



## COMMENTING ON THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE BASED ON SOME OF HIS FICTIONAL WORKS

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### ABSTRACT

*Rabindranath Tagore is a prodigy of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance and is a versatile genius, who besides a poet, dramatist, essayist, musician and painter also distinguishes himself as a prolific writer of fiction. His novels and short stories often deal with some or the other social problems, more particularly ones related to women, like illiteracy, child marriage, dowry, mismatched marriage, etc. Tagore seems to be deeply concerned with the plight and predicament of women under patriarchy, which renders them prone to various kinds of oppressions. He has, therefore, strongly impressed in his narratives upon the need of women's emancipation, self-identity and independence. In the light of the above, the present paper explores the various strands of Tagore's feminist perspectives based on some of his Fictional Works*

**Keywords:** *Bengal Renaissance, Colonial, Patriarchy, Emancipation, Feminist perspective, etc.*

### INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), one of the most celebrated literary luminaries of the colonial India, was a byproduct of the Bengal Renaissance, which was brought about mainly by the introduction of English education and culture by the colonial Government in Bengal in the mid of the nineteenth century. Although done with a selfish motive to produce cheap and docile servants for the East India Company, the introduction and expansion of English caused an extraordinary spurt in the intellectual activities among the natives in Bengal, which was then the centre of the British power in India. Known popularly as the Bengal Renaissance, it gave rise to the opening of new schools and colleges to promote education and scientific research that led to the emergence of Bengali prose, inclusive of novels and blank verses. The Bengal Renaissance challenged the old social order and questioned the rationale of the

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traditional socio-cultural formulations then in existence, especially those concerning with women and marriage, like dowry, mismatched marriage, child marriage, early widowhood, etc. In Bengal the movement for these changes under the aegis of the Bengal Renaissance was led by many remarkable personages ranging from Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore. The other important names, which contributed to the rise of the new spirit in India included those of Derozio, a poet and philosopher, Michael Madhusudan Datta, a poet, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a scholar and social reformer, who fought for the cause of Hindu widows and women's education. Apart from the above, Bankimchandra, a civil servant and novelist, Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Ray, the scientist and Vivekananda, a scholar, preacher and monk also made significant contributions to the making of the New India. Besides, there were two remarkable women, Rassundari Devi, who was the first Indian woman to write her autobiography and Toru Dutt, the young poetess, who wrote poems and novels in English and French at a time when women were mostly illiterate. Thus, the Bengal Renaissance, which brought about numerous socio-cultural reforms in Bengal, was spearheaded by several personages from time to time, wherein the names of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore, figure most prominently of whom if the former can be hailed as the father of the movement, the latter as his best representative. (cf. Sengupta, 2008: 211-12)

Tagore is a versatile genius, who besides being a social, political, religious and aesthetic thinker also distinguishes himself as an educationist, humanist, poet, dramatist, essayist, painter lyricist and fictionist, though he prefers himself being called as a poet and has the distinction of winning the prestigious Nobel Prize Award in 1913 for his collection of songs, *Gitanjali*. However, he is equally recognized as a great writer of fiction and has the credit to depict in his short stories and novels various facets of Indian social life and psyche, more prominently the problems faced by women under patriarchy. He seems to be gifted with unique sense to perceive women's both physical and mental attributes, which enables him to appreciate their beauty and qualities of love and sacrifice, service and sympathy, obedience and devotion, benevolence and piety, etc. He, however, seems aware of the fact that the above qualities of women go against the basic tenets of feminism that expects them to be tough and belligerent to be able to claim their rightful place in the society. It is, perhaps, why Tagore in his narratives has frequently portrayed women as powerful, dashing, courageous and bold, who with their grit and determination, forbearance and self-sacrifice, sense of perception and decision making are capable of withstanding the heavy odds of life. Nonetheless, his approach towards women is rather balanced, as he depicts both her strength and weakness in equal measure. More importantly, he is quite sensitive towards their problems and "understood women in all their joy and sorrow, hope and despair, their yearnings and their dreams" (Dominic, 2010). He is also pained to see that the biased society is not inclined to utilize fully the capabilities of women resulting in the sheer depletion of



huge human resources. He is, therefore, critical of the tendency of imposing social dictates upon women in the name of tradition alleging, “Society takes the burden of thinking so fully and completely on itself that I am not even conscious that it is thinking ... Society has a place for conduct that is false and no place for what is right” (Sen, 1995: 228).

