

Female Autonomy and Agency in Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Parineeta, Devdas, and Borodidi*

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Abstract

This study examines the gentleness and sensitivity with which Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay portrays his female characters in Parineeta, Devdas, and Borodidi, reflecting the status of women in 20th-century Bengal society. The early 20th-century Bengal was not a liberating time for women, conventionally, as patriarchy and lack of autonomy and financial security played against women. However, Sharat Chandra presented many of his female characters with undeniable grace and strength, enabling them to navigate the limitations and hurdles of the patriarchal Bengal. His stories served as a critique of patriarchy and a celebration of women's inner strength, while remaining grounded in reality. Practically, Sharat Chandra's female characters are physically bound by society, but their emotional independence and determination provide them a sense of autonomy that surpasses physical restraints. This paper examines how, amidst the harrowing restrictions of living, his (Sharat's) female characters utilise their agency and claim autonomy and independence, despite being confined within patriarchal limits.

Keywords: *Autonomy; Agency; Female Characterisation; Parineeta; Devdas; Borodidi.*

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3. Introduction

Sharath Chandra Chattopadhyay's stories are the products of his time, the 20th-century patriarchal Bengal. His stories are highly appreciated in the field of feminist analysis due to his complex female characters, which are depicted with sensitivity and understanding. Sharath Chandra attempted to empathise with women in his time and society as strongly as possible, portraying the realistic struggles faced by women with intricate details. The dilemmas and complexities of the characters added richness to them. His (Sharat's) female characters are never put on an idealistic pedestal, but also cannot achieve independent victory, which is practical for the author's time. He (Sharat) accurately depicted the condition of his time and society, as well as the restrictive effects on women. So, the lack of empowerment in his female characters is actually true to the context, and he is not wrong for such portrayals. He could project extraordinary compassion for women by valuing their inner and outer struggles to survive through pain while carrying the burden of traditional responsibilities. Not only that, he has even provided brief moments of control and power to the female characters, which, nonetheless, are only transient moments of power amidst the bigger picture of helplessness and submission to traditions.

Sharath Chandra presents the female protagonist's desired union with her lover as the reward while keeping the other unpleasant possibilities between the lines. He also depicts her separation from her lover as a tragic incident, while assuring that she has been better without the emotional dependency on the lover who caused her pain. He further projects on the contextual necessity of marriage for women to secure financial and social protection, regardless of their happiness. Chandramukhi in *Devdas*, an unmarried woman who can finance herself on her own, is a courtesan (prostitute) who is not deemed a respectable human, who might have self-satisfaction but not social acceptance. Madhavi, an absolutely helpless widow in *Borodidi*, deprived of family support, has neither companionship, nor happiness, nor even protection. Though it remains unrevealed what happens after the end of the story, her continuing misfortune can still be estimated. On the contrary, only Lalita in *Parineeta* achieves both happiness and security, as she marries a wealthy man, fortunately, who happens to be the love of her life. The romantic story saved her from more misery.

Sharath Chandra's time in 20th-century Bengal society still held onto the traditional restraints, as depicted in his novels, where the female character's attempts to defy expectations are tackled subtly, having to compensate for the rebellious behaviour with a misfortune at the end, or the female character's strength is emphasised with her ability to tolerate oppression and suppress her desires. There is a negotiation between

freedom, respect, and societal restrictions for women, where women ultimately end up at the losing end, but not without showcasing utmost inner strength in exchange for autonomy and agency.

Objective of the Study

The broader aim of the present study is to focus on the importance of emotional autonomy over physical independence. The specific objective of this paper is to understand how emotional resilience either defeats or undermines the other heavier boundaries for the female characters in Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's works.

