



Sita Devi-Shanta Devi and Women's Educational Development in 20th Century Bengal

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ABSTRACT

This synopsis tries to investigate the cultural as well as educational development of women of the 20th Century Bengali society which has been observed in the writing writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi concerning women and to examine in details about the women's literary works during that time. It would be fruitful to historically review the short stories as well as the novels of both Shanta Devi and Sita Devi to get a critical understanding about the various spheres they touched many of which are still being debated till date.

The study may not be able to settle the debates going on for centuries about women emancipation and specially about women's educational development in 20th Century Bengal but will sincerely attempt to help scholars think in a more practical and objective manner.

Keywords : Women's Education, Emancipation, Literary Works, Women's Enlightenment

Introduction

The two sisters, Sita Devi and Shanta Devi from whose work a selection is translated and offered to the English-reading public are daughters of Sri Ramananda Chatterjee, a well-known personality and who launched "Prabasi Patrika" in the year 1901. It is very much essential as well as interesting to know about Sri Chatterjee, the father of Shanta Devi-Sita Devi before further discussion of the latter's life and works.

During that era Sri Chatterjee published and edited not only "Prabasi", a Bengali monthly but also "The Modern Review", an English one. Both were very popular during that era, the latter being the most widely read of all Indian monthlies. This influence has come to him after a long struggle, in which he has shown uncompromising independence.

Sprung from a family of Sanskrit professors and priests, his own generation, his cousins and brothers, Shanta and Sita Devi first broke through their tradition of aloofness, and learned English. The father's whole life has been one of battle and political journalism. Yet the reader of his daughters' stories will be struck by the way they avoid politics. The centre of interest has shifted inward, to Hindu social life. This change of interest is a natural development from the father's effort, and completes it.

Early Life Education-writings Of Shanta Devi And Sita Devi

Shanta Devi and Sita Devi were educated at home in the usual subjects, including English, and then sent to Bethune College, Calcutta. From the earliest days their father gave them the fullest intellectual freedom, never seeking to censor their reading. Both passed the B. A. with great credit, at Calcutta University. In 1912, while still students, they published a volume of stories translated from English, which were immediately popular. They introduced "Brer Rabbit" to Bengali nurseries. They trained themselves by study and translation of George Eliot's work, and of a few stories from the French; they kept in close touch with their own land and its life. Their literary careers have advanced together. In

1917, Sita Devi's first original short story Light of the Eyes appeared in Prabasi, her sister's first one Sunanda appearing in the same magazine a month later.

In 1918, they wrote in collaboration a novel, "Udyanlata" (The Garden Creeper in English), a serial for Prabasi. This was given over a column in the Times Literary Supplement, from the pen of the late Mr. J. D. Anderson, who knew Bengali literature as no other European did. He speaks of the books keen observation, sometimes girlishly amused, sometimes tenderly pitying, never harsh or bitter, which was rendered in a style which is in itself a delight to any competent student of Indian letters. The same writer gave equal praise to Sita Devi's "Cage of Gold", which appeared first as a Prabasi serial in 1919. It was followed by Santa Devi's serial, "The Eternal", in 1920. Both sisters have written reviews and other articles. Santa Devi was also a versatile painter and specialized painting in water colours. She is a disciple of the well-known artists, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Sita Devi has published in "The Modern Review" translations by herself of her own and her sister's stories.

Statement Of The Problem

In the 20th century, apart from Sita Devi and Santa Devi, there appeared many talented women who wrote novels in the classical style: Swarnakumari Devi (Tagore's elder sister), Anurupa Devi, Leela Majumdar - all these women writers have contributed literature of eternal value.

In the very modern period Alhapurna Devi (who has a trilogy) and Mahasweta Devi were awarded Akademi prizes. Her Aranyer Adhikar - Rights over the forest, is a novel about the Santali rebels. Hazar Curasir Ma - Mother of the prisoner No 1084, is a political novel. The whole novel states the affairs of a single day. Ashapura was a prolific authoress, while Mahasweta has been writing on how Ashapura's literary world war of middle class families treads on the political ideas.