Articulating his views on woman, Tagore broadly recognizes two forms of women viz. mother and lover or wife, of whom he treats mother “like the rainy season giving water and fruits, soothing in heat and giving herself to others like Gandhari in *Gandhari's Prayer* or Prakriti's Mother in *Chandalika*.” (Suryawanshi, 2014: 288) Thus, in *Gora* Binoy realizes early in life that Anandamoyi is his ‘Ma’ and is the “face ... of his motherland.” (Tagore, 2003: 19) He reveres Anandmoyi as a symbol of maternity, who spends her entire life serving men at home. However, his feelings towards Sucharita, the foster daughter of Paresh Babu, is somewhat different, whom he hails as “a girl he has affection for (and also) has respect and admiration.” (Rani, 2012: 40) Thus, Sucharita fills the slot of the lover or wife type of woman, who he feels “like the spring, illusively charming, influencing passions and touching the heart.” (Suryawanshi, 2014: 289) Hailing woman in her role of a lover or wife Tagore says that it is in this role that Savitri is able to bring “her husband back from the doors of the God of Death. A woman's love is not only a joy to man, in it there is also his prosperity.” (Kripalani, 1962: 41) It thus seems that Tagore's adoration for women, in their binary roles of a mother and wife (lover), is based on their respective importance both within and outside the home. Tagore exemplifies beautifully these dual roles of women in his novelette ‘Two Sisters’ represented by Sarmila and Urmimala, respectively and feels that an ideal wife must include both the qualities together, lest there should be a trouble. As per the story, Sarmila and Urmimala (Urmi) are two real sisters, representing the images of mother and lover, respectively. Sarmila who is married to Sasanka lives happily with her husband, taking care of him affectionately like a mother. But after some time Sasanka is fed up by the motherly love of his wife and begins to yearn for a lover's love. He is, therefore, attracted towards Urmi, the younger sister of his wife, who joins the family to look after the household of her ailing elder sister. Sasanka is instantly drawn towards Urmi, who is intelligent, vivacious and attractive and possesses a child like simplicity. Obviously, the two sisters represent the two distinct facets of women, one homely and comforting like a mother, and the other playful, glamorous and enchanting like a lover. Consequently, Sasanka gets emotionally attached to Urmi to the neglect of everything, wife and business, but he is unable to express his intention openly, which Sarmila senses and decides to make the supreme sacrifice by accepting Urmi as her co-wife. However, Urmi showing her maturity eventually withdraws herself from the scene and leaves for Europe, to save her sister's nest from being broken. (Tagore, u/d: 111 ff) The moral that the above story preaches is that it is difficult to find both- the qualities of mother and lover in one person and an attempt to do so is likely to end up in a fiasco and that “If we are not satisfied / happy with what we have and keep on searching, we have to love the



whole world...” (Tagore, December 17, 2011) Meanwhile, Tagore makes it quite clear that of the two forms the place of woman as a mother is superior, as in *Gora*, the protagonist Gora “proclaims that it is the best to ‘worship woman’ where ‘they are installed as Mother.’...The Mother is the highest pedestal offered to a woman under such scheme.” (Rani, 2012: 39)

