



Negotiating Forbidden Love in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's Palli Samaj

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ABSTRACT: *Palli Samaj* is a commentary on the condition of Bengali villages in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The novel aims to break the delusion of an idyllic village of romantic literature and is a realistic representation of village politics and squalor. The idea of love is problematic in a patriarchal village and love which involves a widow is highly frowned upon. Sarat does not glorify the quaint charm of the village but reveals the layers of hypocrisy and oppression buried beneath the haunting quietude of ancient traditions. Sarat portrays the universal emotion of love manifesting itself in an unjust world and the fate which awaits such love.

KEY WORDS: *Patriarchy, Social Mores, Childhood Love, Widow Remarriage, Exile.*

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INTRODUCTION

The novel *Palli Samaj* was published in 1916 after Sarat Chandra returned to Calcutta from Burma. The various translations of the title like *The Village Life*, *Rural Society*, *Dehati Samaj* provide a glimpse into the social relevance of the novel. The protagonist of the novel, Ramesh, is the voice of the new educated class which has undergone reformation through western education and is playing a part in the regeneration of the social order. "*Palli Samaj* is a story of rural poverty and rural politics, of the bad Zemindar's oppression and the good Zemindar's idealism, and into the texture of this story is woven the nostalgic romance of frustrated, youthful love" (Sengupta 55).

Sarat takes up the issue of widows in this novel. The status of widows in Hindu society was very low and they were considered a burden on the family. The place of widows was negligible and "for a Hindu wife, widowhood traditionally meant one of the three things: immediate death, lifelong condemnation to segregation and drudgery, and subjection to clandestine sexual exploitation by the males of the family or locality" (Sogani 7). Severe restrictions were imposed on them and inability to observe these resulted in social ostracism. The Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1855 after the vigorous efforts of Ishwarchand Vidyasagar. But the legislation did not see much social acceptance and widows remained relegated to a life of seclusion. The question of widowhood is repeated in many novels of Sarat and this class of women were highly vulnerable to societal injustice.

Rama is Ramesh's childhood friend and sweetheart. Their marriage could not take place due to caste barriers and, thus, their relation is more strained and susceptible to the prying eyes of the villagers. She is a young, childless widow and is not projected by Sarat as a mute, suffering woman. Her economic status and control over property has ensured her safety from destitution and other pitfalls of poverty. Beni who is Ramesh's cousin and landlord of the village praises Rama in these words, "The Almighty was on the verge of creating a boy when He changed His mind and fashioned you into a girl. We all talk about how your ready wit and intelligence puts even seasoned landlords to shame" (125). She is a respectable member of the society and is known for her wisdom and intelligence. In her management of her estate, she rivals any male landlord and, thus, lives a comfortable and ascetic life in the village. The return of Ramesh to the village not only changes the fate of the village but also alters Rama's life. Sarat was sharply criticized for "describing illicit love in *Palli Samaj*" (A. Bandopadhyay 322). The novel traces the transformation of the defunct village society into a thriving social order of positivity and progress. The narrative of Ramesh and Rama in this transformation is an onslaught on the discourse of female chastity and questions its place in modern times. The traditional forces stifle the natural emotion of love and observes dual rules for men and women. The novel is full of examples of male landlords themselves having clandestine affairs on one hand and punishing poor widows for their unchaste behaviour on

the other hand. Sarat is against this hypocrisy and duality of morality. He spoke about this novel in a literary meeting in 1929:

Take the example of Rama and Ramesh of my novel Palli Samaj. Both are great souls and have the capacity to do good to others. But the lives of both were destroyed. Why did two such precious lives meet a sad end? Have you ever given a thought to it? Would such things have happened in some other society? My job is to set you thinking. It is for you to provide the solution. We get enmeshed in the externals only. But there is also an internal spirit of things. Love is such a vital force- how vital it is difficult to explain. It can hide all faults and shortcomings. (qtd. in Prabhakar, *The Great Vagabond* 287)