Literature Review

Madhumita Purkayastha [5] explores in her paper how Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay critiques the orthodox 20th-century Bengali society through his novels and how his female characters make critical decisions to defy the same orthodoxy. The author analyses several works by Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, which highlight the culturally rooted feminist critique of the author. Biswarup Das [2] emphasises Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's role as a pioneer of South Asian or Bengali feminism. He mentions Chattopadhyay's protagonists, such as Lalita and Parvati, who quietly rebel against society's pressure with quiet strength. Nawshin Flora's [6] *The Daily Star* article on Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay is an appreciation piece that highlights the broader humanitarian aspects of Sharat Chandra's work, focusing on the humanisation of female characters in his novels. The article discusses Sharat Chandra's real-life humanitarian sympathy for women, as reflected in the characters in his novels. "Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay: A Journey Through His Life and Works" [1] is an online blog that outlines Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's work as an expression of the voice of the marginalised, with his representation of widows, underprivileged women, and the fallen women, shunned by society, and given a voice in Sharat Chandra's stories. The article "Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay: A Literary Luminary of Bengal" [3] points out that Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay was both evidently and calculatedly advocating for women's rights through his novels.

All such prominent secondary sources celebrate Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay by discussing his humanity and the immense strength of his female characters, given powerful voices and stories to express in his novels. However, this paper presents a comparative analysis of the pivotal female characters in Sharat Chandra's novels and their journeys within their respective stories. It also ties in with the narrative structures, which are highly influenced by the characters' emotional strength. While the mentioned studies discuss Sharat Chandra's sensitivity to his female characters,

this paper focuses on the subtle autonomy bestowed upon them by the legendary feminist author.

Theoretical Framework

The present study critically evaluates the three selected novels of Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, namely *Parineeta*, *Devdas*, and *Borodidi*, based on Feminist Theory as suggested in the “Feminist Criticism” chapter of the book *Beginning Theory* by Peter Barry – how predominantly male authors represent women, pointing that even though the sphere of publishable literature has always been shadowed by patriarchy, the representation of women in stories, regardless of the author’s gender, give a space for women to express anyhow. As Barry [7] suggests, coming across female characters in literature, two questions need to be answered: (i) How does the text reflect on the limitations of women in society? And (ii) how do the women still establish their authority despite those limitations? – Being relevant to the present study, Sharat Chandra’s portrayal of female characters, Lalita, Paravati, Chandramukhi, and Madhavi, in the selected novels, is somehow bound by the dominating patriarchy, which this paper examines through the critical lens of Barry’s two questions of “Feminist Criticism”.

Methodology

This qualitative study, employing Feminist Criticism, includes analytical discussions of Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Parineeta*, *Devdas*, and *Borodidi*. The study makes a comparative content analysis of the major female characters, Lalita, Paravati, Chandramukhi, and Madhavi, in the three selected novels, examining the narrative direction and how they are given agency in adverse situations that threaten their autonomy. The three novels serve as the primary sources of information for the study, while relevant scholarly articles have been critically considered as secondary sources. The references for this paper have been formatted according to the Analytical Sciences Style, following the guidelines of the Feni University Journal for a complete paper.

Findings and Discussion

Parineeta

Parineeta is one of Sharat Chandra’s most complete, structured, and straightforward novels. The story is set in 1916 in Kolkata. It is a romantic story inside a Brahmin household. The natural insertion of romance in a society or household filled with conservative values indicates a subtle rebellion from Sharat’s side [4]. The setting is structured in a way that allows romance to blossom despite the conservative

restrictions. The two adjacent houses, which have attached roofs, allow the characters, particularly the young girls, to move freely between them, facilitating the development of attachments without concern for restrictions. Little Lalita was accompanied by her maternal uncle's and Shekhar's families through these houses with attached roofs. Although the romance in the story is not extravagant, it challenges traditional notions of romance. The young main characters refuse to deem anything significant besides what they want.

