

The Novels of Kuntala Kumari Sabat

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Kuntala Kumari Sabat (1901-1938) is the first significant woman poet and novelist in Oriya language. Born in Bastar (now in Chattisgarh), Kuntala Kumari's childhood was spent in Burma where her father, Daniel Sabat, a Christian by faith, worked as a doctor. In 1917, Kuntala Kumari joined Ravenshaw Girls' School at Cuttack and then obtained a degree in medicine from Cuttack Medical School. In 1928, she shifted to Delhi where she set up her medical practice and at the same time plunged into literary and social activities... She wrote both in Hindi and Oriya. She came out with a volume of Hindi poems entitled Baramala. She also acted as editor of several Hindi periodicals such as Mahabir, Jeevan and Nari Bharati. Kuntala Kumari was honoured with the title "Utkal Bharati" by the Mahila Bandhu Samiti of Puri in 1925 and was elected president of All India Aryan Youth League in 1930. In addition to a large number of poems that she wrote during her creative career spanning about fifteen years, Kuntala Kumari wrote five novels between 1923 and 1933. She was a staunch defender of women's freedom and a firm believer of Gandhian principles. Her poems and novels reflect her deep sense of patriotism as well as her profound concern for such problems as the lack of education, child marriage, casteism, untouchability and discrimination against women. Kuntala Kumari passed away in August 1938 in Delhi.

Her first novel, *Bhranti* (Misunderstanding), published in 1923, is based on the relationship between Scephali and Anangamohan who undergo a series of misunderstandings and psychological conflicts and eventually get united in marriage. Anangamohan, an orphan, grows under the care of Harihar Chotray, a zamindar, and his wife Indumati. Scephali is the daughter of Harihar and Indumati. Anangamohan's father Ghanashyam, who was an employee in Harihar's estate, and Harihar had decided long ago that they would get their children married to each other and that Anangamohan would inherit Harihar's property. Anangamohan is a meritorious student and obtains a law degree from Calcutta University. Scephali inspires him in the pursuit of his studies. But their relationship turns sour when, during two years of Anangamohan's absence from the village for study at Calcutta, Scephali's friend Malati along with her father Sananda is apparently successful in diverting Scephali's mind from Anangamohan to Natabar Routray, son of a zamindar of a neighbouring village. Shocked by Scephali's betrayal, Anangamohan flees to Kashi. Scephali, who is later repentant for having shifted her love from Anangamohan to Natabar, suffers from severe illness and is bedridden. By a strange turn of circumstances, Scephali's teacher Sarajudidi sees Anangamohan and tells him about Scephali's mental and physical suffering. Anangamohan returns to the village, nurses Scephali until she

recovers from illness. Now the lovers realize that their separation was due to the machinations of Malati and her parents. They tide over the storm of misunderstanding, get married and live happily ever after. This love story is set against life in the rural setting in all its aspects of aristocracy, small villainies and conservative attitudes.

Kuntala Kumari's *Naa Tundi* (A foul-mouthed woman), published in 1925, reflects the contemporary political milieu shaped by a sense of nationalist sentiment as well as her zeal for social reform, particularly in the field of female literacy. Ratani, the heroine of the novel, is portrayed at the beginning of the narrative as tomboyish, quarrelsome and a dare devil. Her mother, Gelhi, too finds pleasure in causing quarrels among villagers. Krushna Chandra, the local zamindar who is interested in social reforms, is attracted by the uncommon nature of Ratani and takes her as his second wife. After marriage, Ratani's nature undergoes sudden transformation and with the help of her husband, she not only learns to read and write, but also gets into the mission of making the women of her village literate and educated. She shares the joys and sorrows of the poor rustics and helps them in their distress. Krushna Chandra, the rich zamindar, lives a simple life, spins on the charkha, wears home-spun clothes, establishes a spinning centre in the village, destroys the liquor shops and spreads the message of prohibition. Krushna Chandra's family, including his two wives Uma and Ratani, join the Freedom Movement. While some parts of the narrative have a comic strain, the novel is basically a fictional rendering of Gandhiji's concept of "Gramya Swaraj"

