Prabhabati Debi Saraswati: Introducing Her Domestic and Detective Novels

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"One needs a lot of things if one is to write: paper, pen, ink, ink-pot and so on. You have to set everything before you. And I was a woman, the daughter-in-law of the family. I was not supposed to read or write."

— Rassundari Devi, "Amar Jiban" (202)

"All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point — a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (6)

Introduction

Despite being set decades apart, a common thread concatenates the two perspectives given above; strewn across a woman's path towards becoming a writer are obstacles galore, and most of these have nothing to do with whether or not she has the intellect to write! Both perspectives are indicative of a sense of material lack — space, money, leisure — and social and cultural sanctions, which often crop up as significant when a discussion on women's writing is evoked. In fact, critical assumptions, historical circumstances, and ideological underpinnings have always been hostile to women's acts of writing or literary production. The neglect has been so rigorously continuous that not only has it crippled analytical abilities to receive and appreciate women's writings, but it has also stimulated discourses that readily other-ise women's literary production. Women's writings have either been invisibilised as specimens of shallow intellect, considered marginal with respect to male-stream contribution, or have been provided with constrictive, conservative guidance about the what and how of writing, almost welling up in generosity for having spared that space. Thus, it has been convenient to sideline women's literary production as the blurred background, as an 'alternative' to the main/male-stream, thereby reifying the idea of the 'mainstream'.

However, women's writings have emerged from the darkest recesses of oblivion, time and again, to ruffle up the tranquility of established canons, critical methods and critical thinking. In fact, the political consciousness sharpened through women's movements across the world, and in particular, contexts, have been instrumental in circulating ideas of resistance. The need for transformation has, in turn, become instrumental in women writers' recognition and articulation of their own dilemmas while also voicing the dilemma of the marginalised *others*. The triangulation of the development of feminist criticism, feminism as a social movement and women's writing has allowed the creative space to evolve as a veritable platform for the articulation of suppressed voices, thereby promoting plurality in the meaning-making process. Women's writings have been able to foreground the complex subjectivity of women by forwarding the plural frame of reference where coordinates of class, caste, race, religion and geography must intersect with gender. These have been able to project women as a subject-in-process, not an ahistorical, fixed subject/object as is conveniently held.

Keeping in view the above discussion, the present paper intends to delve into the fictional works of Prabhabati Debi Saraswati (1905-1972). In her writing career, which spanned across decades (from the early 1920s-1960s), Prabhabati not only wrote several popular domestic novels but also created the first Bengali woman detective, the

bhadramohila goyenda, in around the 1950s, although her contribution has been forgotten. The paper begins by discussing the various facets of women's writing that emerged during the colonial era. This is followed by an exposition into Prabhabati's domestic novels, which unravels the drift of her thought processes that serve to comprehend the impulses, dilemmas, and contradictions that might have influenced Prabhabati while imagining her woman detective, Krishna Choudhury. In doing so, the imagination of the woman detective in itself is considered a powerful assertion of the woman writer's agency that was used to challenge the male-centredness of the canon of Bengali detective fiction, in particular, and Indian detective fiction, in general. Through a survey of select novels of the Krishna series, the paper also tries to show how the constraints and contradictions involved in the process of imagining the woman detective could not think of agency as a radical march forward but as something that is enmeshed within the play of compliance and contradiction. This creates scope for the interplay of doubt, dilemma, assertion, and vulnerability within the woman detective who challenges the masculine notion of the extraordinary so often associated with the male detective. In fact, Krishna's recognition of her own limitations allows her to evolve as an empathetic subject who connects with other women through the mutual understanding of pain and hurt, an interesting aspect that Prabhabati only hints at, creating a scope for future experimentation in the canon to ponder upon.

Women's Writing and the Nationalist Movement

Surfing through Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha's two-volume work that captures women writing in India since 600 B.C., we can definitely state that Indian women never lacked the talent to write. Although the woman writer begins from a privileged and constricted vantage point, since articulation through writing is neither available to all nor is writing the only method of transmission of knowledge and intellect, especially within oral cultures, it is beyond doubt that writing emerged as a veritable tool of resistance and subversion in certain historical periods and contexts. In fact, while contexts have been instrumental in impacting women's literary production, women's acts of writing have also influenced the way in which certain contexts have gathered meaning. Such an argument can receive appropriate substantiation when the upsurge of women writing during the colonial period in India is mapped.