Rama is a widow and her falling in love is unacceptable in a rural society. Rama and Ramesh have childhood memories of their budding love but when they meet again, the environment is hostile for their relationship to flower into something meaningful. They now belong to opposite social groups and even polite conversation can be deemed scandalous in rural society. "Sarat Chandra developed the motifs of man and manbhajan in several novels wherein young lovers are locked in conflict arising from their own inhibitions or from social pressures which prevent the free expression of feelings" (Sogani 73). Rama is condemned by a ruthless society to a loveless and cheerless life. Her interaction with Ramesh is closely monitored and thus, any act of hostility towards Ramesh is a farce to protect herself and Ramesh from social censure. Her true feelings towards Ramesh are known to her and the futility of this love too. In one incident in the novel about dividing fish in three equal portions, Ramesh's servant Bhojua tells Rama that his master trusts her decision, her reaction symbolizes the image she has to protect in order to live in the village: "It was as though the clamour of innumerable hands clapping was creating a furore in her head. Her fair complexion assumed a rosy hue and at the next moment turned pale- as though not a drop of blood remained. The only sane thought that she could retain was- no one should catch a glimpse of my emotion right now!" (155) She is forced by circumstances to hide her true feelings and live a dual life because "the young widow in love is a tragic, romantic heroine who sublimates her desires and obliterates herself to preserve the social order" (Sogani 92). Rama is symbolic of all the widows who are marginalized by the society for the fateful consequences of a marriage they did not consent to in the first place and are punished to live an invisible life. "A widow's relationship with a man necessarily involved a moral choice: conflict between personal aspirations and social control, a psychological tension between desire and conscience, between the need of the self and the need of the others. This conflict and its resolution posed a challenge for Indian novelists" (Sogani 62). Rama's relationship with Ramesh is awkward and complicated and falls on the border of a formal and informal association. Ramesh is a strong, educated, active and energetic man who is full of ideas for improving the rural society. He calls Rama by the same name which he used in their childhood (Rani) and expects her help and loyalty in his mission. But being an honest and straightforward city man, he cannot understand the contradictory behaviour of Rama. The major source of conflict between them is the difference between Rama's public and private persona. Rama supports and helps in Ramesh's mission of village transformation but when it comes to public support for Ramesh and his efforts, Rama stands as a rival. The furore that happened over the dividing of fish dashed all of Ramesh's hopes regarding Rama's loyalty. More than anything, her dual nature puzzled and irritated him. He says angrily to his Jethaima (paternal aunt) in Rama's presence, "No one should do anything for anyone in this village! They assume a person is stupid if he contributes; an attempt to do any good is attributed to self-interest! Even to forgive is a sin, it is taken for granted that a person has retreated in fright" (157). Rama's pathos is reflected in her helplessness and her inability to explain or justify herself. She is relegated to a position of mute suffering: "Stunned, Rama gazed at Bishheshwari for a few minutes and then burst into tears, 'Why this quarrel with me, Jethaima? Have I tutored Mashi or am I responsible for her actions?'" (157) Both the lovers are tortured by an orthodox society. "The conflict between man and society has been vividly portrayed in the novel. Rama and Ramesh are ranged against the social forces in the rural environment which finally frustrates their love and crushes their life. Rama is delineated as a helpless victim of society. Ramesh also finds himself in the grip of rural life which brings about his tragedy. He has been left behind in the village to fill his empty life with social reform and rural reconstruction. It is a poor substitute for love and happiness" (Madan, *Saratchandra Chatterjee* 65). They are forced to rally against each other to save themselves from scandal and this duality of existence erases out their life force as the novel concludes.

Ramesh and Rama's love has stemmed from the innocence of childhood and not the passion of youth. "A widow's relationship with the hero is legitimized, and projected as a pure-and not an adulterous-association. In most cases it has the sanctity of first love beginning in childhood or adolescence" (Sogani 70). Ramesh remembers Rama in her childhood image, as his 'Rani'. Her image of a widow is complex and unfathomable for him. In order to show the raw emotion of love bereft of any social control, "in many novels, protagonists are transported away from the social context to which they belong so that their romance may develop unhindered. Rama and Ramesh, whose relationship is intolerably strained in the suffocating atmosphere of their village, meet unexpectedly in the pilgrimage town of Tarakeshwar where, away from prying eyes, they can share a few

moments of intimacy” (Sogani 70). This meeting in Tarakeshwar, outside the social constraints and the suffocation of intrusive eyes make it difficult for Ramesh to even recognize Rama:

