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Understanding the Other: A Study of Tagore's *Chaturanga* and *Streer Patra*

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Abstract:

"In a world that often tries to divide us, literature remains one of the last sacred spaces where we can live inside each other's minds, if only for a few pages" [1]. By these words what Banu Mushtaq, the International Booker Prize winner meant is of course, a process of separating one from the other. There is something definitive in the universe through which people from a community segregate other people in the same community or people in a different community, based upon their differences. Generally, this act of division and categorization is done on the basis of 'caste', 'class', 'sex', 'religion' etc. The foundation of the process of dissociation lies in the perspectives of the self towards the other, the way one perceives 'an other' ('an other' is not like the self, but different). What literature does is, it helps us to understand the concept of other, the way 'an other' is transformed into 'the other', the otherness of the other and the self's engagement with the other. The paper has selected two works by Tagore – 'Chaturanga' and 'Streer Patra' which solely deal with one's relation with an other. This paper tries to show how the process of othering is achieved and what are the criteria that are taken into account while objectification of an individual (Nanibala and Bindu) and a group of people (Lower caste Chamars and Muslims) is being accomplished. This is the view of the paper to understand how efforts have been made to subsume the otherness of the other under the umbrella of the same. The concept of 'care' helps us to comprehend the differences of the other and asserts that the others are not really others but the self's imagination and product of excessive thought, which is powerful enough to dismantle the power structure of the given society.

Keywords: differences, categorisation, humanist, ethical, plurality, care.

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Introduction

"Who is obsessed by religion / He is blind

He only kills and gets killed / Even an atheist is blessed

Because he does not have the vanity of faith/ Humbly he lights up his reason

Defies the authority of scriptures / And seeks only the good of men" (Konar 1).

The systematic inequalities are embedded and contested in culture and discourse for all time. People in the highest position in the hierarchy are possessed by their obsession. They divide, categorize and make rest of the people 'other' based on caste, class, gender and religion. Reading literature is a practice that helps to listen to 'an other'. Engaging with literature facilitates us to address the lack of diversity and plurality that is always already there in the universe and therefore investigates how the humanist and ethical engagement with an other assists an individual to understand the world as a relation. Simone de Beauvoir, in her work *What Can Literature Do?,* points out that "It is an activity that is carried out by humans, for humans, in order to unveil the world to them. This unveiling is an action" (Beauvoir 18). By these words, what Beauvoir meant is that literature helps us to see the world outside ourselves and understand it's relation to each other. A committed work unveils the world by revealing its truths about the world. Revealing the unrevealed, seeing the unseen, perceiving the unperceived is an act. The act is accomplished by humans. Literature is a powerful medium that presents human experiences. It exposes human perception, i. e. the way one individual perceives an other.

Review of Literature

The study on Tagore's *Chaturanga* and *Streer Patra* have been done by various scholars and authors and published a number of research articles. Some of them are viewed below-

Saha, Bidushi. *The Performativity of Widowhood and Rebellion for Emancipation: A Study of Rabindranath Tagore's Chaturanga*- here the scholar, Saha talks about the performativity of the widowhood and emancipation of women in 20th century Bengal. She examines two female characters' experience in the male centric society. They resist their exploitation in their own way. She establishes the idea that their rebellious nature helps them to attain their emancipation.

Sharma, Sumit. *Rabindranath Tagore as a Social Philosopher: A Study of His Novels*. Here the researcher deals with the idea of social and philosophical aspects of life and their interpretation. The paper analyses the norms of society at the time and interprets how the feminine psyche resisted social oppression.

Mahapatra, Alina. *Rise of New Women in Rabindranath Tagore's Fictional Writing: A Critical Study.* Here the scholar considers the female protagonists as New Women, and talks about how they come across the dominant societal norms established by patriarchy- the story of successful attempt of coming out of the patriarchal bedrock.

Khatun, Selina. *Exploring Subaltern in Rabindranath Tagore's Short Story 'Streer Patra'*. In this article, the scholar discusses the women rights movements for their empowerment. She establishes the idea that the condition of women in the novel provides a pen picture of Indian society. In this work we can get an idea that how the social norms function to suppress the women in society.

However, the paper "Understanding the Other: A Study of Tagore's *Chaturanga* and *Streer Patra",* attempts to read these texts from a phenomenological point of view. It considers the world as a relation, i.e. how a self sees an other. It analyses how relationality plays an important role in the discourse. It elaborates the idea that how reading texts with care offers a new perspective of looking at the world in a better way. It also looks at the points of view of the 'othered', their responses to being made different.