In the view of contextualising women's writing during the colonial period, it might be interesting to direct our attention towards the 'women's question'. The 'women's question' became a matter of vexed debate that mobilised much of the social, political and cultural transaction of the period amidst the negotiations between the colonial power, the nationalist, and reform movements. While the 'women's question' validated the narrative of the 'white man's burden', thereby legitimising colonial rule as the only means of protecting the uncivilised native from self-destruction, the nationalist and reformist measures manoeuvred the 'woman's question' to suit their own priorities. Partha Chatterjee identifies contradictory pulls of nationalist ideology in its struggle against the dominance of colonialism and the resolution it offered to the contradictions therein. The resolution was built around, firstly, the separation of the domain of culture into two spheres — the material and the spiritual. This was further condensed into "*ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world" in the social sphere (Chatterjee 313). The outer/*bahir*/world was the material, external domain, the domain of the male, where adjustments were required in order to sustain. However, it remained unimportant in comparison to the inner/*ghar*/home, where the true essence of life remained unaffected by the profanities of the outside world. Nationalist ideology gained currency from this notion, which conferred a distinctive identity of superior spiritual culture to the East and thus became the inner core of national culture that the nationalists required to protect, preserve, and strengthen. So they adopted a dichotomous stand — "in the world, imitation and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to the annihilation of one's very identity" (Chatterjee 314). Women were vested with the responsibility of keeping up the sanctity of

the spiritual space of inner/*ghar*/home. Although changes in the external conditions of the life of women were acceptable, as was forwarded by the reformist measures, it was imperative that they retained their inner spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues. Thus, the idea that men and women could be westernised, but with a distinction, was responsible for the ways in which the relation of women with society was perceived.

In consistency with the nationalist project, the woman of the middle and upper-class homes was being offered education within a curriculum that could equip her to operate well within the households, thus embellishing her with instruments necessary for bringing up able sons for the nation. Such an education was also supposed to be effective in creating the category of the *bhadramohila*, a class apart from the rough, uncouth, garish versions of women belonging to the lower strata. Thus, although the idea of the 'new woman' was actively promoted, it came with the baggage of being a *bhadramohila*, a category that sought to isolate middle- and upper-class women from the women of the lower strata, thereby trying to dismantle the relationships women have always enjoyed with each other outside class and caste constraints. Women were, thus, subjected to a new patriarchy (Chatterjee 321). They were idealised either as mothers or as goddesses, in keeping with the image of *Bharat Mata*, while the tropes tended to erase their sexuality. Women who failed to conform to such values were marked as deviants, which reflects how the idea of an emancipated woman was considered to be a threat posed to the sanctity of the idealised domestic space which such women could disintegrate by refusing to obey norms and by flaunting their awareness of being rights-bearing individuals (Roy 11). The notion of female empowerment was, therefore, perceived with immense scepticism and prejudice.

The *Lekhika* Emerges

While nationalist ideology was trying to frame women within a constricted sense of freedom as individuals, the slightest autonomy that reform measures endowed upon women incited them to use their agency to attest to their freedom. The colonial era, with an upsurge in the printing and publishing industry along with the reformist stress on women's education, witnessed a proliferation of women's magazines and the rise of the woman writer, *lekhika*. While not all, but most women writers were trying to comprehend their conditions from a renewed perspective by rising above these oppressive regimes, by directing their wrath towards loveless marriages, the trauma of child marriages, the everyday activities of brutality, and coercion within the households (Sarkar 24). Again, they also decried the loss of language and modes which did not allow them to express their conditions and voiced a need to break down the patriarchal modes of expression. It is to these women writers that the future of the novel belonged.

In fact, women's writings of the period wrestled with the restricted image of the "new woman" as a compatible companion for the *bhadralok* while foregrounding their desire to be emancipated as individuals. The 'new woman' was constantly learning about her boundaries by questioning the sagacity of norms and the organisation of gender relations within the private domain while suggesting social restructuring. While responding to the call to turn into men's, and consequently, the nation's, ideal as guardians of culture and tradition, women were also challenging and overturning inherited practices with their own designs (Bagchi, *Scripting the Nation* 81). Women's literary activities continuously provided space to the 'new', accommodating constant re-evaluation to understand subjectivities by actively participating in the public domain as writers and interrogating institutions that were considered as 'given'. Thus, just when it was thought that the women's question had been resolved by the nationalist movement, it was actually just being posed by women around the 1920s (Bagchi, *Shaping the Discourse* 76). It was such a turn that allowed women to negotiate new possibilities through a subtle play of compliance and contestation.

