Gender Assertion in Colonial India: A Study of Paromita by Sumathi Sudhakar

Shalini Yadav
Krati Sharma

Sumathi Sudhakar’s novel Paromita sets in 19th century Bengal when revolutionary ideas were in the air. The concept of “equality” and “Feminism” were completely alien in the early nineteenth century until liberally exposed Western-educated Indians and social reformers introduced it. Feminism in India was initiated by men to uproot the social evils of sati (widow immolation), to allow widow remarriage, to forbid child marriage, and to reduce illiteracy, as well as to regulate the age of consent and to ensure property rights through legal intervention. Women in this phase were categorized along with lower castes as subjects of social reforms and welfare instead of being recognized as autonomous agents of change. The emphasis was on recreating new space in pre-existing feminine roles of caring. The women involved were those related to male activists, elite, western educated, upper caste Hindus.

It was the time of awakening and renaissance, when social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy were at the forefront. These reformers also gave much importance to the education of the girls which was considered essential for the development of their personality. The hurdles and obstacles were ill-practices like the customs of polygamy, the prada pratha, the denial of woman’s rights over property, child marriage, Sati Pratha, the denial of right of education and denial of remarriage to widows which prevented the young girls and the women of that period to seek their gender identity. Paromita is the story of a young girl’s rebellion against a society which subjugates women. Says the author,

“Girls have been girls all along. Their impulses and feelings, likes and dislikes, and desires could not have been too different from what they are now. Only circumstances were different.”¹ (pp.xiii-xiv)

Paromita or Paro as she is known to all her family and friends is a charming little girl of about 9 years old whose laughter “sounded like then gurgling of a river.”² (pp. 1) With two deep dimples, soft pink cheeks and dancing eyes she is popular with all the children of the village and most of the adults too. Paro loves friends and playing games; but what she mostly desires is to go to school. But in those days girls were usually discouraged from going to school and in Paro’s case a girl’s school was too far away from where she lived. But she is different and has a dream. Her dream and desire is to get education and then to impart education in the young girls of her village. Only one thing which could stop her to become wild and uncontrollable is:

“the sight of school children walking down to the school, with their books, slates and chalk pieces. She loved to watch them rush to school and she loved to listen to them recite poems and lessons in their classroom. She would often stand motionless outside the school, listening to the teacher teach them to write and count, and tell them all about the wide world. It made her want to study too.”³ (pp. 4)
In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the status of women in Indian society was very sorry indeed. Girls were not sent to school, they were married at a very young age and often to much older men. As Raja Ram Mohan Roy points out,

“Although a woman is recognized as being half of her husband after her marriage, she is in fact treated as worse than inferior animals, and is made to do work of a slave in the house. She has to get up early in the morning and has to scour the dishes, to wash the floor, to cook night and day and then serve the same to her husband, father- and mother-in-law, brother-in-law and friends and connections and at the end of all this she is humiliated for the slightest shortcoming. After all the men have eaten the women content themselves with what may be left, whether sufficient in quantity or not.” 4 (pp. 53)

The discrimination of Patriarch father Hariprasad is seen clearly in the concern of education of both children. Debu, the elder brother is going to school while she is not sent to school and restricted to home. The passionate commitment of the reformists like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar to encourage people to get their daughters educated is clearly mentioned in this novel. The reforms which were introduced in the nineteenth century had a tremendous impact on the generations that followed. In every town and village schools were opened for girls to study. Vidyasagar in Calcutta and many other reformers in Bombay set up schools for girls. When the first schools were opened in the mid nineteenth century, many people were afraid of them. They feared that schools would take away girls from home and prevent them from doing their domestic duties. Moreover, girls would have to travel through public places in order to reach school. They thought that girls should stay away from public spaces. Therefore, most educated women were taught at home by their liberal fathers or husbands. As early as 1820, Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued that despite being,

“in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy, women were in no way intellectually inferior to them: in fact... as to their inferiority in point of understanding, when did you ever afford them a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity?... Women were generally kept devoid of education and acquirements.” 5 (pp. 52-3)