One morning as Ramesh was about to take a dip in the waters of the holy pond at Tarakeshwar, he suddenly ran into a lady on the steps. For a moment he was so entranced that all he could do was gaze at her unadorned face and it did not even cross his mind to move away. The girl was probably not more than twenty and was about to return after bathing. When she looked up and saw him, she quickly put down the pitcher full of water and, drawing her wet sari closer, looked down and exclaimed, ‘You are here!’. Ramesh stood entranced. Some magnetic, physical appeal was emanating through her wet clothes and suffusing him with its magical powers. Her entire being seemed so very familiar to Ramesh, but the blocked doors of his memory refused to be opened. (160-61)

The inability of Ramesh to recognize Rama symbolizes the harsh discipline imposed by patriarchy on widows that makes it difficult for friends of opposite sex to freely interact. Rama is cocooned in her widowhood in the village and this meeting gives her a chance to live her life freely, even if it is for a day only. Rama invites Ramesh to partake a meal in her house. The symbolic significance of food is important in the narrative. As a Hindu widow there are customary restrictions on her food habits. This sudden meeting has given her an opportunity to experience the illusion of blissful domesticity with the man she loves. All the anguish of widowhood evaporates for her with this act of feeding Ramesh and satisfies her lonely soul:

It was a great source of worry for her that Ramesh would be unable to eat properly and that she would be to blame! Rama could no longer hide from herself the closeness and intimacy this degree of worry implied and how it had in a flash pushed aside all barriers and restrictions of society. In order to make up for the paucity of food, she was forced to put herself at the fore. The Almighty was the only one to know of the depths of satisfaction that arose from the core of her being in doing so and surpassed even the sense of satisfaction that Ramesh felt. (161)

All the misunderstandings between them vanish in the privacy and serenity of the holy place and they both give a glimpse of a happily married couple. This warmth and intimacy that Ramesh experiences is beyond description for him. He expresses his feelings to Rama and the wall separating them melts:

Sitting alone I was just thinking-in this short span of half a day, you have changed my entire life.

Nobody has invited me for a meal in this manner and there has been nobody to care about how I have eaten! I have learnt from you for the first time that there can be so much joy in such a simple thing as having a meal. I will not criticize, nor will I go about singing your praises. This day is beyond all praise or criticism for me. Rama did not answer. Remaining silent for a while and then getting up, she quietly went to her room. There, in the silence, tears coursed ceaselessly down her cheeks. (163)

The tears symbolize the feeling of pure bliss Rama has experienced in this small act of feeding Ramesh. The gratitude of Ramesh is beyond romance and is symbolic of his unconditional love for Rama. The image of a wife and a mother are fused together in the character of Rama in her relationship to Ramesh.

The narrative of the village society on the verge of a grand metamorphosis is haunted by the suffering and agony of the young widow Rama. The relationship of Ramesh and Rama undergoes many ups and downs during the course of the novel. The happy moments spent in Tarakeshwar do not last and their relation turns sour: “In the years of their childhood, Ramesh had loved Rama. It was undoubtedly a childish emotion, but she had sensed its depth that day in Tarakeshwar. But most of all she had realized his feelings, when in the darkness of that fateful night he had left her house, severing all ties” (169). Their love had long been jinxed and quashed by the social forces and the few remaining hopes and dreams exist in the stifled corners of their hearts. One night when Rama visits Ramesh to make him a request, he confesses his feelings to her openly for the first time: Do not be angry or even embarrassed when you hear what I have to say. Take this to be fiction from a long, bygone era. I loved you, Rama. Now it seems to me, probably nobody could have ever loved with so much fervour; in my childhood, Ma would often say that we were meant for each other. Then, the day all hopes were shattered, I remember breaking down and weeping. You are thinking that it is wrong to talk of all this to you. I also believed so; that is why that day in Tarakeshwar, when one single day’s caring from you changed the entire course of my life, I still remained silent. It was not an easy task to remain voiceless. The truth is, the Rama I am talking of never existed in reality and the Ramesh that lived then is no longer the same. Anyhow, that day in Tarakeshwar, for whatever reason, a belief had been born in me that no matter what you said or did, you could never tolerate any misfortune that might befall me. Probably I had assumed that some remnants of the love you felt for me in childhood still existed. Hence I was secure in my belief that I would be content to carry on with the chartered course of my life in the shelter of your shadow. (174)