Prabhabati Debi Saraswati: an Unremembered Voice

An enquiry into women's writing inevitably becomes a journey of unearthing, relocating, re-reading, and re-evaluating works by women writers, which literary traditions are prone to relegating into oblivion so that the hegemony of sanctioned writing may prevail. In fact, the need for a distinct middle-class culture during the colonial period — *bhadralok* culture — was instrumental in segregating the *bhadramohila* from the *abhadramohila*, especially through the modernist distinction between the literary and the popular. Barring the former from all those content that were considered as sexual threats to women, restrictions were imposed on what women could read, think and write about. Women were directed to texts and reading in order to give shape to the *bhadralok* ideal of maintaining the sanctity of the private sphere by trying to improve the heart of a woman. However, the emancipation that women's imagination received through such measures instigated her to imagine the unimaginable. This article intends to probe into the works of Prabhabati Debi Saraswati (1905-1972) to understand how, as a writer of popular fiction — both domestic and detective fiction — Prabhabati used commonplace situations to put forth her resistance against the given and explore possibilities inherent in transcending conventional imagination. She used subtleties in language, plot, and characterisation to register her resistance against the dominant narrative of culture that considered women as a glorious background in the drama of society. Her most courageous feat was launching the woman detective, Krishna Choudhury, in the oeuvre of Bengali detective fiction.

Prabhabati's woman detective, the first of its kind in Bengali fiction, came at the momentous juncture of the nation's independence, which seems to have had within it the agenda of bringing up a resilient self who would not be easily comprehensible, yet would be a power to reckon with. Targeting young college-going women as her readers, Prabhabati states in her notes in the novels that the stories in the Krishna series are meant to give them an understanding of the ways of the world. The 1952 advertisement of the Krishna series referred to the internationally available works, which probe into making women worldly wise, and also claimed this series to be the first of its kind in the genre of adventure stories for women (Chatterjee 552). Prabhabati claims in her notes that she intends to awaken self-respect in women, make them conversant with dangers lurking everywhere and show how their own common sense and courage can protect them. Her strategy to engage with this popular fictional form during the heydays of her life as a writer can be discerned as quite challenging, given the gendered stigmas attached to the genre. As an established male-centric genre where women were either positioned at the periphery or projected as the vicious opponents about whom the narrative constantly warned, to imagine that a *bhadramohila* could be made credible as a detective was quite a feat, showing how the woman writer used her agency to continuously transcend norms and thus, shock her readers. However, Prabhabati lived an unconventional life for her times, which could be probed into to understand where her imagination received its fodder.

Growing up in an ambience of homely literary culture, Prabhabati's literary inclination received immense encouragement from her father, Gopal Bandyopadhyay. Although she never received conventional education due to her father's transferrable job and her marriage at the age of nine, she was exposed to literary cultures from both within and outside the country. Her exposure to such cultures influenced her worldview, and she exhibited an intense desire to learn, write, publish, and become popular. Hence, she published her first poem, "Gurubondona," in the *Tatvamanjari* magazine at the age of eleven and her first novel, *Amba* (1922), at the age of seventeen (Dutta 21). By this time, her married life had fallen into shambles, and she had also lost her father while they were residing in Lumding, Assam. When she returned to Calcutta, life had already taken a drastic turn. However, very little is known about her private life as she preferred to keep it shrouded in darkness. Prabhabati was a public person — a school teacher, the renovator of her birthplace, Khatua's Banga Balika Vidyalaya, an activist associated with women's

organisations in the provincial towns, president of literary societies and women's development boards, and a writer of popular literature. In fact, not only was she very dear to Rabindranath Tagore, but she also received immense appreciation from Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay, through whose initiative the learned society of Nawadip conferred her with the title — 'Saraswati' — a title indicative of Prabhabati's literary potential and impact (Dutta 22).