Along with the romance, the novel also depicts the atrocities of 20th-century Bengal society. Two recurring conflicts in the story are the financial struggle of Lalita's family and Lalita's appropriate age for marriage. Lalita's uncle's anxiety about getting his daughters married with the demanded dowry represents the excruciating trouble the brides' families endured to fulfill the groom's family's demands. The dowry system had financial consequences and a social reputation at stake. Secondly, Lalita is only 13, while Shekhar is a 25-year-old adult. Being so young, Lalita is considered too old to be married. The gap in maturity and age between the romantic leads reflects 20th-century Bengal society, where maturity and responsibilities were often imposed on women from a young age. Hence, despite the situational difficulties, Lalita demonstrates a strong sense of religious and social responsibility, while Shekhar enjoys the liberty of emotions.

The story revolves around its two romantic leads, Lalita and Shekhar, who meet, connect, separate, and reunite. Shekhar, an attorney, is the son of the wealthy Naveen Roy. The Roy family's neighbour was the poor clerk Gurucharan, whose orphaned niece Lalita took shelter in her uncle's house, thus becoming acquainted with Shekhar and his family. She became so close to Shekhar's family that she could call Shekhar's mother 'maa'. Lalita's good nature made her everyone's favourite. The topic of Lalita's marriage is brought up when Gurucharan's wife gives birth to another daughter five years after Lalita's stay with them. Though she is 13, the family's lack of wealth to provide for a dowry makes it difficult for her to find a suitor.

On the other hand, when Shekhar's family finds a suitor for him with a vast amount of dowry, Shekhar starts loving Lalita and wishes to keep her to himself. As they grow older together and their houses are close, their romance develops smoothly despite the economic disparity, until Girin enters the story and is also attracted to Lalita. Girin is a well-educated young Brahmin man who supports Gurucharan, the man burdened with the responsibilities of his niece and daughters during a time when it was the norm to marry off girls at the age of 8. Girin's sister Manorama, considered a noblewoman,

criticises her own community, commenting on how the upper class is eager to humiliate but not to help.

Unlike many other male leads in Sharat Chandra's works, Shekhar is uniquely expressive in love (8). Upon discovering a potential union between Lalita and Girin, Shekhar experiences a subtle sense of hurt, feeling as though someone has taken something of his own. During a child's play, Lalita puts a mala on Shekhar jokingly. Shekhar's further attempts to place the mala back on her as a form of engagement offend Lalita. Self-respectful Lalita feels humiliated, thinking that the lack of wealth has made her pitiful enough for Shekhar to joke about marrying her. After that, Shekhar confesses his love to her. After a few days, Gurucharan converted, and Naveen Roy ended the relationship between the two families. And when Shekhar learns about Lalita and Girin's potential marriage, he becomes filled with hatred for Lalita and loses all hope of getting together. However, Lalita firmly believes that the mala exchange ceremony itself is enough to seal the union of Shekhar and Lalita forever, and her relationship with any other man is unacceptable. Even the irredeemable separation from Shekhar makes her falter in her beliefs.

Girin, who is a third party in the relationship between the main characters, acts as an understanding and caring friend. Lalita's family needed financial support from Girin. Before his death, her uncle Gurucharan made Girin promise to marry Lalita. Girin eventually becomes the reason for Shekhar's envy and resentment. He is attracted to Lalita, but values their friendship above all else. Lalita trusted him enough to tell him about her commitment to love for Shekhar. Girin respects Lalita's decision without complaining while fulfilling the promise made to Gurucharan by marrying Lalita's cousin to help the family.

The relationship between Shekhar and Bhubaneshwari, the mother-son duo, is remarkable. Bhubaneshwari is Sharat's typical affectionate motherly character. Shekhar and his mother's relationship is filled with respect, love, and frankness. She is from a village but lives in the city. Her character combines the village's simplicity and the city's agility. She has been exceptionally affectionate towards Lalita, loving her as her daughter. After Shekhar's anger towards Lalita subsides on his wedding day, he decides that he cannot marry anyone other than her. He requests that his mother accept Lalita into the family, disregarding the family differences and emphasising that nothing will supersede Bhubaneshwari's decision or permission. Bhubaneshwari agrees and accepts Lalita as Shekhar's wife. They live happily ever after (because the side of the man has opened the previously closed doors for her, and there is no scope

for her refusal because she has already believed herself to be religiously bound to Shekhar, apart from the fact that they love each other. She becomes 'parineeta,' a complete woman, when the man accepts her.

