

## THREE WOMEN WRITERS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY: NIRUPAMA, ANURUPA AND SARATKUMARI

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### ABSTRACT

*This article explores the lives and literary contributions of three prominent 19th-century Bengali women writers: Nirupama, Anurupa, and Sarat Kumari. Through their poignant narratives, these women writers challenged societal norms, advocated for women's rights, and explored themes of love, identity, and human relationships. Their works reveal a deep understanding of human emotions, the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, and the complexities of tradition and culture. Nirupama's writing is marked by simplicity, humility, and emotional depth, while Anurupa's works showcase her intellectual curiosity and advocacy for women's empowerment. Sarat Kumari's writing, characterized by empathy and objectivity, offers a nuanced analysis of women's status in society. This article highlights their unique perspectives, themes, and writing styles, underscoring their significance in the Indian literary canon and their enduring impact on Bengali literature. Their contributions continue to inspire and influence writers, particularly women writers, to this day.*

**KEYWORDS:** Nirupama, Anurupa, Sarat Kumari, Women Writers, 19th Century Bengali Literature

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### INTRODUCTION

In the twilight of the 19th century, when the Indian subcontinent was still reeling under the rigid structures of a patriarchal society, three extraordinary women - Nirupama, Anurupa, and Sarat Kumari - dared to raise their voices, challenging the status quo and leaving an indelible mark on Bengali literature. Through their poignant narratives, they exposed the stark realities of women's lives, explored the complexities of human relationships, and advocated for the emancipation of women from the shackles of societal expectations. This essay will delve into the lives and works of these three pioneering women writers, examining their unique contributions to the literary landscape of Bengal and their enduring impact on Indian society. By exploring their writing, we gain insight into the struggles and triumphs of women in 19th-century India, and the ways in which they navigated the complexities of tradition, culture, and identity.

### DISCUSSION

"Nirupama's writing must be considered good from many angles. It is simple, straightforward, and humble." This acknowledgement of Nirupama Devi's writing skills came from the pen of a prominent personality of the time, whose stature in fiction was unchallenged. He was Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Sarat Chandra wrote a critical essay titled

"Narir Lekha"<sup>[1]</sup>(Women's Writing), although he wrote it under the pseudonym Anila Devi. In it, he made some adverse comments about the obscurity of the writing of Amodini Ghosh Jaya and Anurupa Devi. Yet, in the same essay, he mentioned Nirupama Devi's writing with the utmost brevity and serenity. The same Sarat Chandra, who had once pointed out a few inconsistencies in "Annapurnar Mandir"<sup>[2]</sup> with a critic's detachment and a lot of affection, had Nirupama Devi as his ardent reader. Saurindra Mohan Mukhopadhyay, in his book "Sarat Chandra's Life and Mystery," mentioned his own name as a reader of Sarat Chandra's works and introduced two other devoted readers of the author, one of whom was Nirupama Devi, and the other was Nirupama's brother Putu or Bibhutibhushan Bhatta.

Bibhutibhushan Bhatta was a prominent figure in the Bengali literary circle of Bhagalpur. He was Nirupama's guardian, as her father, Nafar Chandra Bhatta, a sub-judge in Bhagalpur, had passed away in 1907. Nirupama Devi had been living in her paternal home since before her father's death, due to her premature widowhood, as per the common practice of the time. Bibhuti Bhatta was considered an "exception" in the orthodox Bhatta family.

"In the Bhatta household, I lit a lamp, and the recently widowed 'Buri' (Nirupama) found her way through it," he said. Alongside her interest in religion and philosophy, Nirupama developed a love for literature within the confines of her family. She was also associated with the handwritten literary magazine of Bhagalpur. This passion for literature inspired her to write novels and stories.

Nirupama was an avid reader of Sarat Chandra's fiction and had recorded her thoughts on some of his prominent female characters in her diary, as revealed by her niece, Kamala Devi. According to Kamala Devi, Nirupama had written about characters like 'Madhuri' from "Boro Didi",<sup>[3]</sup> 'Hem' from "Path Niradesh"<sup>[4]</sup> and 'Aparna' from "Mandir"<sup>[5]</sup>. Notably, the characters she chose were all premature widows, and their widowhood complicated the plot of the novels, which explored the eternal problem of human heart and emotions.

