



## Identity, Society and Self : A Study of Identity Crisis in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Selected Novels

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**Abstract:** *Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay is one of the most influential novelists in Indian literature, known for his realistic portrayal of social life and the psychological struggles of individuals within a rigid social structure. This study examines the theme of identity crisis in selected novels of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, focusing on the complex relationship between identity, society, and the individual self. His characters often struggle to reconcile their personal desires and emotions with the expectations imposed by traditional social norms, cultural values, and family structures. Through the depiction of internal conflicts, social pressures, and moral dilemmas, Sarat Chandra highlights how individuals experience fragmentation and uncertainty in their search for selfhood. The study analyzes how social institutions such as family, caste, and gender roles influence the formation of identity and contribute to the crisis experienced by many characters in his novels. By exploring the psychological and social dimensions of identity in these works, the paper demonstrates that Sarat Chandra's fiction reflects broader issues of social transformation and individual autonomy in colonial Indian society. Ultimately, the study reveals how the author portrays the struggle for self-realization within a restrictive social framework, making his works relevant to discussions of identity and social change.*

**Keywords:** *Identity, Society, Self, Identity Crisis, Social Conflict.*

**Introduction:** Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay occupies a unique and permanent place in Indian literature for his profound understanding of human emotions, social realities, and psychological conflicts (Mukherjee, 2004). Writing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sarat Chandra portrayed a society deeply influenced by rigid traditions, patriarchal structures, caste divisions, and moral expectations (Das, 1991). His novels are not merely stories of romance or social suffering; they are penetrating explorations of the human condition in a changing colonial society (Chatterjee, 1986). One of the most significant themes recurring throughout his fiction is the crisis of identity experienced by individuals who struggle between personal aspirations and social obligations (Sen, 2012).

The issue of identity crisis in Sarat Chandra's novels emerges from the conflict between the self and society (Roy, 2010). His characters often find themselves trapped between emotional truth and social duty, between personal freedom and collective morality (Basu, 2008). In many of his novels, the protagonists are unable to define themselves independently because society constantly imposes roles and expectations upon them (Banerjee, 2015). Family traditions, gender norms, caste hierarchy, religious values, and economic dependency shape their identities and limit their ability to exercise free will (Chakraborty, 2017). As a result, they experience emotional fragmentation, alienation, guilt, and uncertainty about their place in society (Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

The colonial period in India was marked by social transformation, intellectual awakening, and cultural tension (Sarkar, 1983). Western education introduced ideas of individuality, liberty, and self-expression, while traditional Indian society continued to uphold conservative norms (Chandra, 1999). Sarat Chandra's fiction reflects this transitional moment where individuals struggle to reconcile modern consciousness with inherited social structures (Datta, 2002). His characters often stand at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, creating deep psychological conflicts that lead to crises of identity (Ghosh, 2016).

The theme of identity crisis becomes especially visible in his portrayal of women (Ahmed, 2014). Female characters such as Paro, Chandramukhi, Rajlakshmi, Lalita, and Sabitri struggle against patriarchal systems that deny them individuality and autonomy (Bhattacharya, 2009). Sarat Chandra portrays women not merely as victims but as emotionally complex individuals seeking dignity, love, and recognition (Mitra, 2018). Similarly, his male characters often suffer from indecisiveness, emotional weakness, and social pressure, revealing the psychological burden imposed by traditional masculinity (Roy Chowdhury, 2013).

This study examines the representation of identity crisis in selected novels of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, including *Devdas*, *Srikanta*, *Charitraheen*, and *Parineeta* (Mukherjee, 2004). Through these texts, the paper explores how social institutions and cultural values contribute to the formation and fragmentation of identity (Banerjee, 2015). It also investigates how Sarat Chandra presents the search for selfhood within restrictive social conditions (Sen, 2012).

Ultimately, the study argues that Sarat Chandra's novels continue to remain relevant because they address universal questions concerning individuality, freedom, emotional truth, and social oppression (Das, 1991). His exploration of identity crisis reflects not only the realities of colonial Bengal but also broader human struggles related to belonging, self-definition, and social acceptance (Ghosh, 2016).

**Identity Crisis and Colonial Indian Society:** Identity crisis refers to the psychological and emotional conflict that arises when an individual struggles to establish a stable sense of self (Erikson, 1968). In Sarat Chandra's novels, identity crisis is deeply connected to the oppressive social structure of colonial Indian society (Chatterjee, 1986). Individuals are expected to conform to rigid codes of morality, caste hierarchy, gender roles, and family expectations (Sarkar, 1983). Those who fail to conform often experience social rejection, guilt, and emotional suffering (Ahmed, 2014).