The politics, power dynamics, and resistance within the *antarmahal*, which was slowly becoming instrumental in shaping the consciousness of the marginalised and consequently impacting the formation of subject positions, seemed most important to Prabhabati in her narratives. She was conscious that the readers of her works were mainly middle-class women, and she tried to use the space of the text to write narratives of resistance. She projected these domestic spaces as unsettled, unsafe spaces steeped with atrocities towards the marginalised, and thus, she continuously interrogated the norms and conditions of peace that epitomised the *griha*. Prabhabati moulded her narrative through subtleties enwrapped in the careful language that was used to reason out the need for the new and change. Although she has been dismissed by the critical world for not exhibiting radical resistance through her novels, for restricting herself to the domestic world, and for repetitively associating women with marriage and traditional roles, it must be borne in mind that every writer uses her own strategy to vent her opinion. Prabhabati used covert strategies of resistance in her plots and in her characterisation, which requires reading between the lines for a proper understanding of her philosophy. It might be important to understand that she was operating within the limitations of her context — colonial Bengal — and her target readers — the *bhadralok* — as well as within the constraints of language and imagination in her works. Women's writing was in frantic search for a vocabulary to express its resistance, and every conscious writer devised her own strategy to do so. Placing Prabhabati in this context might allow modern readers to appreciate how she incorporated resistance within her narrative, even while writing within the constraints of her time and society, by subtly incorporating the ideals of the changing times.

Into Prabhabati's Domestic novels

A brief survey of Prabhabati's works would reveal how she interrogated women's position in society, questioned the prejudice associated with religion, exposed the workings of brahmanical patriarchy that were detrimental to society, and reflected upon a society that was in the midst of transition. In *Ayushmati* (1924), Prabhabati portrays the story of a fifteen-year-old girl, Purabi, whose life takes a dismal turn when she marries Pabitra, an educated son of a zamindar, who is too meek to take a stand against his patriarch father, Bhabashankar. Purabi's identity as the daughter of a prostitute is revealed on the day of her reception at her in-laws' place, and she is castigated by Bhabashankar for fear of polluting the family and the *samaj*. Although in the end, Bhabashankar's love for his ailing son makes him accept Purabi, Prabhabati infuses the narrative with subtle but strong criticism against a society that stands on constrained standards of purity and impurity, religion and its misinterpretations. She also categorically points out how both men and women must bear the brunt of a society that refuses to change. She builds silent resistance in the narrative through marginal but strong characters like Banamali, Bhabashankar's servant, and Uma, Pabitra's maternal aunt, who constantly questions norms and tries to argue for a society that needs to change. Purabi stands strong amidst all distress, never begging for recognition but just holding herself together for the love of her grandfather. Prabhabati portrays a compassionate relationship between Purabi and her grandfather, whose lower status does not stop him from nurturing Purabi when she is left destitute by the death of her prostitute mother, who had chosen that way of life for herself in spite of her parents. Prabhabati's language is subtle and compassionate, reflecting resistance but not threatening. She upholds the cadence of a society that is gradually transforming by debating with itself in order to accommodate more human sensibilities.

Prabhabati often uses catchy, conventional titles for her novels, which often allude to the woman protagonist in her works. Her life as a social activist also endowed her with an acute sense of class consciousness so that she would constantly hurl characters of different classes against each other, often taking up cudgels against the hegemony of the upper class as she does in *Ayushmati*. Marriage is a recurrent theme in her novel — especially child marriage — which may stand as a reminder of her own life. However, instead of associating it with a static meaning, she explores it in various ways. Sometimes, the mould is too romantic, as in *Banglar Bou* (1937), where the upper-class Anula gets married to working-class Ranjan in childhood and remains true to him till the end, although Ranjan marries Rama and moves on. When Rama gets raped in the village, Anula provides her refuge, thus securing her sanctity through sacrifice. Again, in *Paaye Chalar Poth* (n.a.), Ila considers marriage to be beyond the chanting of mantra and about a commitment of the heart that she shares with Niyogi *moshai* (Dutta 26). In her short story "Bibaha" (n.a.), Prabhabati pits the progressive, city-bred Bonhishikha against the traditional village woman, Haimabati, where the two of them are given space to build upon their logic for and against marriage (Dutta 26). However, in the end, Haimabati is made to utter that marriage is the coming together of two hearts, whether sanctioned or not by society.

