

THE POISON TREE / BISHABRIKSHA

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee)

(1884)

Story

Despite its melodramatic tone and near-fairy tale plot, this novel forced middle-class Bengali society to look in a mirror and confront the very real problem of widowhood. The story is set in the Bengal countryside, in more or less contemporary times. The story begins when Kunda (or Kundalini) is a thirteen-year old girl. She has already lost her mother and now she witnesses her father's death. At that moment, she has a dream in which her mother warns her about two (unnamed) people whom she will meet in the future. With this clever narrative device, we look forward with expectation and fear: who are these two people?

Kunda is taken up by Nagendra, the wealthy zamindar or landowner who falls in love with her at first sight. He, however, is already married to a woman named Suryamukhi. Eventually, Kunda marries Suryamukhi's brother, Taracharan, who turns out to be a terrible man, a selfish husband and a cruel drunkard. He dies early on in the story, and Kunda now faces a life of miserable seclusion as a widow, even though she is still very young. Kunda returns to the house of Nagendra, the landowner, where she again attracts his romantic interest. Although his wife, Suryamukhi, begins to realise that she is losing his attention, she does not complain. Nagendra's love for Kunda becomes a scandal when he proposes to marry her as a second wife. The controversy is not so much bigamy (which was not uncommon among rural elites at the time), but rather the marriage, or remarriage, of a widow. Nagendra's love for Kunda is not the only romantic intrigue swirling around the large joint-family household. There is also Devendra, Nagendra's younger brother, who is unhappily married and had fallen in love with Kunda when he first saw her, years ago. In order to gain a private audience with Kunda, he disguises himself as a wandering female singer and enters her apartment where he entertains her with his sweet voice. But Devendra himself is the secret love object of Hira, the darkly beautiful and dangerous maid-servant. She is clearly one of the people against whom Kunda has been warned in the dream by her dead mother.

This cauldron of suppressed love, illicit passion and declared lust boils away for several chapters until Suryamukhi finally leaves her husband on the day that he marries Kunda. She does not condemn her husband for loving and marrying Kunda, but she cannot accept the humiliation of his inattention. Now, Hira schemes to do away with Kunda in order that she might have a clear path to Devendra (remember Hira loves Devendra who loves Kunda). After his marriage to Kunda, Nagendra begins to lose interest in her, and he is eventually reunited with Suryamukhi. In despair, Kunda, with the aid of Hira, commits suicide. Nagendra's impulsive and short-lived lust for Kunda was the seed from which poison tree grew.

Themes

Loyalty Running through the tangled web of romance and lust in this novel is the theme of loyalty. It takes several forms. First, there is the obvious case of a husband, in this case, two husbands, who are disloyal to his wife. First, Devendra is disloyal to his wife in his love for Kunda. Second, Nagendra rejects Suryamukhi, who is portrayed as a faultless and loving wife, in favour of the widow, Kunda. Nagendra, who is an easy target of criticism since he is the powerful and pompous patriarch, is then disloyal to his second wife, Kunda, not by loving a third woman but, in fact, by returning to his first wife. Is that an act of betrayal or fidelity? Then, there is the question of a wife's loyalty to her husband. When Suryamukhi learns of her husband's love for Kunda, she does not blame him, at least not in words or actions. She tries to understand why he is attracted to another woman, and she almost feels compassion for him in his inner struggle against his desire for a widow. Eventually, however, Suryamukhi can bear it no longer and leaves her husband. Is that an act of disloyalty? Or is it a justifiable act of self-assertion? What should be the limit of a wife's trust of her husband? In the

words of one character (Suryamukhi's sister), 'She who can no longer trust her husband had better die [kill herself].' These were the questions that Chatterjee's novel raised at the time the novel was published. The novel became a touchstone for debate among critics and readers, some of whom vilified it for condoning Suryamukhi's desertion of her husband, while others criticised the open sensuality in her character. Not unsurprisingly, given that the critics were men, no one mentioned Nagendra's infidelity to his wife. *The Poison Tree* spread its dangerous seeds far and wide, becoming so well-known that many later novels and plays include a character who reads the controversial book.

