



Select Heroines of Tagore – A Feminist Reading

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Patriarchy, Feminism, Personality, Womanhood, Rebel.

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ABSTRACT *Rabindranath Tagore was born in a very custom oriented society. Yet by virtue of his upbringing he developed in himself a liberal feminist mindset. Not exactly like a 'Feminist' in the strict sense of the term what he did was to give a dominant voice to many of his heroines in his works. Within the purview of the family structure, the female protagonists often rebelled against the male dominance, hegemonic patriarchal structure of the society. The paper tries to bring out the very circumstances of their life, the inner ripples of these heroines who by certain exemplary deeds remain unique in the whole gamut of Tagore's literature.*

Feminism is, of course, a heterogeneous concept that refers to political, cultural and economic movements aimed at establishing greater rights, legal protection for women, and / or women's liberation. It is also concerned with the representation of women in literature and with the changing of women's position in society by freeing her from restraint and developing an identity away from the androcratic patriarchal social structure. Simone de Beauvoir writes, "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex" (de Beauvoir 105) was Christine de Pizan, who wrote *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the fifteenth century and thereafter it developed in three waves – first, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, second in the 1960's and 70's and third from 1990's to the present. The idea of third world feminism criticizes western feminism on the ground that it is ethnocentric and does not take into account the unique experience of women from third world countries or the existence of feminism indigenous to third world countries.

Rabindranath Tagore who was born in a very traditional and rigidly custom-oriented society in its outlook towards woman, was very much influenced by his "sisters" (Deb 26-40) and elder brother and it was largely for the illuminating impact of Kadambari Devi that Rabindranath's wayward genius could reach a stage of fruitfulness even when he was still in his adolescent period. In London when Rabindranath came to reside in Dr Scott's family his "earlier observations on English society and in particular the role and ways of its women, which had been mixed with not a little irony and caustic comment, now underwent a change and he began genuinely to admire the charm as well as the strength of character of women brought up in a free society". (Kripalani 41) This admiration, freely expressed in his letters, ensued a debate about woman-liberation with the editor of *Bharati* and the way Rabindranath argued the case for freedom of the women bears testimony to his liberal feminist stand on the question.

That Rabindranath's feminism is unique of its kind, not exactly like Western or 'First World' feminism and also very much different from 'Third World' feminism is exemplified by his excellent lyrical drama *Chitrangada*, (translated as *Chitra*) its original source being the *Mahabharat*. Princess Chitra who had been brought up as a boy and trained in the rough art of the battle-field was plain and rugged to look at and knew no feminine wiles for winning hearts. She is portrayed by Rabindranath as a contrast to Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* because while Nora is a rebel woman to leave her husband and home for the sake of woman's freedom, Chitra demands from Arjuna equal right to live with him. Thus, when she was primarily refused by Arjun, humiliated and wounded in the core of her being, her feminist mindset urged her to beg of Madan, the God of love so that she could equate with Arjun both in status and position. She begged, "For a single day make me superbly beautiful, as beautiful as was the sudden

awakening of love in my heart. Give me but one day of perfect beauty, and I will answer for the days that follow." (qtd. and translated in Kripalani 76)

The concept of feminist heroine is concretized in the play *The Red Oleander* through the figure like Nandini, a young and wilful girl, who fears no one and whose beauty charms everyone, upsets the patriarchal and male-dominated order of the kingdom of Yakshapuri wailing under the rule of the king, living behind locked steel doors, literally and symbolically implying the iron-curtain. She not only made the workers rebellious but lured the king himself out of his hiding. In the words of Tagore himself, "Nandini, the heroine of the play, has definite features of an individual person... Nandini is a real woman who knows that wealth and power are maya, and that the highest expression of life is in love..." (Tagore 283-285) Nandini is like a lightning that contains the potential thunder: "I have brought the thunder, I shall strike the golden citadel". (Tagore 681. vol.6) Thus, in the drama Rabindranath not only represents the role of woman in bringing about liberation for the toiling mass, but simultaneously makes their representative Nandini equal in all respects except physical strength with her male counterpart, the demon-king of the gold-mines.