Tagore is also a great admirer of feminine beauty and his leading female characters in all their manifestations, mother, sister, wife or lover are often attractive. In his story ‘Punishment’ he has conspicuously shown as to how the physical beauty of a woman defines her relationship with her husband, as per which Chidam loves his wife Chandara deeply, because she is “well-rounded, compact, and sturdy”, while his brother Dukhram is always at loggerheads with his wife Rekha, who is ugly and quarrelsome. (Tagore, 2000: 110-20) Sucharita in *Gora* is also a woman of abounding beauty, observing whose face in mirror, Benoy finds her as a “newly manifested wonder of nature” and gets instantly captivated (Tagore, 2003: 2). Similarly, in *Two Sisters* Sarmila, the wife of Sasanka, possesses “large gentle eyes” with “a deep, steady look (and) “the dark well rounded limbs (that) had the comely grace of the first rain laden clouds” (Tagore, u. d.: 111). Her sister Urmimala is also beautiful but on a different parameter, as she is enthusiastic and very active girl and is “always at the receiving end like a child, who is although not an expert “in house hold management, yet by the virtue of her work, by the charm of her personality...filled a great and longstanding void in this house.” (133). Thus, in the above story Sarmila and Urmimala, who incidentally personify the mother and lover images of women respectively also represent them in both traditional and modern forms and Tagore seems to celebrate them in all their manifestations. Besides, in ‘Samapti’ (The Conclusion), Mrinmoyi, too is a beautiful woman, who with “her enormous black eyes...held no shame or fear, and not the slightest coyness. She was tall, well-built, healthy and strong”. (Tagore, 1991: 81) Similarly, in his story ‘Laboratory’ Tagore has depicted Sohini as a woman who “with her sharp, bright eyes, and a lingering smile on her lips like a honed knife...has a magnetic personality (and she) walks in a sari with a knife hidden at her waist (and) uses her feminine charm and machinations when necessary (as) Deceptions need strategies, just as wars do” (Tagore, 1961, Vol. 7: 984). Obviously, Tagore is not averse to feminine beauty being used sometimes to obtain a favor. (Ray, 2010: 75) Sohini’s daughter Nila too is extremely beautiful, who “is very fair complexioned... her skin glows like the white lotus of Kashmir with a hint of the blue lotus in her eyes” (Tagore, 1961, 7: 980). It is thus obvious that Tagore in his fiction lays adequate emphasis on the physical beauty of a woman and describes vividly the comeliness of her each limb.

Tagore in his fiction has also given vent to his feminist concerns and has raised voice against the rampant gender bias as also the various social evils afflicting women. At the first instance, he mourns that the society treats even the very birth of a girl child with contempt,



accordingly in his story 'Taraprasanna's Fame', he depicts the pathos of Dakshayani, who gives birth to four daughters in a row, which curiously she regards as her own failing and later when she gives birth to her fifth daughter unable to bear the trauma she dies soon thereafter (Tagore, 2005: 75) Commenting on the story Dominic remarks, "The birth of daughters in the family was unwelcome and the situation is not very different even today. And the people blame the mother for it can be found even today" (Dominic, 2010). Tagore also notes with indignation that the society prescribes an early marriage for a girl even though it impedes her way for getting educated and making progress in life. He, therefore, expresses his disapproval for a babe being married to a grown up man and believes that married at a tender age a girl not only stands deprived of her formal education, but has also to suffer from various handicaps in the married life, including the emotional adjustment with her husband and the marital home. Thus, Harimohini in *Gora*, who is married barely at the age of eight, faces a lot of problems at her marital home. She is ill-treated by her husband and in-laws and her problem further aggravates when at the age of 17 she gives birth to a daughter. However, next when she delivers a son, not only atrocities against her stops but it also leads to her elevation as the mistress of the household. (Tagore, 2003: Chap. 38) It clearly shows that the position of a woman in the family is defined by the sex of the child she delivers and that the birth of a daughter being unwelcome renders her as an object of ridicule and scorn. Similarly, in 'Conclusion' Tagore brings out the hazards of marrying an immature girl and suggests that in such a case the marriage can be saved only by the sagacious handling of the situation by the husband. As per the story, Apurba Krishna Roy, called fondly as Apurbo, while returning home after passing his B.A. examination from Kolkata, reaching near his village notices Mrinmoyi, a tomboyish, naughty and fun loving girl, who by her looks and behaviour keeps the women of her village "in a constant state of alarm" (Tagore, 1997: 269). Apurbo is instantly attracted by the unusual traits of the girl, who in his heart of hearts decides to marry her, though her unusual traits that suggest her reluctance to conform become the cause of his anxiety. However, he is quite sure that Mrinmoyi will happily honour his choice "when she comes to know of his love for her and of his merits that he is an "erudite fellow . . . who has spent long periods in Calcutta" (291). Thus, despite her being flirtatious, unruly and naïve, who values the company of her childhood friends more than any thing else, Apurbo marries Mrinmoyi, as he thinks that he will soon customize her. He indeed believes that once married Mrinmoyi should adjust with the conditions of her marital home and give up her old traits and affiliations to turn into a proper wife, but his confidence is badly shaken when even after marriage "Mrinmoyi retains her strong adherence to her pre-adolescent self" (Roy, 2010: 599). She does not abide by the traditional social norms, refuses to shoulder the household responsibilities and describes her marital home as a jail. At this Apurbo naturally feels slighted and gripped by jealousy, he loses his self confidence, but he is soon reconciled thinking, "What did it matter if she had momentarily reduced him to a laughing-stock, then ignored him in favour of some ignoramus named Rakhal? So he expresses his 'no objection'