Theoretical Framework

The critical framework for the study is the theory of phenomenology, the theory of otherness by Levinas, Martin Buber's theory of dialogical existence ('I-Thou' and 'I- It'), Hegel's theory of master slave dialectic (Dialectical Idealism) and Hannah Arendt's theory of reciprocal perception of phenomenology. The theory of otherness is the core idea that is used to interpret the texts chosen for the study. The theory of otherness is all about how an individual sees the other, who is like the self, the alter ego of the self. Others are different, not exactly like the self. The world is consists of plural identities, where an individual is related in terms of other. The texts chosen for the study need to be read in relation to each other. In 1915, when Tagore added the Sribilas section, Radha Chakravarty in *Novelist Tagore: Gender and Modernity*, "a reviewer in the journal commented that this work heralds a new kind of writing, a series of interlinked stories that make sense only when read in relation to each other. He also lauds Tagore's skill in representing the complex psychology of his protagonists within the brief span of the short story" (Chakravarty 78).

Chaturanga is a classic Bengali novel by Rabindranath Tagore. It means 'quarter'. It consists of four chapters – Jethamashai (uncle, who is Jagmohan), Sachish, Damini, Sribilas. The story is narrated from first person point of view i.e. Sribilas, who is Sachish's friend. The first chapter is about Jethamashai, an atheist, where we get the reference of Sachish, both of them are of same nature. From the very beginning of the novel, Sachish got influenced by his Jethamashai's philosophy. Jethamashai was a noted atheist at that time. He didn't believe in the existence of God. He was a humanitarian, who was attractive in many ways. He was against hypocrisy and social cruelty of orthodox Hinduism. He disregarded the religious practices of Hinduism completely. He wanted to help people experiencing poverty and the other oppressed classes. He usually argued with a theist in the way- "If there is God, then my intellect is his gift; That intellect tells me, there is no God; So, God tells me, there is no God" (Bhattacharjee 16).

He was influenced by Western thought and Positivism. On the contrary, his young brother Harimohan was a staunch believer of rituals, superstitions and prejudices. Harimohan's idea of God was very different. He was fond of amulets, charms, prayer, holy water from sacred places. He did not only defer to the Gods and deities; he did the same to the people from whom he used to get favours. On the contrary, Jagmohan was an English scholar, also known as the Macaulay of Bengal and the Johnson of Bengal. Sachish gained proficiency in the English language and literature from his uncle. His perception of treating an other was very different from his brother. He never subjugated an other, he used to consider an other as his own. One of the instances of his reply to his nephew-in -law who addressed him 'sricharaneshu' means 'to your gracious feet', a type of address in a letter- "My dear Naren, calling the feet gracious is nonsense as neither you nor I know what it really means. Secondly, you have submitted something only to my feet, but you should know better that the feet are a part of my whole, and as these are attached to me, these should not be seen as separate entities. Thirdly the feet are neither my ears nor my hands, hence to offer something to them is sheer madness" (Bhattacharjee 19). From these lines we get an idea about his understanding of the self and the world. He did not consider anything that cannot be perceived through our senses. His perception was the basis of observation and rationality. He used to tell Sachish, "Look, son, we are non- believers. To maintain this pride, we should keep ourselves completely pure and stainless. Since we do not believe in anything, we must believe in ourselves all the more" (Bhattacharjee 20). He was a philanthropic and considerate who dedicated his life for the oppressed ones.

At the very beginning of the novel, we get to know that Jagmohan's idea of God was very different from Harimohan and Purandar. Harimohon and Purandar made lower class Muslim and Chamars (lower caste people) 'other' based on caste and religion. Jagmohan was determined and made it very clear that his brother expends a lot for the priests and pandals, so

he must have the right to help the poor. He utters "you make your offerings to your deity every day. I never object. I am making an offering to my god one day. Please do not obstruct it… the chamars and Muslims are my God. If you offer them food, they easily take it in their hands and eat it. None of your Gods can do it" (Bhattacharjee 21). For Jagmohan the oppressed ones are his God, Harimohan and Purandar are the bearer of the discourse of caste hierarchy, they put the oppressed in the lowest position in the hierarchy and categorizing people in respect of caste and religion by making an unequal relation between them and the oppressed.