Widowhood The plight of widows in traditional Hindu society was a common theme in late-nineteenth-century novels. The constraints on a widow's life (she was expected to wear no ornaments, to live in seclusion and never to marry again) were, of course, all the more severe when a young girl or woman lost her husband. It was not difficult to raise sympathy for the situation of ten-year-old widow (and they were not unusual), but Chatterjee's novel focused not on the age of the widow but on her wish to marry again. Kunda is a thoroughly virtuous character—innocent, considerate and compassionate—but her desire to marry Nagendra was not simply a desire for a companion or a protector. Rather, she was passionately, madly in love with him. He was beautiful, graceful, attractive and she wanted him physically as well as mentally. Kunda's openly acknowledged but socially repressed sexuality made this novel an overt statement for the need to reform the status of widows.

Characters

Kundalini Kundalini, or Kunda, is the key female character. She is widowed at a young age and becomes the love interest of a landlord, who wants to make her his second wife.

Nagendra Nagendra is the main male character. He is married but falls in love the widowed Kunda, which is the drama that powers the story. He marries Kunda, but tires of her and goes back to his wife.

Suryamukhi Suryamukhi is Nagendra's wife. She suffers from his neglect and then his desire to marry a second woman. Humiliated, she leaves him but is reunited with him in the end.

Kamalamani Kamalamani is Nagendra's sister and Suryamukhi's sister-in-law. She is kind and caring to everyone, and plays the role of peace-maker in this novel of inter-family tensions and secrets.

Devendra Devendra is Nagendra's younger brother, who (like his brother) falls in love with Kunda, even though he, too, is married.

Hira Hira is a maid-servant, who turns out to be one of the people whom Kunda's mother warns her against. She is dark and scheming, and secretly loves Devendra but cannot express her feelings for him.

Kundalini (Abandoned)

Character Kundalini (or Kunda) is a young and innocent girl, who is soon orphaned by the death of her father. Now completely vulnerable, she is timid and frightened, especially after receiving warnings of danger from her dead mother in a dream. Kunda marries and is widowed while still young, about eighteen or twenty. Her husband had turned out to be a drunkard, but she suffered through three years of marriage. Her fully developed character emerges only after he dies and she meets Nagendra, who falls in love with her. Even though, she has no intention of destroying Nagendra's marriage with Suryamukhi, she is drawn to him because of his gentle beauty. This is an important point in evaluating her character. Any suggestion, by the author, that Kunda seduced Nagendra would render her evil, and deserving of the scorn that was poured on any widow who did not conform to the social norms of self-denial, especially denial of the senses. Kunda remains a shy and cautious person throughout the novel, remembering (as the reader does) that her mother has foretold danger to her. She responds to affection, and when she does let someone into her confidences, the bond is strong. That is why her love for Nagendra will cause so much pain to everyone. If she were a

superficial, flighty woman 'on the make', the distress would not be so great because the emotions would not have gone so deep.

Activities Kunda is given English and math lessons by Suryamukhi. In addition, she enjoys her singing lessons and sometimes performs for the ladies of the household. Later, when she has become an accomplished singer, she gives lessons to children in the household. Kunda mostly keeps to herself, although she allows one of the women in the house to come and brush her hair. In the evening, Kunda likes to go into the garden and then down to a pool to watch the rippling water and listen to the chattering birds.

