



A Critical Study of New Women's Desire and Autonomy: A Feminist Perspective in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *The Final Question*

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Abstract

The Final Question is written by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay presents the protagonist Kamal, who asserts her individuality and challenges the dominance of a masculine society. Through her independent thinking and strong sense of identity, Kamal embodies the emergence of the "New Woman," one who is free to express themselves freely without fear of social repercussions. The women of this era are allowed to think for themselves, do whatever they want, and basically live on their own terms. Kamal questions society for its narrow perception of women's desires and aspirations. Chattopadhyay portrays women not as passive figures but as powerful agents of change, capable of fighting for their needs and reshaping societal perspectives. We see there is a lot of discrimination based on caste within the text, too, which shows how much society has not progressed until now. This text shows how much the desires and autonomy were suppressed by the other gender, and the story of a Bengal community in Agra, which has a lot of indifference about Brahmos Samaj and other they can accept people from high society but could not if someone is from low caste there was a lot of difficulties Kamal goes through as coming from low caste community to fit in the society through her experiences the study exposes how women's desires and autonomy are constrained not only by patriarchy but also by rigid social hierarchies.

Keywords: New Women, Desire, Autonomy, Dominance, Patriarchal Society.

Introduction

Imagine living in a society where there is no freedom for women to express themselves or live as they want without any fear. This was the fictional world created by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay through her women protagonist who rebelled against society to show the power they hold and to build up their own identity without people forcing them to conform in a certain way as they do New Woman term was coined by British feminist Sarah Grand in an essay to describe about a woman who seeks achievement and self-fulfilment beyond the realm of marriage and family. According to Grand, the New Woman "proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home – is – the- Women's – sphere, and prescribed the remedy. "New Woman is basically a life with all freedom without any restrictions, so the 20th-century authors try to signify it through their independent actions, so that it could be shown how women are progressing day by day. In *The Final Question*, Kamal, the protagonist, shows the courage to change the perspective or the whole situation, for she started to live for herself as she wanted to break free and live for her own self, and to show the women around her that they need assurance too, and what they actually want and their freedom. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, in most of the novels, has shown female characters who are dominated by society to be the version they want them to be. Still, all of them reject that

idea and rebel against society for freedom. Kamal showcases the figure of the New Woman, A Woman who does not seek any validation and refuses to be subordinate and truly focuses on themselves with her individuality without any hesitation or any negative thinking, and to rule the world with a new beginning and new rules. The title of the novel, *Shesh Prashna*, or the final question, questions the morality and human rights, human philosophy, culture, and individuality that are raised in the novel, and readers need to figure it out that what could the conclusions they can make out of it in Agra a set of Bengalis live where they all have different thoughts about each other here Kamal try to break those thoughts and make it more aware and to improve the conditions of women in the society the way they were living the way they wanted to be all that she tries to fix all the problems they had she became a biggest supporter of the women's around her this novel actually questioned a lot and when it came out it became the most read one because it showed the readers about the moral responsibility that they have within the society how they should treat an individual without treating them from there caste or other than that not treating human as humans the depiction of taj mahal, the novel signifies love and how it just not build in love but also the other details rather than love Kamal sees the desire Shah Jahan have not the once for Mumtaz but for other things she

points out these aspects which made the environment more hot and where people try to figure out that the things they are doing is not wrong and gave the judgements and statements for it. Women were treated as objects that needed to be told to move to sit, to go, or to be held in power, and when women started questioning, there were problems around how they could question the system. Kamal's journey, therefore, becomes central to understanding the evolving discourse on women's autonomy, a theme that has invited significant critical attention.