Paromita also gets excited when the girl’s school in Sonapara was inaugurated by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Many people from Gobindopur visited and promised to send their daughters in school in the influence of Vidyasagar but soon they forgot all their promises. The influence of magnetic attraction of the girl’s school on young Paromita was immense. She wonders, “what new thing would they learn today.... If only she could go to school....!”6(pp. 6) Finally one day she expresses her desire, “Baba, send me to school too!” 7(pp. 6) Father Hariprasad has his constraints and he cannot send her because “It would never do to irk this society’s wrath by educating a girl. The society did not approve of such things. Girls should be married young and live a demure life of service.” 8(pp. 7) Her father was an orthodox and a path follower of societal set norms. He has no courage to face society’s opposition if he sends her in school. It clearly reflects that he is follower of the conventional societal norms. Krishna Mohan felt that many more parents would have educated their girls “if their reputation and perhaps caste were not at stake.” 9 (pp. 80) Marriage at the age of eight or nine years was regarded as optimum for upper class Hindu girl, although these little girls viewed their departure for unknown homes with fear and anxiety. In his sketch ‘A Sketch of the Condition of the Hindoo
Women’, presented in January 1839 Mahesh Chundra Deb spoke at length on the position of women who were forced into early marriage. He commented on their situation,

“Indeed, we are married at an age when neither the graces of the mind nor of the body are sufficiently, if at all developed. We have not a single opportunity of judging for ourselves with respect to either of these until it is too late.... Whatever be the physical or mental recommendations of a youth, they re scarcely taken into account, if unaccompanied by the most important qualification, kul...... the result of these incongruous matches felicity which is universally observable amongst the natives. It is however the women that are by far the greatest sufferers from these ill assorted marriages.”

Debu another young male figure in the house who represented the young generation of early nineteenth century was in the favour of her education and even taught her to read and write. Debu was the first to react when his father announced that Paro is being married off to a man Manik Babu who is old enough to be her grandfather. Debu shouted hysterically: “Na, na na! That old man may die any day and what will happen to poor Paro? Do you want to make a sati like Nandana!” By these lines Sumathi shows that elder brother is not an orthodox and does not want to push her sister into a painful marriage. Debu is a bright boy and he knows the further effects of this ill match marriage so he raises his voice against the decision of his patriarch father. This gives a blow to Hariprasad as he never dreamt of such situation occur in his home by his decision. Being a father he wanted to give all comforts to his daughter and the groom being Zamindar can afford all the luxuries for his young bride.

Debu’s objection caused a crease on Paro’s brow. Paro remembered about Nandana, her friend’s sister who was married to an old man and after some months her old husband died. She heard the rumours of the young girl Nandana who “was dragged through the streets screaming with terror, and being thrust into the funeral pyre.” Everyone in her village being conventional thought that “it would be a shining example to generations of young women in the village,” when Nandana had to become Ma Sati. Though this time Sati was banned by the colonial government and its practice was a punishable offence still people of remote area practiced it.

In the nineteenth century the wise men of Bengal said, “becoming a sati was an important social custom and hence, must be accepted stoically.” One view known about Sati Pratha was that the woman and man are two bodies but one soul and hence death of one should be result in death of another, which would bring fame to the women for her faithfulness and loyalty. So women in ancient India being big-hearted enough used to join their husband on funeral pyre. And it was simply accepted as a part of Hinduism as a traditional practice. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the young widow were forced to enter the funeral pyre of their husbands and for self-immolation by the orthodox members of the society. Vidyasagar’s soft heart melted at the pain and suffering imposed by the society, often in the name of religion, on Indian women. All of this distressed him immensely. Pleading the case for the remarriage of widows he lamented:

“Oh poor India!...you think the woman whose husband dies immediately turns into a stone; she does not have sorrow anymore, cannot feel pain any more and all her senses of passions and sensualities disappear without trace suddenly! But you well know that such notions are based on false pretences as evidence to the contrary abounds. Just think how these erroneous notions are poisoning this world. How sad! The country, whose male population is
unkind, unreligious and unaware of the distinction between the good and the evil and don't care about justice and fairness and where abiding the rituals is the chief preoccupation of religion, should not give birth to girls!” (pp. 59-60)

Shattered and disillusioned by the memories of her friend’s sister Nandana, Paro thinks, “Dada was right. What if her old baur too died very soon……would she has to become a sati?” (pp. 13) But she did not want to become sati. She wanted “to go to school and study, write on the slate and read books, wear spectacles and look wise and when she grew up, teach other little girls like her! She did not want to be cast into the fire…..how hot the flames must be!” (pp. 13-15) Paromita as a member of Zamindar family is well aware about her fate of being a child bride on the contrary being an enlightened girl she was aware of its consequences. Her tender age did not allow her to be burnt in the hot flames of the opposition by the orthodox family and society as a whole.