Here Jagmohan's idea of God and Purandar and Harimohan's idea of God are instances of 'absolute otherness'. Both of their relationship with the other- that is, God -is fix and rigid. And also, the relation with the oppressed is also an instance of 'absolute other'. However, what the oppressed considered them is not mentioned in the text. There is no such direct interaction between upper- caste and lower- caste individuals. They are only the victims of all- round exploitation. Their voices in the texts are unheard. They never resisted the oppression. Jagmohan and Harimohan had a different view about them.

At the very beginning of the novel the narrator gives Sachish's physical descriptions "Sachish looked like a shining star – his eyes were blazing, his long slender fingers were like flame of fires, his complexion was like radiance from halo. When I first saw Sachish, I saw his soul; I fell in love with him simultaneously" (Bhattacharjee 13). Sachish didn't believe in the existence of God. He was also influenced by his teacher Wilkins, the professor of English in a college. Professor Wilkins opined that teaching English literature to Bengali boys in a native college was more like a day labourer's work. He never considered other Bengali boys except Sachish as students. He had also his certain prejudices, therefore believed nobody other than Sachish in the class comprehended the concept of 'positivism'. So, his relationship with the Bengali boys was also different and disparate, though Bengali boys never considered them so.

After few days Sachish left the house and worked as a private tutor. He encountered Nanibala, an unprotected and helpless girl, and took shelter at her maternal uncle's place with her widowed mother. The girl faced a lot of trouble staying there. Sachish wanted to give a secure shelter to the pregnant girl and rescued her. Sachish with the help of his Jethamashai gave her shelter in their house. Purandar (who is responsible for Nanibala's pregnancy) objected. Sachish wanted to marry Nanibala in order to save her life from Purandar.

On her wedding day, Nanibala committed suicide by providing a suicide note, which says: "Father, I could not do it. Please forgive me. So long! I have tried my best thinking over of you. But I haven't been able to forget him till today. A billion obeisance at your lotus feet Nanibala, Sinner" (Bhattacharjee 35). In the letter she mentioned that she did not forget 'that man', therefore she was not willing to get a secure life provided by Sachish. The oppressed girl in the male- dominated society is 'an other'. She had been treated as an object and a commodity by Purandar and other maternal cousins.

Nanibala's letter mentions that she could not forget the man she loved and was rejected. She committed suicide on her wedding day, when she was protected and provided for by Sachish. She had never attempted to take her own life before that day; even when she was utterly helpless and unprotected. Perhaps she was living in fear that Sachish could abandon her like 'the man'. The words in the letter can be interpreted in another way, i.e. she could not forget the man's betrayal and therefore did not want to face the same thing again. So, she preferred to take her life rather than being treated as an other. She resisted her exploitation differently. Here, Tagore's idea of death can be used to comprehend the idea in a better way. Tagore never considers death as an end of life, rather he glorifies the idea of death. The idea of death is not used in a derogatory sense; instead, it is viewed as a means of liberating one's soul from the misery and misfortune of mundane life. He believes in a philosophy where death is accepted as a part of life. It is not segregated from life, it is an inseparable part of life. Life reaches to its

completeness through the acceptance of death. The concept of death appears in many forms in his works. Sometimes he refers to death as 'beloved', sometimes 'friend'. According to him, death is not the end of the journey of an individual, but it helps to gain the Supreme Truth in life. He expresses, "Oh Death, to me, You are equal to my Shyam (Krishna)" (Gangapadhyay 70).

Nanibala was a victim of the male- centered society. But her decision to commit suicide was not what patriarchal society or Purandar or any other representative of the male- centric society forced her to do. It was her agency, her own choice to take her own life which was beyond the expectation of the same society. So, committing suicide was not what the society set for her, it was what she set for her, it was her own decision. Patriarchy made her a victim up to a certain extent. She did not allow anybody to decide for her whole life. The ending shows us that she did not consider herself 'the other' by taking a secure place offered by a man. The point is, in the end, she did not allow anybody in her life to make herself 'the other' again.

