



Swarnakumari Devi's Philosophy Of Life And Feminism As Reflected In Chinnamukul, Snehalata Ba Palita, And "Kahake?"

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ABSTRACT

Swarnakumari Devi, one of the earliest women intellectuals of modern Bengal, occupies a significant place in the history of Indian feminism and literary thought. This research paper attempts to explore her philosophy of life and feminist consciousness as reflected in three of her notable works—*Chinnamukul*, *Snehalata Ba Palita*, and "*Kahake?*". Through these texts, Swarnakumari Devi presents a progressive vision of womanhood grounded in self-respect, education, emotional independence, and ethical strength. Her female characters are not merely passive sufferers; rather, they emerge as thoughtful individuals who question social injustice, patriarchal domination, and restrictive gender roles.

In *Chinnamukul*, the condition of women trapped within conservative social norms is portrayed with deep psychological insight. *Snehalata Ba Palita* highlights the internal conflict of women torn between personal desire and social duty, while "*Kahake?*" critically examines women's identity and emotional autonomy within marriage. Across these narratives, Swarnakumari Devi advocates moral courage, intellectual growth, and social responsibility as the true foundations of women's liberation.

This paper argues that Swarnakumari Devi's feminism is neither radical nor confrontational, but deeply humanistic and reformative. Her philosophy of life emphasizes harmony between individual freedom and social ethics. By analyzing these three texts, this study establishes Swarnakumari Devi as a pioneer of early feminist thought in Bengali literature who paved the way for later women writers and social reformers in India.

Keywords: Swarnakumari Devi, Bengali Feminism, Women's Identity, Social Reform, Philosophy of Life, Early Women's Writing, etc.

Introduction:

Swarnakumari Devi (1855–1932) occupies a distinctive place in the history of Bengali literature as one of the earliest women writers who consistently addressed women's inner lives, social constraints, and intellectual potential. As a member of the illustrious Tagore family, she inherited a rich cultural and literary environment; yet her creative vision extended far beyond privilege to engage deeply with the lived realities of women in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. At a time when women's education, freedom, and individuality were heavily restricted, Swarnakumari Devi emerged as a bold literary voice who explored women's emotions, aspirations, moral struggles, and their quest for self-respect and autonomy.

The late nineteenth century was a period of intense social change in Bengal. The reform movements initiated by thinkers such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar challenged conservative social practices like child marriage, female illiteracy, and rigid gender roles. However, despite these reforms, women continued to face deep-rooted patriarchy within the family and society. Literature became a powerful medium for articulating women's silent suffering as well as their growing consciousness. Swarnakumari Devi's works stand at the crossroads of tradition and transformation, where she upholds moral values while simultaneously questioning social injustice toward women.

This research paper focuses on Swarnakumari Devi's philosophy of life and feminist thought as reflected in three of her important works—*Chinnamukul*, *Snehalata Ba Palita*, and "*Kahake?*". These texts portray

women not merely as passive victims but as emotionally complex individuals capable of ethical reasoning, resistance, sacrifice, and self-awareness. Through characters shaped by social responsibilities and personal conflicts, Swarnakumari Devi presents a vision of womanhood rooted in dignity, compassion, strength, and moral independence rather than blind submission.

Her feminism is not radical in a modern political sense, but it is deeply ethical and reformist. She emphasizes women's right to education, emotional fulfillment, and moral choice while remaining sensitive to the social structure of her time. Her philosophy of life integrates humanism, compassion, duty, and self-respect, suggesting that true progress lies not only in external reform but also in inner awakening. In *Chinnamukul*, she highlights the vulnerability and resilience of childhood; in *Snehalata Ba Palita*, she explores motherhood, identity, and emotional displacement; and in "*Kahake?*", she presents the psychological tensions of women trapped within social expectations.

The objective of this paper is to examine how Swarnakumari Devi articulates a balanced feminist vision rooted in life philosophy, where women seek personal integrity within a restrictive social order. By analyzing these three texts, the study aims to reveal how her literary works contribute significantly to early feminist thinking in Bengali literature and continue to remain relevant in discussions of gender, ethics, and human dignity. Through this exploration, Swarnakumari Devi emerges not merely as a pioneering woman writer but as a profound thinker of life and society.

