

Rabindranath Tagore's novels: A study of man- woman relationships

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's novels reflected man and woman crushed under the yoke of foreign imperialism and poised on the threshold of the modern age. The India of Tagore was grappling with political subjugation and colonial modernity. The British rule ushered in an era of bourgeois capitalism and bourgeois culture. This resulted in altering the equations between the home and the world. The 'inner-outer' dichotomy, was transformed into a new binary- the home and the world- the world representing the external and material, while the home symbolized one's true spiritual identity and the internal. The woman embodied the values of a nation and acted as a repository of its heritage and culture, while at the same time, was a pivot around which the entire family revolved.

Keywords: reflected, imperialism, subjugation, modernity

1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's novels reflected man and woman crushed under the yoke of foreign imperialism and poised on the threshold of the modern age. The India of Tagore was grappling with political subjugation and colonial modernity. The British rule ushered in an era of bourgeois capitalism and bourgeois culture. This resulted in altering the equations between the home and the world. The 'inner-outer' dichotomy, was transformed into a new binary- the home and the world- the world representing the external and material, while the home symbolized one's true spiritual identity and the internal. The woman embodied the values of a nation and acted as a repository of its heritage and culture, while at the same time, was a pivot around which the entire family revolved. Therefore, it became necessary to eradicate the barriers that imprisoned the Indian woman by educating and reinstating her so that she could preserve the spiritual and national heritage of the country. As MalavikaKarlekar, the cultural historian wrote about the new and empowered Indian woman- "Enlightened yet domesticated, by nature loving and devoted to the family's well being; her emancipation was to be viewed within the context of a family's situation." i

The issue of formal education for women is fearful as it can make them highly westernized, inculcate disregard for traditions and encourage 'disruptive individualism'. A man acquiring higher education is motivated to opt for Science, while a woman is expected to settle for humanities. There are double standards in the educational framework and it is tinged with a gender bias. But later, women have realized that education has helped to foster female awareness of gender inequality. Education has not only equipped them with domestic skills but also generated progressive ideas that have enriched their minds. But the education imparted by the Christian missionaries has also resulted in the emergence of westernized, promiscuous and self-deluded 'memahebs'. The educated Indian woman has evolved a new lifestyle, sometimes even flouting the stringent moral code of the society.

A new wind of change has blown over the relationship between man and woman in Tagore's novels. Married couples who possess substantial age or educational differences feel incompatible and stifled in their relationships. The anti-hegemonic struggle of Indian

nationalism has been particularly fought on the issue of 'reforming women'. Numerous laws empowering women have come into practice. The Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Right to Property Act in 1874, gave a widow a life interest in her husband's share of the property, are some of the laws that have been implemented. The Bengali Renaissance of the nineteenth century, has ushered in an era of social transformation in literary, economic and cultural fields. The Young Bengal movement led by a group of radical and progressive free thinkers revolted against the repressive religious and social structures prevailing in the Hindu society.

Cultural historians like MalavikaKarlekar and Tanika Sarkar, stress on the rigidity of the parochial patriarchal system to confine the woman inside the restricted boundaries of 'antahpur/ andarmahal' ii and to treat her as a subservient domestic maid, even by the educated spouse. The husband and wife are not allowed to mingle during the daytime and are frowned at for doing so. The wife is expected to strictly observe the fasts and religious rituals for preserving the life of her husband, the birth of sons and so on as a 'residual' kind of traditional mode of existence. Tagore's female protagonists are almost always portrayed as childless. But in the Bengali society, motherhood is glorified. The woman is assigned the task of rearing a breed of men who must have the proper attributes- courage, spirit of nationalism and patriotism. The mother is expected to conform to the role of a good mother, which means she has to be the moral guide and first teacher of her child. However, the arduous responsibility of rearing is only assigned to the middle-class mother. A mother belonging to an aristocratic family is exempted from this task.

In the colonized framework of society, the insecure and offended male attempts to downplay the subversive female sexuality on one hand. Yet he cannot himself resist the temptation of extra-marital relationships with women on the other. Man is generally portrayed as spineless, fickle-minded and always vacillating between marital and extra-marital relationships.

The woman in Tagore's times is exploited immensely by the feudal society. The traditional, old-fashioned feudal customs have magnified the miseries of the woman. But, Tagore is not influenced by the patriarchal ideas of society. He generally portrays his heroines as powerful and

intelligent individuals. He depicts their spirituality, their strong practical sense and tremendous fortitude in his novels.

My focus shall be on Tagore's portrayal of relationships between man and woman in his two domestic novels- *Choker Bali* (1903) and *JogaJog* (1929) and his novella- *Chaturanga* (1916).

