


Rethinking Socio-cultural Values in Literature

Edited By
Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati & Dr Abhishek Tiwari




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5.
**Shaping Political Ideology: A study of women
in Tagore's works**

Prof. Steven Lobo

Women form half the population of the world. However, they do not enjoy equal representation or rights even today. The sorry plight of women is due to the position that patriarchy has castigated them to. Women have been framed as goddess and at the same time looked down upon as unwanted. This scenario is very much evident from the position that she occupies in society as mother, wife, sister and daughter. The deplorable condition of women has been seen in many writings. However, Rabindranath Tagore has brought out the inner woman in his writings which is an expression of desire for freedom, breaking away shackles, and

breathing in the air of freedom. This paper attempts to understand women in Tagore's writings.

India is known to be a land flowing with milk and honey. Its customs and traditions are rich that still bears a resounding influence on people of different regions and religions. However, there is one aspect that is a blot on the beautiful canvas, and that is the position of women in India. In the Vedic period women enjoyed a position of importance. She was recognized for her role in society. However, this position declined as time passed by. The patriarchal society imbibed certain cultures and traditions upon itself which restrained women from enjoying the freedom that they enjoyed earlier. Many problems were faced by women. Women became marginalized and were deprived of a proper form of existence. They were relegated to household duties and not allowed to participate in social life or even political life.

Women became like articles to be adorned in the house. They didn't have a voice wherein they could express their opinion, share views, have a say in household decisions and matters, etc. Their position was further weakened due to practices like *pardah* system, polygamy, *sati*, child marriage, prevention of widow remarriage, female infanticide, etc. This was all a result of the patriarchal culture and male domination in society in all matters. They didn't enjoy equal rights and

opportunities with their male counterparts. Their living conditions were deplorable. They had to remain dependent on the male members of their family and it was absolutely essential for them to follow the rules, policies and norms that were put in place by society.

Norms had been established and women were consigned to behavioural traits that were found suitable to men. They could not rise above men as they were excluded from rendering any contribution in social, economic, political or religious activities. The only role that they could gloriously perform and which no one else could encroach upon was household chores. Seldom would one find a woman who wanted to break away from this tradition. If at all there was someone then she would be a rebel and would be looked down upon. The patriarchy could not be dented.

Social reformers struggled to educate and open the eyes of people in society. People like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and many more during the time, tried with all their might to bring about a social revolution not just in the thinking of people but also in society. The practice of *Sati* was condemned and banned, widows were allowed to remarry, the age of marriage was increased, women were allowed to inherit property etc. All this became possible because of:

1. The Sati Abolition Act of 1820.
2. Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.
3. Education of Women.
4. Ban on female infanticide in 1870
5. The Native Marriage Act II in 1872 considered a husband having sex with his underaged wife as having raped her, thereby fixing the marriageable age for girls at 14 and for boys at 18.
6. Married Women's Property Act III in 1874 wherein the Indian women, had for the first time the right to possess their own property and considered as guardians of their children, and the wages earned by them were exclusively their own.
7. Abolition of Devdasi System in 1929 wherein the immoral practice of prostitution was stopped.

Though these laws came in place many atrocities were still committed on women. Women did not gain much lost ground since hundreds of years of exploitation. However, efforts were made in this direction and a fruitful beginning had been made. Even from the view of political participation, women gained the right to vote in 1917 (only educated and elite women). The Indian National Movement too saw many women participate in the struggle for gaining independence, which is only a reflection of the slow and steady race for gaining recognition in society.

One individual who has helped reflect on the position of women during these times is Rabindranath Tagore. He is well known and revered both in India and Bangladesh. This achievement of Tagore is on account of his multi-faceted personality. He was a great painter, an expressive story teller, a creative dramatist, a worthy musician and a bard unparalleled. Basically, he seemed to gel in with all art forms. Moreover, his outreach included Bengali audience as well as English audience. Naturally his social outreach was far too vast.

As early as the 1880's, Tagore conceived of three musical dramas with the music and dance being a more predominant element as compared to the dialogues generally mouthed in a drama. In the 1890's, he wrote three farces and each of them was a resounding success.

According to Herbert Spenser's theory of social evolution, consequent to the increasing complexity of large growing societies, the functions of society are divided among the members and the members become reliant on each other. So, Tagore may have donned the cap of an artist but he relied on the thinkers of the time for a sense of direction. But, in course of time, he evolved into a conscientious thinker himself. His literary prowess shone through and he was able to mould societal thinking by creating consciousness. Women were at the core of Tagore's works. Tagore's works reflect his social consciousness

about the status of women in society, their lone battles in the direction of progress.

According to M. Sarada, Tagore brought to the attention of the society some of the issues concerning women. For instance, in his early stories, he highlighted the atrocities practiced against women in patriarchal society. In his later works, Tagore brought into focus the change called education shaping the thinking of urban women. After this phase, Tagore gave women a voice and she openly protested the wrongs being practiced against women at large. The problems ranged from societal opposition to remarriage of widows or education of women to usage of caste to subjugate women.