Description:

Swarnakumari Devi occupies a distinguished place in nineteenth-century Bengali literature as both a creative writer and a committed social reformer. Her enduring contributions to literary culture, scientific awareness, and women's advancement remain highly significant. A close reading of her literary works and social initiatives clearly reveals a well-defined philosophy of life rooted in the ideals of women's education, social equality, moral responsibility, and creative self-expression. At the same time, her feminist consciousness is unmistakably evident in her tireless efforts to promote women's rights, freedom, and intellectual empowerment. Her writings reflect not only personal conviction but also a broader engagement with the social and cultural transformations of her time.

The present study focuses on three of her socially oriented novels namely *Chinnamukul*, *Snehalata ba Palita*, and *Kahake?* All these novels examine how Swarnakumari Devi's philosophy of life and feminist ideals are artistically reflected through fictional narratives. These novels, written against the backdrop of nineteenth-century Bengal, present women not merely as passive recipients of social customs but as active subjects striving for education, self-reliance, and social dignity. While these texts emphasize women's intellectual growth and social rights, they also retain certain traditional feminine values such as compassion, sacrifice, and moral strength. This coexistence of reformist vision with cultural continuity makes Swarnakumari Devi's feminism both balanced and socially grounded. Through these novels, she articulates a progressive worldview that seeks not to reject tradition outright but to reform it from within.

Beyond her literary achievements, Swarnakumari Devi played an instrumental role in shaping women's educational and social advancement through institutional efforts. Her long-standing association with *Bharati* magazine as its editor for nearly seventeen years stands as a testament to her unwavering dedication to women's intellectual development and cultural participation. Under her guidance, *Bharati* emerged as a vital platform for progressive ideas, women's voices, and literary expression. Equally significant was her leadership of the women's organization *Sakhisamiti*, which worked actively to promote female education, social awareness, and economic self-reliance. Through these initiatives, she translated her literary ideals into concrete social action.

Critical responses to Swarnakumari Devi's editorial leadership of *Bharati* consistently highlight her vision, discipline, and progressive outlook. Taken together, her novels, editorial work, and social activism reveal a coherent life philosophy deeply committed to women's emancipation, social justice, and moral progress. Thus, Swarnakumari Devi emerges not only as a pioneering novelist but also as a powerful architect of early feminist thought in nineteenth-century Bengal.

*It was during Swarnakumari Devi's editing that the largest number of women writers gathered on the pages of Bharati- this was also a notable feature of Bharati at that time.*¹

The writers of that time have gratefully remembered the efforts of Swarnakumari Devi to strengthen the place of women in the literary field. In this regard, the comments made by the eminent writer Anurupa Devi in the article 'Bharati-Smriti' in the 1333 edition of the Vaishakh edition of *Bharati* about Swarnakumari Devi are noteworthy:

*If I had not received so much encouragement from her, I would not have been able to enter the literary field with such courage.*²

Moreover, the reflection of the writer's own opinions and thoughts is observed in the above-mentioned novels. In addition, the female characters created in her novels with the writer's writing skill have walked the path of independent thinking and personality development, in addition to the traditional ideal feminine characteristics. For the overall welfare of the female race, Swarnakumari Devi first gave utmost importance to female education. In the context, Swarnakumari Devi's unequivocal opinion on women's education is presented below as an example:

It is not that if women are not well educated, society is not suffering in any way; the proper development of the nation depends on the good education of women. Men can never become well educated if women are left uneducated. ³

And that is why, to bring together the educated women of the country and the women of inner cities, Swarnakumari Devi's 'Bharati' magazine published 'A Proposal' in the year 1292 Baishakh issue of 'Bharati o Balak' with the desire to 'bring together educated women with inner city women' and 'Another Proposal' in the year 1293 Baishakh issue of 'Bharati o Balak'. As a result,

A few educated women enthusiastically accepted that proposal and, for that purpose, are establishing an association called Sakhisamiti from this year's Baishakh. ⁴

A report on the purpose of the said 'Sakhisamiti' was printed in the Paush issue of the newspaper 'Bharati o Balak' in 1298, where it was stated-