In *Choker Bali*, there are six main characters. Mahendra- the chief protagonist, a smart and flamboyant young man, his sensitive and modest wife Ashalata, his adoring yet over-protective mother Rajlakshmi, Mahendra's pragmatic friend Bihari, the vivacious widow Binodini and Rajlakshmi's brother-in-law's widow Annapurna. The concept of the joint family is reflected in Tagore's novels. It is accepted as an established institution in middle-class homes. Rajlakshmi and Annapurna represent the elderly widows of the bygone era.

The oedipal relationship is projected through the mother-son relationship in the novel. Rajlakshmi influences Mahendra's perceptions and his future course of action throughout. She has indubitably attained the dominant position of unchallenged superiority among the female characters of the household. Due to this, Annapurna the other elderly widow of the same family has receded into the background and never plays an active role in the family affairs. Although her love for Mahendra is as strong as his biological mother's, yet she retires herself voluntarily to the widow-quarters in Benaras. Annapurna symbolizes the 'residual' woman, who succumbs to the dictates of the society.

Ashalata, Mahendra's wife, represents the woman of the new generation. She is more a child at heart than a mature and discerning woman. Her education has been futile as it makes her visualize the incidents she reads in the modern-day novels as factual. Mahendra, her husband, seeks companionship and romance in his marriage but to no avail. Ashalata only perceives him as a god who deserves to be worshipped and revered. She is deficient in providing him the pleasures of true conjugal life. Their incompatibility is heightened due to their differences in age and education.

At this juncture, we encounter Binodini- the young, charming and educated woman- with a deadly combination of enigma and voluptuousness. Her marriage had not attained consummation as her husband was sick and incapacitated. She has just got the newly acquired status of a widow. Rajlakshmi visits her ancestral village and picks up Binodini, who in Tagore's words, "has been surviving like a solitary garden-creeper amidst the jungle, leading a joyless existence in the village." iii Her existence is described as 'joyless' and 'solitary' due to the fact that a Hindu widow has to refrain from seeking any worldly pleasures.

Binodini possesses a fine sense of taste and is hospitable to Rajlakshmi and other members of the family. Her qualities distinguish her from the other village belles. She is similar to the 'emergent' kind of woman who has been transformed through education into an independently thinking and emancipated woman. She alienates herself from the sham spirituality imposed on the woman by society. She craves to be recognized for her own merit. But the greatest obstacle in her mission is the fact that she is a widow and so she can never possess the contentment of marital bliss enjoyed by married couples.

Meanwhile, Mahendra disillusioned and fatigued by his crumbling marriage is now seeking a fresh companionship. Soon Binodini's inscrutable charm and blossoming physical

appeal attract him and then begins an illicit affair. Binodini's widowhood status also gives the impression that she needs a man to protect her and provide her security. She is initially attracted to Bihari but later responds to the advances of Mahendra who is obsessed about her. Tagore is unable to resolve the issue- whether a marriage once ruptured by a violation of trust can be repaired into a genuine marital relationship. Bihari too vacillates between his friendship with Mahendra and his unrequited love for Binodini. He is torn between the conflicting emotions of love and duty.

The feudal backdrop portrays the cruel exploitation and injustice meted out to the woman. Three widows in this novel are entangled in grim situations and complicated relationships. Rajlakshmi -the possessive mother, Annapurna -the one who exemplifies the character of a traditional Bengali widow and Binodini- who has a fatalistic destiny doomed by misfortune.

It is Bihari, Mahendra's friend who can actually identify and recognize Binodini's womanly attributes while speaking to her at a picnic. Binodini shares her personal thoughts about her life, her past and her country for the first time. So far the parochial society only considered her as an object of desire. But Bihari realizes that Binodini is not a sensual or decadent woman but a devout lady who is too engrossed in spiritual worship. She is a woman misunderstood by society.

Romantic love is also exhibited through the letters exchanged between the protagonists. Mahendra is irritated with himself for composing a letter to Ashalata. But Binodini's letters on Asha's behalf are packed with the novelistic style of writing. Her letters highlight the barrenness of Ashalata's education while at the same time act as a catalyst for the seduction of Mahendra, since they are addressed to him. Binodini craves for romantic love and these letters provide her the release to express her emotions without inhibitions. Mahendra also spots her reading a novel by Bankimchandra on extra-marital love. This precipitates their love for one another which is now exposed even to the society. But their illicit relationship does not have a societal sanction.

The society has a dualistic approach in its perceptions. While Mahendra by virtue of being a man, goes scot free Binodini is spurned and literally ostracized by society. But Binodini faces the society and Rajlakshmi boldly when she declares that she will not conform to the rules enforced by it on widows. She states- "I am not afraid of the society, I obey nobody." (p-255)

After her rejection by society, Binodini seeks anonymity by moving to the countryside and confining herself there. But due to the introduction of the railways, distances have been marginalized and the news about Binodini's affair spreads like wild fire. She finds no peace in her new dwelling as the urban invasion has spelled disaster on the organic community. Binodini becomes a complete misfit who is shunned by everyone. Later, the ailing Rajlakshmi compares the plight of widows of the bygone era with the modern woman of today. According to her in the olden days widows were released from the fret and fear of life by being immolated. But the modern woman is not so fortunate as she has to suffer the burden of living alone.