Illustrative moments

Abandoned Our first meeting with Kundalini is instructive. We find her in a dilapidated house in the middle of a dark forest. She is by her father's death-bed. The light is dim and the rain is persistent. This is the author's description: 'The leaves of the trees rustled, the wind moaned, and the windows of the ruined house flapped noisily. In the house, the fitful light of the lamp flickered...the lamp was exhausted of oil and...now it went out.' Kunda is all alone, an orphan who lost her mother some years before. The heavy atmosphere of the scene foreshadows Kunda's fate. It will not be bright and sunny. Instead, she will experience pain and desertion. If the story begins with her father's death, it concludes with her own demise. When the story ends, we can understand that Kunda has been abandoned all along. Despite the affection of some women friends, despite the sincere love from Nagendra and the empathy of Suryamukhi, in a time of crisis, she has no one.

Desperate Kunda, the young girl has become a young woman of great beauty and the object of Nagendra's love. This puts her in a terrible position because Nagendra is already married and because she (Kunda) is a widow, who is forbidden to remarry. Kunda's desperate situation is what drives the story forward, and it is dramatically illustrated in one scene when she nearly goes mad. She is by herself, beset with anxiety and without anyone to comfort her. The author describes her inner monologue in a series of fast-moving and often contradictory thoughts. 'Can I call him "my Nagendra"? No, I'm a widow, I cannot marry. Yes, the shastras [Hindu texts] now allow it. A Brahmin has said that. I shall take poison. That is the only way. No, if my body is bloated, he will think it is ugly.' The pathos of this scene is only heightened when we remember that Kunda will eventually take poison and kill herself. Not because she is a widow but because, after marrying Nagendra, he leaves her and is reunited with his first wife. If Kunda had been able to see the end of the novel, her pain would have been even more unbearable.

Sensual Kunda's character (however fictional) was a great scandal when the book was published. Most of the opprobrium was directed at her but not simply because she was a widow who was remarried. It was rather because she was a widow who was full of sexual desire. Even though Chatterjee observed the then-current Victorian conventions about expressing a woman's physical needs, he manages to convey the raw power of her feelings. One of the most dramatic illustrations occurs one night, when she slips out of a hut, to which she has been banished by Suryamukhi, and goes to the house. Standing in front of Nagendra's bedroom window, hoping for a glimpse of his form, she is overcome by the scent of flowers and the love-making of the birds. At last, she sees someone silhouetted against the blinds. She tip-toes closer. It is not her lover. In this delicate scene, full of secrecy, promise and disappointment, Kunda's intense passion is revealed.

Nagendra Babu (Conflicted)

Character Nagendra is a character in conflict. On the one hand, he is a wealthy zamindar (owner of a large estate); he enjoys good health and good looks; he has a loving wife. But these very advantages become the paradoxical cause of his misery. As the author explains, '[s]ince he had never known the lack of anything, he never fell into temptation. So, when he saw Kunda, he did have the mental strength to control his mind.' His anxiety-free life has not taught how to confront problems, how to discipline his feels and control his 'mind,' by which the author means his sexual desire. Once he has been smitten by the young widow Kunda, he is thrown into another conflict: between his duty to his wife and his passion for Kunda. There is no doubt that he sincerely loves his (first) wife, Suryamukhi. We can quote his own words: 'She is not just my wife. She is everything to me...She is my help-mate in worldly affairs, the fortune in my house, the righteousness in my heart, the ornament

of my body.' But this deep love for his wife is equalled by his genuine love for Kunda. And that is what makes his conflict so debilitating. Both sides of his dilemma are powerful and sincere; they are not trivial or flighty. Nagendra is a powerful man, owning a large estate and also serving as the local magistrate. In both capacities, he treats his subordinates fairly. He is also an intelligent man, capable of criticising society and himself. In addition, Nagendra is something of a social reformer, who supports the then-current campaign to remove the ban on widow remarriage. He even shows some courage when he writes a letter in support of widow remarriage. (Interestingly, the letter cites an essay by a Brahmin scholar, which is an historical document.) Nagendra himself then marries a widow (which, by definition is a 'remarriage' for her). Nevertheless, his inner conflict is not resolved, and he does not stay with her.