1. *The union and promotion of the goodwill of respectable women.*
2. *To provide shelter and education to any unmarried women, whether widow or virgin, who is willing to observe the vows approved by the Sakhisamiti; otherwise, to provide financial assistance to the orphans as much as possible.*
3. *If the adopted children of the society are well educated, they are appointed as teachers in the inner city by paying them salaries and thus spreading female education in the country.* ⁵

Furthermore, another notable initiative of the 'Sakhisamiti' is the organization of the 'Women's Art Fair'. Notable

The first Women's Art Fair was organized on 15th Paush 1295 under the supervision of Sakhisamiti. ⁶

The specialty of the fair was that all the buyers, sellers, and visitors were women. Such an effort by women towards women is one of the rare examples of that time. In addition, there are literary examples of such a generous and benevolent mentality of Swarnakumari Devi in her works. However, keeping in mind our limited scope, we will try to analyze the writer's philosophy of life and feminist mentality through the above three novels.

Chinnamukul (ছিন্নমুকুল):

'Chinnamukul' depicts the heartbreaking pain of failure and the futility of women in all fields. The novel is a living reflection of 19th-century Bengali society, revealing the freedom, rights, and social neglect of women. The female characters in this novel are victims of the control of others in their own lives and choices, and needs. The novelist's portrayal of the life of the novel's central character, Kanaklata alias Kanak's mother Charushila and aunt Sushila after their untimely widowhood is noteworthy in this regard.

The time of that farewell was only the beginning of life; there was so much hope for happiness in life, but in this everything has ended, in this the light has been extinguished, and both have become widows. ⁶

From this, it is easy to understand that in those days, women's lives were unsuccessful without their husbands, and everything a woman wanted and got was worthless.

Incidentally, the novel 'Chinnamukul' gives importance to women's education. In this case, Sushila's spiritual attraction to books in the novel, Kanak's reading of 'History of India', and the discussion of the history of India together with the brother and sister, or Kanak's concentration on 'textbooks', highlight the identity of Sushila and Kanak being educated. In addition, the novel also mentions Kanak's self-reliance,

Kanak would not eat the 15 'taka' of water he received from Sushila every month and send it to his brother; besides, he would stay up at night sewing and secretly sell it and send the money to his brother. ⁷

In the novel, Kanaka's self-immersion in the Ganges water in the twenty-sixth chapter, unable to protest against family and social oppression and siege, Kanaka's silent crying in the thirty-sixth chapter, or Kanaka's running around like a madman on the night of disaster, etc. are observed. By portraying a vivid picture of the helplessness in the ongoing life of women at that time, the author has tried to make people aware of how necessary it is for women to liberate themselves and gain their own identity in the future.

Swarnakumari Devi, who believed in women's education, gave importance to women's self-defense and independence by freeing themselves from illiteracy and superstition, and her daughter Neeraja, a monk, is a perfect example of this. When Yamininath, as Neeraja's savior, addressed Neeraja, who was helpless under house arrest, as ungrateful, Neeraja's serious reply was-

"Am I ungrateful? I agree to marry you despite my reluctance; I am ungrateful!" ⁸

The outspoken, courageous, and powerful form of womanhood is revealed through Neeraja; also, the novel clearly portrays the social norms of the time in Pramod's statement regarding Kanak's marriage.

Pro! "Your wish! What is the wish or reluctance of Bengali girls to get married again? Does marriage depend on your wish? Is my wish not enough?" ⁹

This clearly shows that in the Bengali and Indian society of that time; women did not have the opportunity to create their own destiny. In a society ruled by scriptures, customs, or men, women did not have the opportunity to marry the man of their choice.

In this novel, the novelist has depicted the humiliation and slander that took place in the lives of women of that time through Kanak to express the pain of the futility of women's lives at that time. In the life of the

loving Kanak, there was endless love for her brother Pramod, but *Pramod did not understand anything about that selfless love of his sister.*¹⁰

In fact, *Kanak loved Pramod so much that he found happiness in the pain of his parents loving Pramod despite their neglect.*¹¹

However, Pramod, Hirankumar, and Kanak's love fails.

In the novel 'Chinnamukul', the author plans to create a social system where women's social and mental liberation and equality between men and women are established.