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to her playing with Rakhai and decides to take her to her father, superseding even the wishes of his mother (Tagore, 1997: 276-278). It clearly shows that Apurbo is conscious of the fact that he has outraged the sentiments of his wife and that it is tantamount to oppression. In fact, it really takes quite long for Apurbo to come to terms with the situation, but not before undergoing a lot of upheavals, wherein he plays a crucial role in familiarizing Mrinmoyi with her role as a wife. Thus, by favoring Mrinmoyi as such Tagore seems to condone all her lapses, putting the entire onus on the husband for rectifying the faults and follies of his wife.. Tagore also laments for the discrimination made between boys and girls regarding their formal education, according to which while boys get top priority to it and often receive higher education, girls are seldom sent to school with the result that they mostly remain illiterate or semi- literate. Thus, as brought out in the above story, Mrinmoyi being playful and reckless deists from attending a school and remains illiterate even though she is not a dullard and is quite inquisitive with the guts even to perplex her husband at times by her odd questions, “whose answers could not be found in any of Apurba’s college books” (Tagore, 1997: 279). However, the cause of her not going to school lies in the fact that at that point of time educating a girl was an exception rather than a rule and marriage was considered as a better option for her and also for the success of marriage literacy held little importance. Thus, Apurbo, a highly educated youth marries semi-literate Mrinmoyi, on which it is curtly remarked that “The writer made a higher educated hero but made the heroine without ABC.” (Swandipta, 2011) It seems that it is after marriage that Mrinmoyi learns to read and write a bit merely to be able to compose painstakingly a letter to her husband at his behest, which reveals that she is only a bit above the illiteracy level, so much so that she does not even know how to write address on the envelope. She has only a hazy idea that “besides the name, something else is required” to be written, but does not know exactly what it really is. Her handwriting and spelling too are not up to the mark, as remarked, “even so much love could not make the lines straight, the letters neatly formed and the spelling faultless.” (Tagore, 1997: 284-85) Likewise, in *Chokher Bali* Mahendra, the hero of the novel and his friend Bihari are highly educated, both of whom pursue medicine, but the heroine Binodini rather than being sent to school learns her ABC by a missionary lady at home (Tagore, 2014: 3), while the education of Asha, the wife of western-educated Mahendra “is such that she can read modern-day novels and believe the incidents that take place in them as nothing but the truth”. (Ananthaxmi, 2012: 175) Similarly, in *Ghare Baire* Bimala, the wife of a western-educated zamindar is not raised well and is left uneducated, who wonders that “only the auspicious marks with which I was endowed gained me an entry into this family – otherwise, I had no claim to be here” (Tagore, 2005: 21) In his short story ‘The Exercise Book’ Tagore through the tragic account of Uma shows as to how her husband Pyarimohan does not allow her to read and write, treating female education as a taboo and stigmatic, alleging that for a Hindu wife, to wield paper and pen is a sure prelude of her widowhood (Roy, 2010: 600). Commenting on this, Deb aptly remarks that Pyarimohan’s objection becomes



reminiscent of vehement opposition to female education voiced by eminent newspapers like *Samachar Chandrika*, *Sambad Prabhakar* at the instigation of orthodoxy and fundamentalism. (Deb, 2010: 24)