We recall the heartrending cry of a female character in Nirupama's own novel: "Go, you go, why did you say all this, why did you come? I won't listen anymore, you go." The character Uma, from Nirupama's novel "Didi",<sup>[6]</sup> is trembling with fear from head to toe. It's as if the ground beneath her feet is slipping away in a sudden catastrophe, and this rejection is a manifestation of that feeling. A man (Prakash) had suddenly brought a glimmer of hope into her life, which had in a moment erased all her smiles, replaced by fear. Her ingrained cultural conditioning and unspecified anxieties made her withdraw in that instant. Yet, even in that rejection, she felt a sudden pang of pain and longing in her heart. In spite of being a widow, she found herself bound by an inexplicable attachment to that very man. But in the Bengal of nineteenth century, modern in spirit, yet burdened by age-old customs, Hindu widows lived beneath the weight of social taboos and silent oppression. They were denied the freedom to love, and the right to remarry was a privilege forever withheld. So, to hide her own hurt, Uma buried her face in the ground, and in that moment, she was consumed by self-torment, fervently praying to God, "Lord, why has this happened to me? Make me well, Lord." In her silent torment she prayed her God " Save me from sin. Why has my heart been so unquiet today? "

In the novel, there is a character named Surama, who represents the epitome of societal norms, believing that a widow's love is a heinous sin. She punishes Prakash for awakening the seeds of sin in the "pure heart" of a young widow, Uma. When Prakash tries to meet Uma, she breaks down in tears, saying, "I don't want to meet him." The societal fear suffocates the natural desire for life, and the pain remains hidden beneath tears.

This brings to mind a relevant fact mentioned in Radharani Devi's book, "Sarat Chandra, The Human and the Artist"<sup>[7]</sup> (This article doesn't aim to touch upon Nirupama Devi's personal life, but it's necessary to mention a particular

incident, as it holds a mystery about the writer's personality.) Sarat Chandra himself mentioned to Radharani Devi a specific letter that influenced his writing and personal life: "Don't come here again. Don't ruin me like this." This letter, written by Nirupama Devi, haunted Sarat Chandra throughout his life, and its message prevented the widowed heroines of his novels from finding love.

The phrase, "I beg you, Rameshda, don't ruin me in every way. You go," from the novel "Palli Samaj,"<sup>[8]</sup> echoes in the words of those characters that Nirupama Devi had noted in her diary. Later, the same phrase is uttered by Uma in her own novel. It suggests that the writer's own moral code, shaped by societal norms, is reflected in the character of Surama.

By hinting at a woman's, especially a widow's, natural desire for love and dreams of building a life, Nirupama has drawn a boundary of social norms by creating characters like Surma who oppose it. However, she can't be blamed for this, as it was impossible for her to uproot the deep-seated notions of 'good' and 'bad' prevalent in orthodox Hindu families at the time. Within that societal structure, she couldn't indicate a path in her writing that would risk her personal reputation amidst adverse criticism. Perhaps that's why Surama, who allows Uma to braid her hair and wear jewellery, doesn't permit her to wear the flowers sent by Prakash, saying, "Widows shouldn't wear flowers, Uma, don't wear them."

However, the character of Sati in "Annapurnar Mandir" should be considered in this context. Her marriage was a mere farce, like many girls of that time, followed by widowhood. Vishweshwar had awakened a secret longing for life in Sati, but she didn't express it while alive. The letter discovered after her suicide revealed her deep, hidden feelings centered around Vishweshwar. This shows that Nirupama actually believed that love is natural in a widow's life, but she couldn't establish the natural expression or outcome of that love, keeping in mind the unsympathetic society. The story "Pather Kahini" also comes to mind, where Nirupama Devi has freed herself from the bondage of social

In this story, we see the wife distancing herself from her abusive husband; when she visits him after a long time, she's dressed as a widow. The wife considers the abusive husband "dead" to her own mind. We see this courage in valuing a woman's self-respect in Nirupama's writing.