After the death of Jagmohan, Sachish disappeared for two years. He did not inform anybody about his disappearance. He was found "dancing in a trance, cymbals in hands, singing the praise with Lilananda Swami in some place near Chittagong" (Bhattacharjee 40). It was the second influence in Sachish's life. His engagement with Lilananda Swami helped him connect with spiritual mysticism. Sachish prepared a tobacco bowl and did a lot of things for Lilananda. The sight shocked Sribilas. When Sribilas asked, "Sachish you have been brought up in complete liberty, how can you've tied yourself in such binding today? Was uncle's death such an absolute death?" (Bhattacharjee 42). Sachish's reply was "Sri as long as uncle was alive, he gave me liberty in the playground, with his death he has given me liberty in ocean of divine ecstasy, like a child who enjoys freedom in its mother's lap" (Bhattacharjee 42). In the last analogy the idea of a mother is very similar to the idea of God where the God will take care of him like a mother while enjoying the liberty of divine ecstasy. However, the connection with

the God was not there while playing in the ground, it is devoid of God's devotion and attachment. The complete transformation happens to him due to his engagement with Lilananda Swami.

In his journey of spiritual awakening, Sachish came into close contact with Damini, the widow of Sibotosh, who bequeathed Damini and all other property to the spiritual guru, Lilananda Swami. Damini was the epitome of resistance. She did not respond to guru's call. She was not bound by widowhood. It is mentioned that she rejected to join Lilananda Swami. She rejected guru's order by chasing for her desire. She was vocal in fulfilling her wish. She protested against Sachish's decision of letting her join and discontinue her into the group of spiritual guide. She raised her voice against the usefulness of ecstasy, when the wife of one of the disciples of Lilananda Swami committed suicide after finding the fact, that her husband had an affair with her own younger sister. Sachish gazed at her face in silence. Damini questioned him "what use to the world are the things that engross you to day in and day out? … today you have seen what ecstasy is, haven't you? It has no regard for morals or a code of conduct for brother or wife or family pride. It has no mercy, no shame, no sense of propriety" (Bhattacharjee 44).

She resisted when Sachish informed her to live with her relative, she utters "One of you will decide something for me, another of you will decide something else – all to suit your convenience. Am I a mere pawn in your chessboard? I have not joined you at my own accord hoping that you people will like me. But I will not move anywhere else just because you people do not like me" (Bhattacharjee 48). She had her agency all the time.

Jagamohan's death in the novel is very significant and symbolic. It is the end of radical positivist philosophy in Sachish's life. He used to perceive things through reason and rationality. So, Jethamashai's death created a lack in Sachish's life. After Jagmohan's death a

new chapter began which Sachish embraced. In order to fulfill the lack his journey towards spiritual quest started. Sachish's struggle was to find something different which was inadequate in atheism that did not permit him and his Jethamashai to have 'purnata' (completeness). Perhaps this is the reason for which he had been struggling throughout the novel through his encounter with Lilananda Swami.

It is a critique of the Western idea of radical positivism in which one takes precedence over the other. At the very beginning of the novel, Sachish was very much influenced by Jagmohan's philosophy and perceived the world through the lens of this philosophy. After his death, Sachish started seeing the world through a different lens. According to Tagore, perceiving life through one philosophy is not laudable to understand life and its real meaning. He was against the idea of stressing one philosophy over the other. When atheism and spiritual ecstasy start interacting, we get the nuances of life. In the text we have seen "Tagore's presentation of Jagmohan's positivism is admirable in many ways, but insufficient as a philosophy of life, and also somewhat out of date" (Radice 413). It lacks the largeness and completeness. Through Sachish, the more developed soul, Tagore critiques the earlier aspect, i. e. viewing life through reason only.

The death of Jetha symbolises Sachish's new journey towards post- positivism. Jagamohan believed in reason only. According to Lilananda Swami, spiritual mysticism was the sole factor for leading a meaningful life. However, in Sachish we got both, the amalgamation of two, which is needed for the fulfilment of the soul- which is what Tagore wanted to establish. We can get the real nuances of life when atheism interacts with the spiritual ecstasy. Sachish was approaching 'purnata' (wholeness) through his engagement with others (Lilananda Swami, Nabin, Nabin's wife, Damini and Nanibala). Sachish's interaction with others helped him to gain more experience and realise life in a different way. It provides him a different outlook, a new perspective. He uttered: "Once I relied on my intellect but realized that I did not account

for such aspect of life. Then I depended on ecstasy, but it did not have any basic whatsoever. Intellect is mine, so is the devotion. One can't lean on one's own structure" (Bhattacharjee 42).