Although the circumstances restrict Lalita, she is still given autonomy to a degree that allows her individuality to remain beyond external control. She calls Shekhar out when she feels he is trying to belittle her. She expresses her independence in response to Shekhar's feelings, despite concerns about whether his family will accept their relationship. She also stays determined to believe that her ultimate reunion has been with Shekhar only, without faltering from her loyalty to Shekhar, even when Shekhar was marrying another woman. However, Lalita's firm commitment to Shekhar can also be viewed as a socio-religious obligation that compels her. She refuses to marry Girin because she loves Shekhar and is bound to him by the rules after he places the 'mala' around her neck. She refers to herself as the 'parineeta', a woman made complete with her husband.

Furthermore, regardless of Lalita's firm stance as Shekhar's 'parineeta,' her identity as a complete woman is fulfilled only when Shekhar convinces his family to let him indulge in his love for her. Lalita gains social acceptance as a fulfilled woman on the condition that Shekhar's family officially accepts Lalita as their daughter-in-law. Additionally, this joyful acceptance is possible because Shekhar's mother, Bhubaneshwari, who has been fond of Lalita, approves of the union, which becomes possible after Shekhar's father's death, who was the decision-maker in the house before Bhubaneshwari. While alive, Shekhar's father's (Naveen Roy) anger for Lalita's uncle was the greatest hindrance to Shekhar and Lalita's relationship. Bhubaneshwari has the power to decide to eradicate the hindrance after her husband's death, which she could not have done if she were alive.

Furthermore, Shekhar, being a man, enjoys greater emotional freedom than Lalita. Simultaneously, Lalita and Shekhar's hope for a relationship depended more on Shekhar. Shekhar initiates their romance, while Lalita provides support. Lalita confessing her feelings before him would not be socially acceptable. Later, they separate because Shekhar's father gets upset with Lalita's uncle, and Shekhar gives up on the relationship. Shekhar exercises his liberty by agreeing to marry another girl, then decides not to proceed, changing his choice. Shekhar indulged in his personal feelings, appreciating Lalita's determination. The author strives to provide the female protagonist with maximum strength and control, all the while authentically depicting societal appropriation.

Devdas

Devdas portrays the intensity of a lover's reaction to love failure and how the rigidity of societal rules can ruin the lives of two people in love. Sharat Chandra did not like his creation of this novel and did not want to publish it. He even deemed it immoral because of the inclusion of a prostitute's character. The publisher insisted on publishing the book because the writer did not show any hurtful vulgarity in Chandramukhi's character and depicted her emotions for Devdas sensitively [8].

Compared to *Parineeta*, *Devdas* lacks the bonds of mutual understanding, love, and respect in the romantic relationships of the story. The relationships in *Devdas* contain a power imbalance between the characters. Devdas lacks emotional intelligence in both cases, and the ladies in love with him show an unreasonable yet understandable devotion towards him.

Devdas represents a combination of the women who firmly hold on to their dignity while willingly embracing their servitude to him as an expression of their love. The story portrays two experiences of love. For Devdas, it was a mixture of desire and pain towards both love interests. For Parvati and Chandramukhi, love consisted of their selfless devotion and gratitude for the opportunity to serve Devdas. Devdas and Parvati are implied to be childhood friends. As grown-ups, Devdas is 19, and Parvati is 13 years old when the attachment of friendship turns into a hope for romantic love from Parvati's side. Parvati considers herself to belong to Devdas. She expects his affection and believes that his passion is hers. Parvati has clearly articulated what she wants and is brave enough to act upon her desires. Entering Devdas' room at night to meet him would be considered socially scandalous if anyone discovered it. Still, she takes the risk anyway, because expressing her feelings for Devdas is more critical to Parvati than social restrictions.