Ramesh’s confession symbolizes that though their love cannot be fulfilled in the existing social setting but its flame has not dimmed in the darkness of patriarchal hegemony. He does not wish Rama to reciprocate the love because her acceptance will not solve their dilemma. The concept of love in Sarat’s novels is different as Jainendra believes:

Sarat Chandra has discovered himself through giving himself away. It appears that nothing was left in him. Every drop of his being was poured out. He bore only love's relation with his characters-love that leads you to oneness-not the relation of science, which is based on dualism and separate identities but the relation which brings two persons nearer to each other and then aims at getting them so much close together that they may become one, and which never rests, nor allows others to rest till this state is achieved. If there be any element worthy of knowledge, it is that of love. (qtd. in Prabhakar, "Hindi literature and Saratchandra" 70). And it is this power of love that gives Rama the strength to stand up for Ramesh in front of the entire village when he goes angrily to Bhairav's house to confront him. Bhairav had cheated Ramesh and he goes to his house to teach him a lesson. Rama pacifies Ramesh and her support invites cruel taunts and a possible scandal, but Rama stands her ground and faces all humiliation. Bhairav's daughter Lakshmi accuses Rama of dishonourable behaviour when she extends her support to Ramesh. She says angrily, "Don't you feel ashamed to feel to speak in his favour? Nobody says anything just because you happen to be a wealthy man's daughter-otherwise who has not heard of all the goings-on? It is only because you are who you are that you still appear in public, anyone else would have hanged themselves" (183). This public humiliation and false sympathy shown by Beni enrages Rama. Sarat has not portrayed Rama as a dainty maiden and she is empowered enough to fight for herself. She categorically says to Beni, "Maybe gossip does not affect you, but not everybody has such a hidebound skin! However, who is inciting the people to gossip, you? It could be none other than you! There is no misdeed in this world that you have not participated in-theft, cheating, counterfeiting, setting houses on fire; why neglect this area of activity? Don't think, Barda, that I am unaware of your attitude but rest assured, if I am to fall, I will not let you survive either!" (184) This outspoken threat and defiance which Rama shows is a sign of her partial independence. As an economically affluent widow, she enjoys a degree of control and respect. But this does not protect her from social scandals and their consequences. This fear forces her to request Ramesh to leave the village so that she doesn't have to stand witness against him. She pleads to him, "If you leave I do not gain in any way. But if you do not, there will be great loss. I will have to stand witness at the trial. If not, we will be ostracized and nobody will attend any religious ceremony or social programmes that my family organizes. I am begging you, Ramesh da, or you will be destroying me in every way possible! Please go away from this village" (187). This desperate request symbolizes the dilemma that she faces. She is faced with a choice to protect either her love or her honour. The winner of this dilemma not only changes the course of this novel but also of Rama's life. Ramesh is jailed, but he emerges as the leader of village society and Beni also apologizes to him. He shrewdly presents Rama as the mastermind behind Ramesh's jail time and Ramesh also believes him. Rama is heartbroken and falls ill. Jethaima decides to take her to Kashi so that she can be away from the negativity which has surrounded her in the village. The conclusion of Ramesh and Rama's love story is conservative and upholds the social norms. "In most novels, the lovers are separated either by death or the widow's voluntary exile to an ashram or a distant place of pilgrimage, suggesting a withdrawal from life and the sublimation of sexual love" (Sogani 77). Rama also knows that the union she desires is not permitted and, thus, resigns to her fate with the hope that her sacrifice and misery has been worth it: "This is the one consolation that I have, Jethaima-that he will return to find his arena ready for him! What he had wanted has happened-the rustic farming class has awakened. They have come to recognize and love him. In celebration of all this love, will he not be able to forgive me, Jethaima" (196). The last meeting between Ramesh and Rama washes away all previous baggage. Rama appoints him as her brother's guardian and asks him to bring up Jatin in his own image. Her decision to give the responsibility of raising her brother to Ramesh symbolizes her love and devotion for him. She cannot be united in matrimony with him so she sublimates her desires and directs them in the direction of her brother to be raised in the image of Ramesh. "In many Indian novels, the pure and sublime grief resulting from separation represents the spirit's journey from a lower to a higher form of existence. They accept the separation out of a deeply felt need to sacrifice themselves at the altar of a moral law that holds society together. However, in spirit they become one by affirming their mutual love before parting" (Sogani 17). The willing offering of one's love and desires on the altar of an unforgiving society is a reflection of the nationalist ideal. This falls into the accepted organic social structure of Indian society and its inherent values. The idealist Ramesh is shaken up by Rama's goodbye and is unable to understand his emotions. His relationship with Rama has been a constant pull between love and hate. "It was so apparent that in a flash Ramesh felt all his former affection for her flooding back. He himself was amazed to realize that despite so much chaos and anarchy, his fondness for her has not died at all! His emotions had merely fallen into a kind of stupor. It seemed to him that all the enthusiasm about his future, his work-all had turned pale and indistinct as the moonlight ever since he heard of Rama's departure" (202). This upheaval in both their lives has resulted from the orthodoxy of society. Ramesh had ignited the minds of the villagers but the awakening has not been complete. There is no place for their love and any step towards their union will only bring disrepute. He goes to Bishheshwari to find some answers regarding this injustice done to him and Rama. But even she has no solution to give and can only cleanse their relationship of all misgivings.