In the realm of the short stories like "Denapaona" which movingly describes the silent sufferings of a girl child given in marriage and problems of the dignity of the girl child's father in a pre modern society of underdeveloped culture where the place of a woman in her husband's family depends solely on his capacity to pay up the dowry he has promised to give, Nirupama, the child-bride of Rabindranath, raises a revolt and says, "Am I just a moneybag, that I have any value so long as there is money to help it. No father, you don't insult me by paying this sum..." (Tagore 33. vol.vii, qtd. and translated in Mukhopadhyay 269) Among the other stories, "Strir Patra" is judged as the feminist masterpiece and to substantiate the claim Sanjukta Dasgupta quotes from Tanika Sarkar a letter of Rabindranath written on May 17, 1941, where in the poet states, "It's in my short story 'Strir Patra' that I supported the women's cause for the first time". (Sarkar 35 qtd. in Dasgupta 189) Dasgupta aptly observes:

Indeed the obvious agenda of 'Strir Patra' is precisely about eliminating the role model of beautiful- submissive wife 'Mejo Bou' and registering the birth of Mrinal. This metamorphosis from being a non-entity to a person conscious of her identity does not happen all on a sudden. Rabindranath constructs a very sensitive narrative in which he systematically records Mrinal's response in her own voice that becomes gradually more assured and confident as the text approaches her decisive resolution not to return to her husband's house, which never became a home to her, though she lived there for fifteen years. (Dasgupta 181)

Rabindranath's 'Strir Patra' is often compared with Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, famous as a feminist text in which the heroine Nora leaves her husband and home, disgusted with the way of her living there almost as an outsider and without any authority. In "Strir Patra" Mrinal also leaves her house in search of an identity and individuality. Unlike Haimanti, she did not want to remain at 27, Makhan Baral lane, rather chose to go outside for she has undergone a pathetic realization of being a non entity in her own house. In utter hopelessness she says "I will not return to your 27, Makhan Baral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have realized what place women hold in a family, I am no longer in need of that". (Tagore 783,vol.vii)

Although Rabindranath had a progressive outlook on the women question long before the phrase 'feminism', was popularized by feminist writers, he "did not maintain a uniformity in his feminist stance".(Chakrabarty 59) Thus, whereas his novel *Chokher Bali* certainly signals a significant advance in the sense that Binodini, a lady of rare courage, is the most individualistic and her life-style reflects her strong love for freedom, at the end of the novel Rabindranath, bowing to tradition, balks at widow remarriage. In contrast Rabindranath's progressive outlook not only effects an inter-religion marital union but also projects the independent spirit of the women in *Gora*. Specially, Lalita is presented in the novel as a postcolonial feminist woman. Again in *Chaturanga Damini's* independent spirit flouts the society's age-old conventional norms though in *Yogayog* Rabindranath makes a sudden retreat and trails off on a traditional note on the gender question. But Meenakshi Mukherjee asserts that "Yogayog is a powerful feminist text despite (or because of) the fact that it ends with a woman's defeat. Nora slamming the door and going out of the house was a potent image that heralded an entire movement, but the door closing in on Kumudini to imprison her for ever is a more searing statement".(Mukherjee 3)

Rabindranath has examined the question of emancipation of women in his novel *Ghare Baire* from a different angle. It shows how Nikhilesh, an educated aristocrat educates and liberates his wife Bimala from a cloistered existence in the home and encourages her entry into the world where she is deceived by an opportunist Sandip in the name of the ideal of political liberation of the country.

At the very outset of the novel when Sandip is restrained under orders of the Bara Rani by Nanku, her resistance and adherence to conventional norms are superseded through an appropriation of power by Bimala. But it is interesting to note that Bimala's appropriation of power comes from an empowerment which is awarded by her liberal humanist husband Nikhilesh:

I would have you come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality. Merely going on with your household duties, living all your life in the world of household conventions and the drudgery of household tasks, --- you were not made for for that! If we meet, and recognise each other, in the real world, then only will our love be true. (18)

Subsequently, his arrangement of English education for Bimala, appointment of Miss Gilby for the purpose and entreating her 'to be present when he had particular friends to dinner' (30) are all symptomatic of a desire in his part to promote Bimala's individuality to his own status. Unlike Madhusudan in *yogayog* Nikhilesh represented the classical Indian values of broadmindedness and high culture and in right tune of his liberal humanist mindset with a view to translating his own individualistic ideal in Bimala's life he has not even hesitated to make an experiment with his own wife Bimala, and has suffered duly in the process. The power relation discourse in the process of this experiment has made *The Home and the World* a feminist text.

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