

A CONFLICT ON HOMOSEXUALITY: REFERENCE TO TILLOTTAMA MAZUMDAR'S NOVEL 'CHANDER GAYE CHAND'

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Summary:

The representation of homosexuality in Bengali literature is both ancient and contentious. Misconceptions and diverse opinions about homosexuality can be traced back to ancient mythology, where it is often depicted in varying lights—sometimes as perverse or merely a phase of youthful exploration. Since the 19th century, there has been a gradual acknowledgment of homosexuality as a distinct orientation. Tilottama Mazumdar's novel '*Chander Gaye Chand*' serves as a significant document of Bengali social evolution, particularly in its portrayal of female homosexuality, a subject previously marginalized by societal norms.

Tilottama Mazumdar's novel challenges societal constraints and confronts various stigmas associated with homosexuality. In '*Chander Gaye Chand*', the character Shruti Basu reveals the homosexual relationship between Devrupa and Shreyasi, which progressively jeopardizes her own position. The novel highlights the societal barriers to accepting same-sex relationships, contrasting these with the conventional acceptance of heterosexual relationships, which are both biologically and socially sanctioned. Attraction between individuals of the opposite sex (XX female and XY male) is recognized and accepted both biologically and socially, reflecting fundamental laws of nature within the biosphere. The exploration of female homosexuality and lesbianism has been recurrent in 20th century literature, often within the broader discourse on women's sexuality. To contextualize these discussions, one might consider the ancient Greek poet Sappho, whose work provides early references to female same-sex relationships.

Born on the island of Lesbos, from which the term "Lesbian" is derived, Sappho's poetry, though fragmented, offers insights into the daily lives and emotional landscapes of women in her time. Although little is known about Sappho's life, her surviving fragments illuminate aspects of women's lives and relationships in her era. Homosexuality can also be traced in ancient India, as seen in epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as in the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho. This historical context suggests that homosexual practices existed, though often unapproved by religious scriptures.

Homosexuality in speculative fiction refers to the exploration of homosexual themes within genres like science fiction, fantasy, and horror, collectively known as speculative fiction. In today's society, self-diagnosis has become a widespread issue. Tilottama Mazumdar's '*Chander Gaye Chand*' challenges misconceptions by presenting homosexuality as a natural variation in human sexuality, not a deviation. The novel contends that individuals with diverse sexual orientations—lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—are just as "normal" as anyone else, despite societal biases and biological differences, such as variations in sex chromosomes (like XXY), which have historically contributed to their marginalization. Their inability to produce offspring has often been a factor in societal exclusion. Sankari Mukherjee, in her write up on '*Bangla Sahitye Nari Samakamita*', said on homosexuality: "Since its coming, the term homosexuality had acquired multiple meanings in the original sense, it refers to a sexual orientation characterized by aesthetic attraction, romantic love, and sexual desire exclusively for members of the same sex or gender identity. It can also refer to the manifestation of that orientation in the identity of an individual, which may or may not be at odds with that Person's sexual behaviour. Finally, it can refer to sexual relations with another of the same sex to sexual relations with another of the same sex regardless of the one's sexual orientation, self-identification or gender identity."¹

Keywords: Homosexuality, Sexuality, Shruti, Devrupa, Shreyasi.

Main theme:

'*Chander Gaye Chand*' by Tilottama Mazumdar is an unconventional and groundbreaking contribution to 21st century Bengali literature. As a celebrated Indian Bengali novelist, Tilottama

Mazumdar is also a short story writer, poet, lyricist, and essayist, known for her ability to portray the evolving dynamics of life and society. Her novel, '*Chander Gaye Chand*', focuses on female homosexuality—a theme rarely explored in Bengali literature to such depth and significance. There has never been such a big work on female homosexuality in Bengali literature. Her Novel '*Chander Gaye Chand*' was first published in the autumn issue of *Anandabazar Patrika* in the Bengali year 1409. In terms of her philosophical explanation, she explains the sexuality of the novel, acknowledging the world of female homosexuals. The sexuality she visualizes in the text is not ecstatic, but has an intense sensuality and emotional depth. These profound narratives challenge conventional societal views and invite readers into a more nuanced understanding of human sexuality.

The subject of '*Chander Gaye Chand*' is entirely women-centric, with no significant male presence, as the novel delves into the socio-psychological dynamics among its female characters. Divided into two parts, the story primarily revolves around three main characters: Shruti, Shreyasi, and Devrupa. Shruti Bose, the central character, admitted in Bethune College with honours in Philosophy after excelling in her Higher Secondary exams.

While staying in the college hostel, Shruti encounters Bana Mishra, Shreyasi, and Devrupa Paul, all of whom share the same room. This living arrangement sets the stage for the novel's unfolding events, gradually revealing the complex emotional and psychological atmosphere that binds the characters as the narrative progresses.

Shruti, a bright student from a Mafswal school, faced numerous challenges upon moving to Calcutta for her college education. Her once-focused life began to unravel due to the unexpected and intense emotional dynamics that emerged in her new environment. Shruti found herself caught in the whirlwind of her roommates'—Shreyasi and Devrupa's uncontrollable attraction and love for each other. Like a shipwrecked boat, she struggled to stay afloat amid these new experiences, yet this internal erosion was not fatal. Instead, it became a journey of self-realization, prompting Shruti to confront her identity and discern between right and wrong.