Discussion

As a Writer, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay has mentioned many more struggles in his works. For instance, let's take Parineeta, where Lalita fell in love with Shekhar, but due to the caste problem, they could not marry each other, and Shekhar used to tease Lalita a lot, saying, "Why would I marry her. Her parents died, so she lives with her uncle Gurucharan, and her uncle wants Lalita to get married early. He asks Shekhar to find someone suitable for her. Both Lalita and Shekhar love each other, but because of societal pressure, they could not marry each other. Lalita still waits for Shekhar to come, and then maybe, just maybe, they could marry, and this shows how society still has so many taboos or issues that prevail among people, and they follow them to have security from society, so they can look like others and not feel that they are behind. This is similar to what happens in Devdas. Paro fell in love with Devdas, and as for the age difference, both have maturity according to their ages. Paro was still a child, according to Dev. The actions of Paro show how much she wants him to accept and call them in front of everyone, but he did not do that because of the family; they would not accept him if he married someone who was not equal to their status. He shouted at Paro for coming into his room at night, so she could not be seen by anyone. He could not show her the love he had or her or did not want to give the security that one deserves, so then Paro's marriage was fixed, and then she got everything she wanted; she became rich, and for the longest time, she did not turn back and see Dev in whatever condition he was but Dev had a heartbreak after losing Paro he started seeing a prostitute Chandramukhi his mother was tensed about him but the life of Dev did not turned well he died in regret that he could not love Paro in the way he could these stories shows how the child was exploited in all this both Paro and Lalita were kids and where they could get education they would have been somewhere else all the works of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay wants to show the social constraints in society but to make a living out of it those women take a jump out of it and made something out of them to get out of the situations even though there were numerous issues related to caste, religion or child marriage widow remarrying nothing stops the protagonists of these story to prove their own worth and to be the New Woman of the era who lives without fear and could do anything to make her living without anyone's need Coming back to *The Final Question* we see the culturally, socially and ideological framework breaking through Kamal by asserting herself as a thinking, desiring and autonomous individual. Her presence challenges the deeply internalized patriarchal assumption that a woman's virtue is synonymous with silence, sacrifice, and submission. There was no one when she tried to fix everything on her own. Shibhnath married her for looks and because she looked younger than his old wife, who struggled with Cancer so he divorced her and married Kamal, but that time he never remembered caste and all but later did he

remembered when everyone again questioned his choices and no one even, he did not help or supported her a bit but Ashutosh Babu loved her like his daughter Manorama he supported her in every step and encouraged her to move ahead in her life.

When we get to know more about Kamal, because the story revolves around her as a protagonist, and we see that Kamal is more privileged than others because she has freedom of education and mobility, which separates her from other socially backward women. Now, when she is with Shibhnath, there is economic hardship that she has to face, while the novel surrounds the female autonomy of many women. Yet by imagining a woman who claims her right to desire, to speak, and to choose, Chattopadhyay opens the conceptual space for the other feminist articulations. Not only that, but this tells us how women are built or to be called a nurturer or caregiver, and is not accepted in the outer world, and is claimed to be called a man's world when clearly everyone is allowed to take part in it.

The Final Question, which means the question that finally comes into the mind and is unanswered and unnoticed by many, and cannot get the clue of it that what was actually the question was so the question was about how women's actually driven by society what is their position is that what equality means is that women's autonomy in this world is about the small community of Bengal settled in Agra where all the things happened within the community made them realize how these small questions within the society matters and how to actually address them when the novel actually came it had lot of questions surrounding its publication that it created the discomfort generated by such representation. This text addresses some social questions that need to be answered to clear societal anxieties, so that most people can gain a clearer view of it, and there will be no such issues in the future. Suddenly, this made women more aggressive and to question their identity with a lot of stress and aggression, which made them question further. This led them to transform or change themselves for what? For the society that questions them on their own wishes demands them to be what they want them to be, and how they want them to be. Nilima is divorced, and then she is questioned and judged by society for her moral and social choices. She could not even live on her own terms. She has a lot of obstacles going through the hard times, even Kamal herself faces allegations when her husband Shibhnath leaves her, they questioned her marriage, and always told her it's not the real marriage, it was a Shaivite marriage. As described: "You have such a natural indifference to what women hold as their sole possession in life." When she comes with Ajit and when Ajit still admire her without any obligations or queries other people have they start to question her character that she was the one who broke the marriage cause she was not loyal or she is rebellious she was rebellious because society needs to learn about what is right and what is wrong and what need is to followed and why there is a need to open all that up and to judge societal views where when the Woman tries to raise their voice they were projected wrong and selfish if it's in benefit of the women but that's the benefit.