Colonial India witnessed major cultural transformations (Chandra, 1999). Western education introduced ideas of rationalism, individuality, and freedom, while traditional social institutions continued to emphasize obedience and collective identity (Datta, 2002). This conflict between old and new values created confusion among individuals who attempted to redefine themselves in a rapidly changing society (Roy, 2010). Sarat Chandra captured this transitional anxiety with remarkable psychological depth (Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

In his fiction, society functions as a controlling force that shapes identity (Banerjee, 2015). Characters rarely possess the freedom to make independent choices. Instead, their lives are governed by family honour, social reputation, caste restrictions, and moral expectations (Bhattacharya, 2009). The inability to reconcile personal emotions with social obligations produces identity fragmentation (Sen, 2012). Sarat Chandra demonstrates that identity is not formed in isolation; it is constantly influenced and often suppressed by social institutions (Mitra, 2018).

The crisis of identity also emerges from emotional repression (Roy Chowdhury, 2013). Many of Sarat Chandra's characters are unable to express their desires openly because society condemns emotional honesty (Das, 1991). Love becomes restricted by class difference, caste barriers, and patriarchal morality (Chakraborty, 2017). Consequently, characters suffer from inner turmoil and alienation (Basu, 2008). Sarat Chandra portrays these emotional struggles with compassion and realism, revealing the psychological consequences of social oppression (Mukherjee, 2004).

**Identity Crisis in Devdas:** Among Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's works, Devdas is perhaps the most powerful exploration of identity crisis (Mukherjee, 2004). The protagonist Devdas represents an individual who is unable to assert his identity against social conventions and personal weakness (Sen, 2012). Torn between love and social expectation, Devdas gradually loses his sense of self and descends into emotional destruction (Roy, 2010).

Devdas loves Parvati (Paro), but social hierarchy and family pride prevent their union (Das, 1991). Although Devdas emotionally desires Paro, he lacks the courage to oppose his family and society (Banerjee, 2015). His inability to make independent decisions reflects a fragmented identity shaped by social conditioning (Basu, 2008). Devdas is neither fully obedient to society nor fully committed to his own emotions (Chatterjee, 1986). This internal contradiction becomes the central source of his psychological crisis (Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

Paro, too, experiences an identity crisis (Ahmed, 2014). As a woman in a patriarchal society, her identity is determined largely through marriage and family honour (Bhattacharya, 2009). When Devdas rejects her due to social pressure, Paro marries another man to preserve social respectability (Chakraborty, 2017). Yet emotionally she remains attached to Devdas (Mitra, 2018). Her identity becomes divided between social duty and emotional truth (Roy Chowdhury, 2013).

The character of Chandramukhi further complicates the theme of identity (Ghosh, 2016). As a courtesan, she exists outside respectable society and is denied dignity despite her emotional sincerity (Das, 1991). Society defines her identity through moral judgment, yet Sarat Chandra portrays her as compassionate, loyal, and spiritually superior to many socially respected individuals (Ahmed, 2014). Through Chandramukhi, the novelist challenges the hypocrisy of social morality and questions how identity is socially constructed (Sen, 2012).

Devdas ultimately symbolizes the tragedy of an individual incapable of achieving self-realization (Roy, 2010). His alcoholism and self-destruction reflect his inability to reconcile selfhood with social expectation (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). The novel demonstrates how rigid social structures destroy individuality and emotional authenticity (Banerjee, 2015).

**The Search for Self in Srikanta:** Srikanta presents a more philosophical and introspective exploration of identity (Chatterjee, 1986). Unlike Devdas, Srikanta is a wandering figure searching for meaning and self-understanding (Mukherjee, 2004). The novel reflects the psychological journey of an individual attempting to define himself within a society full of contradictions (Roy Chowdhury, 2013).

Srikanta's travels symbolize the quest for identity (Ghosh, 2016). He encounters people from different social backgrounds, including marginalized women, ascetics, labourers, and intellectuals (Datta, 2002). These encounters gradually shape his understanding of life and selfhood (Sen, 2012). Sarat Chandra uses the protagonist's journey to examine how identity is influenced by social experience and human relationships (Mitra, 2018).

One of the most significant aspects of the novel is Srikanta's relationship with Rajlakshmi (Ahmed, 2014). Rajlakshmi represents a woman struggling to construct her identity in a patriarchal world (Bhattacharya, 2009). Despite social stigma and emotional suffering, she demonstrates strength, independence, and resilience (Chakraborty, 2017). Her emotional complexity challenges traditional gender expectations (Basu, 2008).