Devdas' respect for Parvati fluctuates multiple times based on the class difference between the two families. Devdas's upper-class elite background gives him superiority over Parvati's middle-class background. He admits to caring for her as a friend, but it is beneath him to consider marrying her. Devdas' rejection letter creates immense pain for Parvati, and her self-respect overtakes her love for Devdas. Devdas' lack of emotional understanding becomes prominent when he feels betrayed or deprived because of Parvati's marriage to a man of another well-established family. Parvati's unreachability makes him realise that he loves her and now desperately wants to attain her for himself. He visits Parvati before her marriage and requests that she come back to him. Here, the author establishes Parvati's power despite her helplessness. She

refuses to accept Devdas' love, even though he reassures her that it is mutual. She chooses to be with someone she doesn't love, rejecting the loved one who hurt her and punishing him at the same time.

Parvati and Chandramukhi's love for Devdas facilitates their contentment from within, and the value of their love stems from their internal satisfaction rather than external validation from Devdas. Chandramukhi's acts of service and Parvati's constant desire to serve Devdas reflect their journey of self-satisfaction more than their intention to please Devdas. When the married Parvati sees Devdas in a miserable condition at his father's funeral, she feels terrible for him as a friend. Since childhood, her internalised idea of herself was considered unique to Devdas. The internalisation rushes back, making her want to take care of Devdas. She pities him and herself for being in a situation where she cannot fulfil what she believes to be her duty: supporting her 'Devda.' Her sudden wish to shelter Devdas may seem whimsical, but it stems from her sense of responsibility rather than her suppressed love for him. Immediately, she realises that she cannot help him even if she wants, because just the thought of bringing Devdas to her in-laws' house is enough to create a scandal, especially when the daughter-in-law of the house falters in keeping the family's honour intact. Understandably, she bids Devdas farewell and resumes her expected role within the family and society.

Chandramukhi, the courtesan, is an illegal love interest. The writer did not attempt to impose purity on Chandramukhi. Devadas' disgust for her made her fall in love with him. Her depth of character lies in her selflessness. She loved Devadas; she rescued him and tried to save his life, though she was aware that she could not retrieve him. The temporality of her company with Devadas itself was precious to her.

Similar to Parvati, Chandramukhi's self-satisfaction also does not depend on Devdas. Her selflessness fulfils her. Chandramukhi, in terms of social position and status, is inferior to Parvati and Devdas. She hardly gets any equal respect from Devdas. She is introduced to him by Chunilal to distract him from his pain. His pitiful condition and desperate attempt to cling to his pride, despite his vulnerability, make her fall in love with him. Her difference from Parvati is that Chandramukhi does not expect anything from Devdas. She loves him and continues to love him for her own. She ignores Devdas, belittling her for being a courtesan.

Even when Devdas is not in his senses, he remains aware of his superiority, which suggests that he believes he is performing an exceptional act simply by existing in

such a deplorable place among people like Chandramukhi. Chandramukhi's speciality is her intrinsic understanding of reality. She understands her place in society and the basis of Devdas' disdain, and she loves him despite that, without expecting anything in return. Eventually, Devdas improves due to Chandramukhi's care. He acknowledges her dedication and even admits his feelings of appreciation for her. Chandramukhi's profession has been to satisfy men physically; however, she becomes spiritually drawn to Devdas. The opportunity to talk to a sober Devdas is as beneficial as getting to know him all over again. So, she confesses her feelings for him. His affectionate behaviour makes her briefly dream of travelling to the West and starting a new life with him. Devdas' desire for Chandramukhi makes him contemplate the possibility of a life with Chandramukhi. But soon enough, he shudders in fear at the thought of Parvati learning about Devdas' relationship with a courtesan, and he refuses her proposal with the reasoning of their prominent social and situational differences.