The story is narrated by Sribilas, Sachish's friend. He describes what he sees. We get all the description from the first- person point of view. Sribilas is Sachish's friend, an admirer and a lover. From the very beginning of the novel we witness Sribilas used to appreciate Sachish. He has the access of knowledge about Sachish. However, there is also a lack of it. The narrator believes that he knows Sachish properly, but as the text proceeds we understand that he does not know Sachish as much as he claimed. He considers Sachish as 'theist' and 'son of a Hindu Brahmin' which is far from Sachish's reality. He narrates the story of Jagmohan in an interesting way, and presents the character of Jagmohan as he is. Sribilas, a follower of Jethamashai's philosophy which was limited to a certain extent. This is the reason Sribilas could not realise Sachish properly – as Sachish gained something different which cannot be judged through intellect only. That is why he was always in a dilemma of what Sachish tried to do, it was more of his dependency on Sachish than his love and admiration for Sachish.

The narrator claimed that he has no intension to belittle Sachish, anyway. However, while describing his first appearance after Jethamoshai's death, he utters "At the time, news came about Sachish – our own Sachish – was dancing in a trance, cymbals in hands, singing the praise of the God, by disturbing the village" (Bhattacharjee 39). His selection of words 'trance' and 'disturbing the village' contradict what he claimed earlier. Besides that, he considered that it was not easy for him to understand Sachish completely. Sachish's wholeness, ideas and magnitude are all above the narrator's understanding. Unable to comprehend Sachish's vastness, the narrator made a comparison between Sachish and the mendicant, whom Jetha called 'pawn- broker' at one point in time. We got different representation of Sachish that did not suit him. The narrator was jealous of Sachish, when Damini took care of Sachish, his food, health, he could not tolerate Damini's concern for Sachish. He utters, "This concern of Damini

stung me sharply like an angry bee. Sachish travelled alone for two years after uncle's death, but did not survive? Unable to suppress my indignation, I blurted it out, colored with some strong emotions" (Bhattacharjee 81). Sribilas never considered another individual as an object. He was influenced by Jethamoshai's philosophy. He used to appreciate both Jagmohan and Sachish. He never established an inequal relationship with them. He respected both of them. He was not that insightful to foresee things.

Besides that, we got different descriptions of Damini in Sachish's diary. The narrator never portrayed Damini the way we got her depiction in Sachish's diary. We got a different delineation from the direct interaction between Damini and others- where her sexual desire was expressed explicitly; "the darkness of the cave was like a primitive black animal- its wet breath was as if touching my body. I felt as if it was the first primordial animal with no eyes, no ears, but only an atavistic hunger; it was imprisoned in that cave for endless time; it had no mind, no awareness of anything; it only had pain- it cried silently" (Bhattacharjee 53).

Streer Patra (*The Wife's Letter*) is a short story written by Rabindranath Tagore. The story begins simply but gradually develops into something different. The woman protagonist in a male-dominated society is helplessness to save the life of another woman. She represents 20th-century Bengali women. The story tells us how she becomes a subject of patriarchal domination. It exposes her struggle in a male dominated society and her inability to realise her own choices and decisions.

Mrinal, the protagonist, presents herself as an advocate of women's emancipation. In her letter to her husband, she states that she will not return to her in-laws' house. The reader understands her suffering and hardship in a man's world. Mrinal got married at an early age. She was selected by her mother-in-law for her unique beauty as the eldest daughter-in-law was not striking. So, Mrinal's unparalleled beauty had been chosen to compensate for what their

eldest daughter-in-law lacked. In the letter, she mentioned: "… the groom's family had come to see the prospective bride, and whatever assessment or value judgement they made was the girl's price. However beautiful or talented a girl might be, she needs must always be apologetic about herself and her worth" (Sharma 8).

When Mrinal entered into her in-laws' house, she had no idea about marriage. She had been assigned a new title, 'Mejo Bou' (second daughter-in-law). After scrutinizing her beauty, everybody in the family and outside the family considered herself as really good looking and intelligent. Mrinal could not cherish her intellect in the conservative family. She was never allowed to show her intellect at home or in society. After fifteen years of marriage, she started protesting against the societal norms that did not help her to flourish as an individual. Mrinal used to write poetry that set her free from all the constraints. Writing poetry was her passion. It was her only space where she felt free to do what she wished. She exposes how 'female intellect' becomes a headache for the entire family. She mentioned: "It didn't take you long to forget that I had beauty. But that I was intelligent, that is what you are reminded of at every step… My mother was always very anxious about this intelligence of mine. For one who has to accept the line of control, if she desires to follow her rational thinking then she is destined to struggle at every step" (Sharma 9).