In addition, the novel's main idea is the attempt of women to become familiar with their own existence and the desire to be free from the patriarchal society, which is the result of the novelist's mental awareness of society.

Snehalata Ba Palita (স্নেহলতা বা পালিতা):

The thoughts that the novelist has reflected in the novel 'Snehalata ba Palita' bear witness to a feminist mentality when examined carefully. A deep philosophy of life has been presented against the tragic consequences of women's widowhood, family and social neglect, and the limited opportunities for women to establish themselves.

However, although the author's writings partly echo feminist tones to develop the helpless, neglected life of women, she spoke about the equal rights of women and men with a pure heart in her writings. Even the fact that the cooperation and encouragement of a section of men rather than women took a leading role in changing the status of women in society at that time is also revealed in her writings; as a result, she created male characters like Jibanlal in the novel to achieve the welfare development of the female race. Therefore, Jibanlal's speech has revealed the overall issue of women's education, independence, and becoming self-reliant. In this case, Jibanlal's speech is understandable:

Jibanlal| The reason for this is the education of Bengalis, rather than the lack of education. The character of a person is formed by women. If our women were well educated, if we knew how to give them the appropriate dignity-then we would not have such a predicament.¹²

In the novel 'Snehalata ba Palita', the burning problems of the society of that time, namely, women's illiteracy, child marriage and its consequences, child widowhood and widowhood, etc., have come up. Criticizing the miserable condition of women, the novelist writes-

The conflict that is going on in society these days over women's education, women's freedom, child marriage, and widowhood means that we have also started to understand, to some extent these days that the progress of the nation depends on the progress of the status of women.¹³

Furthermore, Jibanlal's speech has revealed the importance of women becoming self-reliant-

And those who say that will depend on women's education, on child marriage, national progress is impossible. If they consider it, they will see that only if women can stand on their own feet with their birthright will the path to real education be freed, and the real benefits of social reform will be realized.¹⁴

Especially at that time, the lack of social rights of women, deprivation, scolding, humiliation, etc., in personal-family-social life, etc., manifests the novelist's overall sympathy for women and makes them aware of women's self-awakening, which is indirectly the fruit of feminist consciousness.

The novelist has given considerable priority to women's education in this novel. Only through proper education can the instinct of women to go beyond the household and work for others, orphans, or widows be born, which paves the way for social progress. As a practical example of this, the name of 'Sakhisamiti' has been mentioned in the novel, the founder of which is the writer herself. The writer's own life and literary pursuits played a leading role in achieving the overall welfare of the female race.

The novel depicts the family and social hardships and the pitiful conditions of widows of that time. The novel contains cruel examples of deprivations met by widows by their families and society. The novel also depicts the plight, economic and social deprivation of a specific class of society- the 'adopted', to whom Snehalata belongs, in the novel. Attempts to expel Snehalata are observed everywhere- first, Ajanma Lalita Snehalata is freed from Jagatbabu's house by marrying her off at the initiative of Jagatbabu's wife, then after becoming a widow in her in-laws' house, she is forced to leave the shelter of her in-laws' house with terrible torture to deprive her of her share of the property, then again while staying in Jagatbabu's shelter, she is sent to suffer the pain of her in-laws' house through deceit and trickery, from there she is taken to Togor's in-laws' house and finally she is tricked by Charu to go to Jagatbabu's house and commits suicide.

The tragic life story of the heroine of the novel, Snehalata, portrays the helplessness, loneliness, and social isolation of women, intertwined with sorrow and suffering. In the novel, Snehalata's life is seen to lack personal will and freedom; there is mental tension and helplessness in her personal life.

In addition, Snehalata's life is seen to be shattered by personal disappointment, rejection and dreams under the pressure of the social structure- Snehalata took refuge in Jagatbabu's house to get rid of the unbearable pain of her in-laws after the death of her husband, but at the instigation of Jagatbabu's wife and Togor, she returns to her in-laws' house for a fiery shelter, wishing for Charu's good fortune. In this context, the plight of orphans and widows in the society of that time is portrayed in Snehalata's commentary:

*So, be it, why should a poor woman like me hope for peace- otherwise, why fear?*¹⁵

The novelist's overall sympathy for women is expressed, and it makes women aware of their self-awakening, which is indirectly the result of feminist consciousness.