In Sarat Chandra's novel "Palli Samaj," Rama was taken to Kashi by Vishweshwari; there was no other way for her to distance herself from Ramesh. Uma, from Nirupama's novel "Didi," also went to Kashi with Surama, although she later returned. Nirupama herself took refuge in Vrindavan. Perhaps, the pain of deprivation and some hidden, private emotions in the life of the strong-willed, creative Nirupama led her to seek refuge in Vrindavan, keeping them unexpressed.

Anurupa Devi (1882-1958) was recognized with the Kuntalin Award, announced by Hemendra Nath Basu. Established in 1896, this award for Bengali stories was perhaps initially intended to promote commercial products. However, it inspired many stories that enriched Bengali literature. Even Rabindranath Tagore was drawn to this story competition, which included prominent writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay, as well as several women writers among its successful contestants.

The introduction to the 1903 collection of these stories noted, "It's a great pleasure that women, despite being confined to the inner quarters, have competed with male writers and secured most of the fifteen awards, except two."<sup>[9]</sup> Anurupa Devi was one of these story writers. The emphasis on women writers competing alongside men, highlights the prevailing notion that writers were primarily men. The idea that men had priority in intellectual pursuits was taken for granted in society.

Despite this atmosphere, writers like Anurupa Devi established themselves. Evidence of this can be found in her books "Sahitye Nari: Shrastri and Srishti"<sup>[10]</sup> (Women Writers) and "Sahitya O Samaj," as well as her novels. However, male critics have often mocked her intellectual pursuits. Dr. Sukumar Sen, for instance, wrote in his "History of Bengali Literature,"<sup>[11]</sup> that, "The writer couldn't forget, while writing novels, that she was the granddaughter of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay."

Anurupa inherited the intellectual legacy of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, a prominent figure of the 19th-century Bengali Renaissance. Perhaps unable to accept the notion of men's priority in intellectual pursuits, Anurupa had a desire to express her knowledge through her writing.

However, in literature, it's the depth of emotion and the ability to transcend to the realm of aesthetics that determine its excellence, not knowledge or factual reasoning. Yet, Anurupa Devi's writing prioritizes knowledge and facts, which often fails to evoke a deep response from readers. Sarat Chandra, writing under the pseudonym Anila Devi, once commented on Anurupa's novel "Poshyaputra," saying, "The book is knowledge-intensive... The spirit of showcasing her vast learning, despite being a woman confined to the inner quarters, is reprehensible."

As a novelist, Anurupa Devi may not be considered a major talent. However, her desire for self-expression has its own value. In a time when women's worlds were limited to the home and immediate surroundings, her mind yearned to explore the vast realm of knowledge, and she wanted to express this world through her writing. This is no small feat, considering the societal context.

Anurupa sought to combine intellect and emotion in her writing. In "Panchabhoot"<sup>[12]</sup>, Rabindranath wrote that the realm of the heart is where women excel. This is where we see the expression of human emotions like affection, love, and compassion. Ultimately, women tend to view life through the lens of love.

Anurupa Devi's novels also focus on human relationships, but she was keenly aware of the social moral standards that govern these relationships. Her novels emphasize selflessness and concern for the greater good, along with her devotion to God. Unlike Bankim Chandra, who drew inspiration from Western utilitarian philosophy, Anurupa's love for ancient India taught her to love humanity. She was also critical of European civilization, which she saw as antithetical to Indian society.

The writer seems to have sought to explore Indian identity through her works, which is why her novels are replete with scenes of worship and depictions of wise Brahmins. Her female characters are immersed in this spiritual atmosphere. However, this spiritual and religious context hasn't always been conducive to her novels. In works like "Jyotihara"<sup>[13]</sup>, this ideal of spirituality sometimes creates confusion. The bonding between Yamini and Anima is more driven by ideals than romance. This spiritual and altruistic ideal gradually distances the characters from their natural, flesh-and-blood selves.