The novel also reflects existential uncertainty (Roy, 2010). Srikanta often feels detached from social structures and uncertain about his purpose in life (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). His identity remains fluid rather than fixed (Banerjee, 2015). Sarat Chandra presents identity not as a stable condition but as a continuous process shaped by experience, memory, and emotional conflict (Ghosh, 2016).

Through Srikanta's introspection, the novelist explores themes of alienation, loneliness, and self-discovery (Das, 1991). The novel suggests that identity cannot be fully understood through social labels alone; it must emerge through personal reflection and emotional truth (Sen, 2012).

**Gender, Morality, and Identity in Charitraheen:** Charitraheen is one of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's most radical novels in its examination of gender and moral identity (Ahmed, 2014). The title itself, meaning "characterless," reflects society's tendency to define women according to rigid moral standards (Bhattacharya, 2009). The novel critiques patriarchal hypocrisy and exposes how society imposes identities upon women without understanding their emotional reality (Mitra, 2018).

The female characters in the novel experience severe identity crises because society judges them primarily through sexual morality (Roy Chowdhury, 2013). Women who deviate from social expectations are labelled immoral and excluded from respectable society (Chakraborty, 2017). Sarat Chandra questions whether morality should be defined by social norms or by human compassion and emotional sincerity (Sen, 2012).

Kiranmayi is a particularly complex character who struggles against social constraints (Basu, 2008). Her desires, emotions, and individuality conflict with patriarchal expectations (Ahmed, 2014). Society refuses to recognize her humanity and instead reduces her identity to moral labels (Banerjee, 2015). Sarat Chandra portrays her psychological suffering with empathy, highlighting the injustice of social judgment (Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

The novel also reveals how men participate in maintaining oppressive moral systems while simultaneously violating them (Das, 1991). This double standard creates emotional and psychological damage for women, who are denied agency and self-definition (Bhattacharya, 2009). Sarat Chandra demonstrates that identity in patriarchal society is deeply gendered and unequal (Ghosh, 2016).

By challenging conventional ideas of virtue and respectability, Charitraheen becomes a powerful critique of social morality (Roy, 2010). The novel argues that society often destroys individuality through rigid moral categorization (Mukherjee, 2004).

**Social Class and Emotional Identity in Parineeta:** Parineeta explores identity crisis through themes of class difference, emotional insecurity, and social expectation (Chatterjee, 1986). The relationship between Lalita and Shekhar reflects the tension between love and social hierarchy (Roy Chowdhury, 2013).

Lalita's identity is shaped by economic dependency and patriarchal expectations (Ahmed, 2014). Orphaned and financially vulnerable, she lacks social power despite her emotional intelligence and moral strength (Mitra, 2018). Society views her position as inferior, affecting both her self-perception and her relationship with Shekhar (Banerjee, 2015).

Shekhar himself experiences psychological conflict due to his attachment to family authority and social prestige (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). Although emotionally connected to Lalita, he hesitates to acknowledge their relationship openly because of social and economic considerations (Das, 1991). His emotional uncertainty reflects the influence of patriarchal and class-based values on identity formation (Chakraborty, 2017).

The novel portrays how love becomes entangled with issues of social status and family honour (Sen, 2012). Sarat Chandra demonstrates that emotional relationships in traditional society are rarely free from social interference (Roy, 2010). Identity is therefore shaped not only by internal emotions but also by external social structures (Ghosh, 2016).

Despite these conflicts, Lalita emerges as a symbol of emotional resilience and moral integrity (Bhattacharya, 2009). Her quiet strength challenges patriarchal assumptions about female weakness (Ahmed,

2014). Sarat Chandra portrays her identity as rooted in emotional authenticity rather than social status (Mukherjee, 2004).

**Women and the Crisis of Selfhood:** One of the most remarkable aspects of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's fiction is his sensitive portrayal of women's psychological struggles (Mitra, 2018). His female characters often experience deeper identity crises than men because patriarchal society denies them autonomy, education, and emotional freedom (Ahmed, 2014).

Women in Sarat Chandra's novels are expected to sacrifice their desires for family honour and social morality (Bhattacharya, 2009). Their identities are defined through relationships such as daughter, wife, widow, or mother rather than through individual selfhood (Chakraborty, 2017). This social structure prevents women from developing independent identities (Banerjee, 2015).