Besides, it is also due to such superstitions that girls at the time were deprived of their formal education and marriage was thought to be a better substitute to education for them. Being thus uneducated and tender in age at the time of marriage in a natural course girls did not have any say in deciding upon their life partners and were bestowed by their guardians upon a stranger like chattel and pawn, whereas boys had a decisive say in the choice of their brides. The case of Apurbo's marriage perhaps furnishes the best example of it, as he marries Mrinmoyi superseding the choice of his otherwise tough mother. In fact, this aspect of the story clearly suggests that girls' education at the time occupies but only a back seat and marriage forms the top priority for a girl. However, in the case of Mrinmoyi things seem to be somewhat different as she must not have been a child, when Aupurbo, while returning from Kolkata, happens to see her and to fall for her instantly. He proposes to marry her, but his mother hesitates in making a tomboy her daughter-in-law, who, however, has eventually to succumb to the eagerness of her educated son and thus Mrinmoyi and Aupurbo get married. The physical profile of Mrinmoyi as depicted in the story suggests that she is not innocent like Ratan in 'The Post Master', as there is no "trace of shame, fear or guile in her large dark eyes. She was strong, well-developed and healthy but it didn't occur to anyone to ask her age. Had they been curious people would have inevitably censured her parents that she was not yet married?" (Tagore, 1999: 164) This shows that Mrinmoyi is well past the marriageable age and with her unfeminine traits has already turned into a nuisance:

She was quite infamous in the village. The men affectionately referred to her as crazy, but the women were worried and petrified of her. She played only with the boys of the village, shunning and treating girls of her own age with contempt. In the children's world this girl was a veritable marauder, a borgi (164)

However, as Tagore indicates in his story 'The Post Master', the option of marriage is not free for all and is available only to those fortunate girls, whose parents have enough money to meet their dowry expenses. Thus, Ratan, the protagonist of the story, being an orphan with nobody to make arrangements for her dowry, has to serve as a maid to the Postmaster Dadababu at the age thirteen. Here it is to be pointed out that the appropriate marriageable age for a girl at the time was "about twelve or thirteen", beyond which her marriage ought not to be pushed (Tagore, 2005: 42). Accordingly, Tagore himself had to marry a girl of about only ten years when he was twenty-two himself, as "His father wished him to get married, and he did not go against that wish" (Dyson, 1991: 58), though paradoxically in his writings he makes "a frontal attack on those social rules and especially on the abominations of child-



marriage of girls” (Thompson 1921: 19). Hence, it is rightly opined that the views expressed by Tagore in his works against early marriages for girls represent not his personal experiences in life, but the temper of his age as “The period during which a writer is born gets reflected through his writings (Mukhopadhyay, 1970, II: 546). However, being a visionary he goes still ahead and depicts not only his time in his writings, but also gives a new shape and direction to it.

