





Research Article

Silent Strength and Subversive Acts: Feminist Interpretation of *Pather Dabi* (*The Right of Way*)

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Abstract

This research item delivers a feminist interpretation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Pather Dabi* (*The Right of Way*), examining the subtle but powerful forms of resistance embodied by its female characters within the context of colonial Bengal. This article aims to analyze characters like Bharati and Sumitra's journey in colonial India through their silent strength and subversive acts. The research shows that these women move forward to complex social and political landscapes, contributing significantly to revolutionary movements. Bharati's intellectual prowess and strategic silences, juxtaposed with Sumitra's behind-the-scenes activism, exemplify diverse modes of female empowerment and defiance. This paper explores the evolution of feminist ideas in Colonial India, illustrating traditional Indian society and Western ideologies converging to redefine women's roles. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender dynamics in early 20th-century Indian fiction, arguing that Chattopadhyay's sophisticated portrayal of women rises above conventional narratives of victimhood. By putting forward these often-overlooked aspects of *Pather Dabi* (*The Right of Way*), we propose a new framework for understanding female influence in colonial-era Bengali literature, one that recognizes the power of quiet rebellion and the lasting impact of women's contributions to social change.

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1. Introduction

In the shadow of revolution, whispers can be as powerful as shouts. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, originally published in 1926, and later translated by Prasenjit Mukharjee in 2017, has long been celebrated for its portrayal of political upheaval in colonial India. Hidden within its pages lies a subtler, equally profound narrative; the quiet rebellion of its female characters. Bharati and Sumitra wielded silence as a weapon and found strength in subtlety. They fought not with guns but with whispered words, strategic silences, and small acts of defiance. These women tread through a patriarchal world with grace and cunning and march for the revolutionary movement. Although, their resilience never reaches the limelight.

This study has followed a qualitative research approach, employing descriptive and explanatory methods to elucidate the topics at hand. It aims to examine and expound upon thought and human experiences within the textual context. To identify new ideas and views and provide logical explanations about the subject under discussion, this study has been undertaken via a logical interpretation and analysis of the material currently accessible from both primary and secondary sources. By adopting a qualitative methodology, this study seeks to probe the intricate layers of meaning immersed within Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, through the feminist critique. The primary source was the novel by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and secondary sources contain books, journal articles, newspaper articles, websites, etc.

A feminist interpretation of *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)* illustrates the nature of resistance itself. In exploring the ornate ways, Bharati and Sumitra assert their agency and a form of feminism that transcends cultural boundaries and historical periods.

Theoretical Framework

The feminist interpretation in Colonial India emerges as an excellent narrative, combined with the socio-political unrest and the burgeoning nationalist movements of the era. This paper depicts the evolution of feminist ideas during colonial rule, examining its roots in traditional Indian society and its transformation under the influence of Western ideologies. The synthesis of these diverse elements sought to redefine the role of women in Indian society, challenging both colonial and indigenous patriarchal structures.

The period of British colonial rule in India was marked by significant socio-cultural and political transformations. During which, the feminist movement began to take shape, influenced by both indigenous traditions and Western feminist ideologies. Colonial India was characterized by a rigid patriarchal society where women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere. The arrival of the British and the subsequent exposure to Western education and ideologies brought about a gradual change. Reformist movements, such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, began advocating for women's education and emancipation, laying the groundwork for the future. The influence of Western feminist ideas was instrumental in shaping early feminist interpretation in Colonial India. Educated Indian women, exposed to the writings of Western feminists, began to articulate their aspirations for equality and justice. Concurrently, indigenous reform movements sought to address issues such as child marriage, sati, and widow remarriage. Prominent leaders

like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar pioneered these movements, highlighting the need for social reform to improve women's status.

The feminist movement in Colonial India was sped up by the contributions of several pioneering women. Figures such as Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, and Kamini Roy played crucial roles in advocating for women's rights and education. Sarojini Naidu, a prominent nationalist leader, seamlessly blended feminist concerns with the broader struggle for India's independence, emphasizing the need for women's active participation in the freedom movement. The literary and cultural landscape of Colonial India also witnessed the emergence of feminist themes. Writers like Toru Dutt and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain used their literary prowess to criticize the patriarchal norms of their time. Rokeya's influential work, *Sultana's Dream* (1905), envisioned a utopian society where women ruled and men were confined to domestic chores, offering a radical critique of gender roles. These literary expressions provided a voice to women's aspirations and challenged the prevailing societal norms.