Prabhabati's numerous novels, therefore, consistently deal with issues pertaining to women, where women are not presented as mere victims but are also seen as resisting society and its norms. However, the language of resistance is often muted, depicting covert strategies of putting forth resistance since there cannot be a universal language of resistance. Women often need to find their own language of resistance, which might not suit radical ideologies. Through consistent movement between compliance and contestation, she does not fail to strike at the illogical atrocities often directed against women with respect to caste, class, race, religion, and the like. Creating a niche within domesticity, she not only tries to uphold the problems infesting the space mainly due to the oppression of the patriarchal society but also directs attention towards the minor resistances among the women in the *antarmahal*, which is bound to create a definitive impact on society and vice-versa. By not using a radical language of negation or revolt, she assured her entry into *bhadralok* libraries as she did not seem to pose a threat of awakening the 'new woman' of the era to rebellion, as is exemplified by the titles of her novel: *Ayushmati*, *Bangla Bou*, *Chirosakha*, "Bibaho," and the like. However, she lighted subtle sparks of rebellion within her extensive women readers, often by presenting her arguments through logic and reason. She was amply directed towards creating a new world for women by endowing them with a broader scope of realising such resistances within the canvas of life, thereby rendering women's domestic novels a space for subtle but strong resistance.

Into Prabhabati's Detective Novels

Prabhabati's creation of the urban, young, *bhadramohila* detective in Bengali fiction, Krishna Choudhury, might be an expression of the urge to imagine the impossible. When Prabhabati's first Krishna story, *Gupta Ghatak* (The Secret Assassin), was published in 1952, a woman detective was not just unimaginable, but it was also a daunting feat to launch such a figure in the market of Bengali detective fiction which was flooding with male detectives and their activities. Prabhabati, on the other hand, portrayed Inspector Byomkesh in her *Krishna* series as a chauvinist male police officer who was often beaten by Krishna's wit but never acknowledged it, thereby obviously parodying the male-centeredness of Saradindu Bandyopadhyaya's *Byomkesh Bakshi* series.

Although, technically, the *Krishna* series was published in the post-independence era, the genre of detective fiction, as it was propagated in Bengal, carried the impulses of the nationalist movement, which seems to have had a definitive impact on the way the detective figure developed in Bengali detective fictions. The unprecedented popularity of

detective fiction in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Indian context may be understood in the backdrop of the socio-political upheaval provoked by the nationalist movement. Moreover, with the formalisation of legalities that set up the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, which became intensely complex when the coordinates of class, caste, religion, and gender intersected to determine its contours, detective fiction prioritised the *bhadralok* way of life in every aspect. In fact, detective fiction came to reflect upon the aspirations of the middle-class Bengali *bhadralok*, who was, by then, assured of the reduced possibility of emancipation through racially biased government jobs (Roy, 2017). Besides, the *goyenda* or detective stories featuring male detectives became the epitome of that wishful Bengali masculinity which was capable of decisive action, heroic valour, and physical dynamism, almost conforming to the idea of masculinity as understood by the dominant discourses of coloniality (Roy 39). Moreover, in their bid to harness the attraction of the *bhadralok* readership, the fictions claimed their superiority over *battala* crime stories by highlighting their use of language and presentation of sanitised, Sanskritised, and sober content, so much so that despite situating the scene of crime mostly within *bhadralok* household, the presentations insisted on depicting an upper caste Hindu *bhadralok* viewpoint with allegiance to conservative norms that centred around the sanctity of the Hindu *griha* and the family (Roy 62).

As such, when women featured in these fictions, their presence was reduced to being victims or villains whose offending bodies became either the locus of unrestrained desires or unusual aspirations. This projected them as transgressive feminine, detrimental to the cause of family honour and peace, that the society should be wary of. In both these roles, women were seen as carrying out tasks otherwise unimaginable for women in that era, thereby subtly challenging the conventional idea of a *bhadramohila*, the genteel woman. The narrative, however, showed disastrous consequences for their nonconforming act, almost as a warning to the educated 'new woman' who was slowly awakening to her rights and critiquing social and cultural practices that shoved her to a marginal position. It seems that these representations also voiced the inner fears of the patriarchal *bhadralok* community regarding the changing dimensions of women's role in society during the period. What is important to note here is that the pressure on detective fiction to develop a form of literature that would be acceptable to *bhadralok* sensibilities bore itself heavily on women. An incredibly popular genre of colonial times became an exclusive domain for men — from writers to characters. A sort of idealised femininity could not allow the *bhadramohila* to be seen in police stations or get involved in judicial or legal complexities (Roy 25), making the relationship between women and crime ambivalent and the imagination of a middle-class, urban woman detective impossible. Prabhabati's creation of Krishna can, therefore, be reckoned as a formidable intervention into a genre that viewed women's prowess, individuality, and courage with scepticism. In fact, although by that time, women's entry into the public sphere of work had begun, following movements for women's emancipation, a *bhadramohila* brushing against crime on a daily basis did not seem acceptable. The character seems like an outcome of an intellectual tradition slowly being built by Indian women writers as they were striving towards transforming women's world and imagination. A brief examination into the characterisation of Krishna is bound to reveal contradictions and problems, although those might not be enough to dismiss Krishna or remain oblivious of her when the canon of Bengali detective fiction is mapped, as has been the case.

