

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

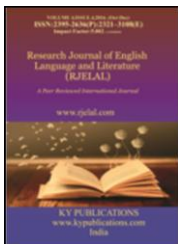
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

DESIRE VERSUS DUTY: DEPICTION OF THE DILEMMA OF THE CENTRAL WOMAN
CHARACTER IN BADAL SIRCAR'S *SARARATTIR*

ANKITA PAUL¹, DIPANKAR SUKUL²

¹Research Scholar, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh



ABSTRACT

Badal Sircar's *Sararattir* (1963) is a psychological play about a couple, a husband and a wife named Purush and Stree and an old man. The play depicts the psyche of the central woman character, Stree, who is drawn towards a man created out of her imagination on one hand and has a social responsibility towards the man she is married to on the other hand. The play reveals whether she meets the imaginary man she desires for in real life and sacrifices everything to be with him or like a duty-bound wife goes back to her husband to give him companionship and comfort. This research raises pertinent questions about how married women are perceived in society since times immemorial and the social and moral codes that binds them. The aim of this research is to analyze the position of the central woman character in the play, who was torn between her desire for the unknown and her duty towards the known.

Keywords- Desire, Duty, Imagination, Marriage, Social responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

"To be or not to be" – This statement from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (3.1.64) is most suitable in revealing the state of mind of the central woman character of the play *Sararattir* by Badal Sircar. The play depicts the psyche of a middle-class Bengali woman caught in the web of her desire for a man created out of her imagination on one hand and the social responsibility she had towards her husband in real life on the other hand. She had to choose between the two and the play reveals what she finally chooses for her survival.

Sararattir, a play which relies heavily on psychological realism is about a married couple, Purush and Stree, who go on a vacation to a place, far from their hometown. In that small town of

Bengal they get stuck in a dilapidated house as it rains outside and are compelled to stay overnight due to unfavourable weather conditions. It is only later that they discover that the house belongs to an old man. The presence of the old man in the play lends a mysterious touch to the play and is instrumental in holding up a mirror to the relationship between the husband and the wife. The couple take refuge for only one night in the deserted, dishevelled house of the old man and the revelations which unfold with the night takes each of them by surprise and brings about a remarkable change in each of their lives.

The play *Sararattir* was originally written in Bengali in 1963 and since then have been translated in several Indian languages and staged all across the

country. The word "Saraattir" in Bengali means "All Night". The word "Saraattir" was used in the play for the first time when the wife who was initially reluctant to spend the entire night in that dishevelled house and was willing to leave the house as soon as the rain stopped asked the husband in a panicky tone, "If it rains all night?"(Sircar 321).

ANALYSIS and DISCUSSION

The play opens with the couple, Purush and Stree, trying to find some shelter to escape the wrath of the rain and entering that dilapidated house. Purush and Stree went on arguing about trivial matters. It was evident through their conversations that the man takes the self-important role in the relationship. It is him who tries to dominate the wife by aggressively putting across his points thus compelling her to go into a mode of submission. He dismisses everything she says by labelling them as childish and immature and points out several times in the play how she needs to have mental growth and develop a more practical approach towards life. But in reality it was the husband who failed to understand his wife and the wound she has been safeguarding in her heart for years, which has affected their relationship too. The husband deprives his wife of equal status in their relationship and makes no effort to appreciate her. Consequently it is the woman's indifference towards the relationship that stops her from establishing her arguments despite provocations on part of the husband. It seems that the wife has nothing to look forward to in the relationship and it is like two people living under the same roof who are cordial to each other but are actually strangers to each others' needs.

