

# DEADWEIGHT OF TRADITION

## The Sati – Savitri Ideal

WOMEN in Indian literature, though not so frequently in Indian life, are docile, self-sacrificing creatures. Thanks to hundreds of Hindi films and best-selling novels in the regional languages, this ideal of Indian womanhood is so firmly established all over the country that even the most dim-witted of us have no difficulty in recognizing the good woman and the bad.

Have the films not taught us that the virtuous woman is invariably the patient one in a handloom sari, with long hair and a bright red *bindi*? And woe betide the man who is snared by the charms of short hair and synthetic fabric!

This cultural ideal can be seen in its purest form in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's novels, so popular in Bengal half a century ago, still widely read in many parts of the country. Sarat Chandra's women are famous for their self-negating concern about the welfare of their men. In his novels, not only the good wives, but also the good prostitutes are forever preparing elaborate meals for their men, fanning them as they eat, fondly tucking in their mosquito nets when they have gone off to sleep and placing a covered glass of water by their bedside last thing at night.

It is not surprising that Sarat Chandra is the most popular writer among commercial film makers even today. His is still the most saleable image of womanhood.

Yet to think that women in Indian literature and myth have always been self-effacing martyrs is far from right. Not many people are aware that the first women's liberation literature in Bengal was written as early as 1914, long before this particular label came to be attached to the world-wide women's movement.

In a Bengali short story *Streer Patra* (Letter from a Wife) which appeared over 60 years ago, Tagore described the predicament of an intelligent and sensitive woman in a rigid social system – a system which did not permit any role to a



woman other than that of wife and mother. For half a century, no one singled out this story for any special notice, until the sixties when women's demands for equality gathered momentum in the West and the waves gradually reached our shores. Then an avant-grade director decided to make a film out of this short story, and many people realized for the first time what iconoclastic ideas lay behind it. When we think of the orthodox society 60 years ago, Tagore's attitude in this story seems startling in its modernity.

Written in the form of a letter, this story describes the development of a woman who was married young into a joint family, stifling in its conformity and exacting in its demands on its women. This family, like the rest of society, had a double standard of behaviour for men and women. Mrinal grew up in her husband's household with more intelligence than was necessary for performing the daily chores, so she had to suffer. After 15 years of drudgery she happened to go on a seaside

pilgrimage with an elderly female relative and this letter was written from there.

Away from the restricting walls of the husband's home, Mrinal had a sudden realization that apart from being a cog in the family wheel, she was also a human being: "After 15 years, today standing by the sea. I have realized that I am not just a wife in your household. I have some independent relationship with the world and its creator." At the end of the story, Mrinal took the momentous decision that she would never return to 27, Makhan Baral Lane, her prison, but would strive to find a life of her own.

Whether her decision was practical or not in the society of 1914 is a different matter, but the idea itself is significant. So many decades ago, long before it was trendy to do so, the author had the courage to treat a woman as a separate individual who is not just an appendage to a man.

The revolutionary nature of Tagore's short story becomes all the more evident when we compare it with a novel by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, only a generation before him. His novel *Debi Chaudharani* (1885) seems interesting today for sociological reasons. It starts with a situation familiar in Indian life and literature – desertion of an innocent young bride by her husband. But what happens in Bankim's novel is rather unusual. He makes the deserted girl join a Robin Hood-like band of robbers who plunder the rich to help the poor. Eventually, this young girl grows up to become their leader. She is called Debi by her devoted followers and her name strikes terror into the rich.

Upto this point it reads like the affirmation of the power of a woman – though somewhat romanticized – and certainly a sharp criticism of the way orthodox society exploits women. But the end comes as an anticlimax. Debi's followers in their raids happen to capture Debi's husband and she suddenly undergoes a transformation.

Debi's total surrender to her husband is the end of the novel. She prefers being one among her husband's three wives to independence and power. The last chapter of the novel depicts this spirited woman totally domesticated, contentedly scrubbing pots and pans in her husband's large household and finding complete fulfillment in it.

When I was younger, I used to be enraged by the end of *Debi Chaudharani* but I think I can now read the novel with a little more historical understanding. This novel was written five years after Nora had slammed the door of her Dolls' House in Europe – the famous bang whose echoes are yet to die out after nearly a century. But Bankim, who was an Indian contemporary of Ibsen, lacked any conscious awareness of self in woman, mainly because the social context and cultural values were different.

Yet perhaps unconsciously, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was trying to synthesise the two different concepts of womanhood which have always been present in the Indian

tradition. One of these two concepts is Shakti, woman as the life force and the other is embodied in Sita whose strength lies in surrender and self-sacrifice. The Shakti cult is significant, not for religious reasons alone but also for its socio-cultural implications.

It conceives of woman as a source of power, the dynamic creator of good and the destroyer of evil. It is because of this archetypal mother image that women have been given so much reverence traditionally, at least in theory if not in practice. But more familiar today is the Sita ideal – the woman who subordinates her individual will to the wishes of her husband. This is the image of woman projected in the mass media.

But Sita is an incomplete ideal because she represents only one aspect of the dual concept of woman in the Indian tradition. If the Ramayana gives us Sita, the passive sufferer, the Mahabharata gives us some magnificent, spirited women. In the famous dice-playing episode in the Mahabharata, Draupadi's husbands gamble away their property, then gamble themselves away, and finally using their wife as a stake in the game, lose her too.

When their Kuru opponents send for Draupadi, her fiery rejoinder immediately establishes her independent spirit: "She, proud woman, rose up again and stood before the assembly, her hair streaming behind her and large eyes flaming. Holding her head high, she said to the elders, 'Yudhishtir was a slave already when he pledged me as a stake in the game. As a slave, he had no rights and no belongings. The moment Yudhishtir became a slave, I ceased to be his wife.'"

Iravati Karve in her excellent study of the Mahabharata has shown how Draupadi and Sita are, in many ways, similar – both were daughters of the earth, brought up as royal princesses, both were wed in a *Swayamwara* and each was given to a man who proved himself the best archer of his times. One was exiled for thirteen, and the other for fourteen years. The lives of both, for various reasons, were frustrated. Yet no two characters could be more different.

Take for example their exiles. Sita's *vanavasa* was an idyllic existence in the company of two devoted men. Draupadi's years in the forest were years of shame and humiliation. She clenched her fists and cursed; she burned with anger that her husbands were incapable of avenging the insults she had suffered. She did not shed silent tears as today's good heroines would, but risked her life by going out to watch her enemy Kichaka's funeral procession. She went out to the battlefield so that Bhima could braid her hair with hands gory with the blood of her tormentor Duhsasana.

The Mahabharata women are far more powerful and vibrant as characters than the simple women of the Ramayana. It is a pity that the Sita symbol has gained wider acceptance in Indian literature than any other. It is time creative artists begin to look at women as complex human beings, instead of conforming to well-worn cultural cliches. □