Sharat's creation of the character, Chandramukhi, does not rebel, as she has always known what to expect from Devdas. Chandramukhi is satisfied with her selfless love, understanding that Devdas no longer hates her, despite being ashamed of her for who she is. For a woman whose profession is to feign love, confessing her true love to someone is a conscious effort on the writer's part to normalise her humanity. The writer's decision to emphasise Chandramukhi's side of love is an attempt to humanise a courtesan who does not lose her humanity and the emotions of womanhood despite the circumstances that compelled her to choose this profession. Women like Chandramukhi have been sympathised with, in *Devdas*, through the depiction of natural goodness, kindness, desires, and emotional expressiveness.

The feminist element in *Devdas* is tragic. By the end of the story, Devdas dies before he can fulfil his promise of visiting Parvati. Nature punishes him for his internal arrogance through his sufferings and the slow, silent, tragic death. And his female lovers, despite their limitations, are given the control of opting for or rejecting a life with Devdas. Their separation from Devdas is indeed painful for them as well; however, their individuality is more important than their love for Devdas.

Borodidi

Although *Borodidi*, Sharat's first novel, is not as rich and complex as *Devdas* and *Parineeta*, it still tackles sensitive issues, such as the right to love of a widow and the young widow's sense of youth in a romantic relationship with a man. This novel also portrays the landlords' oppression of the people of lower status. Madhavi is the 'borodidi', the elder sister, who was married and widowed at 16, and returned to live

with her parents. Despite being young, her widowed status puts her on a pedestal of selfless maternity, having to let go of any desire for happiness for herself; the barrier of imposed chastity crumbles with her attraction to her sister Promila's house tutor, Surendranath. The emergence of romantic desires occurs without her control, despite the restrictions on her dignity (status) as a widow, which ultimately creates havoc within her.

Surendranath initiates the saga of Sharat's tender and carefree male love interests. He is a graduate, yet to establish himself. As a person, he is perceived to be absent-minded and immature. He is assigned the task of tutoring Promila while he continues his studies. Surendranath, a grown man with an innocent demeanour, captivates Madhavi, eventually leading to romantic love. Depiction of a widow's infatuation is important in destigmatising the inevitable emotions of women who had to suppress their humane feelings after losing their partners. This depiction especially challenges the social oppression of emotionality for widows in 20th-century Bengal.

However, Madhavi is bound by the rules, so her feelings for Suren (Sundranath) bother her. She impulsively requests that he leave their house, which he does, albeit at the risk of endangering himself. Suren eventually returns to his landlord father's household, inherits landlordship, and marries Shanti Devi, trying his best to forget Madhavi. But his love for Madhavi continues to grow even after his marriage. He gets addicted to alcohol to divert his mind from Madhavi. Later, upon learning that Madhavi has been pauperised, he rushes to reach her with his deteriorating health, only to die in her arms. The tragic end of their story serves as a punishment for illicit love and as a commentary on the stiflingly excessive restrictions on the freedom of love imposed on the potential couple, particularly when a widow is involved.

Suren has been overly dependent on others. His immature, childlike dependence on others, combined with a lack of a grounded understanding of practicality, makes him suffer and hinders his ability to achieve independence and capability. He is aware of his incompetence, and he attempts to overcome his dependency on his family, which further pesters him. He goes in search of work and starts tutoring Promila. Even during his pursuit of self-reliance, he has been naïve and a simpleton, which Madhavi notices, and she feels emotionally attached to him. As a widow and an elder sister, referred to as the 'borodidi,' Madhavi is given the role of an affectionate caregiver who is presumed to have no desires or emotions of romantic youthfulness. Her attachment to Suren is also expected of her, given her role as a desireless maternal figure who feels affectionate towards a young man. So, when Madhavi realises that

her affections are turning into something more than what is acceptable, she is conflicted and defensively distant. On the other hand, while Madhavi has dealt with the burden of maturity at a young age, Suren is still struggling to achieve maturity and cannot manage or act upon his feelings, making it difficult for him to express his emotional attraction to Madhavi. Even when he is attached to Madhavi and desires affection from her, viewing her as an elder sister, his inability to vocalise his desires creates internal stress for him.

