

## FROM MYTH TO MODERNITY: FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION IN SUCHITRA BHATTACHARYA'S FICTION

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the representation of alienation and marginalisation of women in the fiction of Suchitra Bhattacharya, with particular reference to I Am Madhabi and Postmortem. Bhattacharya's writings highlight the exploitation and suffering of women within a patriarchal framework, where their identities are shaped and often suppressed by social expectations. Through the retelling of the myth of Madhabi, the narrative exposes how a woman is reduced to a commodity, used to fulfil male obligations while being denied individuality and emotional recognition. In contrast, Postmortem presents the contemporary character of Anasuya, whose life reflects emotional neglect and psychological alienation within the domestic sphere. Despite fulfilling her roles as wife and mother, she remains unacknowledged as an individual, leading to deep inner conflict and despair. The paper highlights how Bhattacharya portrays alienation across both mythological and modern contexts, emphasising that women's loneliness and identity crises persist within patriarchal structures. However, their forms may differ across time.*

### **Keywords**

*Patriarchy, Female Identity, Commodification, Feminist Criticism, Psychological Isolation*

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Suchitra Bhattacharya is a distinguished writer of recent times. Born in 1950 in Bhagalpur, Bihar, she started writing from her childhood. After graduating from Calcutta University and getting married, she came to prominence in the mid-1980s with the publication of her novel *Kacher Dewal* (Glass Wall). She is one of the major women writers of Bengal. She has written over 24 novels and several memorable short stories, which have been published in prominent Bengali literary magazines. Her works have been translated into several Indian languages and also into English.

Bhattacharya's writings focus on contemporary issues, especially those encountered by the urban middle class. The exploitation and suffering of women, irrespective of their social and economic identities, find a distinct voice in her writings. The purpose of the present paper is to examine the alienated female characters that have been repressed in a male-dominated world. In *I Am Madhabi*, a collection of short stories, she shows the dilemma of repressed and alienated women who find their loneliness inevitable in a patriarchal society. Bhattacharya explores human relationships, especially women's issues, their status as depicted in mythology, as well as in contemporary society. She explores the battle of the sexes, which has been raging since ancient times till today.

Let us begin by examining the title story *I Am Madhabi*. In this story, Suchitra recreates the myth of Madhabi. She shows her concern for the repressed voice of Madhabi, the dutiful daughter of King Yayati. For ages, myths have played a great significance in moulding the perception of the common man. Myths have had an immense impact on the consciousness of the masses and continue to affect them even today.

In order to understand the story, it is important to recount the mythological tale associated with it. The myth is concerned with Galab, a pupil of Rishi Vishwamitra, who, after the conclusion of his studies, implored Vishwamitra to tell him what he should offer as guru-dakshina. The already content guru got annoyed at his pupil's insistence. Vishwamitra asked him to bring eight hundred white horses, each having one black ear. Only six hundred such horses were to be found in the whole of the Aryavarta. These were owned by three different kings.

A perplexed Galab sought help from Garuda, who took him to King Yayati of Pratisthan. The king, known for his magnanimity, was unable to provide the horses but gave his daughter Madhabi in the service of Galab. Galab's dilemma was resolved with Madhabi's help. She had been blessed with two boons, one the ability to regain virginity and the other to give birth to chivalrous kings. Taking advantage of these boons, Galab loaned her to the three different kings in exchange for two

hundred horses from each of them. Madhabi provided three male heirs to the three kings, but Galab still fell short of two hundred horses. Notwithstanding her triple marriage and maternity, Madhabi remained a virgin. Galab presented her and the horses to Vishwamitra. The sage accepted Madhabi and had a son named Ashtaka. Vishwamitra retired to the woods, and Madhabi was returned to Galab. Galab retired to the woods and gave Madhabi back to her father.

King Yayati was greatly worried now because he had a marriage yet unmarried daughter at home. As a responsible father, it was his duty to get her married. He finally decided to hold a Swayam Vara so that Madhabi could choose her husband. According to the myth, Madhabi rejected the suitors and did not perform the Swayam Vara.

Suchitra has narrated this story through Madhabi, who shares her dilemma and recounts how she was used by the men in her life. It can be read as a feminist text. In the course of the story, all have benefited except Madhabi. Her physical exploitation was not a matter of concern to either her father, Galab or the three kings or even a sage like Vishwamitra. It seems that the sole aim of Madhabi's life was to provide her body for the fulfilment of Galab's commitment. By giving away Madhabi, her father maintained his status of being known as a gracious king. Galab's commitment to his guru was accomplished. The three kings got Chakravarti's sons, and even Vishwamitra's lust was satisfied. Madhabi was the only loser. At the sage's hermitage, too, she was just a female body.

*"Like the three kings, the great sage too clawed at my flesh."*

She reflects on her physical exploitation:

*"A princess or whatever I might be, every fibre of my body knew that a woman would not have an independent identity."*

*"I was passed from one man to another, yet none ever saw me as a person."*

The story opens with Madhabi, who introduces herself as the daughter of King Yayati, and when it comes to giving her mother's name, she is somewhat perplexed. She feels that it is not necessary to give the name of her mother because—*"Mother is the name given to a womb. A receptacle for babies. The mighty King Yayati fathered me. And this is my only identity."*

In the course of her life, Madhabi too becomes a mechanism whose sole purpose is to provide the different kings with Chakravarti heirs. She is valued only because she can be physically exploited to satiate the sensual desires of lusting men.

