

Re-Visiting Exile in Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Srikanta*

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Abstract: Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) was one of the most read and loved Bengali novelists who wrote about the socio-cultural issues plaguing turn-of-the-century Bengal. *Srikanta* is considered an autobiographical novel and is divided into four parts. The protagonist Srikanta travels to Burma in the second part of the novel. The present paper would study this 'Exile' to Burma and Srikanta's experience of a cosmopolitan society. During the nineteenth century, Burma was a land of opportunity for Indians and many undertook this perilous journey for financial betterment. Life in Burma was a cultural shock for Indians and meant a break from their inherited mores and values. The land of Burma was not an exclusive space reserved for the high castes and men alone. The nostalgia for their hitherto static identity of caste was challenged and modified according to the living conditions in Burma. This migration led to the adoption of new cultural values; both good and bad by the Indians. Burma symbolized a space of equality and liberty. The displacement of Indians to Burma shattered their comfort zone and threatened the secure identity they had enjoyed in the motherland. Basic human nature is tested in Burma and the barriers that divide Indians are demolished at the onset of the journey itself. The memories of old identities fade away, new relations are formed, governed by new values and their individual achievements determine the place they occupy in a modern society. Like the modern day globalization, colonialism created hybrid identities. Srikanta's experience in Burma portrays the effects of this displacement on human behaviour. This paper will study how human identity shifts and adjusts as a result of migration, as narrated by Chatterjee's *Srikanta*.

Keywords: Migration, Cosmopolitan Culture, Alienation, Adaptation, New Identity

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Srikanta* (1916-1933) is considered an autobiographical novel and is episodic in nature. The novel is divided into four parts and the present research paper studies the second part of the novel titled 'Exile.' The paper studies the experiences of the protagonist Srikanta in an alien culture when he travels to Burma in search of a livelihood and his realization of the fluidity of inherited cultural values.

The journey to Burma symbolizes the rite of passage which displaces the travellers from their comfort zone and introduces them to a cosmopolitan culture. The Indians travelling to Burma are stripped of their status and the categories of caste, class and religion are demolished on the ship itself.

The sea voyage to Burma exposes Srikanta to the grim reality and pitiable condition of his fellow beings. People from all over India travel in jam packed conditions to earn their livelihood. The description of passengers boarding the ship is very symbolic: “As the train was entering the station, I had observed herd upon herd of motley-covered animals packed between the road and the jetty. Coming closer I recognized them for what they were--not animals but men, women and children who had spent the night in the cold and the fog in the hope of securing some space to sit on the boat that was to carry them across the black water. I had a reservation for the deck but my heart quaked at the thought of forcing my way through this turbulent sea of humanity to the entrance of the jetty” (332). Burma was a land of financial opportunity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and many people undertook the perilous journey for the betterment of their lives. But the humans have been reduced to animals in their attempt to travel to Burma for a better life. The racial humiliation and the horrendous conditions they face on the ship test the limit of their physical and mental ability.

The identity of the Indians travelling to Burma is defined by their caste and religion. The caste hierarchy forms an integral part of life in India and the passengers set up their luggage on the ship and are seated in a compartmentalized manner. The interaction with fellow passengers is also governed by barriers of caste, religion, language and region. But distinctions of caste, region, and language are washed away when a storm ravages the whole compartmentalized seating arrangements and the passengers fall upon each other:

In *Srikanta*, there is a description of the sea voyage from Calcutta to Rangoon. The passengers of the lower class were all Indians and as the voyage commenced the people belonging to different parts of the country and of different religions and linguistic groups kept themselves separated from one another. In a sense they looked like a miniature India but in mid voyage a severe storm gave them a big jolt and enough rollings. As a result artificial barriers were broken and the people got mingled with each other. This description is very much symbolic and represents the liberal ideas of Sarat Chandra as well as his love for national unity. (Biswas 263)

The journey and the storm are symbolic of the imminent changes that the immigrants would witness in a new country. The migration to a cosmopolitan country has begun already and old identities are under threat.