The couple continues with their verbal duel while waiting in that house impatiently for the rain to stop. Just then an old man appears from nowhere in the house and since then has been an important character in taking the play forward. It was on the old man's insistence that the couple did not head out to their destination in that thunderous night and decided to stay back at his house. The old man was kind enough to let them stay in his house for the night, serve them food and took care of all their primary needs for the night. In fact it was the old man who after meeting the couple was quick to

understand Stree's isolation despite being married. In the first scene only when the old man was asked about his choice of staying alone in that crumbling house, he had questioned Stree back if she can explain her loneliness, to which the husband had answered that she does not stay alone (Sircar 321). Perhaps the husband was hinting at the physical companionship whereas the old man might have hinted at the isolation she faced at the emotional level despite being in an apparently good marriage. The old man's words did strike a chord with Stree as she kept thinking about the assumption made by the old man even while her husband kept on talking to her. She was amazed at the other prophecies made by the old man about her age, her habit of waking up in the middle of the night and other small things about their lives. She was also impressed with the theory of seven proposed by the old man according to which every person goes through some changes after every seven years of his/her life- seven, fourteen, twenty one, twenty eight, thirty five and so on. It is interesting to note here that while the wife was twenty eight years old, the husband was thirty five. There was a difference of seven years between them and they have also been married for exactly seven years. So according to the old man's theory, Purush and Stree were both going through different stages of change in their lives. While the husband has crossed that stage of fancy and imagination and has reached a stage in life which has made him more practical, the wife on the other hand has just reached that age where she dwells more in the world of imagination. So there was an obvious difference in their thought processes which became evident through their conversations in the play.

As the play proceeds the readers become aware of another character- Ranjan who is not physically present in the play but whose imaginary presence brings twist to the tale. The name, Ranjan is first uttered in the play by Purush to describe how the wife seeks solace in the world of imagination. This makes the wife defensive about her choices and she further asks her husband if "it is wrong to be imaginative?" (Sircar 326). While the husband never appreciated the wife's ability to imagine it was the old man who tells Stree that she is a poet because

according to his understanding, poetry moves her, makes her dwell in the land of imagination, makes her happy and at the same time makes her suffer (Sircar 327). Since the old man believed that poetry is not only about playing with words and that a poet should not only write poetry but also feel it so according to the old man the wife was a poet, which goes in complete contrast to how her husband perceived her ability to imagine.

It is also revealed in the course of the play that the old man keeps awake all night and that is where his profound understanding of things comes from. This is a habit that the old man shares with Stree who also wakes up in the middle of the night after her husband goes off to sleep. This time is utilized by her to access her world of imagination, something that her husband is completely unaware of. But the old man could understand this only by seeing her for some time. Surprised at the old man's predictions Stree confesses to him of having a strange feeling in the middle of the night when she wakes up and sits by the window pane. She failed to describe how she exactly feels but gives out a hint that it makes her feel strange, restless and suffocated. Here she feels a sense of comfort in revealing intricate details of her life to the old man. She also feels free to talk about Ranjan- an imaginary character, her man of dreams who keeps her alive at night, in front of the old man. In the play Ranjan is the symbol of passion and security for the woman, the elements which have faded in her married life. Ranjan is still not in a fully evolved state but growing gradually within the woman. The old man on hearing about Ranjan reveals that Ranjan is a version of himself, in fact his successor and Ranjan is on the way towards becoming from the state of being (Sircar 334). The old man himself seemed to have transcended the boundary of the known, the real and reached a stage where there lies no security, no assurance; even dreams crumble down in that deep, dark chasm. It is a world of feelings, emotions, hidden fears, insecurity, pain, suffering, agony and in that world one can find joy in going through these emotions.

The play reveals that Purush and Stree are a childless couple. As confessed to the old man, Purush wants a child not for the sake of having a

child but in the hope that having a child would make his wife a more matured person. He believes that his wife would be engrossed in fulfilling her maternal duties and that would keep her away from her imaginary world. But the wife on the other hand does not want a child at this stage in her life. Perhaps it is because she was aware of the fact that having a child will not bridge the gap between her husband and her although she had married her husband out of her own choice. Stree felt disappointed about the fact that she had always been judged by her husband for everything she said or did. In fact in the second scene of the play there is a confrontation scene where the wife accuses the husband of not understanding her ever and instead accusing her of being childish all the time (Sircar 343). This was the long suppressed angst which got expressed in a moment of fury. Still the husband failed to understand the gravity of the situation and urged the wife to be more practical. But with the old man around her, Stree was much more at ease. Stree felt that the bond between the old man and her was sacred as she could freely reveal the otherwise concealed facts about herself to the old man without the fear of being judged.

