time after the death of his first wife, Jhilli became distanced from him mentally. That unsatiated paternal affection resulted in a vacuum in her life and she became a different Jhilli—brusque and irritable. She had craved for her father’s undivided company, but her step mother’s clever machination saw to it that a wall of coldness was created between the father and the daughter. Her unusual behaviour with Nabakanta is the result of that unfulfilled desire. What Jhilli thought of as a love was actually a yearning for affection. The reflection of an ‘electra’ complex (Just like Oedipus complex that occurs between the mother and her male child) is too evident here to miss one’s notice. According to Freud, the complex relation that the child undergoes with his or her parent shapes his or her personality and behaviour in later life. Unnatural relationships are manifested through the behaviour of the concerned characters.

“...In the presence of trauma, however, there occurs an infantile neurosis that is an important forerunner of similar reactions during the child’s adult life. The super ego, the moral factor that dominates the conscious adult mind also has its origin in the process of overcoming the Oedipus complex. Freud considered the reactions against the Oedipus complex the most important social achievement of the human mind.” 49

Sunil has raised a basic moral question through this relationship.

Nabakanta wanted Jhilli as a woman in his life. He was not concerned about fatherly affection and did not definitely burden himself with the moralistic connotation of this relationship. But the moment he realized that Jhilli was actually looking for her father’s image in him, he backed off. To him, the relationship was mired in a sin. He was too strong-minded to resort to any mean trick to perpetuate this relationship. He rejected the
company of the beautiful Jhilli for good.

Here we see that Sunil has a respect for the father-daughter relationship. Similarly, we do not have any doubt about the faith he reposes in the institution of marriage. Though, he appears to be an iconoclast, he has shown enough respect for those relationships which are beautiful as well as eternal. His moral vision is wide. It does not confine itself to the boundaries of a physical relationship alone. It goes beyond and points to a greater and deeper meaning of life and society.

In his novels it is sometimes partially evident that he wants to represent the conflicts between puritanical notions and materialistic utilitarianism, between broad humanism and narrow respectability. To him value is nothing but the absolute power of anything that supports life.

The male-female relationship is about mutual trust and dependence. The different shades of love and marriage have been captured beautifully in the coloured prism of the novel ‘Purba-Paschim’. Set on an expansive canvas, this eventful novel has pictured the winds of various changes experienced in two Bengals in the political and social arena.

On the one hand are the death of Nehru, the Indo-Pak war, the untimely demise of Lal Bahadur, the rise of Indira Gandhi, the economic declivity, the revolutionary zeal amongst the emerging generations of the society, the politics of extremism, the war of independence and on the other hand, are the aftermath of the language movement, the agitation for the restoration of the democratic rights, the liberation movement in Bangladesh, a sense of despair and disillusionment amongst the youths post-independence, the assassination of Mujhib—all these come together to form the stream of events of ‘Purba-Paschim’

But the political whirlpool is not our theme. Our theme is complexity that is the other name of male-female relationship and which is there aplenty in this novel in different hues
and layers.

One criticism about Sunil’s writings is that they are very physical, but on careful analysis, it is not difficult to see that the physicality has no narrow, coarse instincts attached to it. Actually, the truth that body without soul or vice versa is meaningless has been repeatedly carried in his writings. ‘Purba-paschim’ bears testimony to that. That sometimes the mind plays a stronger role than the body, even in a conjugal relationship, has been shown here. The NRI doctor Tutul alias Bahnishikha loved and married a Muslim doctor called Alam from Bangladesh. It is worthy of notice that though, the novel was written on the choppy background of the Bangladesh liberation war (‘Mukti Yuddha’), Sunil did not use the pretext of a Hindu-Muslim marriage to raise the predictable questions of crisis on religious front. To him, Alam’s sincere love for a lonely, brain tumour-afflicted Tutul was more significant and valuable. Sunil is a firm believer that love is above all narrowness whether it is religious, political and social. This novel also tells the story of another couple who had been the active members of the naxalite movement and had been tortured so much by the police as to be reduced to virtual cripples. When they were in a normal state, revolution was their first love and once ill, their friendship became the reason for them to live. Both of them are now in hospital beds. Kaushik, who could hardly stand on his feet, got married to a ‘catheter’-carrying Pompom. According to doctor Shantimoy, this ‘unusual’ marriage would act a medicine for their recovery.

Will we then still say that Sunil highlights only ‘physicality’ in his novels?

The male-female relationship is familial, social, physical and to some extent psychological. If any one of these loses its balance, the whole relation turns complex and unnatural. The novel ‘Raka’ is about the journey of the girl named Raka from adolescence to adulthood. But, on the backdrop of the main plot, runs the story of Raka’s mother Sebanti’s love and lovelessness. Sebanti was happy with her husband Somnath
and her children. But her husband’s friend Chandramouli came as a storm in her placid life.