But Paromita determines to take destiny in her own hands to fulfill her dream of being educated at the cost of her marriage day and then Paro makes a decision, “No! She could not let that happen! She would not let that happen!” (pp. 15)

Sumathi has clearly depicted here assertion and determination of a nine year old girl towards her future. And that day a girl with twinkle in her eyes and dimples on her tender cheeks was lost somewhere in that patriarchal society and the quest for her identity could be seen at stature. Paro vows to herself, “I won’t become a sati like Nandana.” (pp. 15) Then Paro goes in Kalibari temple and asks for strength in such a way, “Ma, give me strength. Take care of me. Make me a strong girl.” (pp. 17) There she encounters Mastermoshai Biswajit the teacher who started first girls school in Sonapara first time. When Mastermoshai was introduced to her by her friend Sarbari, she impatiently asks to Mastermoshai, “Mastermoshai, will you take me to school?” (pp. 19) But she feels disappointed when Mastermoshai said to her to take her orthodox father’s permission. Then Paro says to Mastermoshai, “Baba won’t listen! He sends Dada to school….but he won’t send me. He says girls must not go to school.” (pp. 21) Paro knows her father and she does not want her father to know about her desire for education. On the other hand Biswajit being a responsible and sensible individual considered that the it is better to take father’s permission before educating the young little girl.

The discrimination between boys and girls in the colonial period can be clearly seen in this novel where the education of girls was denied and restricted and reins that were firmly grasped by a heartless society. Malavika Karlekar states in her book “Voices from within” about education of girls in colonial India:

“Boys were enrolled in school early, while girls remained at home, the argument being that boys and not girls had to look to a future which involved employment.” (pp. 6)

Two days before her wedding Paro absconds. Everyone was shocked. There was panic, anger and hysteria in the Zamindar’s house. Paro’s elder brother is in a state of dilemma and worries about her. His mental situation is clearly revealed here:

“Debu was confused. He did not know whether to be happy or upset; happy, because Paro had escaped that hateful marriage, and upset because who knew where his darling sister was and what trouble she was facing? ......Was she safe? Could she be in danger? Did she need help? Would they see her again? What would happen if she was caught and
brought back? And again what would she do all alone in the big world, a little girl with nobody to help her to take care of her? These and many more questions whirred past one another in his mind, and caused deep furrows to appear on his young forehead.” (pp. 27)

On the other hand, Paro, in search of her gender identity, sets a target for herself to go to Sonapara to meet Mastermoshai and decides not to be discouraged by thorny ways and obstacles. The young girl, her heart thudding with fear, set her foot to cross the narrow bridge of the river to go to Sonapara in darkness although it meant a tiresome walk. In meanwhile her brother Debu also escapes to find and support her. Paromita reaches Biswajit’s house and meets his wife Dipali who takes gentle and firm control of the situation. When Dipali offers her food at night, Paro feels surrounded by the memories of her affectionate mother and her tender care. But being assertive and firm towards her aspiration of getting education, she brushes off her tears which threatened her. Then she plans to reach school and get admitted somehow and stop the marriage immediately. Although she wants to create her own identity but still thinks about her parents: “After she began reading and writing, they would be proud of her. But her father did not understand the importance of all that to her. And so she had to work out a plan for her future.” (pp. 44)

While the need to change women’s lives through reforms and the introduction of education was gradually gaining ground in the nineteenth century Bengal, Mastermoshai being a generous and liberal husband teaches his wife Dipali. He says to her, “In a few months from now, you must be able to independently handle classes and I shall turn my attention to recruiting more girls to our school from the villages around us…” (pp. 46) According to Mastermoshai Girl’s education was not only essential for their self-esteem but also for the general advancement of society. Krishna Mohan observed,

“Many Hindus of respectability are, I know from personal observation, very desirous in the abstract of instructing their females. They see the palpable benefits which education has conferred upon their Western sisters and often wish they could boast of such accomplished wives and daughters as those of their European neighbours.” (pp. 190-1)