Yet, Anurupa Devi couldn't escape the pull of this spiritual realm or the transcendent aura that goes beyond worldly life. Even in her novel "Ma," a tone emerges that, while connected to worldly life, somehow transcends it. The word "Ma" (mother) is tied to our very being, evoking the concept of an all-enduring, eternal woman. The novel's protagonist, Brajrani, achieves this motherhood at great cost. Her husband's lack of love and her own childlessness complicate her life, leaving her without a stable foothold in her marital home. When she finally finds it, she becomes "Ma." Beyond her social identity as a stepmother, Brajrani ultimately reaches an ideal realm where she embodies love and affection, becoming the epitome of "Ma." This novel is Anurupa's masterpiece, as it captures the timeless human emotion

of motherly love.

Anurupa's other heroines also seek peace through great struggles and hardships. Women who once suffered in complex relationships later find peace through those very complexities, albeit with much pain. The character of Dhira in "Mahanisha" is a slightly different example. Dhira is blind, and her husband Nirmal is indifferent to her, being enamored with another woman. When Nirmal later realizes his mistake and returns to Dhira, she has already distanced herself. Her refined sensitivity prevents her from accepting Nirmal's belated kindness. This is where Anurupa's novels establish the independence and self-respect of women.

However, Anurupa Devi's writing wasn't limited to social or personal problem-centric novels. She also wrote two historical novels, "Ramgarh" and "Triveni." Her curiosity even extended to politics, as evident in her novel "Pathhara." Additionally, she penned two plays, "Bidyaratna" and "Kumari Bhatta," showcasing her versatility as a writer.

Through her writing, Anurupa Devi and women like her sought to establish their identity and find a sense of self-expression. While the ideals and values reflected in their work may differ from those of the 21st century, it doesn't diminish the significance of their desire for self-expression and the value they brought to the literary world.

Sarat Kumari Chowdhurani (1861-1923) was older than both Nirupama Devi and Anurupa Devi. Born in 1861, she was a contemporary of Rabindranath Tagore, who praised her writing. In the July 1906 issue of "Bangadarshan," Rabindranath reviewed her story "Shubhabibaha," saying he hadn't seen such a "vivid, true-to-life picture" in any other Bengali story. However, the story didn't bear Sarat Kumari's name, leading Rabindranath to attribute it to a "woman's writing."

In her personal life, Sarat Kumari was closely associated with the Tagore family<sup>[14]</sup>, being the wife of Akshay Chandra Chowdhury. Encouraged by her husband and driven by her own passion, she sought to express her creativity through literature. In a time when women were confined to the inner quarters, she chose to write about women's lives, highlighting their near-valueless status in society and family, and exploring possibilities of liberation.

When Sarat Kumari Chowdhurani, educated at Bethune College, took up her pen to advocate for women's liberation, a space for such ideas had already begun to emerge in Bengal. Since the early 19th century, various forms of women's oppression had been depicted in Bengali literature. On one hand, social movements sought to explore possibilities for women's liberation, led by figures like Ram Mohan Roy and his "Atmiya Sabha," Derozio and the "Young Bengal" movement, and Vidyasagar's multifaceted efforts.

Literature also reflected attempts to recognize women's value. Whether through social movements or literature, 19th-century visionary men played a key role in establishing women's dignity. Consequently, women's liberation in literature was often seen as a force conducive to men's self-development.

It's worth noting that the heroic figure of Pramila in Madhusudan Dutt's "Meghnad Badh Kavya" loses some of its luster due to her excessive pride and arrogance.

When Pramila in Meghnad Badh Kavya boasts of her bravery, saying that Ravana is her father-in-law and Meghnad her husband, so why should she fear the penniless Ram, her words reveal an arrogance that suggests her bravery is rooted in her husband's and father-in-law's prowess. This implies that women hadn't yet learned to assert their own identity beyond the patriarchal framework. It's not unusual for male writers to struggle to capture women's independence, given the societal context.