After a certain point of time in the play, Stree could sense that the old man is trying to hold up a mirror to her relationship with her husband through his questions, prophecies and sarcastic yet introspective replies. He is digging deep to bring out the hidden emotions which remained intact within her as her husband did not ever inquire about those innermost needs of hers. The old man was picking up information about them in bits and pieces and putting them together to uphold a mirror image of the truth that lied veiled within her. According to Manujendra Kundu, the old man was placed in the play "as a prophet, a seer, a soothsayer, even as a supernatural presence" (Kundu 99). The old man had the ability to see through the couple's relationship and the inner turmoil of the wife but could not muster the courage to reveal it on their faces directly. He feared that it might harm the relationship rather than doing good. But at the same time he also could not control his urges to make small commentaries on the nature of their relationship and the wife's suffering. The wife tried

to find more meaning in her life, which was something that the husband failed to understand for he resided in the practical world and did not care about meaning.

In the play, the common habit of the old man and Stree- that is to keep awake at night was perhaps an attempt to search for meaning in their lives. The old man reflects upon events and circumstances which helps him understand things better. Staying awake and alone at a peaceful time made the process of self-discovery easier. The wife also like the old man goes through soul searching all night sitting by the window pane and that is her personal space which she does not expect the husband to understand. She does it by choice and asserts her independence in bringing out her innermost desires and indulging them when Purush is sound asleep, in fear that her attempts might get thwarted by his insensitive remarks as he does not approve of her imaginary skills. She knows that with her husband awake she cannot exercise her will to delve into the unreal to feel the essence of the real.

It is in the third scene that the bold side of the woman is revealed where she as usual wakes up in the middle of the night and comes to the room where the old man was staying up at night, while her husband was asleep in the other room. Here she tells the old man that she has come to the room because the old man is there and she wants to talk to him (Sircar 346). She cannot let go of the opportunity to communicate her heart out in front of him as she knows she can feel free to bring out her otherwise suppressed self as there is no fear of non-acceptance here. She did not want that particular night to pass by uselessly but wanted to utilize it by talking to the old man, something that can give her momentary bliss. When the old man asks her back how she knew that he would talk at the middle of the night she tells him that she has always heard him talking at night, and even spoken to him (Sircar 346). From this it becomes clear that in the old man Stree sees Ranjan- a creation of her mind who can fulfill her desires. Her longing for Ranjan comes alive on meeting the old man. She observes that the old man resembles the Ranjan of her dreams in his outlook on life, his philosophies, his ability to dig out the deepest of emotions and in

his ability to search for meaning in life. Stree is fascinated by him. The old man as Ranjan is the answer to her suppressed desires- desire to talk freely and not be judged, desire to be understood, desire to give meaning to her life, a desire that gives her peace of mind, a desire that transcends all things material and mechanical. The woman wanted to feel the moment, wanted to know what the real Ranjan was like and wanted to possess him. Ranjan represents her eternal joy. She knows that there is pain ahead in wanting to explore the truth about Ranjan and their future together but she is so possessed by her desire that she does not think before taking the leap. It was an ecstatic moment for her where she can see him and touch him. Her desire for Ranjan knows no bounds and she was willing to sacrifice her peace and contentment for a moment of union with Ranjan. She had earlier had a hint of that feeling but never felt that joy completely. Now that she is sitting in front of her Ranjan (the old man), she wants to feel that joy of being with him, knowing him and talking to him. Despite the old man's warnings that it would be better for her to not know Ranjan because that might cause her grief later, she was reluctant to move away from where she has already come. Ranjan symbolizes the freedom which Stree trapped in a ritualistic marriage never got to experience. He represents liberation for her as he is beyond the trivialities of everyday life. Stree wanted Ranjan to validate her presence by giving her what she deserved- meaning to her life, company in her loneliness, value of her existence and to make her realize her self-worth. Ranjan is the outcome of the emptiness she has been through in her marital life. Ranjan signifies Stree's restless quest for substance in her life. The old man's presence makes Stree complete and gives her a sense of fulfillment as in him she sees Ranjan. Her sense of fulfillment was evident in the words: "Today I know (Ranjan), today I am complete. Today I have a meaning. Today I exist. Today onwards I will exist" (Sircar 349) indicating that until that point of time she had lived a mechanical life. The old man was like a ray of hope to Stree much like how the tinker was to Elisa in the American short story, *Chrysanthemums* by John Steinbeck. In the old man ends Stree's search for