Yet Shanta Devi and Sita Devi are segregated from the above writers due to their views about the emancipation of women. They always maintained a much different view about women emancipation. Their writings does not represent in any way, "feminism" in the wider form.

It will also be noticed further, that their writings portrayed women protagonists and the male characters in their novels (unlike other novels/stories of that era) more than being dominant characters are more practical and have a soft corner towards womenfolk. It may be observed that both Shanta and Sita Devi have portrayed in their writings the sorry plight of the women as well as the man which may be observed by reading the story "Loyalty". Also their way of thinking of women emancipation was different from the rest of the women authors of that era.

Objective Of The Study

The attempt of this study is not to reiterate what other scholars have written, the researcher's sincere attempt would be to examine the cultural values of the society during that time as well as to examine in details about the writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi as well.

It would be fruitful to historically review the short stories as well as the novels of both Shanta Devi and Sita Devi to get a critical understanding about the various spheres they touched many of whom are still being debated till date.

The study may not be able to settle the debates going on for centuries about women emancipation as well as women's educational development but will sincerely attempt to help scholars think in a more practical and objective manner.

Hypothesis (es) Of The Study

While working on this topic certain questions needs to be answered clearly:

- women's literary works during 20th century Bengal with special reference to Shanta Devi and Sita Devi's works
- women's educational development in the 20th Century Bengali society
- the meaning of emancipation
- the meaning of 'women's emancipation'

This proposal do not present a finished corpus of knowledge on women emancipation as well as feminism. This is not contingent on time, but in recognition that there is no overarching truth, no specific matter or essence is to be discovered.

Delimitations Of The Study

It has been noted that a investigator cannot often employ the method of direct observation. Data are thus collected from the reports of those who witnessed or participated in events related to this topic. The data produced have to be subjected to careful analysis which may be false or misleading. So, the work may be left to make his own comparisons, to see the resemblances and differences in their respective contributions.

Methodology

"In doing research of any kind, there is an implicit assumption that we are investigating something outside ourselves, that the knowledge we seek cannot be gained solely or simply through introspection" (Charlotte Aull Davies, 1999, p.3.).

The study focuses on socio-cultural dynamics that make up the fabric of Indian society and encapsulates a broad interpretation of ethnography as a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of (mainly qualitative) research techniques. Hence, elements of ethnography have been 'borrowed' in the sense that the researcher has carefully connected the observed facts with the specific features of the backdrop against which these facts occur, which are linked to historical and cultural contingencies (Baszanger and Dodier, 1997, p.13).

Historical Research Study Method have been adopted for the purpose of the present study.

Conclusion

The two sisters, Shanta Devi and Sita Devi present a wide culture, and their writings proceed from lives of unfettered freedom of thought. Other circumstances have helped to give them their detached view of Hindu society. Though born in Calcutta, they lived in Allahabad from 1895 to 1908, and most of their dearest memories cluster about that place.

They have also lived for a considerable period at Shantiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's 'Abode of Peace', a place where thought is as liberal as the wide spaces that surround it. Here they found their fullest powers of expression, as nowhere else.

The readers will now be in a position to understand something of the experience which lies behind these stories. He may be left to make his own comparisons, to see the resemblances and differences in their respective contributions. Bengali opinion discriminates between them by finding in Sita Devi's stories a touch of playful malice. Santa Devi's often show a delightful humour, with lifelike pictures of manners and persons. Both may be expected to improve greatly in technique, as they are still at the beginning of their careers. To the foreign reader, perhaps the most interesting thing in their writings will be the intellectual and personal element, their keen, scornful vision and the angry contempt which blazes out.

This fire of personality and personal feeling gives the sisters' work significance beyond itself, and will make it a matter of deep interest to watch the development and widening of their powers. For the present, there is in their work the added interest of seeing Indian life as Indians themselves see it, and of noting how Indian society deals with the problems which are occupying society everywhere, the readjustment of the relations of different classes, and above all, the readjustment of the relations in which the sexes stand to each other.

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