Tilottama Mazumdar provides a unique philosophical exploration of sex and love, particularly between opposite sexes, as an underlying theme in the novel. The story captures the pain and confusion Shruti endures in her emotional upheaval. On her first evening in room number 20 of the hostel, Shruti, Shreyasi, and Devrupa wept together, sharing their collective pain of separation. Over time, however, Shruti became lost in the emotional labyrinth of these strangers, unable to focus on her studies or even visit the library. Meanwhile, Devrupa continued her academic journey, securing admission to the mathematics honours program, highlighting the contrast in how each character dealt with their struggles.

In this Novel, it is seen that Shruti's anger and hatred towards Devrupa gradually increased. Because Devrupa was controlling everything in this group. As Devrupa begins to dominate the dynamics between the three, she assumes control not only over decisions but also in passing judgments about Shruti's worth. This increasing control by Devrupa causes a rift between Shruti and Shreyasi, whose once-strong friendship begins to deteriorate after Devrupa's arrival.

Shruti becomes acutely aware of a shift in the secret conversations between Shreyasi and Devrupa, noticing a distinct change in their tone:

"That day, the voices of Shreyasi and Devrupa were unlike any other day. Devrupa's voice was notably strong, and her usual house tone was present in that moment."²

Shruti had always considered Shreyasi a true friend, and after a long period of distance, she was overjoyed to reconnect with her. However, the arrival of Devrupa introduces a complex emotional undercurrent that disrupts the bond between Shruti and Shreyasi. Tilottama Mazumdar poignantly portrays Shruti's deep love and attraction toward Shreyasi, revealing the intensity of Shruti's feelings and the emotional turmoil she faces as her friendship begins to fracture under Devrupa's influence.

'A girl loves another girl. A girl loves another girl deeply. A girl wants to enjoy another girl'- this sort of desire is not always transparent to society and is not socially acceptable. The novel does not explicitly define Shruti as either good or bad, but rather emphasizes that her heart carries the universal truth: 'Love begets love, hate begets hate'.

The revelation of Shreyasi and Devrupa's homosexuality defies social boundaries, as Devrupa seeks to embrace her inner masculinity, a shift that Shruti initially resists. The novel illustrates how the pair's relationship invites scrutiny from the senior women in the hostel, who, on several occasions,

come to their room under various pretexts and witness Shreyasi and Devrupa's intimate moments. The whispers of 'Devrupalesbi, Devrupa homo...' spread through the hostel, stigmatizing the two girls.

A few days later, senior ladies call Shruti along with Bana. The main purpose of this meeting, that they want to know from Shruti about Shreyasi and Devrupa's homosexuality. This confrontation highlights the clash between individual desires and societal expectations, further illustrating the struggles the characters face as they navigate their identities in a judgmental environment.

At first, Shruti is confused and overwhelmed by the situation she finds herself in. The reality of Shreyasi and Devrupa's relationship shatters her sense of understanding, and she struggles to comprehend what she has witnessed. In Shreyasi's absence, Shruti, still in disbelief, begins to search through their letters, turning page after page. The content reads like the intimate exchanges of a lover and husband to his wife. This discovery leaves her shaken, as she slowly comes to terms with the fact that the closeness between Devrupa and Shreyasi is undeniably homosexual.

The gradual realization unfolds before her eyes, and as she processes this, Shruti becomes acutely aware of the complexity of human emotions and desires. In her reflections, she recalls her brother Olu, who is mentally retarded. Olu's behaviour, speech, and mannerisms are not typical of what society deems normal. Yet, at a certain age, Shruti is startled to witness his own expressions of sexual desire, further complicating her understanding of human sexuality. These experiences deepen Shruti's internal conflict, as she navigates her feelings of shock, discomfort, and the broader implications of love, identity, and societal norms.

The students who witnessed the intimate relationship between Devrupa and Shreyasi wrote to the hostel superintendent, condemning their behaviour. During a meeting, Shruti was summoned as a witness. However, out of loyalty to Shreyasi, she chose to remain silent and did not speak against them. Tilottama Mazumdar uses this pivotal moment to explore the deeper emotional and philosophical themes in the novel, expressing the union of mind and nature over the body—a merging of deeper human connections beyond societal norms. The novel touches on the idea of voyeurism, quoting:

"a sexual pervert who derives gratification from surreptitiously watching sexual acts or objects: a peeping Tom, one who takes a morbid interest in sordid sights."³

These harsh words reflect the way society views and condemns same-sex relationships, adding to the sense of alienation and judgment faced by Shreyasi and Devrupa. Despite the insult and stigma surrounding the situation, the reader senses that Shruti's silence stems from her deeper values of humanity and friendship. She refuses to expose the relationship, not out of fear, but out of a recognition of the complexity of love and identity.