Ranjan. She finds her sense of existence from his existence. She was willing to sacrifice everything for the old man who was Ranjan now only on one condition that he also says he dreamt of her. It is on Stree's insistence that the old man says that "I have dreamt of you" (Sircar 350) and then the epiphanic moment arrives where the woman jumps over to the old man's chest and he embraces her. That was the fulfillment she had been craving for every night in her life. She found security in the old man's embrace. This is the sacred space, the idea of which she has been nurturing in her heart since a long time. She was willing to submit herself to him to seek spiritual fulfillment in return. Anjum Katyal says in this regard that "The language used throughout (in the play) is that of spiritual devotion, a mystic desire for union and completion, very reminiscent of the language of Sufi and Bhakti poetry. It is indicative of a deep longing in Stree for something deeper, more meaningful than her current existence". (Katyal 201).

But the fulfillment Stree was seeking in the old man soon vanishes with the appearance of her husband in the old man's room. The husband felt betrayed at the sight of his wife embracing the old man. It was Purush who was earlier very confident about the fact that nothing or nobody can come in the relationship between him and his wife, the reason being his immense love for her, their knowing everything about each other and being dependent on each other. But his assumptions were proved wrong in that moment of embrace, especially because of the negative impression that it gave out. Despite the fact that Purush found his wife in that compromising position with the old man, Stree still mustered up the courage to stand up to confront her husband when her husband said he wanted death because the woman who he thought was his everything has been caught in the shameful act of being in the arms of another man. Stree tells him that, "Whatever you had, you still have" (Sircar 351). But Purush disgusted at the sight of embrace between his wife and the old man tells her that he wanted everything she could give him to which the woman asked him, "My everything? What my everything- Did you ever know? Wanted to know?" (Sircar 351). The confrontation goes on with each

party trying to justify their stands. The wife tells her husband how in their marriage she has always been seen as a person who can give company and comfort to the husband and nothing beyond that (Sircar 352). The wife makes the husband realize how he has seen only that side of the woman that he wished to see- doing household duties, fulfilling duties of a companion. He did not try to find out anything about the woman beyond that. It becomes evident here how the husband failed to cater to the wife's emotional needs and had never cared to discover the other side of the wife- the side that has always been concealed by her in fear of rejection; the side which speaks of her passion and her innermost desires. Unlike the old man, he only saw the side that appeared to be real but was actually not real. He loved her not for who she was but for who he thought she was. So the bond between them though appeared to be apparently strong was shallow and fragile. The husband mistook his dependence on the woman to be his love for her. He kept insulting her and the old man for their act which he felt was disgraceful. He accused the old man of taking his most prized possession from him and breaking up his family (Sircar 353). The play then shows the woman wanting to leave the house not being able to take her husband's insults anymore but it is only after her husband stops her and tells her that he will not say anything about this to her again that the woman stays in the house (Sircar 354). Here he shows his fear of losing her. It shows the man's emotional dependence on the wife, and how he like a child clings to her for comfort but remains blinded to her desires.