Bindu, the sister of the eldest daughter-in-law, took shelter in Mrinal's in-laws' house. Nobody welcomed her except Mrinal. Mrinal is the only one who accepted Bindu as she is. The other family members used to see her as a burden. Bindu used to do all the housework to live in the house. The entire household turned against Mrinal after she took Bindu's side. Bindu's sister explained to her husband how Bindu was a profitable maid to the family. She silently tolerated all the misbehaviour and maltreatment. She was suppressed, ignored, disregarded and treated differently. She was deprived of her own place and her sister's in-laws' place as well. If anything goes wrong or anything is missing, Mrinal's in-laws used to blame

her – because she is Bindu. At last, they successfully found a way to get rid of this burden by arranging her marriage with a lunatic person. When Bindu got to know about her husband, she escaped from her husband's place. Mrinal went against everybody in the family but could not save Bindu's life. She commits suicide to free herself from the tragic life.

Bindu commits suicide by burning herself. Everybody criticises Bindu's way of taking her life by considering it 'a new trend'. After being deprived of her own house, she is neglected in her sister- in-laws' house; she commits suicide at her husband's house. She cannot find her freedom anywhere in the world. Bindu's death changes Mrinal's life. It is Bindu's death that makes Mrinal rethink her position in a patriarchal society and the way a woman is treated in the same society. It develops a new perspective towards her emancipation. Mrinal decides not to come back to her in-laws' place. She utters "… I shall not return to 27 Makhan Baral Lane ever again. I saw what happened to Bindu. I have realized the position of women in this society. I do not want to go through anymore" (Sharma 24).

The letter in the story is not only a letter, it is a document proposed to a man by a woman. *Streer Patra* is a protest by a woman against the patriarchal system where women are nothing but objects. It questions the institution of marriage and the concept of female beauty. Mrinal exposes the hypocrisy of selecting a bride by considering her physical beauty only. Female beauty is a highly valued trait before marriage. After marriage, the same beauty is no longer the primary concern. The standards of female beauty change dramatically. This is nothing but a patriarchal construct whose value depends on the perception of men only.

Mrinal is an other in the male-centric set- up, as it is 'she' not 'he'. Bindu is doubly othered as she is a black woman. The text provides a lot of information about Bindu; we come to know them from Mrinal. She revealed that "after some time everybody in the house has forgotten my beauty except the ugly Bindu. She used to come to my room and adore my beauty. Bindu used

to say ‘dear sister, nobody can see your attractiveness except me” (Sharma 5). The story questions the concept of perception, the way a woman is being perceived in the society. Women are biologically different from men; they are treated as ‘other’. One who is not like the self, becomes the subject of categorization. The process of categorization is accomplished based on caste, class, gender, religion and colour. The process of objectification offers a particular point of view in which ‘an other’ becomes ‘the other’.

The study offers the theory of the ‘Master Slave Dialectic’ proposed by Hegel to interpret the texts. In his “Master slave Dialectic”, G.W.F. Hegel talks about the individual’s existence in the world. The existence of one individual depends on the existence of the other. Here he talks about three important aspects of human life – self, self’s consciousness and its existence. It is individual’s consciousness that affirms his or her existence. One’s existence depends on the other. The existence of the self and the other are mutually dependent. One’s self-consciousness cannot be achieved through individual existence but through mutual recognition. Robert. C. Solomon explains Hegel’s idea: “Human existence is primordially a matter of mutual recognition, and it is only through mutual recognition that we are self -aware and strive for the social meanings in our lives” (Solomon 68).

In the book *I and Thou*, Martin Buber expresses that, “When we encounter another individual truly as a person, not as an object for use, we become truly human” (Terian 105). Buber argued that we should emphasize our shared humanity rather than the differences that separate us. His theory centers on the concepts of ‘I- It’ and ‘I- Thou’. These theoretical concepts are so relevant to analyse the texts chosen for the study. This stems from his concept of dialogic existence. ‘I- Thou’ relationship acknowledges that the existence of an ‘other’ is already there. This relation offers a perspective to treat the other as a subject or an individual. It believes that understanding the other can expand one’s knowledge about the world. Therefore, this relation is pluralist, humanist, inclusive and holistic. I-It relationship denies the

existence of the other and neglects the individuality of the other. It emphasises the point of view of the self only. Here the self objectifies the other individual by reducing his or her identity. Here the perception of the other is not taken into consideration. It is not a reciprocal relationship. Here otherness is treated as abnormal, strange and unnatural. This relation is homogeneous, specific and exclusive. In the selected works, Jetha, Sachish, Sribilas and Mrinal emerge as followers of 'I-Thou' philosophy. They make an equal relationship with the others. Harimohan, Purandar, and Mrinal's in-laws adhere to the 'I- It' philosophy. They make an asymmetrical relationship with the others.

