

TAGORE AS A FEMINIST: A STUDY OF HIS SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

In India, the feminist movement, unlike the Western feminist movement, was initiated by men. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen were pioneers in India. Swami Vivekananda strongly affirmed elevation of women in all aspects of society to complete the history of India. Deeply influenced by these reformers, Tagore tirelessly wrote about the liberation of women in which they are not bound by gender stereotyping, rather could experiment as freely as men could do in their lives. Tagore wrote Binodini (Chokher Bali) in 1903 to highlight the struggles of the widows. In the Home and the World, through the character of Bimala, he presented his concept of the new women who were capable of moving out of the family courtyard. But their movement from the Zenana to the world outside should not lead them to be treated as second sex by persons in authority. As a visionary, his message to his female reading public was loud and clear: eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. This paper develops a concept of female aesthetic by re-reading Tagore's female-centric novels.

Keywords: Autonomous being, *Binodini*, Brahmoism, empiricism, *Gora*, patriarchy, *Pride and Prejudice*, realism, seduction, sexual politics, Shakti of the motherland, *The Home and the World*, *The Second Sex*, Victorian England, widow.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist theories caught the eye of the reading public in England in the last quarter of the eighteenth century when Mary Wollstonecraft published her thought-provoking books. That was nearly eighty years before the birth of Tagore. In 1787, the feminist, Wollstonecraft, influenced by the empiricism of John Locke, realized the need for the education of the female child and wrote *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). She followed it up with *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1790) in which she castigated the patriarchal ideology of the male – dominated society and its unfair attitude of subjugating women. To what extent Tagore familiarized himself with those feminist theories as he grew to sensitive manhood is a debatable point, but most of his novels were excellent illustrations of Wollstonecraft's thesis.

Wollstonecraft did not live long enough to see her feminist theories getting translated into practice, but the women (as well as men) of Victorian England saw a spate of reforms in the 1870's as a result of her reformist ideas: establishment of public schools for girls and colleges for women. A few career options opened for women: teaching, nursing and typing. When Tagore went to England for higher studies in 1878, he was much pleased to see the reforms in the lives of women.

In India, the feminist movement, unlike the Western feminist movement, was initiated by men, and later joined by women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy carried on a crusade against the patriarchal society for its practice of Sati,

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polygamy and child marriage. He demanded property inheritance rights for women so that he could free women from the economic stranglehold of men. Vidyasagar legalized remarriage of widows in 1856 and thereby raised their status considerably. Keshab Chandra Sen formed the Indian Reform Association in 1870 and set up schools for girls. All those great reforms had a tremendous impact on the mind of Tagore. But the reformer who exercised the most potent influence on Tagore's thought process was Vivekananda who affirmed that by relegating women to the background of society, politics and culture it was impossible to complete the history of India.

Tagore wrote *Binodini* (The original Bengali title was *Chokher Bali* or Eye Sore) in 1903 to highlight the struggles of the widows. The condition of the widows had improved theoretically in 1856 with passing of *The Remarriage of Widows Act*, but in actual practice their condition was far from satisfactory. With no education and no career options before them, the alternative to remarriage was bleak indeed. In the absence of education, widows existed in a state of ignorance and depended on external circumstances and associations in a servile manner. Even if some widows could analyze situations by their power of reasoning, the patriarchal society turned a deaf ear to their voice of reason. Tagore showed the conflict in the psyche of the widows and their search for identity in a world where men ruled the roost.

Binodini, an accomplished girl, lost her father early in life and this resulted in the impecunious condition of her house. A bosom friend of her mother, Rajlakshmi, got her married to one of her distant and diseased cousins, who died soon after their marriage. Mahendra (Rajlakshmi's son), who had declined the offer of marriage made to him by Binodini's mother, now surprised everybody by marrying the simple, Asha. Rajlakshmi fell out with her son and left for the village. In the village, Rajlakshmi was awed by the efficiency of Binodini's housekeeping and brought her to Calcutta, where shortly, she became the cynosure of all eyes. Binodini's efficiency in household chores could easily be compared to that of Agnes Wickfield in Dickens' *David Copperfield*. As Asha was no match at all for Binodini, she expressed a feeling of inferiority before her and addressed her in the sobriquet, 'Eye Sore'.

Binodini gave vent to her jealousy against Asha and even ranted at the male-biased society for all the injustice that it meted out to her:

"What I was denied and deprived of now belongs to the slip of a girl, this little play-doll!" (*Binodini* 37)

Binodini could differentiate between appearance and reality and it rankled her when she realized that Mahendra's nonchalance towards her was mere pretence:

" Why this difference? As though she was a piece of furniture!" (*Binodini* p.42).