The intersection of nationalism and feminism during the colonial period added another layer of complexity to the feminist discussions. The nationalist movement, while primarily focused on political independence, also provided a platform for addressing women's issues. This intersection was not without its tensions. The nationalist leadership often prioritized the struggle for independence over women's rights, leading to debates and negotiations within the movement. Although there were challenges, many women leaders successfully integrated feminist concerns into the nationalist agenda, advocating for a more inclusive vision of freedom.

2. Literature Review

The topic of female empowerment and resistance has been explored extensively in literature and academia. Various scholars have examined how female characters in literature subvert traditional gender roles and assert their agency through both overt and subtle means.

One prominent area of study has been the concept of "silent strength" or "quiet defiance" exhibited by female characters. Scholars such as Mary Lou Ratte, analyzed the depiction of female agency and subjectivity in works of Bengali literature in her scholarly article titled "The Lotus and the Violet: Attitudes toward Womanhood in Bengal, 1792-1854" (1977). While not specific to *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, (2017), activists like Kumari Jayawardena's influential work *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986), provides a theoretical framework for understanding the intersection of feminist and nationalist movements in colonial contexts. The intersectionality of gender and other identity markers, such as caste and colonial misogyny, has also been a subject of critical examination. Author Radha Kumar raises important issues about the women's movement in India and the kind of issues the movement has taken up, such as *satidaha*, child marriage, domestic violence, remarriage, girl education, rape, dowries, women in politics, health and environmental destruction as well as the directions and perspective it has taken, in his book *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*, (1993). Indrani Chatterjee's research article "Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India, c. 1820-1930" analyzes the representations of gender and power in colonial literature that offers relevant insights for interpreting *Pather Dabi (The Right of*

Way). Similarly, the affinity with the patriarchal and caste-conscious ethos of contemporary Indian society has been discussed with the ambivalence in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's approach towards the prevalent caste system, social norms, and Victorian morality in colonial India in Narasingha Sil's scholarly article "Sharatchandra's "Caste and Gender Consciousness: A Reassessment" (2015). In a more recent study, author Dr. Farzana Nasrin's scholarly article titled "Exploring the Depiction of Women in Bengal in the Novels of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee: Patriarchy in Bengali Society" (2023), bring forward women's intelligence and emotions, cruel practice of child marriage and its aftermath. Researchers like Madhumita Purkayastha analyzes the representation of "educated", "liberal" middle-class Bengali women in her paper titled "Cultural Relativism and Feminist Discourse in Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Fiction vis-à-vis his Concepts on the 'Worth of Women" (2013). According to Roy (2020), his article *An Insight into Sarat Chandra's Depiction of Dynamic Women* in the Daily Sun provides an analysis of how Chattopadhyay fueled women's inherent desire to slide out of the slough of despond. He exposed the sham values and double standards of a society that set different codes of conduct for men and women and a culture that glorified sacrifice and chastity only on the part of women. Overall, the existing literature on the feminist interpretation of *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*, (2017) presents a rich understanding of the novel's engagement with gender, power, and resistance. This research item's goal is to contribute to scholarly discourse on feminist themes in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)* through the optics of female characters asserting strength through silence and subtle resistance, the subversive actions they undertake to challenge societal norms, and the gendered dynamics depicted within colonial Bengal's socio-cultural context and its impact on women's experiences.

3. Discussion

At the heart of this work lies the character of Bharati, who emerges as a compelling representation of silent strength and subversive action. Bharati's silent strength is evident in her unwavering commitment to her principles.

Bharati had received her education from Christian missionaries. She had herself seen the nobleness of many of them. (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 286).

As a woman in a patriarchal society, she is expected to conform to traditional roles and expectations. Bharati defies these constraints through her actions rather than overt rebellion. Her quiet determination to pursue education and intellectual growth stands as a testament to her inner fortitude in Chapter 26. This pursuit of knowledge, often conducted in private, becomes a form of resistance against the limitations imposed upon her for her gender. Her intellectual brilliance can be seen in every suggestion she provides. One stark instance is in Chapter 11:

Tomorrow is a Sunday. So nothing can be done. But the day after you should go to the court at noon. You'll get your money and articles back. Be sure they don't cheat you. (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 116).

The subversive nature of Bharati's character is particularly noteworthy in her interactions with the novel's male characters. Bharati's ability to deal with complex social situations without compromising her integrity showcases her adeptness at subverting expectations

Do you really feel for the suffering of men, Apurbababu?' asked Bharati. 'Is there really no objection in someone's touch? Doesn't the air of one's room become polluted by the presence of another person?' (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 118).