Consequently, Tagore turns into a votary of women’s freedom and feminism, advocating frequently the need of female education, their economic independence and freedom, though unlike the west he is averse to uninhibited freedom including the sexual liberty being granted to women, wherefore he is termed as a sober feminist. Tagore in his narratives closely observes various problems faced by women in India through the people around him and treats them through appropriate images of womanhood, which remain immortal in the minds of the readers. In fact, his main message is that “The discriminatory treatment to women had existed complacently in our society for ages (and) men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past.” (Tagore, 1961, Vol. 13: 24) He also asserts time and again that for all the troubles and humiliations that the woman confronts in the society are mainly due to man. Thus, in ‘The Post Master’ when Dadababu merely to kill time teaches his illiterate maid Ratan how to read and write and also shares his family tales with her, she gets emotionally attached to him, aspiring even to marry him. In fact, being a naïve she misunderstands the whole situation and treats Dadababu’s bid to teach her enthusiastically as his effort to prepare her to be a wife of his worth. By way of this, Tagore probably wants to suggest that being educated enhances the matrimonial prospects of a girl and enables her also to get a suitable match. She, therefore, learns her lessons painstakingly and always presents herself before the Postmaster not only as a quick learner but also as a dedicated person. Obviously, Ratan’s eagerness to learn is rather to please the Postmaster to enhance her marriage prospects than a real urge for learning something. In the process she is so reassured that one day she would be able to marry Dadababu that she even begins to allude “to the postmaster’s family – his mother, sister and brother – as if they were her own” (Tagore, 2005: 43). She does also not suppress her feelings and often reveals her love for the Postmaster through her gestures, who though does not even recognize them. Being a materialistic person, Dadababu perhaps believes in the importance of taking dowry, but knows that Ratan could seldom fetch it, as without a family she has little or no money to offer (Tagore, 2005: 46). So even though attracted towards Ratan, he does not view her as a potential spouse and continues to view her “as nothing more than a servant girl” (46). But oblivious of all this in the end Ratan makes a desperate attempt to persuade the Postmaster to take her with him to Calcutta, his new place of posting, not as a reward for her services as a maid but because of her love for him, which the selfish postmaster, however, refuses to accede and leaves her behind feigning ignorance of her emotions.





Thus, by way of Ratan's tale, Tagore aims at expressing his indignation against the exploitation of women both on gender and class basis. Similarly, in another of his popular stories, 'The Punishment' the husband of the protagonist Chandara disregarding her love for him asks her to take the guilt of the murder of his brother's wife, which though is really killed by his brother himself. Chandara though does not approve the idea, has no courage to defy her husband, at which Basu curtly remarks: "Chandara who loved her husband dearly is taken aback by her husband's cruel suggestion and is convinced that her husband had never given any value to her feelings" (Basu, 1985: 59). Tagore as if commenting on the misery of a married Indian woman through the example of Chandara writes at the end of the story: "Some time in the dawn of youth a very young dark complexioned lively girl, setting aside her dolts left her parents place to live with her in-laws. But who could imagine that auspicious marriage night, of what would happen today." (60) Thus, even though neglected and humiliated Chandara does not have courage to show her protest openly, but in retaliation prefers to die. Curiously, in the end just before her hanging Chandara shows her anguish by refusing to meet her husband, accordingly when the sympathetic Civil Surgeon asks her whether she wants to see anybody, she names her mother, but when he tells that her husband too wants to see her, she evades a reply uttering surreptitiously "Ah Death!", meaning thereby that instead of meeting her husband she would prefer to die. Commenting on this Basu says, "These simple words convey the depth of the offence and grief in the mind of a simple but strong-willed and stable woman, who found that she has been deceived in his love towards her husband." (Basu, 1985: 115) Chandara's intense feelings of dejection indeed reach at the stage of repulsion, as she turns her face against her husband in the courtroom and replies the questions covering her face with her hands and in the end wants to see her mother and not the husband. The story in totality reveals that during those days women in an Indian home were treated merely as slaves, against which they protested but only meekly and in a passive manner. Tagore, however, doesn't want woman to make only a symbolic protest like Chandara, but a genuine one as made by Mrinmoyi, who unlike Chandara is not a passive person as she asserts her views effectively. As for instance, at the very first instance she refuses point blank to marry Apurbo, but eventually does so only on her own terms, according to which after marriage she refuses to behave like a docile wife, telling her husband that she will never love him, and asking him insolently as to "Why did you marry me?" (Tagore, 1997: 276) In the same way, when Apurbo asks her to accompany him to Calcutta, where he has to go to finish his further studies, she again refuses vehemently to oblige. She also not obliges Apurbo with a parting kiss though demanded pointedly and laughs it away. Apurbo in utter helplessness has to concede his defeat and has to leave her with her mother, telling her desperately that "I won't come back until you write me a letter" (281). True to that after a few days, Mrinmoyi realizes her mistake and comes back to her mother-in-law "veiled with due respect" and then a free-spirited, non-conforming Mrinmoyi