In Tagore's stories, his female protagonists came across as individuals who fought for their beliefs and their identity. In *Sampati*, we meet Mrinmoyee who does not want to be tied down to traditional feminine roles, behaves like a tomboy. She is fun-loving, in her element while playing cricket although she ends up taking home insects that did not exactly please her family members. She does not want to marry and so cuts off her own hair before the occasion and refuses to look at her groom or spend the marriage night with her husband and escapes to the pristine company of nature. In *A Broken Nest*, protagonist Charulata discovers her latent talents under the influence of her brother in law, dares to find her true self while choosing to live with her husband rather than developing relations with her

brother in law sans her husband. When Mrinal in *A Wife's Letter* feels stifled in her marital home and learns of the complicity of her in laws in packing off a helpless young lady knowingly into an abusive marriage, Mrinal fights back boldly by leaving this poisonous atmosphere to a more pleasant one according to her liking and she takes up writing for a living. In "*Noukadubi*", Hemnalini and Kamala do not consider a marriage of convenience necessary for living. Tagore essentially never prescribes a solution that is conventional and allows his protagonists to do what they feel like doing. So, Hemnalini refuses to marry her brother's friend just because the man she loved married another and Kamala tries to find her real husband rather than complacently accepting the man whom she stayed with in the belief that he was her husband. In his novel "*Chokher Bali*", Tagore vents out the frustrations of women married and widowed young. The story traces Binodini's sexual emancipation and attempts to right the wrongs that she inadvertently committed by getting involved with her friend's husband. In novel after novel, Tagore's protagonist voiced their angst against the institution of marriage. Labanya, from middle class wonders why her relationship with Oxford-returned Amit should culminate in marriage, in Tagore's "*Shesher Kobita*" while in *Haimanti* we find the protagonist being stifled within the aegis of an arranged marriage.

Maya Khela, or "the Game Of Love" is Tagore's first ever written Musical Play. Herein the male protagonist realizes

the worth of feminine love as more important than superficial beauty. He also learns to appreciate the love that shines through amidst monotony. Tagore's was an honest attempt to help women come out of their shell. So in 1926, with *Natir Puja* he helped them to come out of private spaces and perform in public spaces. Going a step further, in 1933 he came up with 'TasherDesh' ('Land of Cards') where he satirizes the fascist outlook of patriarchal society. In fact, it was adapted as a fantasy film in 2012. The director Q analyses the unique plot and its role. He says:

"The Land of Cards acts as a metaphor for society, with its priority on control, which in itself is a form of energy that transposes through geometrical progressions. History provides us with enough examples to prove that the overwhelming need for social control consistently subverts all forms of individual liberty. A system is fascistic. Tagore looks at an alternative form of governance."

Tagore has also written several dance dramas. Of these, two of his dance dramas, Chandalika and Chitrangada assume importance in this context. Chitrangada is a reworking of the love story of Arjuna and Chitrangada from the epic Mahabharata, Chandalika builds on the marginalized Dalit voice. However, the story of women building their own identity, against the norms of traditional patriarchy shines through the fabric of the tales depicted through dance drama.

'Chitrangada', the story of a princess from Manipur was written in 1892 and while it recounts the passionate love between her and Arjun from Mahabharata, it underlines her strength of character. Mahabharata reveals the tale of Arjuna, the brave pandava, who when exiled traverses the entire country. In course of his travels, he encountered the princess of ancient Manipur, Chitrangada who marries him with an agreement that she would not leave her parental home and accompany her husband. In the drama, Tagore compares the opening of sleepy eyes first to the coloured apparition of dawn before its progression to the bright colourless morning light to the appeal of beauty in love slowly giving rise to appreciation for the core humane element in your love. He thus throws light on the process of love with it initially taking root on the basis of desire and passion, unravelling of strands of reality finally leading to true understanding of each other. Thus, although initially Chitrangada takes help from Madana, God of love to transform into a real beauty, yet when she reveals her true self, she is accepted by Arjuna as his equal for Chitrangada is trained by her father to rule the kingdom. Chitrangada's strength of character is seen in her ability to stand true to her father's expectation and her ability to rise above the trappings of femininity.

In the dance drama Chandalika he reveals the plight of the Dalit woman who is doubly marginalized, once on account of being a dalit and again for being a woman. The beginning of the play finds Chandalika, a dalit expressing inability to quench the

thirst of a Buddhist monk on account of her dalit identity. But on being convinced by the monk of doing no wrong, she does give him water. As she falls in love with him, she implores for magical help from her mother. So, the monk comes to her door even as he prays to the Buddha. Realizing the folly of her plan by Buddha's grace, she retracts from the magic although this costs her mother her life.


As we have seen, women do have a voice that had been subdued. It is not that they have been very submissive and have given in to society. There have been voices which have never been recognized or recorded. These women have made an impact at their own level. Tagore has beautifully brought this aspect out in his works. His women are strong characters who have made a bold statement at their times. It is perhaps the voice of every woman at the time. They weren't allowed to speak! This representation of Tagore is a window in the suffocated house of patriarchy through which all women make their escape. What joy for those women who have found their freedom in the open airs of democracy! Every day is a new day of experience for women in the 21st Century!

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