In this excerpt from Chapter 11, Bharati's questions to Apurba plunge into both societal empathy and personal boundaries. Her inquiry about Apurba's empathy for the suffering of others is her attempt to probe into his moral compass and compassion, indicating her own strong sense of social justice and concern for human welfare. Bharati's reflection on the intrusion of another person's presence into one's personal space reveals her contemplation on the nuances of privacy and autonomy. These questions depict Bharati's intellectual depth, sensitivity, her introspective nature, and critical engagement with the world around her.

What sort of a person are you? Don't you know it's impolite to inquire about one's salary? Isn't it insulting to the other person? (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 116).

Bharati's response here in Chapter 11 reflects a powerful act of subversion. By suppressing a smile and responding gravely, she maintains her composure and dignity, maintaining her self-respect and awareness of social etiquette. Her rhetorical question, pointing out the impoliteness and insult inherent in such an inquiry, gently but firmly reprimands the other person for overstepping boundaries. This act of subversion lies in Bharati's ability to assert herself and stand against inappropriate behavior without overt confrontation. It shows her strength and intelligence, demonstrating her capacity to redefine and resist societal norms that attempt to undermine her autonomy and self-worth.

But will the risk be less if they're confined indoors? The fault lies not in their venturing out but with God, who created men and women, created mutual attraction between them. Apurbababu, see for yourself what's happening in other countries (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 126).

In this passage from Chapter 11, Bharati challenges the notion that women's safety can be ensured by confining them indoors, arguing that the real issue lies not in women's behavior but in the natural attraction between men and women, which was created by God. She critiques the restrictive societal norms that blame women for this natural attraction and restrict their freedom as a solution. By referencing the similar issues faced by other countries, Bharati broadens the scope of the problem by bringing to light that it is a universal concern rather than one that can be resolved by limiting women's autonomy. She tried to redefine women's role to Apurba, converging traditional Indian society and Western ideologies. Here, she accentuates her belief in women's right to freedom and mobility, advocating for gender equality and challenging patriarchal structures that seek to control women under the guise of protection. This passage highlights Bharati's subversive stance and her determination to assert women's independence.

Chattopadhyay's portrayal of Bharati's inner world reveals the depth of her character and the tension between her outward conformity and inner rebellion. In Chapter 11, Bharati appears as such a strong feminine force that in one whisper, Apurba stood up like a mechanical doll: "He's our doctor. You must stand up" (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 128).

This shows her inner strength as relatively powerful and not controlled by the masculine force of the society. In Chapter 17, Bharati reached out for Apurba but somehow checked herself:

Looking at his face steadily, she said in an undertone, 'Even if you've no place in the organization, there's another place from which no power on earth can remove you. (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 189)

This inner monologue brings forward Bharati's deep, unwavering emotional connection to Apurba, emphasizing the strength and resilience of personal bonds in the face of external changes or challenges. It portrays her inner conflict, self-control, silent strength, and the depth of her loyalty, leading to the belief that true connections endure beyond the vicissitudes of societal roles and organizations.

It is a contrast to her often-placid exterior, highlighting the duality of her nature and the psychological toll of maintaining such a facade. In Chapter 17: "I don't know why, but I feel afraid this time. I feel as if everything is going to break up." (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukherjee, 2017, p. 196).

Her admittance of fear and the feeling that "everything is going to break up" divulge her anxiety about an uncertain future and the potential collapse of her world, whether personal, social, or political. The strong appearance of Bharati turned into a vulnerable state, displaying her state of duality.

The novel's exploration of Bharti's involvement in political and social movements provides another layer to her subversive actions. She never was at the forefront of these movements, but her behind-the-scenes support and intellectual contributions are crucial. This clandestine participation lets Bharati shake the status quo without overtly threatening her social position, demonstrating a refined approach to activism that is both pragmatic and effective.

You're an important member of our society. If you don't go to the scene of action how'll you form an idea of our work? (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukherjee, 2017, p. 163).

Here, in Chapter 15, this passage reinforces the theme of active engagement and experiential learning as vital components of leadership. This call to action gives the idea that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient without firsthand experience.

Bharati opened her almirah, took out something and slipped it into her pocket. Apurba noticed it and asked, 'What was that?'

'A country-made pistol.'

'Pistol? What for?'

'For self-defense.'

'Do you have a license?'

'No.'

'If you're caught, it'll be the end of the road for both of us. What's the punishment for carrying un- licensed arms?'