Tagore's novels evinced his opposition to the feminist theory of gender-stereotyping which states that men can experiment but women must conform. Tagore showed that Binodini could experiment too. Srikumar Banerjee showed the scheming side of Binodini's nature at this part of the plot when he stated that her picture was "*that of a woman denied her right to love, afire with jealousy, bent upon bringing Mahendra to his knees by all means, an arch plotter, torn with mental conflict and repression.*" (*Homage to Rabindranath Tagore*, p.73). That intriguing ability of Binodini individualized her completely.

Tagore showed how the conduct of certain males towards the widows went beyond the pale. But they were never arraigned for it. One night, Mahendra entered into the room of Binodini with a wicked motive of seducing her. Although Mahendra's plot of seduction failed, Rajlakshmi, instead of bringing her son to book, branded Binodini, a seductress. She did not know how to prove herself guiltless, but in her letter to Mahendra, she stated in no uncertain terms:

I have no right to love or be loved in this world. That is why I play at love to lighten my sorrow I have no desire to play the game any longer. (*Binodini*, p. 132)

Tagore's feminist ideas were reflected in the theories of the American feminist, Kate Millet. In *Sexual Politics* (1969) she argued that the patriarchal authority has given woman the minority status that inflicts on her "*self-hatred and self-deception, contempt both for herself and her fellows.*" (*Sexual Politics*, p. 55).

Another feminist theorist, Toril Moi argued in the book *Sexual / Textual Politics*(1985) that *feminist struggle must try to undo the patriarchal strategy that makes 'femininity' intrinsic to biological femaleness and at the same time insist on defending women precisely as women.*" (*Sexual / Textual Politics*, p. 82)

Binodini turned to Bihari and was sanguine that he would fill the emotional vacuity in her heart caused by the perfidious, Mahendra but Bihari, influenced by the male-bias, labelled her a seductress. Surprisingly, the excursion to Dum Dum picnic garden enabled Bihari to discover a new Binodini, in whom, burnt "*the austere light of a pure and devoted woman.*" (*Binodini*, p. 60)

Rajlakshmi and Asha proceeded to Kashi but prior to their journey, they left Mahendra in charge of Binodini. Mahendra now made sardonic mockery of the love affair of Bihari and Binodini in the presence of Binodini.

One day Bihari saw Mahendra cringing before Binodini and that altered his impression of Binodini. Despite the change in Bihari's impressions regarding Binodini, her admiration for the former increased manifold. When Bihari flung her away in a fit of angry contempt, she remained impassive. She did not even allow Mahendra to touch her wounds. When Mahendra pestered her with his protestations of love, she sought the protection of Bihari. Bihari took her to be somewhat "melodramatic theatrical". He advised her to go to the village.

Life in the village was really harrowing for Binodini. She was branded a whore wherever she went and was called names. No experience in her life could be more mortifying to her than that. To escape further calumny, she decided to elope with Mahendra. Majumdar, in his perceptive study of Tagore's heroines, described the elopement as "*the strangest elopement in the world,*" (*Heroines of Tagore*, p. 212). Despite the sweeping generalization of the critic, any reader could realize that she was perfectly justified in eloping with Mahendra, her perfidious companion. The thought of vindicating herself before Bihari was uppermost in her mind; hence her plan of elopement.

Towards the concluding part of the novel, Bihari went to Allahabad in search of Mahendra with the desired objective of taking him to attend to his ailing mother. Bihari found Binodini in the adjacent room, all spick and span. Besides the room exhaled the fragrance of flowers. Without verifying the relations of the two, he declared her unchaste. Binodini set his doubts at rest by affirming that she had carried Bihari's image in her heart like shining gold. To prove her unquestionable chastity she minced no words: "*I touch your feet and swear that nothing has happened to destroy this value.*" (*Binodini*, p. 217).

Binodini's case was just the reverse of Hardy's Tess. Towards her end, Tess knew Angel as the man '*who had believed in her as pure*'. (*Tess*, p. 386) Binodini had to convince a suspicious Bihari that she '*remained chaste*' (*Binodini*, p. 217). Though critical opinion was sharply divided about Hardy's assessment of Tess as 'A Pure Woman' in 1891, yet Hardy had to fight against the sexual prejudices of his age to justify her chastity. Tagore, who composed *Binodini*, (a decade after Hardy composed his Tess) was very much occupied with Binodini's chastity and could have given to his novel 'Eye Sore' (1903), the secondary title, 'The Chaste Woman'. Perhaps his cynical indifference to censorious criticism prevented him from doing so.