The episodic structure of the novel is presented in a style reminiscent of a philosophical diary, blending reflective thought with narrative events. As the story progresses, Shruti takes on a new role as a Field Associate at Hope CCI, an NGO dedicated to social welfare. Her decision to join this organization is deeply connected to her responsibility for her mentally challenged brother Olu, and her emotionally distant, aging father. Through this role, Shruti continues her personal journey of self-realization, balancing her professional life with her personal obligations, while confronting the societal and emotional challenges that have shaped her path.

Shruti begins documenting her experiences at Hope, the social welfare organization, in a diary. Her time in the hostel had already exposed her to new perspectives on homosexuality, and upon joining Hope, she unexpectedly reunites with Devrupa, her former hostel friend. This reencounter allows Shruti to see a transformed Devrupa, now working in a new environment and no longer adorned in modern attire. However, Shruti has faced various perverse and challenging situations throughout her life, which makes her more attuned to the complexities of human nature and desire.

The novel delves into the psychological and emotional layers of Shruti's journey, where she confronts not only societal notions of love and sexuality but also her evolving understanding of herself. The story touches upon the concept of gender reassignment surgery, suggesting that in some cases, a lesbian woman can transition to a male and even bear children. This reflection serves as a broader commentary on how identity, love, and lust are fluid and often defy rigid classifications.

As Shruti deepens her self-awareness, she witnesses another profound and striking scene that resonates with the complexities she had observed in the hostel. The novel offers an analysis of the fact that one woman can experience love and sexual desire for another woman, showcasing the intricate

interplay between love and nature. In particular, the character of Lalita, who is described as a feminine man, represents a unique example of this blending of gender and desire. Lalita had no objection to Devrupa having a sexual relationship with him, despite not tolerating any other man. This juxtaposition of femininity and masculinity within Lalita highlights the novel's ongoing exploration of identity, love, and societal norms, as Shruti continues her personal quest for understanding. There is a wonderful scene in this novel-

"Lalita is on Devrupa's lap, a cloth corset tightly on her chest, and Devrupa's cloth is coming up at her waist. The two embrace each other. As if they are far above the discriminating notions of caste-class-gender. For Shruti, this scene is an extraordinary experience. This time Shruti's own indifferent self is also there for her. The world that was beyond the concept of hearing has caught him. Brought closer to self-realization. The sense of this unfolding scene is to her a union of mind-nature over body-nature and over body mind."⁴

The novel intricately examines the various complexities of human sexuality, particularly how it evolves and takes shape during adolescence. Through logical exploration and philosophical reflection, Tilottama Mazumdar portrays the twists and turns of sexuality as something that is often not fully understood or recognized until puberty. As understood one day, Devrupa's brother could not understand their true sexuality.

"Life has no routine of its own. I find it pointless to try to explain any feeling. The mind is the ultimate mystery. Is there an end to it?"⁵

Thinking of the Devrupa, Shruti feels compassion for the Third Gender. Devrupa's homosexuality manifests itself from childhood, suggesting that her sexual orientation was an innate part of her being rather than something influenced by external factors. The novel subtly critiques societal structures, hinting at how the wealthy and privileged shape their own insulated worlds, often overlooking or marginalizing those who do not conform to traditional gender or sexual norms.

"How many theories in the world, how many kinds of suffering and how many hungers, how many craves... and how many theories of all these hungers. And in the unthinking effort of people's incomplete thoughts by putting theories in the theory... the real thing is theory in people. Philosophy in people. From what is so. So, she has to do. She doesn't do it. What do you have in mind. She has no choice but to reveal herself."⁶

Tilottama Mazumdar presents a nuanced exploration of sexuality, emphasizing that sexual attraction, whether homosexual or heterosexual, is an inherent part of nature. The novel suggests that if one feels attracted to a man or woman, it is simply a manifestation of nature, grounded in genetics (XX and XY chromosomes). Mazumdar challenges the notion of what is deemed "natural" by arguing that love and sexual desire, regardless of gender, ultimately provide soul satisfaction for those involved. This philosophy emphasizes that same-sex love is not anti-nature because both individuals are part of nature itself, shaped by their environment and biology. The narrative breaks down societal prejudices, urging people to cast off ignorance and embrace a more enlightened view of love. The author writes:

"Then let's get right of ignorance. Culture brings the light... we will hold each other in love. Don't discriminate between men and women: take it to your chest. There is no lustful stimulation, love is there. There is lustful stimulation, love is also there. In fact, people love each other. let it be women to women, men to men, women to men."⁷

Such a subtle philosophical explanation about the author's sexuality is a new horizon in Bengali literature.

"The moon is on the moon

What do we thin...

The moon is on the moon-"⁸

Like humans, the moon is also a part of nature. In a symbolic parallel, the moon serves as a metaphor for the unity of body and soul. Like humans, the moon is part of nature, embodying the aesthetic essence of sexuality that defies conventional boundaries. In this way, the novel explores not just the physical aspects of love but also the deeper emotional and spiritual connection that exists between individuals. By doing so, Tilottama Mazumdar redefines sexuality in Bengali literature, exploring the universal human need for union, love, and connection—whether in heterosexual or homosexual relationships—while questioning societal norms that restrict these expressions.

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