Chandramouli is totally different from Somnath. He possesses a raw life energy which sits uneasy on their etiquette-borne, cultured life-style, rather disbalances it. His manliness, his fearless approach towards life stirred the innermost recesses of Sebanti’s heart which she was also unaware of. One day when a little inebriated Chandramouli tried to be a little intimate towards Sebanti, she resisted his advances very coldly prompting Chandramouli to apologise for his not so honourable behaviour. Though she rejected his proposal, she definitely felt some tremor in her heart for this middle-aged man. That is why, on one rain-drenched afternoon, she left her indisposed husband behind in the tent and found herself snuggling upto Chandramouli, knee-deep in the river. But this time, Chandramouli did not cross the limits of propriety and resisted the advances of Sebanti firmly. This rejection did not go down well with Sebanti so much so that she lost the balance of her mind. Later on, when she gave birth to Somnath’s daughter Raka, she began believing that Raka was actually a child borne out of love between Chandramouli and herself. This belief took such a firm root in her mind that her family of so many years seemed very insignificant to her. The turmoil in her mind on account of this constantly raging inner conflict resulted in a psychological imbalance which even climaxed in her unfortunate suicide. Sebanti was a romantic at heart which is why her incongruous actions are hard to believe. However, the writer has his own explanation for this behaviour. But when Raka came to know about her mother’s story, she started to believe that Chandramouli is her father, thereby disregarding the biological fatherhood of Somnath. She found logic behind her mother’s eccentric behaviour and Chandramouli became an ideal hero in her life. She was so enamoured by the vigour and prowess of Chandramouli that she wanted the reflection of the same in her gentle, timid and educated husband Suprakash so much so that she was not hesitant to send him to fight with the villagers,
knowing that this act of heroism might prove perilous for Suprakash. Suprakash died a tragic death. After the initial trauma, Raka found herself under the guidance of Chandramouli. Thus, Sebanti’s unfulfilled desire to get Chandramouli in her life got fulfilled through her daughter.

Here, Sunil has made the general theory about marital morality topsy turvy. Those who put a derogatory ‘Physical’ tag before his name have got to read this novel and appreciate Sunil’s viewpoint that love is borne in the mind and that body without mind is meaningless.

Sunil has written a thrilling novel ‘Hei Mahājīban’ where he rebuffed the prevalent societal norms and in the process has invited controversy. The protagonist of the novel is Hemkanti who was once a revolutionary and was highly educated, has suddenly surfaced in the present after a long hiatus. A bachelor and in his mid-fifties, he has lost his past memories and is, at present, living an imbecile’s life, thanks to the cruel machinations of his step brothers. Memories, sometimes, come to him like a flash of lightening and go off the next moment. His niece, Joyee is determined to bring him back to the rhythm of a normal life. She was a great fan of this uncle of hers in her childhood. He initiated her into a variety of literature, both Indian and foreign, introduced her to a treasure-house of knowledge. In short, he was her hero at that impressionable age. The same uncle ushered her to the threshold of adulthood through his caresses and kisses.

After experiencing the ups and downs of life, Joyee is a fully self-reliant and self-dependent woman now. She is a divorcée who had already aborted her child from her first marriage. She still loves her uncle Hemkanti, wants to nurse him back to his mental composure. In the bargain, she is prepared to use the warmth of her body, as she read from foreign journals that sex sometimes helps to cure those patients who have lost their mental world. She sincerely wants to marry him. She even wants to mother his child.
because the unfulfilled desire of motherhood still lies in her. It is very difficult to accept a physical relationship between an uncle and his niece as is sought to be portrayed in this novel. It is highly immoral by our society's moral yardstick, but through this unnatural relationship, Sunil wanted two different individuals, who were incomplete in their own lives, to complement each other. But as the story unfolds, this relationship did not end up in marriage and there is a hint of a sigh of relief to the reader that Hemkanti was in fact Joyee's step uncle, not related through blood.

So is not it legitimate to ask a question here and which is—whether Sunil is afraid of the society, contrary to the image he wants to project before us?

Sunil is a life artist who loves to portray life in the raw, though paradoxically he is a romantic at heart. Modernity characterizes his mindset, but the bitterness and cynicism that one associates with the complex modern life is absent in his writings. A streak of rebellion, be it against the prevalent tradition or the glaring unequalness in the society is visible in most of his male characters. The age-old chasm between idealism and realism is there in his writings, so are a philosophy of life and a positive attitude to discover the hidden meaning of life. His heroines are free from all these inner conflicts. They are as if a species of a different world. The onslaught of time and space does not sweep them off their feet. Their life boats sail along more easily and assuredly.