However, Sarat Chandra does not portray women merely as passive victims (Das, 1991). Many of his female characters possess emotional intelligence, moral courage, and inner resilience (Roy Chowdhury, 2013). They question social injustice and seek dignity despite oppressive circumstances (Sen, 2012). Through characters like Rajlakshmi, Paro, Chandramukhi, Lalita, and Kiranmayi, the novelist critiques patriarchal society and highlights women's struggle for self-recognition (Ghosh, 2016).

Widowhood, social stigma, and sexual morality become major sources of identity crisis for women (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). Society often excludes women who fail to conform to idealized standards of femininity (Ahmed, 2014). Sarat Chandra exposes the cruelty of such moral judgment and emphasizes the emotional humanity of marginalized women (Mukherjee, 2004).

His portrayal of women was revolutionary for his time because he treated female characters as psychologically complex individuals rather than moral symbols (Roy, 2010). Their struggles for identity remain relevant in contemporary discussions of gender and social inequality (Mitra, 2018).

**Psychological Realism and Inner Conflict:** A defining feature of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novels is psychological realism (Chatterjee, 1986). He focuses not only on external social conflict but also on the inner emotional world of his characters (Mukhopadhyay, 2011). Identity crisis in his fiction is therefore both social and psychological (Sen, 2012).

His characters frequently experience loneliness, emotional repression, guilt, indecision, and alienation (Roy Chowdhury, 2013). They struggle to understand themselves while simultaneously attempting to satisfy social expectations (Banerjee, 2015). Sarat Chandra carefully depicts how internal conflict shapes human behaviour and emotional suffering (Das, 1991).

Unlike idealized literary heroes, his protagonists are flawed, uncertain, and emotionally vulnerable (Ghosh, 2016). This realism makes them deeply human and relatable (Mukherjee, 2004). Their psychological struggles reflect universal human anxieties concerning love, belonging, freedom, and self-worth (Ahmed, 2014).

The novelist also portrays silence as a significant aspect of identity crisis (Roy, 2010). Many characters are unable to articulate their emotions openly because society discourages emotional honesty (Bhattacharya, 2009). Their silence intensifies misunderstanding and emotional isolation (Chakraborty, 2017). Sarat Chandra uses this emotional restraint to reveal the tragic consequences of social repression (Mitra, 2018).

**Tradition, Modernity, and Identity:** Another important dimension of identity crisis in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novels is the conflict between tradition and modernity (Sarkar, 1983). Colonial India was undergoing rapid intellectual and cultural change (Chandra, 1999). Western education introduced new ideas about individuality, women's rights, and social reform, while traditional society continued to value hierarchy and conformity (Datta, 2002).

This cultural transition created uncertainty among individuals who were caught between conflicting value systems (Roy, 2010). Sarat Chandra's characters often desire personal freedom but fear social rejection (Sen, 2012). Their identity crises reflect the broader transformation of Indian society during the colonial period (Mukhopadhyay, 2011).

The novelist neither completely rejects tradition nor blindly glorifies modernity (Das, 1991). Instead, he critically examines both (Banerjee, 2015). He recognizes the emotional and cultural significance of social relationships while simultaneously exposing the cruelty of oppressive traditions (Ghosh, 2016). His fiction advocates compassion, humanity, and emotional truth over rigid social conformity (Mukherjee, 2004).

**Conclusion:** Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay remains one of the most important literary voices exploring the relationship between identity, society, and selfhood in Indian literature. His novels portray individuals trapped within restrictive social systems that deny emotional freedom and personal autonomy. Through psychological realism and social critique, he reveals how identity is shaped, fragmented, and often suppressed by social expectations. In novels such as *Devdas*, *Srikanta*, *Charitraheen*, and *Parineeta*, Sarat Chandra examines the emotional consequences of social oppression, patriarchal morality, class hierarchy, and cultural transition. His characters struggle to reconcile personal desires with collective expectations, leading to deep psychological conflicts and crises of identity. The novelist's sensitive portrayal of women is especially significant. By presenting female characters as emotionally complex individuals seeking dignity and selfhood, he challenged patriarchal norms and exposed the injustice of gender inequality. His exploration of emotional repression, social alienation, and moral hypocrisy continues to resonate with modern readers. Ultimately, Sarat Chandra's fiction demonstrates that the search for identity is both personal and social. Individuals cannot fully realize themselves within oppressive structures that deny emotional authenticity and freedom. His novels therefore remain powerful reflections on human dignity, social change, and the enduring struggle for self-realization in a complex and restrictive world.

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