The significance of 19th-century women writers lies in their ability to express women's lives through their own perspectives. Sarat Kumari Chowdhurani's writing offers a nuanced analysis of women's status in society, marked by empathy and objectivity. She identifies the patriarchal society as the primary obstacle to women's rights, noting that "if men aren't civilized, what can women do? We can't blame them alone." In her first published essay, "Calcutta's Women's Society,"<sup>[15]</sup> she expresses this frustration, criticizing selfish, opportunistic men who exploit women.

However, Sarat Kumari isn't a misandrist; her characters, like Ganesh or Bijoy in "Shubhabibaha"<sup>[16]</sup> and Harish Babu in "Yautuk"<sup>[17]</sup> demonstrate this. She highlights the flaws in the institution of marriage, which often leads to men's heartlessness and women's helplessness. As a woman writer, she intimately understands the indignities women face in Bengali society due to marriage customs, where the relationship between two families is often determined by dowry amounts, as seen in "Yautuk" and echoed in "Kanyaday" and "Shubhabibaha."

In the story "Shubhabibaha," the groom's family's financial demands crash down on the bride's family like a violent storm just before the wedding. This brings to mind Rabindranath Tagore's stories "Denapaona" and "Haimanti." Many Bengali stories have addressed this issue, but Tagore's focus on the bride's suffering in her in-laws' home after marriage. In contrast, Sarat Kumari Chowdhurani's story identifies a solution to this dowry problem and empowers women to resist.

In "Shubhabibaha," the bride's father is the first to protest, boldly telling the groom's family that handing over his daughter would lead to a miserable life for her. He rejects the greedy groom at the last minute. In "Yautuk," the bride, Manorama, protests against her husband and father-in-law.

In "Shubhabibaha," when the bride's father rejects the groom, the female narrator saves the situation by offering her own son as the groom. The resulting marriage, facilitated by the generosity of Bijoy and his mother, is truly "Shubhabibaha" (a blessed marriage).

In a patriarchal society, Sarat Kumari Chowdhurani realized from her surroundings that a daughter's birth is a nightmare for parents. In her story, a guardian sends his second daughter to her in-laws, invoking Goddess Durga's name, but still fears and hears the sound of the goddess's farewell ritual, wondering why daughters are born. In medieval and 19th-century India, girls were born to suffer. No conch shell sounds with joy at a daughter's birth; the father's heart turns to stone, worrying about dowry and her happiness. The mother often feels guilty for giving birth to a daughter.

In a 1891 essay, Sarat Kumari depicted this societal reality, where a daughter's death doesn't evoke as much grief as a son's, with everyone frantically trying to save the male child, as seen in her piece "Adorer naAnadorer." Her writing exposes the family's and society's disdain for women, highlighting that women had no value except as bearers of male heirs, as evident in her story where a woman sarcastically remarks, "The bride is cherished only for preserving the lineage; otherwise, she's just a burden."

However, Sarat Kumari believed that women must assert their dignity and rights through their own strength, as patriarchal society wouldn't grant them. In essays like "StriShiksha" and "Dosh Paribar," she urged women to transcend societal limitations and seek broader horizons through education, claiming their rightful place. Women's lives are central to her writing, focusing on liberation rather than conventional romance or reunion narratives. Her work is characterized by a quest for women's freedom, set against the backdrop of her time and place, aiming to spread self-reliant personality to every Indian woman's life.

## CONCLUSION

These three women writers wrote during a period when, despite the so-called Bengal Renaissance, patriarchal pressures and oppression continued to dominate women's lives in families and society. While many male writers of the time spoke out against these injustices, the pain and the struggles of women, were more credibly captured by women writers themselves. Nirupama-Anurupa and Saratkumari sensitively portrayed the various layers of suffering endured by ordinary bengali women of their time. Their writing also conveys the message that women must find their own value in society and fight for the right to live with dignity and self-respect. Tounderst and the struggles for rights of women in the nineteenth century, it is essential to read the works of Nirupama-Anurupa and Saratkumari.

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