The issue of widow-remarriage is also condemned by society in the novel. At the end, when Bihari proposes to Binodini, she rejects his offer, as remarriage will tarnish his spotless reputation. Binodini is conscious of the violation of social norms if she marries Bihari. Binodini has the stigma

of being a widow whose remarriage is considered a taboo by the society at large.

Tagore's next novella, *Chaturanga* revolves around Sachish- an educated and handsome young man, his reactions to social and religious influences exerted on him and his struggle to break free and move towards complete unrestrained freedom. His story is narrated by Sribilash, his friend and admirer. The dilemmas of Sachish are portrayed against the backdrop of the religious and reformative movements that have occurred in the Hindu society in Bengal during the second half of the nineteenth century. The novel unfolds with the clashes between orthodoxy and western aesthetic humanism.

Sachish's uncle is Jagmohan- a well-educated, strict atheist, a humanist, Utilitarian and a rationalist. Jagmohan opposes every social or religious practice that denigrates human dignity. He is prepared to sacrifice his family relationships at the cost of serving the poor and underprivileged outcasts of society. Sachish is brought up by Jagmohan like his son and so he imbibes the same principles. Sribilash his friend, too comes under his influence and turns agnostic.

The Hindu society in Bengal is averse to the idea of widow remarriage. In this novella, Tagore again stirs the same issue that has been condemned by society. Sachish shocks the society by offering to marry a young pregnant widow- Nanibala, who is seduced by his cavalier brother. The young mother is not able to bear the shame caused to her as well as the separation from her lover and commits suicide. This depicts the helplessness of young widows in those times.

Damini, the heroine and Nanibala, a character with a secondary role, are two widows who represent two different types of consciousness- one residual and the other emergent. Damini resembles Binodini as she refuses to be tied down to anonymity and lead an ineffectual existence, a role that the male-dominated society imposes on all women especially widows. Damini opposes this subjugation when she retorts to Sachish- "Haven't you people put chains round my feet and flung this woman without faith into the prison of devotion? --- Some of you will decide this for me, some that, to suit your convenience- am I a mere pawn in your game?" iv A woman is completely suppressed and humbled to the status of a doormat and a plaything in this male-governed world.

Damini like Binodini is deprived of conjugal bliss in her youth though the reasons vary. Damini's husband Sivatosh renounces marital life and adopts a state of celibacy. He abstains from any physical intimacy with his wife. Finally, after his death, Sivatosh bequeathes his entire property and the custody of his young wife Damini, to his religious guru, Sri Lilananda Swami. It is at the ashram that Sachish and Sribilash meet Damini. Damini and Sachish fall intensely in love- but Sachish is apprehensive to acknowledge it. He is torn between his love for her and the societal demands. Sachish begins to view Damini as a distraction and finds that her sexuality is an enticing force that is driving him away from the path of true freedom.

Tagore projects Damini as a strong, articulate and determined woman who is not hesitant to ask the swami disturbing questions. She even enquires as to why he did not ask her opinion before accepting her guardianship. Later we notice Sachish pleading with Damini to release him from the bonds of her love. Sachish feels powerless before her and this also demonstrates the inner strength of Damini. She sets Sachish free from the ties of her love.

At the end, Damini accepts Sachish's friend, Sribilash's

proposal and marries him. But since she is a widow, who has re-married Sribilash, she has committed a grievous crime in the eyes of the society. Tagore therefore portrays her life as blighted by the shadows of her past. Death overtakes this young widow who has dared to remarry. Therefore Damini has to pay a heavy price for going against the preconceived social norms which have been prescribed for Hindu widows in Bengal.

Tanika Sarkar, a cultural historian of the nineteenth century writes about the nationalists' idea of the Hindu woman, "--- the discipline exercised upon her body by the iron laws of absolute chastity, extending beyond the death of the husband, through an indissoluble, non-consensual infant form of marriage, through austere widowhood---." v

Sribilash is the only man in the novel who establishes a contact with Damini purely on a human level. She shares her memories of the past and confides in him. Although Sribilash is inexperienced in analyzing the secrets of a woman's heart yet he tried to understand the woman's psyche and her strife towards the quest for individuality and emancipation. He has a strong conviction that a 'woman is ready to give her heart away only where she receives sorrow'. He also affirms that women are neither 'toys made of clay' nor 'pure notes of the melodious veena'. vi One cannot compartmentalize them by pre-defining their roles in society. They are not mere puppets that move at the whims and fancies of men. Neither should they be perceived as idealistic spiritual creatures possessing no voice of their own.