At the end of the novel, Bihari proposed to Binodini but she declined the proposal in a mood of self-abnegation. Her reason for declining the proposal was, '*Religion and society would never tolerate it*'. (*Binodini*, p. 218) By 'society' Tagore implied patriarchal society. Majumdar was critical of Tagore's lack of courage when he stated that it prevented him from uniting Bihari and Binodini in a wedlock. But had Tagore solemnized their marriage, he would have failed to arouse the conscience of the insular males of the society. Nihar Ranjan Ray, who studied Tagore's novels from the standpoint of psychological realism, averred that Binodini's sacrifice became "*the symbol of the stricken conscience of the contemporary middle-class Hindu society.*" (*An Artist in Life*, p. 186)

In dealing with the struggles of the widows, Tagore's novels showed much advancement over the novels of his predecessors, namely those of Bankim Chatterjee. In *Bishabriksha* (1873) and *Krishnakanter Will* (1878) Bankim had highlighted their crippling social and economic condition. But Tagore turned his focus inward and showed the anger, the dejection, jealousy and revenge natural to any sensitive widow, maltreated by the society. By imparting to Binodini, an identity different from that of other widows, Tagore "*emerged as a non-conformist, ready to expose social conservatism.*" (*An Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 117).

Tagore wrote *The Home and the World* in the second decade of the twentieth century when Indian women were no longer buffered, denatured and decushioned by patriarchal mores. With the opening of schools and spread of education, women no longer had the nagging feeling that they were condemned to the enfeebling darkness of bondage to external reality. As women became enlightened, they moved out of their cabined world. They came into

contact with reality and as a sequel to that they were torn between the pull of the "home" and the pull of the "world". At one stage, the love of women which remained confined within the four walls of the room, now came "*in conflict more narrowly more fiercely with politics also.*" (Rabindranath Tagore, p. 84).

Nikhil, the protagonist of the novel had a sprawling estate which formed the background of the novel. Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal into Hindu and Muslim states had created anarchy everywhere. Bengal was in a state of great political turmoil. The Swadeshi movement was boycotting the purchase and use of all foreign goods and cries of 'Bande Mataram' were renting the skies. Though Tagore made use of the political imbroglio to project his themes, yet his principal concern was to explore a world beyond politics, a world in which human relationships, particularly of the husband and wife, is of paramount significance.

Nikhil, a well-meaning husband, was concerned with the development of the mind and soul of his wife, Bimala. With that end in view, he engaged an English teacher, Miss Gilby so that her English education would help her gain an awareness of the world outside. Though Bimala was enjoying a laid-back tranquility in her private world of the *Zenana*, yet she could not remain unaffected by the deafening calls of the Swadeshi. Her decision of dispensing with the services of Miss Gilby and her adamancy in burning foreign clothes were clear indicators of her growing disenchantment with anything English. Her fire-brand politics distanced her from that of her husband, Nikhil, whose notion and practice of Swadeshi appeared "dull milk-and- watery Swadeshi." (*The Home and the World*, p. 122). All his compromising statements on the Swadeshi appeared lackadaisical to Bimala when she compared Nikhil's speeches of moderation with the flamboyant rhetoric of Sandip.

Sandip won his way to Bimala's heart by his mixture of flattery and stratagem; sometimes he addressed her as the "Shakti of the motherland"; sometimes he applied to her the appellation of "Queen Bee" of the Swadeshi workers. But underlying his glib talk of patriotism was his latent, hideous motive of gratifying his sexual lust, perceived by none other than the insightful Nikhil.

Sandip's language of flattery mesmerized Bimala to such an extent that she no longer thought of herself as "*the lady of the Raja's house, but the sole representative of Bengal. And he was the champion of Bengal...*" (*The Home and the World*, pp. 28-29)

Nikhil was strongly opposed to the idea of providing any healthy corrective to Bimala's fallacious notions about men and manners. He wanted Bimala to come out of the delusions herself. By not exercising the traditional authority of a husband over his wife, he gave his creator (Tagore) the opportunity to express his feminist concerns. Patriarchy or the ideology committed to male supremacy had no place in his thought process; He was a true feminist as he was opposed to the use of physical force on his wife: "*Use force? But for what? Can force prevail against Truth?*" (*The Home and the World*, p. 49). Tagore's Nikhil stood in sharp contrast to the protagonists of the modern novel. Men like Rycker and Victor Baxter's father in Greene's novels, *A Burnt-out Case* (1960) and *The Captain and the Enemy* (1988) respectively, indulged in domestic violence and tyrannised over their wives.