The plot of the novel, "Kali Bahu" (The dark-complexioned daughter-in-law), published in 1925, centres round the predicament of child widows in a superstition-ridden rural society. The

heroine Laxmi, the only daughter of Achyut Mishra who is rich and morally corrupt, marries Pitambar at the age of seven and becomes a widow at the age of ten. As enjoined by social customs, she is forced to live a life of stern austerity, observing religious rituals, fasting on prescribed days, wearing plain clothes and abstaining from any kind of make-up. The four wives of her father, on the other hand, live a life of pleasure and enjoy the social status of respectable married women. On the death of her father, Laxmi is ill-treated and tortured by her step-mothers, Rebati and Indu, who are of her age. Fed up with the lustful advances of a man named Nabaghana, Laxmi runs away to Brundaban Dham and takes shelter in an ashram where she is shocked by the sensual living of the inmates who pretend to live a life of abstinence and devotion. Out of frustration, Laxmi attempts suicide by jumping into the river Yamuna. She is rescued by Swami Sadanand who shelters her in his ashram. Laxmi is deeply inspired by the progressive views of the Swami and dedicates herself to study and service. Swami Sadanand is a great champion of women's emancipation and widow marriage. Inspired by the Swami's discourses on widow marriage, a young man named Chandroday marries Laxmi in the face of strong objections of the conservative families. Both Chandroday and Laxmi dedicate themselves to a life of social service and live a happy and contented life. The dark-complexioned child widow turns into an embodiment of selfless service and perfect happiness.

The plot of Kuntala Kumari's novel *Raghu Arakhita* (Raghu, the orphan), published in 1928, is also based on contemporary social problems such as superstitions, dowry system and the pathetic predicament of widows in a rural conservative society. The plot centres round unfulfilled love between Sita, daughter of a rich

person, and Raghunath, a poor orphan. Sita's father, Chandrasekhar Mishra, is so greedy that he is prepared to get his daughter married to Brundaban Choudhury who comes to see Sita for his son but decides that he himself would marry her. Before this marriage takes place, Brundaban dies. Then Chandrasekhar forces Sita to marry Dibakar Mishra, a dissolute zamindar, by exhorting money from him. Sita is his third wife. His first wife has committed suicide having been tortured by her husband, leaving behind two children. His second wife, Shankari, suffers from various ailments. Dibakar has also concubines in Cuttack and Calcutta. Sita lives a life of misery and soon becomes a widow. Raghunath, an orphan from childhood, is brought up by Jagannath Kaviraj and Saraswati who treat him as their own son. Raghunath marries Maya but soon becomes a widower. By a strange turn of destiny, Raghunath becomes a rich person and entreats Sita to marry him. Sita rejects the proposal and chides him for daring to commit the sin of seeking marriage with a married woman. Raghunath dedicates himself to the service of the nation. There is a pronounced element of didacticism and social criticism in all the novels of Kuntala Kumari. She wrote at a time when there was an upsurge of nationalist sentiment, and Gandhian ideals inspired the whole nation to fight against alien rule and to resist social evils. Kuntala Kumari's novels clearly reflect this socio-political milieu.

Kuntala Kumari's last novel, *Parasmani* (The precious stone), was published in 1933. It narrates the predicament of Lalita who is tortured by the in-laws despite her best efforts to please them. Her husband Bimbadhar lives in the town and comes home once or twice a year. Lalita silently suffers all the maltreatment of her mother-in-law and eagerly looks forward to her husband's homecoming. But as the torture turns inhuman and

intolerable, Lalita attempts suicide but is saved by Brundaban, her husband's thirteen-year old brother. Bimbadhar gets into evil company and develops the habit of drinking and visiting prostitutes. Lalita goes to Bimbadhar with the help of her father and is shocked to find him in a state of debt and ill-health. She helps him to redeem the loan by selling her ornaments. With her care, he recovers from ailments. For sometime, Bimbadhar gives up all bad habits but soon relapses into evil ways and dies. Lalita renounces her worldly life and lives the austere life of a sanyasin. She is portrayed as an embodiment of ideal womanhood and the novel is an indictment of the traditional archetype of a cruel and sadistic mother-in-law.

Kuntala Kumari presented a realistic image of the suffering women in the male-dominated society of the early decades of the twentieth century and pleaded for their emancipation from the bondage of superstitions, ignorance and exploitation. Her fictional narratives also manifest a missionary zeal for social reforms and a deep commitment to the ideals of patriotism and selfless service. The years during which she wrote her five novels were those of great nationalistic upheaval, when Gandhian vision of an egalitarian society inspired writers to articulate resistance and protest against all forms of discrimination. Kuntala Kumari's novels are a significant landmark in the history of Oriya literature not only because they continued the tradition of social realism that characterized the works of post-Fakir Mohan novelists such as Chintamani Mohanty, Nanda Kishore Bal, Upendra Kishore Das and Baishnab Charan Das, but also because they skillfully represented the social and political ethos of a crucial period of modern Indian history.

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