The eleven novels that Prabhabati wrote featuring Krishna as the detective had been immensely popular at that time. In the first novel, *Gupto Ghatak* [The Secret Assassin][3] (1952), Krishna is introduced as an outsider to both Bengali culture and the place. Born and brought up in Burma, where her father served as an illustrious police officer of the colonial regime, she is escaping from Burma with her father after her mother has been murdered by the atrocious Burmese dacoit, Yu-yin. She is tutored by her father to uphold a brave, strong, and daunting personality as he regards the meek, weak, and

submissive Bengali *bhadramohila*, like his wife, with high disdain. Hence, Krishna is envisioned as a foil to the stereotypical Bengali woman, who must give in to change while answering the call of the moment. This defiance of traditional orthodoxy, promoted by a father figure, might also serve as an attestation of a new patriarchy, which dominated the 'new woman' with new demands, who could be seen jostling between new and older orders, rarely being able to decide for herself. However, Krishna epitomised a new Bengali *bhadramohila* consciousness by not only occupying public spaces with ease and possessing a fit body but also laying down the foundation of imagining a resistant woman who is required to shock the unprepared mind of the reader into receiving her as a possibility. This outsider-insider strategy that Prabhabati plays with Krishna, by which Krishna considers Burma her home and Bengal a displacement yet tries to accommodate her modern self into a pseudo-modern Bengali cultural framework, is interesting. This framing constantly necessitates the reiteration of that shock so that Krishna is ultimately accepted by the Bengali mind while the inherent ambivalence of the society is also brought to the fore. Thus, the daunting, vigorous, fiery-spirited woman continuously rallies for women's emancipation, resists women's dominance and fights for women's equality while urging society to look beyond the gendered subjugation of women so that they can understand their rightful place.

The Krishna stories are reflective of the contemporary debates regarding women's legitimate place in society and societal construction. Krishna belongs to an upper-class, upper-caste Bengali society, thereby making her an ideal case for experimenting with the construct of *bhadramohila*. However, while Prabhabati uses Krishna as a vehicle to assert the need for social change, there are moments in the portrayal of Krishna where Krishna appears to comply with the norms rather than confront them. In the advertisement to *Mayabi o Krishna* [The Enchanter and Krishna], Prabhabati asserts Krishna's respectable and genteel character, her being a well-bred woman of class and descent (Ghosh 71), which might be reflective of the moments of compliance that the author had to resort to in order to make Krishna acceptable to the middle class, *bhadra*-readership. However, there are moments of resistance to this limiting ideology as well. Although the reason for Krishna's advent into this male-infested world of detection was the murder of her parents, at the end of the second instalment of the Krishna series, *Hatyar Protishod* [Avenging the Murder] (1953), she intended to dedicate her service for the common people of her community, and also towards making herself happy through her work. However, this resolve of extending one's service beyond closed circles dwindles when, in later stories, we find Krishna insisting:

> I have not taken this up as a profession […] The reason I am into this work is to be of some help to relatives and acquaintances in danger — even at the cost of my own loss. (Saraswati, "Krishnar Abhijaan" 317)

This seems to take away that sense of passion from the work visualised in Krishna earlier, making it amateurish. Although Krishna is seen to dominate the public sphere with her strength of mind and body, it is difficult to consider such involvement as a profession or as something outside the motive of helping kith and kin. While this conflict in representation is reflective of Prabhabati's dilemma in making Krishna compliant with the *bhadralok* demands of women, there are subtle moments when Prabhabati is also extremely critical of women's place within societal institutions like family.