His heroines do not apparently suffer the pains of disillusionment, nor are they unduly weighed down by the guilt of morals gone wrong. Because they (Like Sunil) do not blindly follow the traditional dos and don'ts. They have their own version of morality. Youthfully exuberant and sometimes impulsive, his heroines, most of who belong to a upper-middle class society, are, by nature, less pessimistic.

The catharsis of mind through repentance and guilt-feeling and the conflicts within—all these so typical of the Dostoyevskian heroes are conspicuous by their absence in his
novels. He has not delved into the characters of his heroines deeply, he has seen them outwardly. This is where his weakness lies. This is also the reason why the journey from moral digression to moral resurrection is more pronounced in the stories of his male protagonists, not his female ones.

‘Interior journey’ is not something we often find in his writings. The stories are incident-centric and dramatized but not impregnated with deep philosophy.

That is why the strata of moral analysis in a modern novel, viz., confession, detection, self-projection are less visible in Sunil’s novels.

Since Sunil has a lot of faith in the intellectual sharpness of his heroines, they are more matured mentally than the males of their age. The profundity of life touches them more. In contrast, his heroes are preoccupied with class struggles or battles on the ideological plane. Bruised in the conflict between dream and reality, they are metamorphosed into angry young men. But his women are too composed to be carried away emotionally. This is the reason why they (Those women) seek their match in the middle-aged men who are steady and have some worldly wisdom.

Many may find this age-belying love immoral and may even see in it certain sexual perversity. But this sexual complexity is more psychological than physical. The thinking in their sub-conscious mind has found manifestation in this unconventional behaviour. They are bold enough to enter into those relationships which have not got the sanction of the Bengali society as yet.

Let me cite some examples:

(1) In the bloom of his recently savoured youth, Piklu takes fancy to his cousin (Sister) Tutul {Purba-Pascim} (2) Sharmila and Atin get into a pre-marital physical relationship with Sharmila getting pregnant {Purba-Pascim} (3) The widow Jaya allows her college friend Shekhar to lie on her lap {Aranyer Din-rātri} (4) Nabakanta puts his
hand on the thigh of Jhilli, the daughter of his friend { Prabasi Pákhi} (5) Prarthana unsolicitedly pays court to Arindam in the hotel room shamelessly banking on her youth { Tān } (6) Yamuna's elder sister Saraswati takes to wooing the males, her faces daubed with snow and powder { Ātma-Prakas} or (7) Siddhartha enters the room of that buxom nurse, attracted by her sexual appeal { Pratidbandi}.

It should not be concluded that Sunil's writings are voyeuristic or are there to tingle one's carnal senses. The above-cited examples go to show that Sunil has brought some secret truths of life into the fore as they are——in raw and naked shape. In doing so, he has not been pretentious, nor has he cared much for the hullabaloo the conservative society is certain to raise.

What is worth noticing, though, is that he has not held anybody responsible for these 'aberrations'. To him, no one is guilty or a sinner. In the stream of life, at its various turns, desire has manifested itself in different forms, hues and in different relationships, sometimes in a normal manner, sometimes perverse and distorted. But to his credit, he never has let his characters wallow in that muddy whirlpool endlessly. Through those aberrative experiences, sometimes they attained a rare philosophical or spiritual upliftment or sometimes they were simply lost in the complexities of a bigger whirlpool, that is life.

Sunil has been acknowledged as the greatest romantic writer of the Bengali literature. He can weave amazing, dramatic stories around the relationships and lives of men and women. Laced with oodles of imagination, many real life incidents which he had been a witness of, were made into wonderful stories. But when it comes to describing physical intimacy between man and woman in details, he feels ill at ease. Though Sunil wrote about the dreams of common Bengali youths, but he has his prejudices and his own sense of decency.

Herein lies the greatness of Sunil, the novelist. His aim is never to write to titillate in
the sense of those scores of raunchy and lewd novels that abound the footpaths of Battala. At the same time, he does not saddle his characters with the burden of any Dos and Don’ts. We can understand that he is a philosopher, not a saint. Moralistic preaching is something he is not comfortable at. He loves to imagine himself in the situations and predicaments of his characters and then to digress in his Bohemian style (Through his characters that is) as the story progresses. He never perches himself on an idealistic pedestal and looks down at his characters contemptuously. He avoids the temptation to play the omniscient role of a writer while portraying his characters. This sets him apart as a truly modern writer with a brand of morality which is his own, very own.
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