'We won't. Come on. (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 163).

This scene from the same chapter abridges Bharati's active participation in a struggle that requires courage, strategic thinking, and a readiness to confront authorities. It also foregrounds the gravity

and intensity of the social and political movements she is engaged in, showing that her subversive actions are integral to her character and the larger narrative of resistance and liberation within the novel.

Another supporting character of the novel who is an irreplaceable cornerstone for the progression of the novel is Sumitra (original name - Roz Daud). Initially, she was a drug dealer but was rescued by Doctor Sahib while smuggling and later became the president of the *Pather Dabi* organization. Both her silent strength and subversive acts become apparent as she actively participates in political and social movements, which march forward behind the scenes that are vital to the cause, defying traditional roles assigned to women. Her active participation included logistical support such as organizing supplies and communication channels crucial for operational success, gathering and disseminating intelligence, and leveraging her social networks to obtain vital information for strategic planning. Her involvement extends to direct actions like distributing revolutionary literature, organizing meetings, and participating in protests, demonstrating her courage and dedication despite the inherent risks. In Chapter 25, Sumitra's silent strength, subversive act, strong voice, and dedication towards the revolutionary movement outshined: "If you must have the blood of a trusted comrade instead of a traitor's, take mine" (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 265). Her willingness to make personal sacrifices for the greater good strongly shows her dedication and selflessness and was carried out without seeking recognition.

As a supportive figure, Sumitra gives Bharati emotional solace and practical assistance during challenging moments. Her presence provides a source of stability and understanding, allowing Bharati to confide in her and seek counsel. Sumitra's firm support also extends to Bharati's involvement in political and social movements, where she acts as a trusted ally, aiding in logistical arrangements, communication, and moral encouragement. In Chapter 18, Sumitra helped Bharati to understand Doctor Sahib (Sabyasachi Mallick), an important member of the *Pather Dabi* organization, more precisely saying:

Remember this dreadful thing; you'll be able to understand Doctor better. This is his true image. (Chattopadhyay, trans. Chattopadhyay, 2017, p. 204).

Sumitra shared such a strong bond with Bharati that her constant search for Sumitra has been seen several times. One stark instance is in Chapter 19, where Bharati walks down to Sumitra's place and asks:

What's the matter, Hira Singh? Where's Sumitra-didi? (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 210).

In Chapter 19, Sumitra is portrayed as a trusted and insightful member of the *Pather Dabi* organization, whose opinion and agreement are sought after for the execution of their plan. Apart from the tension and potential risks involved in their actions, Sumitra remains engaged and provides a stabilizing presence within the group. Her portrayal in this scene draw attention to her dedication, intelligence, and the critical support she offers to her comrades in their shared struggle for justice and change:

But if it was your intention to enact this drama, why didn't you tell us so in the beginning?'

'It'd have been better if there'd been no necessity for it at all. However, considering the circumstances, you'll agree, Sumitra, we played our parts well. (Chattopadhyay, trans. Mukharjee, 2017, p. 218).

Bharati and Sumitra are the mirror reflection of feminine strength and subversion in early 20th-century India. Their actions, both overt and covert, show an image of resistance and colonial oppression. They were two sides of the same coin - Bharati working within societal constraints to effect change, while Sumitra operated in the shadows. This revelation re-contextualizes their entire narrative, portraying that women's resistance can take multiple forms, all contributing to a greater goal. Their combined efforts laid the groundwork for a future generation of female revolutionaries, and their legacy echoed through time.

4. Conclusion

A story much richer than it first appears is *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)*. Chattopadhyay did not just write a tale of revolution - he showed the silent strength of women like Bharati and Sumitra, who fought their own battles in a world that often ignored them. These characters are not just side notes in a man's story. They are the hidden powers, pushing back against society's rules in their own clever ways. Bharati uses her sharp mind and careful words, while Sumitra works behind the scenes, both of them changing things bit by bit. The striking point is that their struggle still feels relevant in today's world, still talking about many of the same issues - how women can make their voices heard, how they balance social expectations with their own dreams. *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)* brings it to light that progress often happens in small steps, through everyday acts of courage. In the end, *Pather Dabi (The Right of Way)* does more than just shine a light on overlooked characters. It shows a different side of early 20th-century India, where women were quietly shaping the future in their own ways. Bharati and Sumitra's silent strength and subversive acts left an indelible mark on the path of revolution. It is a powerful portrayal that revolutions do not always shout, sometimes they whisper, and those whispers can echo through history.

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