Earlier in the novel, when Sachish argues with Sribilash over the true relationship between the 'woman', 'nature' and 'spirituality' he says- "It is obvious that woman is Nature's spy, which is forever trying at Nature's bidding to deceive us with her artful ways." Sribilash firmly retorts, "We must steer our boat of life, --- up the stream of Nature. Our problem is not how to bypass the stream, but how to keep sailing without sinking. What we need is a rudder." vii Sribilash is a practical and pragmatic young man who does not allow himself to be governed by the preconceived and rigid rules of society. He believes that men are not infallible or perfect. They are prone to making mistakes just as women.

Ashish Nandy in his essay, 'Woman versus Womanliness in India' writes- "To make the issues of emancipation of woman and equality of sexes primary, one needs a culture in which conjugality is central to male-female relationships," and "if the conjugal relationship itself remains relatively peripheral, the issues of emancipation and equality must remain so too." viii The man and the woman must be treated on an equal footing in a marriage.

Tagore makes the issue of conjugality a primary one in *Jogajog* - in the portrayal of a society whose culture compels and manipulates a woman to assume her maternal role soon after her marriage which is deemed more necessary than the peripheral concept of conjugality.

The story revolves around the hostility and rivalry between two families- the Chatterjees, Kumudini's family who are aristocrats, now on the decline and the Ghosals- Madhusudan's family representing the nouveau riche. Kumudini has been overprotected as a child and her gloomy world is governed by the goddesses of women's household rites. Her brother Biprodas brings her to the city where she learns how to play chess, dabble in the art of photography and pistol shooting. She becomes proficient in Sanskrit grammar. Kumudini's association with Kalidas results in virginal meditations in which she imagines that her

husband-to-be appears pure and radiant in the divine light. For Kumudini, spirituality is all-pervasive and the carnal desires are to be suppressed and curbed.

Madhusudan, on the other hand, is a man of the world whose life has been spent, 'among the crowd of suppliers, buyers and bullock-cart drivers'. ix He has a provincial outlook towards women and believes in their complete subjugation. From the inception of their marriage, Kumudini is assigned the demeaning space of the 'antahpur'. "Behind the walls, shrouded by the triviality of daily chores, she would carry on with the life that women lead, a life controlled by their master's frown." x This dichotomy that prevailed in constraining a woman to a position of complete chastity and familial domesticity on the one hand and treating her as a plaything or an object of carnal desires on the other is difficult to fathom.

Tagore, has initially used Biprodas as a mouthpiece, to voice his own opinions on the plight of the Hindu women. Biprodas comments, "The men of our times have no virtues of their own, so they speak one-sidedly of the virtues of chaste women. They can't supply the oil, but command the lamp-wicks to burn. The parched souls keep on burning and are reduced to ashes." xi

The hollowness of Madhusudan and Kumudini's marriage and their incompatibility lies not in their age-difference, nor in the difference in their social status but in Kumudini's incapacity to gratify Madhusudan's sexual needs. The spiritual devotion of a chaste wife to her husband did not seem sufficient to consolidate a marital relationship. A woman was expected to satisfy the physical cravings of her husband or else she would have to accept his proximity with other women.

Kumudini's repulsion towards her husband is also revealed in this novel when Madhusudan repeatedly used to sneer at Kumu's family by flaunting his wealth. His inborn vulgarity, the crudeness of his speech and the uncouthness of his body and mind made Kumudini feel an aversion for him. She is later subjected to emotional trauma and marital rape. A woman is expected to submit either willfully, or by coercion, to her husband and satisfy his physical needs.

A woman generally unprotected in the family or a widow often becomes a victim of male lust. A deep emotional imbalance and familial schism occurs as a result of sexual frustration of a man or even a young widow. In Kumudini's family, a beautiful widow named Shyamsundari comes forward to fulfil Madhusudan's physical needs. Their liaison is shortlived, as Shyamsundari is unable to assume a dominant position in Madhusudan's home. Her character is pitiable as she gradually fades away into oblivion.

In the end, Tagore sends Kumudini back to Madhusudan's house after her pregnancy is discovered. Even the articulate Biprodas does not accept Kumudini's pleas for liberation from her marriage. Kumudini is carrying Madhusudan's child and so he has regained his right of ownership of his wife. Biprodas surrenders helplessly to his sister's destiny by justifying that he could not have deprived his sister's child of its father's home.

We are left to introspect about the pathetic situation that has befallen the destiny of the Hindu woman of Tagore's novels. Tagore himself firmly believed in the education and emancipation of the woman yet he has chosen to leave the issue of the woman viz-a-viz man, in the Hindu society in Bengal, unresolved, as it is indeed a controversial issue.

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