Activities Nagendra is a zamindar, which means that he is responsible for a large estate, employing a hundred or more men. We do not see him engaged in these management activities, but he does take trips by boat and road to large cities and towns, to look after his business interests. At home, we see him organise and then preside over a major Hindu festival. He sometimes is called out, as the local magistrate, to arbitrate labour disputes or domestic arguments. After his affair begins with Kunda, Nagendra becomes a heavy drinker.

Illustrative moments

Kind Our initial view of Nagendra is positive. On one occasion, one of his labourers is beaten and robbed of a rupee by a supervisor. Nagendra promptly calls in the supervisor, takes ten rupees from him and gives it to the labourer. However, a more dramatic illustration of his kindness occurs in relation to the orphaned Kunda. Nagendra has come by boat to visit an isolated village as part of supervising the affairs of his estate. On the journey, he unexpectedly finds a young girl grieving by her father's death bed. Nagendra immediately enquires who she is and then agrees to arrange for her father's funeral. Then he takes her to Calcutta, where he arranges for her to be married to his wife's brother. He is careful not to marry her into a poor family or to an old man, knowing that in those situations she would simply become a servant in the house. Even in this first encounter, however, there is a dark shadow. Kunda, although a young girl, senses that Nagendra's interest is not altogether altruistic. She has had a dream in which her dead mother warned her against a man who looks very much like the seemingly kind Nagendra.

Disturbed From their first meeting, Nagendra's attraction to Kunda is evident, and it quickly becomes an infatuation, then sexual desire and then an uncontrollable lust. This sudden passion leads to a 'mental instability', as he himself describes it, a disturbance that will trouble him throughout the novel. A clear illustration of this condition comes in a scene when he and his wife, Suryamukhi, converse. She says that he looks ill (she knows that he is suffering from love-sickness), but he denies it. When she tells him to look in a mirror, he does and then smashes the mirror to the floor. A servant enters, and Nagendra strikes him for no reason. As the author comments, 'Formerly he had been of a very calm temper, and now he got angry at everything.' Nagendra is disturbed in his mind because he cannot admit to himself, let alone to his wife, what he feels. To love another woman is one thing, but to love a widow and to wish to marry her is such an unimaginable idea that his mind rejects it. His inner struggle is a personal representation of the wider debate that was ongoing in Bengali (and wider Indian) society over the status of widows.

Honest Despite his infidelity to his wife, Nagendra is not deceitful. As the author tells the story, Nagendra struggles mightily to defeat the love he feels for Kunda, and it is a struggle that his wife appreciates and acknowledges. Nagendra's admirable candour is demonstrated in a highly emotional scene with his wife. Suryamukhi has sent Kunda away (not because Kunda is loved by her husband but because of a false accusation that Kunda has had an affair with someone else). This leads to Nagendra's full confession that he is in love with Kunda: 'In truth, the fault is entirely mine....I am sinful. I cannot control my own heart.' This tearful admission of blame makes him a more sympathetic character than would otherwise be the case. In fact, much of the later criticism (among scholars in the late 20th century) of Chatterjee's novel centred on his portrait of Nagendra. The unfaithful husband, the critics claimed, escapes censure in the novel, and even appears morally strong, while the widow, Kunda, is reviled and commits suicide. Why must the female transgressor always die? Does the novel covertly uphold traditional sexist attitudes? Or does it, and should it, reflect realities? The debate over Nagendra's character has not been concluded.