Marriage is Not a Game or a Forced Duty

It should be the desire of both partners. If it is forced, then it should be the end of those relationships that never work if it is forced. Here, the protagonist Kamal tries to break the generational cycle that has been followed for ages by telling how marriage is an act of love where both people are

committed to each other without any play and have the seriousness for the marriage, and try to understand each other rather than thinking of societal judgement because it's the two adults deciding whether they want to stay or not they have their own will and own decisions which they have to face it with how much fear they have to be caught Kamal was the one to work with modern rules others were still believing in those old roles which practically brought them in lot of trouble they were not able to accept new rules even when Kamal came been bride everyone was teasing her for her status her caste and many more even Manorma was the one who talked rudely to Kamal always did and Manorma in one incident didn't give her soap to Kamal because of the caste and how Kamal was from lower caste so she was considered as downtrodden or looked down upon so she encouraged everyone else to be someone they want to be to open up at least for women to be someone whom they always wanted to be the novel takes a in a dimension where things take a turn Ashutosh Babu dies and Kamal finds that how she can live a life peacefully through recognizing her strengths. Kamal's engagement with desire is not merely emotional but deeply intellectual. She refuses to equate love with surrender. Eve, in moments of intimacy she reminds herself of her self-worth. This distinction is crucial, for traditional narratives often depict women dissolving their identities within romantic attachment. Kamal's refusal to lose herself in love foregrounds the idea that emotional connection need not require erasure of individuality. Her relationships are marked as choices, not as force; when those relationships threaten to limit her autonomy, she retains the capacity to withdraw. This ability to choose and to unchoose transforms desire into an expression of agency rather than dependence. Where no one is dependent on the others for any type of needs, and for women, it becomes a prison when she gets emotionally attached to someone; it's difficult for her to get out of the state of mind that she is in most broken state, where she cannot even find herself and her own motive to live and forgets herself in the process of loving someone else and most marriages have these issues where they feel left out or not seen or heard.

Kamal's journey is marked by introspection and philosophical questioning. She does not seek a philosophical questioning. She does not seek freedom for rebellion's sake but pursues authenticity. Her insistence on living according to conscience rather than convention reflects an ethical dimension that differentiates her autonomy from mere defiance. It positions her as a thinker engaged in existential inquiry. She continually interrogates the foundation of belief, asking what constitutes truth and whether social approval can ever substitute for inner conviction. Through these inquiries, the novel aligns female autonomy with intellectual seriousness rather than emotional seriousness.

“Marriage is Not the Ultimate Goal of a Woman's Life”- Kamal-

While discussing the autonomy and how gender roles plays the basic roles, how female are questioned for their roles and how they use themselves as a power, why they have been treated as object why societal acceptance is needed in society, and why this acceptance played a major role in these novels, and many more questions related to this as the topic surrounds the questions and the power, autonomy concept of New Woman which clears it all that some of the Women's who are trying to come out of the shell and try to give up those traditional thought away from the modern thinking and

building something out of it getting back in the shape being themselves and that is what females in the novel tries to do to be someone whom she can trust on remember Manorama she is portrayed at first as evil like she hates Kamal she did hate her because of what she heard and caste her lower status but Kamal's knowledge shocked everyone when she tries to enter politically and tries to fix all the problems that depicts as general problem but not been ever spoken about so all other women stays away cause they do not want to get involved a bit they have been spoken ill about the women's who are asking for the demands so there was a terror between people and they do not want to join but when Manorama saw Kamal as someone who understands and help all other women's including her who breaks the rule not because she wants to adjust but because she wants others to feel safe and have the safe place in society where each and every female should feel safe around each corner and should not have any fear going to any place and there would be no discrimination against who would you been talking to and what were you about to do with whom these unnecessary questioned are not been tolerated by anyone as it was tolerated by Kamal and other woman in the text that what is the thing about them asked their identity forced them into the activities which they do not like and tries to manipulate them sees them as an object where they believed everything does a man does and it is man's world whether women is here to serve them and they do not have any right to speak that shows how Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay mentioned women in power because it was a contrast to the society to tell them where these people are lacking behind and what need to improve and how *The Final Question* is relevant in modern society we realize there were some of the elements which shows how it depicts modern society in what portrayal the society is about and what effect does it have in society and his plays gives women protagonist wings to fly which never did they get or never did they got their own self to open up and that's where they lack.