Widow Snehalata has been deceived and deprived by her family and society and has finally chosen the path of suicide. The novelist, mocking the indifference of society towards widows in the society of that time, writes- *Snehalata is no more, but the family is still going on happily. So much affection is dying day by day, yet the family has a smile on its face.*¹⁶

The novel depicts the existential crisis of widows and the exploitation and deprivation of women in society. Above all, the novel emphasizes the importance of issues such as preventing child marriage, promoting widow marriage, and women's education. This novel hints at the idea of changing social thinking and reform in the field of social reform and the spread of women's rights in the late nineteenth century.

“Kahake?” (কাহাকে?):

The novel ‘Kahake?’ is the product of a progressive feminist mindset. It also portrays the feminist consciousness of Bengali society in the context of the 19th century, where signs of changing the social status of women are observed by breaking the barriers of conservatism. The first chapter of the novel contains a true example of this, which is presented below:

*But let's assume that I was eighteen or nineteen at the time, and I was still unmarried. Anyone surprised to hear this? But what is there to be surprised about? Nowadays, many people remain unmarried until an older age, and I am also either.*¹⁷

The novel sheds light on the traditional family and social ties of women's lives, mental complications, and women's personal hopes and aspirations. There are also signs of women's position in society, traditional family and social responsibilities, lack of education, and freedom, etc., which give the novel a sense of reality.

The heroine of the novel, Mrinalini alias Mani Ramanath Ghosh, who has an exceptional way of thinking, refuses to marry him after learning about his character flaws, and then Mani's sister's comment reveals the traditional mentality of the women of that time and the position of women in that society.

*“Are you angry, or will the marriage be stopped for this small reason! Don't even think about it, then what will be the limit of stigma in society? He is a man, what about him, if he is not with you, someone else will marry him right now, and so much talk will arise about you that getting married later will be a burden.”*¹⁸

A section of men with thousands of faults in society have no obstacles or dangers, which are the exclusive possession of women in all limits and bounds.

However, the novel observes the attempt of women at that time to establish their own identity and independence in the hope of getting rid of traditional bonds. Mani's thoughts and questions bear witness to this. In this case, Mani's opinion about the character traits of her husband is particularly noteworthy, of which testimony appears as follows:

*In my mind now, the one who is the object of my forgiveness is not worthy of being my beloved, my husband; in my husband, I want to see a glorious gem shining like the sun.*¹⁹

The evidence of such an adventurous mentality of Mani reveals the difference in the mental formation process of women of that time, so it can be said that such an exceptional mentality of Mani's character has made the novel innovative.

In addition, the novel is innovative because the position of women in the male-dominated society of the literary world of that time was passive; the female characters were subordinate to men. But in addition to the women's love life, the novel also sheds light on the extent of women's individuality and intellectual abilities, evidenced by Mani's interest in reading English novels and the awakening of her poetic powers.

However, the theme of love in a woman's heart is the main theme of the novel. Therefore, Mani repeatedly raises questions in defining love, mocking the so-called patriarchal society for giving different status to the feelings of men and women. Mani asks as follows:

*Who will sympathize with my desire? How can I explain that I can forgive him, marry him- he can be my husband. But he will not be able to fulfill the ideal desire of my heart, I indeed went to give him a place in the temple of my heart, but if it is placed in the heart as an abandoned, broken, limbless statue abandoned by delusion, disillusionment, it will not be the beauty of the heart, it will become distorted and ugly for life. Does a woman have sympathy for such a masculine heart?*²⁰

Through intense criticism, Mani, as a representative of the entire female race, has tried to bring about changes in her own life by not accepting the social customs and unjust domination of men, which bears witness to the writer's own mentality and courage, contrary to the prevailing ideas of that time.

In addition, an attempt to establish an educated and independent mentality of women is observed in the novel; therefore, it can be said that the novel ‘Kahake?’ is an excellent example of feminist mentality.

In the novel, the inner world of women bound by the traditional social norms of that time, blocked hopes and aspirations, and a mental struggle against family and social exploitation and deprivation are observed- Mani is its representative.