Suryamukhi (Proud)

Character Suryamukhi is a woman who is caught in an emotional trap. She is an affectionate and devoted wife to Nagendra. She is also intelligent and beautiful. Nothing can stain her reputation. And yet, that very virtuousness harbours a dark streak of pride. Because she is so nearly perfect, she holds herself off from the other women in the household. If she does choose to be among them, the others feel her to be a restraint on their free-flowing conversation and joy. She often criticises others on their cooking or housekeeping or parenting. These qualities are manifest when she discovers that her husband is in love with another woman. On the outside, she contrives not to criticise him and tries to maintain a serene façade, but there are signs that, on the inside, she is being torn apart. When she first hears that her husband has rescued a young orphan girl, she is suspicious. In a letter to him, she writes, 'In picking up this little girl, have you forgotten me? Many unripe fruits appear attractive but are not good to eat.' Despite her incipient jealousy, she rarely shows any animosity toward her rival, the widow Kunda, and, in fact, she even arranges for her to marry a brother and to live in her household. Then she gives the village girl lessons in Bengali and English, in maths and geography, hoping to improve her as a sister-in-law. Beyond these secret love affairs, Suryamukhi is a cautious person, always counselling patience and having a second opinion.

Activities As the zamindar's (estate owner's) wife, Suryamukhi has responsibility over the kitchen and servants, which is a considerable task. When her husband takes to drink (to assuage his guilt over the love affair with Kunda) and neglects the estate, Suryamukhi is quick to step in and do whatever is necessary. She is very 'hands-on' and is perhaps a little overbearing with the servants, but one cannot accuse her of being lazy or disorganised. Suryamukhi, who is an educated twenty-six-year old, likes to write letters, to her brother, her husband and her sister-in-law.

Illustrative moments

Devoted Suryamukhi is a model of the devoted wife. Despite her discovery that her husband has fallen in love with Kunda, she refuses to blame him. Although she is suffering, she writes to her sister about her enduring love for Nagendra: 'I do not blame him. He is virtuous....I can see how he exerts every ounce of strength to control his mind. As far as he can, he never casts his eyes in Kundalini's direction....Why would he be so eager not to look at her? Why would he be so careful not to say her name? At meal times, with food in his hand, he cannot get it to his mouth... As soon as he hears Kunda's voice he starts to cram food into his mouth.....We have now a new maidservant named Kumud... Sometimes instead of 'Kumud' he says 'Kunda'. And he becomes very embarrassed.' This is a valiant attempt by a rejected wife to find goodness in her husband.

Magnanimous Suryamukhi displays a magnanimity in the novel that goes beyond mere empathy and enters the realm of sainthood. Earlier she has told her sister-in-law that she had not opposed Nagendra's love for Kunda because she could not bear to see him unhappy. But a more poignant display of this quality occurs when she has a face-to-face scene with him. He makes a full confession of his love for Kunda and offers to leave the house. But Suryamukhi will not let him. She begs him to grant her one last favour and, when he agrees, she says that she wants him to remain for one more month in the house. As she watches him turn and leave the room, she says to herself that he has consented to remain with her for a month, but only in his mind not his heart. 'He is going to leave this home because of me,' she says to herself. 'Oh, my darling, I would give my life to extract the thorns from your feet.' Her suffering is nothing compared to the pain she imagines him to feel, his guilt toward her and his frustrated desire to be with Kunda. Out of concern for his suffering, she arranges his marriage to Kunda.

Proud In spite of her devotion and her magnanimity, Suryamukhi is also a proud woman. He has a high opinion of herself in comparison with other women in her class and rules the household with a strong hand. Thus, it was only a matter of time before her self-respect would triumph over her self-effacement and she would somehow assert herself in the tragedy of losing her husband. That moment comes right after her husband has married Kunda, a marriage that she herself has condoned and helped to arrange. Suryamukhi decides to leave her house and her husband and to live in a place where she cannot be found. She explains her action (in a letter to her sister-in-law) in the familiar phrases of self-sacrifice: that she does not deserve her husband's love, that she wishes she would die because she has lost him, and so forth. However, the author's description of her face and

her movements suggest that she has 'had enough' and has finally decided to separate from him. As Chatterjee comments in an authorial aside, 'The poison tree can be found in every household. There is no human heart, however noble, that cannot be touched by anger, envy and desire.' Suryamukhi is noble, but even her saintly heart has been poisoned.