Family, for Prabhabati, does not have a benevolent structure. While she presents Krishna as someone who must deal with the traumatic memory of a family devastated by displacement and murder, she also uses Krishna as a vehicle to unearth the vicious cycle of violence that traps women in the name of family. In *Krishnar Abhijan* [Adventures of Krishna], after Krishna has killed Rajendra Prasad, the culprit, she goes to meet Rajendra's bereaved wife, Sandhya, who introduces Krishna to the dark side of her husband who tried

to slow poison her father, hold her captive when she protested and was responsible for the death of her two-year-old son held in captivity in unhealthy conditions (Saraswati 353). However, she cries because her husband has been unable to live up to his promise; she cries at the demise of her sinful husband, unable to completely abandon the latter, although she feels betrayed. Except for poetic justice, there is no solution at hand. In *Karagare Krishna* [Krishna Imprisoned], in the character of Sumiya, Prabhabati presents an ideal wife who lives and dies for her cruel, terrorist husband, A-Chin. In order to suppress all news about her husband from the authorities and ensure his safety, she poisons herself (Saraswati 243). Both women project the image of ideal womanhood while they are also conscious of its complexities. Krishna pities these women, as their pain is not just because of their choices but because their choices were constrained by societal structures that define the family as the ideal place for women, which eventually brought about their doom. She empathises with them, a connection that is built through a shared understanding of pain and hurt.

However, Krishna does not settle down within the structure of a family till the end. While this apathy may be related to women's newfound sense of individualism and self-dependence within the structure of the independent nation, it may also point to an escape from the unequal and gendered power structure that creates the family, of which Krishna's experiences make her quite aware. These dwindling dimensions of Krishna leave her negotiation with the notion of family quite ambiguous, thereby making her stand at the threshold of public and private dichotomy while she becomes aware of both her limitations and her capabilities.

Prabhabati's nascent attempt at creating a *bhadramohila* detective opened up avenues for imagining the woman detective while also making it imperative to interrogate the construction in itself. A woman detective, by her mere presence, cannot always problematise the scenario if she does not challenge the masculine terms of canon formation. Prabhabati's endeavour brought forth the vulnerabilities, doubts, fragmentation, and limitations that the character of Krishna embodies, which challenge the masculine notion of extraordinary, which is mostly upheld by male detectives. This also opens up possibilities for future endeavours in the canon to improve upon. Prabhabati prepared the stage for the woman detective who, while challenging the patriarchal norms of the genre of detective fiction itself, would also become the vehicle for unravelling the atrocities of society towards the marginalised and would thereby emerge as an empathetic subject who connects with other women through the mutual understanding of pain and hurt. Prabhabati's contribution lies in showing the pathway for experimenting with the boundaries laid down for the *bhadramohila*, and her endeavour created avenues for dealing with the problems with enough seriousness as women's movements and literary endeavours forced a rethinking of canon formation. Going by the popularity of these writers, it might be discerned that although the struggle of these writers seemed to be a lonely one, it was actually a struggle that was well recognised by the women of the period as realistic. The woman novelist tends to hide shock waves within her narratives, shocks that would allow her to resettle in the already unsettled land marred by contingent patriarchal forces.

Conclusion

This discussion on Prabhabati's works, which have been invisibilised on account of these being products for mass consumption, tries to emphasise a crucial point: Prabhabati, as an informed, conscious writer of her era, was an intellectual who used specific critical tools and strategies to look below the surface, explore and expose the ramifications of the society which she chose to vent through genres that had mass appeal. Bursting the myths about women's weakness, brainlessness and lack of courage, Prabhabati's innovative move seems to find its

rationale in the continuous experimentation in women's writings, which tried to interrogate all conventional structures of literary expression. It is interesting how her writings provide a careful amalgamation of her intense analysis of public demands, social issues, and the need for resistance while she set most of her novels within the bounds of the domestic sphere. Critical discussions on such works can, therefore, become instrumental in gauging how ideas, when presented in the most receptive form, impact social change and vice-versa, as is intended by the women writers. Intellectuals are not restricted to a narrow range of academics but encompass an entire galaxy of people who use various forms of art to address their angst and effect change. Writers are intellectuals of the written word who have been instrumental in constantly affecting that idea of change and new through various forms of writing. It is, therefore, important to critically engage with such writers as Prabhabati and allow them to show how they complicated popular imagination in order to create a new class of readership who might play an instrumental role in bringing about changes in society, an aspiration that is still attached with the world of fictive imagination. Thus, although the woman writer evokes a sense of privilege, delving into women's writing definitely creates the scope to unwrap, identify and discuss the development of women's intellectual tradition through processes that interweave dilemma, experimentation and also the use of proactive energy and resistance, in the face of the politics of subjugation and amnesia.

Notes

[1] Prabhabati created two women detectives — Krishna and Agnishikha — who later became part of the *Kumarika* series. This paper, due to its limited scope, concentrates only on Krishna.

[2] All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

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