In most of the writings of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, there is a concept Apni and Tumi, where Apni is used more formally, and Tumi is used more informally to depict how the loved ones call you, like Ajit uses Tumi to show how well he is connected to her but during their interactions Kamal remains cold because of the incidents which Kamal has faced that leads her to not have that attachment or love for anyone now so she tries to push Ajit away but somehow he never goes and wants to accept the past whatever she has and want to accept her but she never wants that and move forward in her life but this concept did came and was written by him in most of the works like Parineeta and Devdas when both of the male protagonist uses the word Tumi for their beloved and how it actually shows the love the bond they have with each other and how this bond remains through these small gestures within themselves is a symbol of love and how love can change and what magic it has in it shows how love can change or make things better. Kamal surrenders her individuality within emotional relationships. Even in love, she insists upon equality. Novel never romanticizes autonomy as effortless liberation. Kamal's independence carries a social cost. She faces suspicion, moral scrutiny, and isolation. Society interprets her freedom as danger because it tolerates a woman who chooses without fear. Autonomy in a patriarchal society is never neutral; for that, you have to fight for it within the system. You will not get things easily; you have to deal with it by being brave, and that's how you will get the autonomy you deserve, the way you have desired. Now, as the desire in the novel moves from romantic fulfillment to

existential choices, it enters the existential realm. Kamal's desires are not motivated or influenced by others; it is the truth she has to present to everyone, and she shows how a new woman has been embodied to know her own identity.

This story became the light of how it's about the women who are living in this condition, sacrificing their own souls for others, and these suffering when did it end and how does all of this come for Kamal, believing in whatever she is doing is right if you believe that whatever you are doing is good then everything comes beautifully there was a time when they have to rebel against the traditional versus modern and where all of them were rigid about traditional rule and were not ready to accept it so there were lot of hurdles they have to cross and be the person they were.

Conclusion

The Final Question portrays the desire, autonomy, and moral judgement that how Kamal and other females were silently suffering in 20th century Bengali society, which tries to be modern but they were more traditional but to remove these constraints, they have to act like they are progressive, and also it never happened before the concept of marriage which made clear that it is not a game it has to be spend in a serious way they also exposes the fragility of these institutions. Her presence compels both characters and readers to confront uncomfortable questions of authority, ethics, and freedom. Kamal is portrayed as a bold one who can do anything for herself and the community that she is with, and has fought the conflicts around her, like marriage, divorce, and Shaivite marriage, which goes through the broader social anxiety created by women. The institutions that claim to uphold morality are revealed to be invested in maintaining gender hierarchy. Refusal of Kamal to be fragile of these institutions made everyone more and more aware and readers to confront uncomfortable questions about authority, ethics, and freedom. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay mentions Kamal as a modern woman who has a psychological depth and ideological boldness. Rather than punishing her for her independence, the narrative allows her complexity to remain unresolved. Open ended play adds more depth to the story, where readers have to decide what the story meant to them. If we follow Kamal's journey, it starts with fixing to change. She had a lot of change in herself. This made readers learn that at that time, women had to fight for themselves for their own will, knowing how society turned out to be. *The Final Question* is not simply a narrative about one woman's life. It is a meditation on whether society is prepared to accept women as they are, with their thinking, desires, and autonomy. Kamal's voice resonates because the questions she raises remain urgent. Her autonomy is not only personal resistance but a call to reimagine the ethical foundations upon which gender relations are built.

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