Srikanta witnesses another aspect of Indian identity on the ship. At the time of the writing of this novel, India was a colonized country. According to Ashish Nandy, “The Raj saw Indians as crypto-barbarians who needed to further civilize themselves. It saw British rule as an agent of progress and as a mission. Many Indians in turn saw their salvation in becoming more like the British, in friendship or in enmity (7). On the ship Srikanta witnesses a British officer beating up Indian sailors. When the doctor of the ship who is Indian protests against such harassment and threatens to complain to the Captain, he realises that the sailors have actually accepted such treatment as normal:

Looking in the direction of the pointing finger, I saw the men who had been kicked only a few moments before peeping from behind some barrels and grinning from ear to ear. The Englishman laughed again and, wagging his thumbs in front of the doctor’s face, walked away swelled with triumph. I glanced at Doctor Babu. Anger, revulsion, humiliation and despair struggled against each other on his face. He walked rapidly up to the men and said harshly, “What are you grinning at, you rascals?” At this, the good measure of self-respect returned to our countrymen. They stopped laughing and advancing aggressively, spoke as if in one voice, “Who are *you* to call us rascals? Are we your servants that we have to take your permission before we laugh? (345)

The behaviour of the sailors shows that they have internalized their colonial status to an extent that they can take a beating from an Englishman but will confront an Indian who stands up for them. They question the authority and diminish the stature of an educated Indian even when he fights for their cause. They feel proud to align with the British rather than with their own countrymen.

On the ship Srikanta witnesses an inter-caste relationship between Nanda Mistri and Tagar, which is representative of many relationships he will witness in Burma. They live a cat and dog life and Tagar does not accept Nanda as her husband because he is a Shudra:

So what if we have lived together for twenty years? Does that make us man and wife? Since when has the daughter of a Boston-born been the wife of a Shudra? Have I ever let you enter my kitchen or touch my food? Not even my sworn enemy can say

that of me. Tagar Boshtomi would rather die than besmirch the caste she was born into; and Tagar rolled her eyes at me in pride and triumph at her illustrious birth. All the way back to my tin-trunk, I couldn't stop laughing at the Vaishnavi's logic. But immediately afterwards, I reminded myself that Tagar was, after all, a foolish illiterate woman. There were many educated and respectable men in the cities and villages of Bengal who fell back on a similar logic when faced with the prospect of losing caste. But males--no matter what they do or say--are protected from mockery in our society. We laugh at women--never at men. (335)

This episode of the journey of exile touches upon two very important issues: caste and status of women. In Burma women enjoyed freedom which Indian women did not enjoy at that time. The relationship of Tagar and Nanda can survive blissfully in Burma only. Their inter-caste relation may lead to personal fights but there is no fear of social ostracism. The inter-caste relation could thrive in Burma as there is no concept of caste in Burma.

The migration to a different country provides not just financial opportunities but also changes the identity of the people. The traditional identities no longer work and money is the most important social marker. The displacement meant for financial gain sometimes leads to permanent settlement and the new place creates new identities. Srikanta's first few days in Burma show him the after effects of the journey which bring about changes in the behaviour and attitude of the people once they start living in Burma. "The concentrated essence of India--the India of religious, communal, linguistic, provincial and customary difference--sets out on the voyage. Before the voyage is over, all this has changed. The artificial barriers that the travellers have set up are smashed beyond repair. The storm has smashed through their former prejudices and at least as long as they live in Burma, the old social beliefs have little hold on them" (Kabir 22). Srikanta's stay at a hotel in Burma shows him the change in his countrymen with their stay in Burma. It reveals a liberal side of his countrymen who have been freed from their orthodoxy and have discarded caste prejudices:

It was by living among them that I first learned that what we call samskar is not founded upon rock and can easily be shed. Two English words 'instinct' and 'prejudice' together make up the full meaning of the word samskar. One is not the other--that of course is obvious. That the strongest of our samskars--the caste bias--is not instinctive and can easily be overcome, was revealed to me that very first day at Da Thakur's hotel. I was amazed at the discovery. I realized that many of us, who

wear the shackles of caste imposed upon us through centuries of mandatory compartmentalization, happily, even proudly, in the conviction that we are upholding and handing down to posterity worthwhile systems of thought and action, discard them with the greatest ease the moment we enter an area where they have no relevance ... It was obvious that their brief exposure to a foreign country and culture was sufficient to successfully wipe away the generations of conditioning with which they had gone. (350-52)