stands completely transformed into a dutiful, self-sacrificing wife. She also tries to fulfill quite diligently the promise of writing a letter to her husband. (284). Thus, the story brings to the fore as to how the problem of adjustment for a girl in the marital home at times takes an ugly turn and tells that it can be tackled well only through the patience and prudence of the husband. Meanwhile, it also rules out coercion as a tool to bring the errant woman to reason. As for instance, in view of the stubbornness of Mrinmoyi, who insists to enjoy life as a free bird and escapes twice from her marital home under the pretext of meeting her father, her mother-in-law locks her up in her room where she feels like a “newly captured bird”, but the device utterly fails to elicit the desired result (Tagore, 1997: 276). At this, true to his maturity Apurbo attempts the conciliatory method and takes Mrinmoyi to her father himself and the formula works as reciprocating the friendly gesture of Apurbo she begins to love him. Apurbo once again shows his class when his wife refuses to accompany him to Kolkata and stays back at her maternal place and he leaves for Kolkata alone without creating a fuss. However, eventually the good gesture of Apurbo brought about a dramatic change in Mrinmoyi and she writes a letter to her husband, begs pardon of her mother-in-law, and even goes to Kolkata with her to give Apurbo a surprise. (cf. Tagore, 1991: 102)

Obviously, the purpose of Tagore in depicting first the insolent behaviour of Mrinmoyi towards her husband and mother-in-law seems directed by the principle that man ought not to take his wife for granted. In the same way, the mild and ever forgiving stance of the husband suggests that a husband ought not to treat his wife harshly, whatever might be the provocation. Also the part played by Apurbo in forging a rapprochement with his errant wife, culminating in the happy ending of the story signifies that under the Tagorean formula a man is more responsible for the protection of the marital ties than his wife. It also indicates towards the feminist commitments of Tagore and belies the blame on him of being an anti-feminist. The moral that Tagore wants to preach through the story is that women like a fragile item ought to be handled with care. True to it, Apurbo, though insulted repeatedly, never loses his cool and continues to love his wife, adopting the policy of ‘forget and forgive.’ and doesn’t use a coercive method or use physical force against her, despite provocations. Thus, Tagore places the onus of saving a marriage on man rather than the wife, which curiously is in conformity with several modern regulations on the matter passed by the Indian legislature from time to time.

However, Uma in ‘The Exercise Book’, unlike Mrinmoyi, is a sensitive and intelligent girl, but she also suffers from the prejudices of the patriarchal society and is denied an opportunity to get educated and to show her creative genius. Instead she is pushed into child marriage, which makes her life miserable (Tantriklemons’ January 28, 2009). In fact, her husband Pyarimohan despises the very idea of a Hindu wife being educated and considers wielding paper and pen as a sure prelude to widowhood. He, therefore, does not even want that Uma



should continue to maintain her exercise book (khata). Nevertheless, whenever Uma finds herself amidst an odd situation and is gripped by a sense of pathos she makes entry to that effect in her khata in the space allotted to her, but Pyarimohan encroaching upon her private space dismantles it. One day the girl resists and makes all attempts to save it from being damaged, “held the exercise-book to her breast and looked at her husband, entreating him with her gaze ... covered her face with her hands, and fell to the floor” (Tagore, 2005: 145). Thus, unable to endure the oppression any longer Uma concedes her defeat, commenting on which sarcastically the writer remarks: “Pyarimohan also had an exercise-book full of various subtly barbed essays, but no one was philanthropic enough to snatch his book away and destroy it” (145). Thus, through the plight of Uma Tagore tries to impress upon the fact as to how “the female self is curtailed by forceful interventions of patriarchy. Writing becomes metonymic of the autonomous self-hood of Uma. Probably, her husband could sense this and seeks to efface every possibility of Uma’s self-expression” (Roy, 2010: 601). The story though depicts the eventual surrender of Uma before the male hegemony it also signifies the persistent attempt of a woman to assert her right to education and self expression.