Debu being a responsible and mature brother supports her younger sister and takes charge of paying her school fees. But when Biswajit comes to know about her marriage which is going to be held on next day, he says them to go back home. On the other hand Dipali, wife of Mastermoshai takes a firm stand against child marriage and says to Debu, “Both boys and girls must be married, but not at your age. At your age, both girls and boys must study equally.” (pp. 50) In the introduction Malavika Karlekar writes about the impact of learning and education on a few Bengali women, “the role of education in promoting new ways of viewing the world.” (pp. 2)

Mastermoshai being rational and logical when encountered with this reality that Paro has run away from home says with affirmation to his wife about their society and people’s outlook on an escaped bride, “you know our society. They do not look kindly on girls who have disappeared for a day or two, and that too, just before her marriage. The girls’ marriage will break up. And in the future, who will marry her?” (pp. 50) Here Biswajit gives an idea about the conventional thinking of Bengali society towards girls who escape from their houses. Dipali being a woman of the nineteenth century who knows the significance of girl’s education argues and tries to convince her husband, “Paro needs the support of education.” (pp. 51)
On the other hand, Paro also with her back and call reminds Biswajit about his mission. Paro wants to make a place for herself in this society. Paro challenges the gender roles set up by the society. She is very firm to take education and wants to be educated like her brother. This is push and pulls which made her even furious and she asks, “This is a school for girls, isn’t it? Then how can you deny me permission to study? You’re a teacher. Should you not convince girls to attend school? And when I come seeking a place in your school, you want to send me back?”

She struggles for her self-identity. Then Paro’s father Hariprasad puts a case of kidnapping of his kids against Biswajit in front of the colonial master Inspector Jones who is progressive and fair enough in his judgments and believes in the mission of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Being Zamindar Hariprasad wants to show his power by punishing Biswajit. But Inspector Jones understands the situation and dismisses the case and he says, “I’ve known Biswajit for many years now…. He is an associate of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. He is a city-bred boy who has come all the way to Sonapara to carry forward Vidyasagar moshai’s campaign for girl’s education. So kindly stop imagining things. He is no kidnappers.”

Even Inspector Jones admonishes him for getting his beautiful little girl married to an old man who is older than Hariprasad. Indeed, the redefinition of women’s position seemed increment while India was supplanted from the pre-colonial state into colonial state. It shows that colonial government also rebuked the meaning less traditions of the natives and as the agents of the progressive western civilization; they could not turn their back against the rising progressive elements of the Indian society. The reaction that the colonial government as well as the officials expressed about the “barbaric practices” and their propaganda as the agents of civilization helped the social leaders to look into the state of affairs in colonial India.

The canons of the reform movements were exercising its influence not only on the native but also on the colonial master and under its impact women were becoming consignors of their gender identity. In the era of 19th century orthodoxy, superstitions and discriminations were at their peak and the reform movements were the torch bearer to show path to the men and women who wanted to shackle off the conservative norms to have their identity. In the article “Women Education in Colonial India” Hemant Kumari Chaudhurani quotes:

“In fact, the Bengal Renaissance of consciousness, intellectuality and cultural pursuits, ushered in a phenomenal rebirth or Renaissance of the consciousness of women’s well-being amidst the prevalent tyrannical society.”

Hemant Kumari further pointed out in her article that improvement in the position of women came about from the nineteenth century onwards which is the result of a process of conscious assertion on the part of Indian women, but through social reforms devised and carried out by Indian men and the colonial state.

Hariprasad brings back the kids at home but the atmosphere is changed now. Paro announces at home with her firm voice, “...there is no marriage happening here.” These lines show a new avatar of Paro who is bold and confident. She decided to have her gender identity any how. Paro rejects the marriage without taking permission from her parents. She is focused for self-identity and self-assertion and not to be lost like other child bride of her own age. She announces her decision to her relative who are the part of stereotype society. Paro’s mother feels astonished to see the change as she remains silent observer and with an image of ‘good and obedient’ wife at home. The courageous Debu and Paro both challenge the conventional societal norms by running away and by taking the reins of their life in their hands.
Biswajit decides to help out Paro in her aspiration. He reaches her home and bears hostility of Hariprasad and anyhow takes his permission to have a discussion. The heating debate is being heard outside the closed room. Paro wants to be a part of it when her mother asks her to be away from the door but Paro says, “Na, ma, my life depends on this.”  Paro is called inside and everyone thinks about the end of Paro’s ambition. It is interesting to see the change in the Hariprasad conservative attitude to a progressive attitude with the words of Biswajit. He understands that there is no match in marrying a girl at such young age with an old man. It is his duty to educate her to make her stand in the society. He gets courage to go against the society and follows the dream of her dear daughter Paro. Hariprasad looks at society with the new light. Here the mission of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar transformed not only the life of Paro but also his father. Malavika Karlekar states in her book, “it was a handful which was prepared to grant daughters the privilege of stepping out of the home into a new world of experience.”