These words show the effect that a change of place has on the inherited identity of a person. In Burma, the living space is marked by freedom from social prejudices. People are not judged by their caste status and their hard work is appreciated. And thus, the immigrants from India also adapt to the new social environment and forge friendships with people outside of their limited zone. The Indians who have left their roots to earn a living in Burma have in the process given up shackles of an orthodox life. They have accepted and befriended their fellow beings irrespective of their caste. Srikanta witnesses the inter-caste friendships in Burma and applauds the positive change. Here the Indians are not threatened by social ostracism and the concepts of purity and pollution do not hinder their social interactions. Srikanta witnesses how a group of Indians maintain their friendship with a man who lied about his caste in order to save him from guilt:

The man went his way leaving me wondering at the psyche of the expatriate Hindu. How could a land like ours, in which even the educated upper class devoted itself almost exclusively to seeking out the weaknesses of others, produce men like Karmakar and his fellows--men who were liberal enough to forgive an errant colleague for robbing them of their caste, and sensitive enough to empathize with his shame and sorrow? The secret lay, no doubt, in their movement away from the stagnant cesspools of their native villages and their efforts to build a future in a land where caste is unknown. Mental mobility is the natural sequel of physical mobility and together they could be the making of our people. (353)

This change in the outlook of the expatriates shows that orthodox rules are not eternal and mental mobility is possible in the right social and cultural conditions. According to Shibdas Ghosh, "Sarat Chandra wanted to rouse a strong urge for social revolution by generating pain, anguish and a feeling of want in the minds of the readers--leading to a yearning for higher values of life. He did not deceive himself, nor did he confuse others with hollow and tall talks

of social revolution” (284). In Burma, all Indians are outsiders and this displacement creates an ambivalent attitude towards their fellow beings. New friendships are formed based on memories of the homeland. The agony resulting from migration demolishes the artificial barriers of caste and makes them realize the value of human friendships in a foreign land.

Money in Burma is the source of power and the concept of a combined hand reflects the power of money in a foreign land and again symbolizes the flexible nature of caste:

Combined hands are men who combine cooking and serving food with every other kind of menial chore. They are generally found among Brahmins from northern India who, though rabidly caste-conscious in their native village, display a remarkable flexibility in Burma. For an extra rupee or two the purest of pure Dwivedi and Chaturvedi cooks will undertake to clean dirty utensils, wipe floors, prepare hookahs and polish the shoes of their low-caste masters, for if there is one thing they cannot resist, it is the lure of filthy lucre. For them money is the most potent of purifying agents. (378)

By equating money with a purifying agent, Chatterjee is sarcastically attacking the whole concept of purity and pollution of the caste system. In a country where the identity of a Brahmin does not guarantee a position of power, the said identity can be forgotten to achieve financial goals. As Sara Mills asserts, “A Foucauldian analysis focuses more on the way that power is dispersed throughout a society in all kinds of relationships, events and activities; focusing on contingent factors enables us to examine the way that power operates” (52). The Brahmins occupy the highest position in the caste hierarchy but the greed for money makes them do the chores they will not do in a million years in their native country. They relinquish their inherited power in a land where only money guarantees power in the social arena.

The position of women in Burma is also very different from that in India. The independence of Burmese women is not seen as positive by the Indian men and they see Burmese women as unchaste. Hence, the Burmese women do not deserve the same respect. Srikanta witnesses this moral hypocrisy when he sees a young Bengali man shamelessly abandoning his Burmese wife and children and planning a return to India as a pious Hindu. His brother supports his decision and his logic is as demented as his deceit:

“Burmese women are filthy, casteless whores. She’ll catch another man before the boat leaves the harbour. The sluts eat neppi and stink to high heaven. They are not like our women, moshai. Young men must sow their wild oats. Which son of a bastard

doesn't? My brother's case is a little more complicated than normal, I admit it. But must he be made to sacrifice his future for a trifling error committed in the heat of youth? Does he not have a country and a family? Is it not more important that he returns to them, marries, begets children and becomes a respectable member of society? People get away with far more serious offenses. Some men I know have even eaten fowl when they were young and headstrong. With age and wisdom they have admitted their folly. We, as older men, should forgive and forget. Therein lies our greatness." I was so taken aback by his assumption that eating fowl was a more serious offence than exploiting an innocent girl's love and then abandoning her, that I was rendered speechless. (367)

The total disregard for the Burmese woman is symbolic of the patriarchal mindset that sees a woman as a disposable entity. The man praises Indian women but rejects his brother's Burmese wife because of her cultural difference. The caste prejudices make the choice easier and guilt free. When his wife comes to say goodbye relying on his false promise of return, he mocks her in his native language and insults her loyalty in front of a crowd. Srikanta is filled with anger and sorrow at his crude display and sees this act of deceit as a result of his orthodox upbringing. Along with all the positive effects this culture which allows the migrants freedom to forge new identities also highlights the depravity of human nature:

Such dissolution of social beliefs and customs may lead to an utter anarchy of individualism. With many of the emigrants, this was actually the case. They discarded the patterns of social behaviour to which they were accustomed at home, but built up in its place no new uniformity of conduct. The result was a relapse to a social atmosphere in which selfishness and sensual pleasure were the dominant elements. Libertinism and sexual promiscuity of every type was the order rather than the exception. Double standards of life and morality were maintained side by side. The emigrant looked forward to the day when he would return home and resume the social conventions he had left behind. In the meantime his only objective was pleasure unhampered by any moral considerations. In *Srikanta*, Chatterjee paints a scathing picture of such moral hypocrisy. (Kabir 23)

The cultural gap and patriarchal orthodoxy combine to negate the exploitation of the Burmese woman and the young man easily chooses the protection of his own social status.

The narrative of Abhaya and Rohini restores our faith in relationships surviving in an open environment. Srikanta had met Abhaya on the ship and she was going to Burma to look for her husband with Rohini, a man from her village. Rohini and his love for Abhaya symbolizes the presence of true love within the patriarchal web of male privilege and a cosmopolitan culture. Rohini is a stark contrast to the young man who abandoned his Burmese wife. Rohini directs his energies to taking care of Abhaya beyond his means. When Srikanta visits them, he witnesses a lovers' quarrel between them and Abhaya asks him to look out for her husband.

Abhaya's estranged husband is a male chauvinist and is undeserving of a woman like Abhaya. Srikanta meets Abhaya's husband a little later as an accused in a theft case. He is repulsed by the man and sees a shocking contrast in the personalities of the estranged husband and wife: "I had been reared in a tradition that exhorted a woman to revere her husband as her God. But, try as I would, I couldn't bear to think of Abhaya in connection with this animal. Abhaya, whatever she may have done, was sensitive and refined and this creature looked and behaved like a buffalo that had strayed in from some tropical swamp of innermost Burma" (359). He proves his description true when he lies about his wife Abhaya and accuses her of adultery. Srikanta is disgusted with his lies and asks him to get a letter from Abhaya of his innocence and he might be able to retain his job. His hypocrisy is revealed when he changes his verdict about Abhaya the next time he meets Srikanta and agrees to reinstate Abhaya as his wife.

Rohini symbolizes the face of true love and when Srikanta visits him to check on him, he is pained to see his pitiable condition: "A machine needs fuel, I thought sadly. It cannot run on water. I repeated my offer of taking him to Da Thakur's hotel but he refused. I realized that he couldn't bear the thought of breaking up the household he and Abhaya had built together. Not that he cherished any hope of things ever being as they had been. He stayed on only for the sake of the memories that breathed all around him for they, alone, could sustain him and keep him whole--painful though they were. To leave these protecting walls would be, for him, equal to embracing annihilation" (365). Rohini's refusal to go to a hotel symbolizes his yearning for memories that he and Abhaya had created. This house was made into a home by them and he cannot bear to lose this identity and displace himself further. Unlike Abhaya's husband, it is Rohini who had given Abhaya the honour and prestige of a wife and is unwilling to break away from the remnants of their domestic bliss. When Srikanta visits Rohini's house again after a few days, it is Abhaya who opens the door. Abhaya has broken

away from her wedded husband and has come back to the man she loves. Srikanta is shocked by this change and is about to leave when he realizes his mistake of judging Abhaya: “I cannot leave Abhaya--not this way. I have no right to humiliate her. So many do’s and don’ts are ingrained in us from childhood. What are they truly worth? Who has the right to sit on judgement over another human being? Not I certainly. Not you. Not even God” (370). Srikanta had seen the incompatibility between Abhaya and her brutish husband and stays back to show respect to Abhaya and her decision.