The climax of the novel has been dedicated to the unresolved issue of a widow's aspirations and absence of any options to her. Sarat's approach towards widows is conservative in this text. He showcases the agony and despair of widowhood through Rama's character but does not resolve it in a revolutionary manner. The direction in which Rama is forced by society is that of celibacy and loneliness. Her happiness is not an issue worth considering for the stalwarts of the society. The fate of widows was sealed long ago and even the dramatic change brought about by Ramesh cannot alter it. "All novelists preferred to show the widow remaining single and sacrificing herself for the sake of a higher, spiritual goal. In doing this, they were perhaps reflecting the values of the nationalist movement which valorised suffering and martyrdom. It is obvious that the reading public of this period preferred the widow to remain celibate, for her asceticism conferred on her a higher status than that of a twice-married woman. It was prepared to sympathize with her agony but was reluctant to disturb the social order in which it had a vested interest" (Sogani 55-56). Though Rama has to leave the social scene, her narrative resonates in the mind of the reader. Her tragedy forces the reader to question society for this injustice and this dissent reflects the questioning of power as "Foucault sees power as also at the same time productive, something which brings about forms of behaviour and events rather than simply curtailing freedom and constraining individual" (Mills 36). Thus, her subjugation does not stifle her voice but produces ripples of enquiry and dispute.

Social change is a slow and agonizing process and a just and equal society requires continuous efforts. Any idea or value cannot be transplanted on a social system without prior groundwork. A happy ending to Ramesh and Rama's love story would alienate them from the society and, thus, "there is love in Sarat Chandra's literature-deep and unfathomable. But the love to which society does not accord its sanction remains unfulfilled even in his literature. Love cannot be transplanted on society. It has to stem from the depth of society. If it does not, society is to be blamed, the rules and regulations of society are to be blamed, not the writer, nor even the character. Time and again, Sarat Chandra has painted this very despotism of Hindu society through the pain and anguish of his characters" (Prabhakar, "Hindi literature and Saratchandra" 69). The reformation of society is an ongoing process. The rousing of the villagers for their dignity was not an easy task for Ramesh. The village society is fragmented into a hierarchy of victims also. All the victims could not achieve equality and justice at the same time. Sarat could only depict the social reality and a solution in the narrative could not have been replicated in real life.

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