Both Nanibala and Bindu committed suicide. They wanted freedom from their tragic life. Their deaths are a protest against social inequality. It clearly indicates that committing suicide was their own choice rather than being treated as the other. Hannah Arendt's reciprocal perception of phenomena examines how an individual or a self perceives 'an other' and how 'an other' sees himself or herself. So, the perception of the self and the other are equally important. This reciprocal nature of perception is the basis of the human condition, as human beings live in a plural society. Reciprocal relationship is the most important factor here. Humans cannot live in isolation; the perception of the 'other', or a different perspective, is essential to constructing one's self. For him, to exist is to be perceived by others. He points out, "To appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectator" (Arendt 21). Individuals have autonomy over their own lives. This is the first time they made decisions for themselves. The texts make it clear that their lives are ruled by other people. Throughout the text, we have seen that Bindu is dominated by the patriarchal bedrock. Her cousins decide to refuse her at her own place; Mrinal's in-laws find a resolution to her expulsion by arranging a marriage for her. She makes no decision in her life. So, committing suicide is the only decision made by her in her entire life.

Nanibala also suffered like Bindu. Nanibala was a helpless girl who used to stay at her maternal uncle's place with her mother. After her mother's death, her cousins began abusing her. Sachish rescued her and gave her a secure shelter in his own house. However, Purandar (who is responsible for Nanibala's pregnancy) and Harimohan objected. Purandar tried to assault her again. Sachish wanted to marry her in order to save her from Purandar. On the day of her wedding, she committed suicide. A close reading of the text shows that nothing in her life went according to her choices and wishes. Killing herself was the only decision she took in her entire life.

In *Chaturanga*, we got contradictory ideas from narrator's perspective and their interaction with the other characters. There is a lack of congruity in the narration. The narrator had different relationships with the other characters in the novel, sometimes these relationships are equal and sometimes they are not. Sometimes he expresses his love for other characters, sometimes he shows his envy towards another. The novel deals with how people relate to one another. It tells us how one sees an other; the way one treats another who is different from him or her. From the very beginning we got the perspectives of Jetha, Sachish (Chaturanga) and Mrinal (Streer Patra) toward others, i. e. lower caste Muslim, Chamar and Bindu. Jetha built an equal relationship with others. He had love, care and respect for the other and therefore ethically engaged with them. However, Harimohan, Mrinal's in-laws' and Purandar's relationship with the same Muslim, Chamar and Bindu were unequal, this relationship was devoid of love, care, respect for each other. This relationship was unequal, and there was no ethical engagement on their part. In this relationship, there was a complete lack of reciprocity. There was no trace of relating other people, understanding them and considering them as subject. The same was true for Prof. Wilkins. For Wilkins, the other Bengali boys in the English Literature class were 'other'. Here Jetha, Sachish and Mrinal considered other people as subjects and therefore helped them to assert their individuality. Jetha considered the poor Muslims and Chamars as

'God'. He mentions: "…these Chamars and poor Muslims are my God" (Bhattacharjee 20). On the other hand, Harimohan, Purandar and Mrinal's in-laws considered the other as 'untouchable'. Jetha used to follow "Ethics as First Philosophy (Levinas 304)". Jetha's responsibility and ethical engagement towards the other draws our attention. The theory induces a certain order. Justice leads morality, while being morally and ethically engaged with another person accelerates our responsibility towards them; in turn, and responsibility leads to love for the other and treating them as a subject. *In Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, Tagore talks about the relation between an individual and the universe. He again stresses how love, compassion and care for others assists an individual in understanding the world in a better way. He expressed, "Let what seems a barrier become a path, and let us unite, not in spite of our differences, but through them. For differences can never be wiped away, and life would be so much the poorer without them. Let all human races keep their own personalities, and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living" (Das 712).

Note

[1] Banu Mushtaq delivered this speech while receiving the International Booker Prize in 2025 in London.

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