The woman in *Sararattir* was torn between two worlds- the real and the illusory. On the one hand was her real life with her husband, and on other hand she was irresistibly drawn towards the unreal world- the world of Ranjan. She was in a state of dilemma as to who she should choose. It was her moral duty to be with her husband. She was expected to fulfill her social role by being an ideal wife to her husband. But she wanted to give up the role of a dutiful wife to be with Ranjan. She wanted to leave the world of norms and conditions to find ultimate freedom in Ranjan. She felt that her real joy lay in embracing the world of Ranjan. She could not

confide in her husband about her desire for Ranjan, her midnight cravings for someone else other than him in fear that her claims could hurt her husband and also that would socially not be acceptable. She would be ruining the expectations that her husband and the civil society have from her by confessing something that would not be approved by them. She has been conditioned to not be desirous of any other man apart from her husband simply because of the fact that she is married. But after meeting the old man and seeing her man of dreams come alive she could not exercise restraint on her emotions and wanted to possess him and stay with him. For a moment she forgot about the social codes that binds her and did not want to let go of the moment. She wanted to sacrifice all the comforts and peace of her life to throw light on her desire. It is only when the old man told her that Ranjan can only last for the night she wakes up to the realization that she cannot have Ranjan forever and has to return to her real life. She knew that she cannot possess Ranjan for lifetime and Ranjan could not give her anything except the pain in which she finds pleasure. Though she was willing to let go of all worldly desires, it was the old man who put sense in her mind to make her realize that with the breaking of dawn she will have to return to her role of fulfilling her moral responsibilities. According to Anjum Katyal, Stree was "torn between the security of home and the unpredictability of everything Ranjan stands for" (Katyal 199). Despite being initially reluctant to go back to being the ideal wife, being too absorbed in the moment, she finally knew that she had to return to her world of social responsibilities just for the sake of it though she knew she cannot go back to having the same equation with her husband that she once had, owing to the fact that he had discovered the concealed side to her personality and caught her enjoying her moment of pure bliss in the arms of another man, a man old enough to be a father-figure to her. The experience was surreal for the woman to have known the unknown for some time and lose it with the breaking of dawn to return to her daily chores. She knew she would have to compromise on her desire to do her duty. She has to return to her husband, who can never give her the joy that Ranjan gave; to somebody she loves out of

duty and not passionately. Despite being a working and financially independent woman who did not become a mother by choice she had to give in to her duty instead of her desire. It is much like the character of Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* where Sue had to submit herself to the social codes and return to the man she had been married to out of a sense of social responsibility instead of staying with the man she loved deeply. Like Sue, Stree could not exercise her own will over society's will. She had to conform to the set rules and the old man also felt that it would be good for her if she returns to submit herself to her social role as an ideal wife.

CONCLUSION

The play shows how one night changed three lives remarkably making it memorable for all the characters- for the woman it was wish fulfillment and a new beginning; for the husband a new awakening to certain realizations; for the old man in becoming the desire of the woman thus bringing the woman closer to her quest. But despite being so close to something that can give her ultimate bliss, Stree had to return to the real world of codes and conditions. Like a stereotypical woman she had to fall bait to the situation and according to customs return to save her marriage. The play is basically a depiction of her conflicted psyche where she initially did not have the courage to tell her husband about Ranjan, then gathered the courage to go to the old man at night when he was alone to having her moment of spiritual fulfillment with him and finally returning to her husband quite reluctantly to play the role of the ideal wife who is expected to be always there by her husband's side. Despite being a modern woman she could not live her life on her own terms and had to succumb to her duties.

REFERENCES

- Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure*. England: Penguin Books. 1994. Print.
- Katyal, Anjum. *Badal Sircar: Towards A Theatre Of Conscience*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd. 2015. Print.
- Kundu, Manujendra. *So Near, Yet So Far: Badal Sircar's Third Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2016. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. n.d. Web. 8 May. 2017.

<<http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org>>

Sircar, Badal. "Srarattir". *Natak Samagra*, Vol. 1. Kolkata: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers Pvt Ltd. 2009. pp. 315-56. Print.

Steinbeck, John. "The Chrysanthemums". *The Chysanthemums-Steinbeck.pdf*. 1938. Web. 7 May. 2017.

<<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic1220828.files/The%20Chysanthemums-Steinbeck.pdf>>