*"My body was never mine; it belonged to the needs of others."*

King Yayati expresses his inability to arrange for the eight hundred horses, but he promised Galab that the problem could be resolved by giving his daughter to him. A woman of flesh and blood is made into a commodity in a male-dominated society. Her father displays the attributes that she is exquisitely beautiful and has an amiable disposition. Galab would have no complaints from her. Taking advantage of these attributes, Galab further trades Madhabi for a breed of rare horses. Madhabi enters wedlock and maternity, but at the core of her heart, she is lonely and alienated. *“In the midst of duties and roles, I remained alone within myself.”*

She has no one with whom she can share her sorrows and tribulations. She hardly gets time to reflect and assess her course of life. She undergoes all the humiliation first because she feels that she belongs to Galab, and it is her duty to keep him happy and give no cause for complaint. It is only when she is returned to her father that she reflects on the events of her life. Till now, the focus has been on Madhabi’s physical attributes. On the eve of the Swayam Vara, Madhabi uses her intellect. She asserts her identity and individuality by rejecting the Swayam Vara ceremony.

From being a dutiful daughter to being a useful commodity, Madhabi retaliates against her physical exploitation and realises that *“I am Madhabi.”*

She chooses her way to her freedom on the day of her Swayam Vara, when she would have been ceremoniously and legally passed on from the custody of her father to the custody of her husband. She does not want to be tied down to men all her life, be it her father, husband or son. A more determined and freer Madhabi reflects:

*“After my father’s death, will I seek shelter from my brothers? They too are men. Shall I wait until my sons grow up and come to take their mother? By that time, they too will be men! Is there no other way? No other way at all?”*

Through this story, Suchitra has given voice to the anguish of Madhabi. Having been betrayed in love, she discards the falsity of marriage and the so-called concept of love. She rejects the very institution of marriage. Earlier, she was the victim of a male ideology that subjugates women. But now she asserts, she protests and chooses to live life on her own terms. She manages to find her space and interacts with herself. She is no more alienated—at least from her own self. For Madhabi, it has been a process of self-discovery, of freedom and self-expression.

As compared to *I Am Madhabi*, *Postmortem* is a story of contemporary times. In this story, Suchitra has poignantly portrayed the anguish of Anasuya, an

alienated housewife. She had been married to Samarendra, and the couple had had a married life of well over forty years. They have four children and grandchildren as well. Anasuya is a lonely woman in the midst of her large family.

*"Surrounded by people, yet unseen, unheard, and unknown."*

The news of the death of her childhood friend Niharda takes her back to memory lane, and suddenly, all the events of her life till now resurface in her mind. She is so acutely overcome with grief at her non-existent status in the family and also by the death of Niharda, that she attempts to end her life. She consumes an overdose of sleeping pills and is admitted to the hospital in a critical condition. Her husband and her children can't see any apparent reason for her suicidal attempt. Samarendra comes across a notebook that Anasuya had used as her personal diary. Samarendra was not aware of the fact that Anasuya had been making personal notes in the diary. On reading the inner thoughts of Anasuya, he suddenly felt that his wife, who had been so familiar for so many years, was now turning into a mystery. *"He had not imagined in his wildest dream that Anasuya could possibly have any thoughts of her own that she would want to keep secret from him."*

Anasuya was a timid, powerless woman who lacked the courage to voice her feelings. She had been conditioned through the scriptures, since her childhood days, that-

*"A woman is a subject all her life."*

She had been taught that a woman is not entitled to have a mind of her own, and even if she has one, she does not have the right to express it. Traditionally, the sole reason for her existence is to give birth to babies. In her forty-five-year-old marriage, Anasuya had apparently got everything one could think of, but somewhere it hurts her to think that

*"I have sons and daughters. I have wealth. Yet I think that I have nothing of what I really wanted."*

*"My life was full, yet empty of myself."*

In school, her teacher had recognised her talent and flair for writing. Nobody at home had taken her studies seriously. They had fulfilled their duty by marrying her off to Samarendra, an eligible groom. After marriage, she had merely become a shadow of her husband. She was a dutiful daughter-in-law, mother and wife and nothing beyond this.

*"I existed only in relation to others, never as myself."*

A disillusioned and alienated Anasuya concludes that-

*"This life has been a total failure. What do I do in this life? Was I a good mother?"*

Thus, ultimately unable to bear this contempt, she decides to end her life.

Anasuya's notebook is a touching account of her innermost feelings and secret desires. Her silent thoughts find expression in her writing. Her family members are not aware of her pain and sorrow. They feel that she has tried to commit suicide for no reason whatsoever. Samarendra, who has gone through the notebook, knows the truth, but he does not dare to make it public. He decides to destroy it so that no evidence of Anasuya's alienation would ever remain.

The story ends with the news that Anasuya is out of danger. Her life has been saved. No doubt Anasuya has got a second life, but the circumstances and the environment of her home suggest that her loneliness would continue. She would once again lead a suppressed and lonely life. From mythological to contemporary times, women are usually represented as lonely souls who find their loneliness unavoidable against the backdrop of patriarchy.

Suchitra Bhattacharya has tried to investigate the women's status in a patriarchal society. She is a perceptive observer of the changing urban milieu, and her writing closely examines the crises faced by the contemporary Bengali middle-class women. All the stories in this winning collection focus on the sense of alienation experienced by the women protagonists. These are stories that make us pause and reflect on the lives of ordinary women. The stories of Suchitra Bhattacharya pose questions on women's issues that we cannot ignore.

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