“Abhaya represents the forces of instinct and revolt by completely breaking away from the influence of the dead past. She embodies the spirit of freedom against social conventions” (Madan 40). She blames it on her traditional upbringing and shows him the wounds rewarded to her by her husband for her wifely devotion. She had been treated like a disposable thing but she refused to be disposed off like garbage. She has rejected her hollow social status of a wife and has come back to the man who treats her like a wife deserves to be treated. Srikanta agrees to her decision of leaving such a brutish man and yet ends his approval with a “but” that shows his patriarchal doubt about her action. Abhaya is a personification of an intelligent and bold woman and she dismantles this ‘but’ with fierce logic:

That is just what I want you to explain--that ‘but’ which stands in the way of all rational thinking. May my husband live happily with his Burmese wife. I grudge him nothing. Only one question, Srikanta Babu! Do vedic mantras have the power to command a wife’s loyalty, even after her husband has stripped her of all her rights and drives her away by brute force into the streets? Rights and duties are inextricably linked, Srikanta Babu. There can be no question of one without the other. My husband took the marriage vows, as I did, but they have played no part in shaping his needs and desires. They are no more to him than a piece of rhetoric, uttered in an idle moment, to be blown away at will. Yet these same vows bind me to him with iron fetters simply because I’m a woman. You said you did not blame me for coming away and added a ‘but.’ Were you trying to tell me that it is my duty to atone for my husband’s sins by voluntarily embracing a death-in-life? Why? Because once, long ago when I was still a child, I had involuntarily pronounced some words of which I knew not the meaning? Are those words, uttered in ignorance, all that is true and meaningful in my life? And the terrible injustices and affliction that has been heaped on my head--are they of no consequences? I am deprived of my rights as a wife and a mother. I am denied my legitimate place in society. Love, laughter and joy are not for

me. Simply because I had the misfortune of being chained in a wedlock to a selfish, brutal, loathsome creature? And am I to be denied my womanhood because such an animal would have none of me? In no society other than the Hindu is the woman so crushed and crippled. (372)

Abhaya is unapologetic about her decision and blames the society for its unjust and unequal rules. “In his novels, Sarat Chandra demonstrates that the norms of sexual morality cannot be applied to every situation: an extra-marital relationship may be more gratifying than marriage while an incompatible marriage may oblige a woman to disregard her pativratiya. In Srikanta, Abhaya leaves her cruel and depraved husband to live with a man who loves and needs her, boldly declaring that their relationship is in accordance with the principles of truth and humanity” (Sogani 98). Abhaya challenges the varying rules of sexual morality prescribed for men and women and claims freedom from a claustrophobic marriage. She asserts her right to be happy in marriage and questions the judgemental male gaze of Srikanta. She wants to restore the balance between rights and duties and contests her husband’s right over her in the absence of him fulfilling his duty:

Abhaya could take that decision and resolved to make a meaningful beginning out of their dismal existence in an unfamiliar locale. The unfamiliar surroundings are clearly a metaphor for the setting up of a new life, unbounded by the familiar social inhibitions; here Abhaya could truly seek out a new identity. (Mukhia 95)

The space and location of an individual creates his/her identity defined by social and cultural factors. Chatterjee displays the dynamic nature of caste and personal identities which are otherwise rigid in their native location. Thus, this ‘exile’ to Burma opens new avenues for Indians to earn their livelihood but also expects them to leave their past behind and embrace the new culture with an open mind. The embracing of a new identity symbolizes the ambiguity inherent in social identities and how displacement challenges the orthodox values to destabilize power structures.

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