Paromota gains her gender identity with this push and pull of the events in her life. It is her determination that she challenges the society and makes them realize that women are not submissive or passive and they have their dreams and desires to be fulfilled and they have their identity which should not be concealed. Because of women’s assertion and decisiveness, their education started spreading its wings and the result was the advancement of the nineteenth century generation of the “new women”. The latter half of the 19th century was considered as the period of the rise of Indian womanhood to freedom and assertion. In this paper, we have looked into the history of women in colonial India in the radiance of new notions of gender which has made the study of gender assertion in colonial setting more attention-grabbing and demanding.

Notes:

1. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (26 September 1820 – 29 July 1891), was an Indian Bengali polymath and a key figure of the Bengal Renaissance. He was asocial reformer, philosopher, academic, educator, writer, translator, printer, publisher, entrepreneur, reformer, and philanthropist. His efforts to simplify and modernize Bangla prose were significant. He also rationalized and simplified the Bengali alphabet and type. Vidyasagar championed the uplift of the status of women in India, particularly in his native Bengal.

2. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (22 May 1772 – 27 September 1833) was an Indian religious, social, and educational reformer who challenged traditional Hindu culture and indicated the lines of progress for Indian society under British rule. He is sometimes called the father of modern India. He founded an influential Indian socio-religious reform movement during the Bengal Renaissance. His influence was apparent in the fields of politics, public administration, and education, as well as religion. He is known for his efforts to abolish the practice of sati, the Hindu funeral practice in which the widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

3. Parda Pratha is the practice of requiring women to cover their bodies so as to cover their skin and conceal their form. In nineteenth century India, Parda pratha coupled with early marriage became very popular in Hindu society, which led to the women to gloomy situation.

4. Sati was a religious funeral practice among some Indian communities in which a recently widowed woman either voluntarily or by use of force and coercion would have immolated
herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. From about 1812, the Bengali reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy started his own campaign against the practice. He was motivated by the experience of seeing his own sister-in-law being forced to commit sati. Among his actions, he visited Calcutta cremation grounds to persuade widows not to so die, formed watch groups to do the same, and wrote and disseminated articles to show that it was not required by scripture. On 4 December 1829, the practice was formally banned in the Bengal Presidency lands, by the then governor, Lord William Bentinck.

5. **Sonapara** (West Bengal) was one village of Bengal in India.

6. **Gobindapur** (West Bengal) was one of the three villages which were merged to form the city of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in India. The other two villages were Kalikata and Sutanuti. Job Charnock, an administrator with the British East India Company is traditionally credited with the honour of founding the city.

7. **Baba** is used to address father.

8. **Old baur** – old husband

9. **Ma-** Mother

10. **Dada-** Elder brother

11. **Mastermoshai-** Teacher

12. **Zamindar-** A landowner in a village who owns a big area of land and hires workers to work.

**Works Cited:**


2. Ibid, pp. 1.

3. Ibid, pp. 4.

4. Raja Ram Mohan Roy put forth his views on women in five pamphlets, two petitions and a number of letters. Written originally in Bengali he translated these into English so as to make them available to a larger reading public. These quotations are from his second tract on sati entitled ‘*A Second Conference between an Advocate and an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive*’ in Collet, *Life and Letters*, pp. 53.


8. Ibid, pp. 7.


11. Ibid, pp. 11.


18. Ibid, pp. 15.

19. Ibid, pp. 15.
22. Ibid, pp. 21.
24. Ibid, pp. 27.
25. Ibid, pp. 44.
26. Ibid, pp. 46.
27. Benarja Krishna Mohan, ‘Reform, Civil and Social’ in *Awakening in Bengal.* pp. 6, 190-191.
28. Ibid, pp. 50.
30. Ibid, pp. 50.
32. Ibid, pp. 51.
33. Ibid, pp. 61.
34. Chaudhurani, Hemantkumari. *Women Education in Colonial India.* Article
35. Ibid, pp. 67.
36. Ibid, pp. 68.