The traditional custom of our country is marriage, but Mani has failed in the search for true love and has expressed reluctance to marry without sacrificing love. However, Mani did not want to waste her life, and so Mani also wanted to remain single and work for the country like foreigners. However, Mani's exceptional mentality has finally yielded to the patriarchal society. The daughter's hopes and aspirations have lost importance in the face of the father's social responsibility. In this case, Mani's understanding of the overall fate of the woman is as follows:

I understood that his resolve was unwavering- I further understood that I had no power to violate his orders; I am a weak Bengali woman, an obedient daughter ²¹

The novel's portrayal of women's new forms of life and existence in the society of that time is a sign of the writer's conscious mindset about women's freedom and rights, which is indicative of the progressive feminist thinking of that time.

In addition, the writer has presented an educated female character who is interested in reading Western literature in her desire to establish women's self-esteem through education and free herself from the bonds of social conventions, which is a very brave attempt against the conservative society of that time.

Above all, it is seen that the novel is the novelist's attempt to judge the intellectual development of women of that time and their lifestyle through the real family and social environment.

Swarnakumari Devi is the first Bengali female novelist whose literary work has brought about a change and improvement in the personal and social status of women. In this case, the novel 'Kahake?' is a valuable example of the philosophy of life and feminist consciousness of women of that time in Bengali literature, which bears testimony to the writer's brave mindset.

An analysis of her work shows that the writer did not limit the place of women to the confines of domestic life but inspired women to make important contributions to society. The novelist's literary efforts in raising awareness about the importance of women's education and the social status of women for society and the country under British rule in India are therefore memorable.

Findings:

The study reveals that Swarnakumari Devi presents a deeply progressive and humanistic vision of womanhood through her literary works. In *Chinnamukul*, she highlights the emotional struggles and moral strength of women caught between social expectations and personal aspirations. The novel reflects the inner conflict of women who seek self-respect and autonomy within restrictive domestic structures.

In *Snehalata Ba Palita*, Swarnakumari Devi strongly emphasizes women's education, moral independence, and social responsibility. The character of Snehalata represents a new woman who dares to question unjust customs while remaining emotionally sensitive and ethically grounded.

In *Kahake?*, the writer sharply critiques patriarchal authority and exposes the psychological oppression faced by women in marital and social relationships. The female protagonists in these texts are not passive sufferers but active thinkers who attempt to reshape their lives.

Overall, the findings establish that Swarnakumari Devi's feminism is rooted in social reform, emotional dignity, and intellectual freedom rather than radical rebellion. Her philosophy of life upholds a balance between tradition and transformation.

Discussion:

The discussion highlights that Swarnakumari Devi's feminist thought is closely linked with her broader philosophy of life. She does not seek to reject family, marriage, or society entirely; instead, she advocates reform from within. Her women characters struggle against unequal power structures, yet they also value compassion, morality, and responsibility.

Unlike later militant feminist voices, Swarnakumari Devi's approach is reformist and ethical. She envisions women as independent moral agents capable of reasoning and self-determination. Education emerges as a central instrument of empowerment in her works.

Her feminism also reflects the socio-cultural context of nineteenth-century Bengal, a period marked by the Bengal Renaissance. Through her narratives, she challenges child marriage, forced obedience, and the emotional suppression of women. The psychological realism in her female characters gives depth to her feminist perspective.

The discussion further shows that Swarnakumari Devi anticipates many modern feminist concerns, such as identity, autonomy, and emotional freedom, although expressed in a culturally sensitive framework.

Conclusion

Swarnakumari Devi stands as a pioneering figure in the history of Bengali feminist literature. Through *Chinnamukul*, *Snehalata Ba Palita*, and *Kahake?*, she presents a compassionate yet powerful critique of patriarchal society while proposing a balanced philosophy of life based on dignity, education, and moral strength.

Her feminism is not aggressive but transformative. She envisions a society where women are respected as thinkers, decision-makers, and ethical individuals. By combining emotional sensitivity with intellectual depth, she creates female characters who resist injustice through self-awareness and moral courage.

This study confirms that Swarnakumari Devi's contribution goes beyond literary creativity; it serves as an early blueprint for feminist thought in Bengal. Her works continue to inspire discussions on gender, freedom, and human values, making her philosophy of life and feminism both historically significant and socially relevant even today.

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