Madhavi keeps going through torments. After her father's death, her importance in her parents' house is reduced to nothing with the mistreatment from her sister-in-law, who has more control in the house. Despite being a daughter of the house, because she was once married to someone, she is still regarded as an unwanted outsider, even though her partner is no longer there. She moves to her in-laws' house under Suren's landlordship. Her father-in-law's friend conspires with Suren's manager and impoverishes Madhavi of all her supporting properties. The news infuriates Suren, prompting him to impulsively leave in search of the abandoned Madhavi despite his extreme sickness. He finds out before he dies and reaches out for Madhavi's love, which she offers him as herself, not as a 'borodidi.' Suren's immaturity stopped him from understanding his feelings for Madhavi. He has always agonised over her memories, but he has never distinguished his possible romantic love for Madhavi from the apparent nurturing affection he feels. However, Madhavi has been aware of her emotions, realising the unacceptability of her feelings and the necessity to take action against her desires. During her last moments with Suren, she utilises her brief power of letting go of the restraints and embraces Suren's presence as a lover, not as a maternal figure of a widow. Even in the pitifully vulnerable moment, the author gives the exhausted heroine her cathartic agency.

The politics of the home is a significant phenomenon to observe. After Madhavi's husband's death, she could live in her father's house with his permission. After the father's death, the mother, a widow, no longer has control of the house as the matriarch. The power shifts to the eldest son's wife, who is now in a position of higher authority than the daughter of the house. Despite Madhavi being one of the family's own, because she was married, she is no longer considered part of the family; she is an outsider, and, as a widow, she is inferior to the daughter-in-law married to the head of the household. Though harsh and brutal, the social system allows Madhavi's brother and sister-in-law to force her to leave the house, which ultimately happens to Madhavi.

Concerning each other, the other characters portray the power play inside a family. Positively, Suren and his wife, Shanti, have a loving and respected relationship. Suren's unresolved obsession with Madhavi consumes his entire existence. But he shows love and appreciation for Shanti with honour and dignity. He listens to her advice on his activities as a landlord and obeys requests to protect the people under his lordship. They also have an effortless understanding, which might result from blissful ignorance. Shanti knows about Suren's devotion to Madhavi, which she perceives as a platonic relation of affection. Nonetheless, she understands how important Madhavi has been for Suren. While being highly anxious for her husband's safety, she empathises with Suren's reckless reaction of rushing to look for Madhavi. She is last seen beside Suren's dead body, grieving as his traditional bride. Ultimately, she remains an undermined supporting character, left with the pain of losing her loved one, the pain that is simultaneously shared with Madhavi but is also incomparable to hers.

Madhavi and Shanti are not relatively comparable in terms of their significance in the story, in the same way as *Devdas'* Parvati and Chandramukhi were. There had been a contrast or comparison between Parvati and Chandramukhi based on their status as Devdas's beloveds. They both lost their love for Devdas himself while maintaining a subtle power over Devdas. On the other hand, Madhavi and Shanti both have distinct and separate places in Suren's life. While Madhavi is helpless, Shanti still has the protection of being the landlord's legal wife and a widow after his death. Madhavi loses everything with the loss of her husband. However, a sense of agency remains with her when she finally shares the moment of love with Suren authentically in the way she desires, even if it is brief.

Conclusion

Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's portrayal of female characters in *Parineeta*, *Devdas*, and *Borodidi* is marked by sensitivity and care. It clearly shows how much he respected his characters to write about them and their stories with dignity and respect. In his novels, he adheres to societal norms. He depicted a realistic, to the point of being ruthless, view of the reality of his time. However, his feminist views demonstrate the agency he has given to his female characters, despite their restricted existence. They typically lack autonomy and independence. However, Sharat Chandra characterised his female characters with such internal autonomy, individuality, and determination that they supersede the restrictive norms of conventional patriarchal society.

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