Based on the foregoing discussions, it can be surmised that the attitude of Tagore towards women undergoes a process of evolution, as per which, in the beginning he seems to be obsessed with romanticism that holds women as a means to serve, entertain and inspire the man. However, with ‘Nashtoneer’ (1903) he begins to touch upon the feminist issues eagerly, raising voice against women’s subjectivity. Accordingly, he portrays Charulata, the protagonist of the novel, as a bold woman, who decides to leave her husband and to live with his cousin with whom she is in an illicit relationship. Between 1903 and 1940 such bold themes become a recurring feature of Tagore’s writings, as for instance in *Gora* (1910), he creates two powerful female characters, Sucharita and Lolita, who hold their own independent views on marriage and family. In *Ghare Baire* (1916), Nikhil, a wealthy zamindar concedes his wife Bimala personal freedom with a view to win her true love, who, however, discredits her liberty and falls in love with Sandip, a firebrand political activist. Similarly, in *Jogajoga* (1930) Tagore depicts the problems arising from forced conjugal relationship and underlines the need of one by consent. The above bold type of women of Tagore’s perception also find place in many of his stories, such as ‘Streer Patra,’ ‘Aparichita,’ ‘Badnaam,’ ‘Laboratory,’ etc. In ‘Steer Patra,’ Mrinal leaves her husband and his family in protest against the injustice meted out to Bindu, a maid with whom she is perhaps in a lesbian relationship. In ‘Aparichita,’ Kalyani decides not to marry in protest against the racial humiliation she faces. However, it is perhaps the character of Sohini in ‘Laboratory,’ who answers best to the woman of Tagore’s imagination. It is believed that the character of Sohini seems to be inspired by the women of Tagore’s own family, who were educated, bold and dashing. (Roy, 2010: 597) Such bold characterization of women, it is believed, belies the theory that women are simply to be kept and used at will and endorses



that they ought to be “wooded not just claimed” (Ray, 2010: 73). It is probably due to this and also in view of women’s contribution to the society both within and outside the home in their multifarious roles, as a mother, sister, daughter, wife or lover, etc. that Tagore adopts a pro-woman stance in his narratives. It eventually leads Tagore to conceive the idea of a ‘complete woman’, which really implies a woman who excels in all her roles and is also intelligent, purposeful, bold and assertive, ever prepared to fight against injustice and victimization under the patriarchy. Besides, as a social reformer Tagore deals comprehensively with various women’s issues to educate people to create an atmosphere in the society against them and also to come out with proper remedial measures to help solve them. Meanwhile, he also endeavors to make women conscious of their inferior position in the society to exhort them to claim parity with men, which by far is the hallmark of feminism. However while supporting the women’s cause Tagore adopts a middle path, which is why at times he is even accused of being an anti-feminist, but in view of the examples of free thinking and even rebellious women like Sucharita, Lolita, Mrinmoyi, Mrinal, Sohini, etc. as portrayed by Tagore in his fiction the blame does not hold much water. Nevertheless, it is true that Tagore perceives a vision of India that is caught up in the cross-current of opposing ideologies, e.g. the traditional and modern, the reformist and revivalist, the moderate and extremist, etc. (cf. Singh, 2002: 146) But amidst this dichotomy, Tagore prefers to adopt a middle path between social strictures and individual aspirations, thereby giving a tangible shape to his feminist perspectives. Thus, Tagore eventually emerges as a feminist who, while hailing women in their traditional role of homemakers, concedes them sufficient scope to express their individual inclinations and experiences even on such delicate issues as gender discrimination and man and woman relationship in and outside the wedlock.

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