Here Tagore, through the Sandip-Bimala relationship, was giving wonderful illustrations of Wollstonecraft's notions. Tagore raised the question of gender-stereotyping which results on a culture producing the images by which it deludes itself. Both Bimala and Sandip, on account of faulty culture-conditioning and education looked out for the wrong things in each other. Sandip looked for a veneer of attraction in the beautiful Bimala. Bimala, more prone to deception on account of her faulty and unfinished education, looked for Sandip who had the appearance and manners of a gentleman, but in reality was a scheming, promiscuous person.

The call of Swadeshi flared up the nationalist sentiments of many people who demanded the outright boycott of foreign goods. But Nikhil was adamant in his refusal of banishing imported goods from his state. The Muslim traders decided not to go the Swadeshi way. The adamancy of the Muslim traders goaded Sandip and his workers to resort to violence. When the militant Swadeshis sunk the boat of one influential trader, Mir Jaan, he threatened to report it to the police. The Swadeshis decided to pay him some hush money. As money was not forthcoming, Sandip requested Bimala to do the needful. Throwing all moral scruples to the winds, Bimala stole some gold coins from Nikhil's treasure chest. In doing so, she constantly felt the qualms of conscience for her having robbed her house as well as her country. She could no longer hear the melodious notes of the flute or shehnai that once drew her to her nuptial ceremony. Tagore's message to such impudent, hasty and trustless women was crystal clear. Tagore was

hammering the idea that a woman eventually ruins her own happiness by betraying the trust of a well meaning and faithful husband.

Sandip, who had just written all over him, was waiting expectantly for the beauty and the gold. As Bimala drew close to hand him over the gold, Sandip sprang forward to seduce her. He reeled backward, hit his head on the edge of a marble table and dropped on the floor. Any reader could find an illustration of the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir in Sandip's motives and actions. Though Beauvoir wrote *Second Sex* nearly thirty years after Tagore's composition of *The Home and the World*, yet Tagore seemed to anticipate Beauvoir's concepts: Beauvoir wrote:

"... Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... [woman is simply what man decrees: thus she is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appeals essentially to the male as a sexual being." (*Second Sex*, p. 16)

Bimala could never read into Sandip's motive of treating her as the second sex. So she breathed a sigh of relief when she eventually freed herself from Sandip's clutches which she referred to as 'his snaky coils'. Though Bimala was re-united with Nikhil yet she was constantly hounded by the thought of her act of betrayal. Within the space of a few days, a fatal injury of Nikhil in a communal disturbance during the Swadeshi gave her the most shocking blow of her life.

Through the character of Bimala, Tagore presented his concept of the new women who were capable of moving out of the *Zenana*. But their movement from the *Zenana* to the world outside implied danger at every step. They could be exposed to the false patriotism of spurious leaders who could shatter their peaceful, conjugal lives by their establishing a wrong connection between the home and the world. They could be treated as second sex by persons in authority and their modesty could be outraged anywhere. Tagore was the last to forestall the movement of ladies in public life. He was a pace-setter in bringing out girls from educated families on the public stage and this spoke volumes for his liberal outlook about women. But at the same time, he wanted them to use their discretion (in keeping their chastity unassailed) before they moved to the centre-stage of politics and public life. As a visionary, his message to his female reading public was loud and clear: eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.

Gora (1909), Tagore's fifth novel was a landmark in the history of the Bengali novel. It could be interpreted on several planes: the novelist's evolution of outlook from revivalism of Hinduism to universal brotherhood, from nationalism to internationalism and finally his change from rigid Brahmoism and Hinduism to the religion of man. To a reader in search for Tagore's feminist concerns, the novel had much to offer.

Tagore began the novel by depicting Binoybhusan. Tagore's feminist concerns could be gauged through Binoybhusan, who freely discussed matters pertaining to women. Several of his discussions centered on women's relationship within the female circle and outside it. A road accident brought him face to face with Sucharita. At the outset, Tagore presented Sucharita as a symbol of nature. But with the progress of the plot, he gave to his symbol, an independent mind. Tagore was opposed to gender-stereotyping, the feminist theory that states that men can experiment but women must conform. Through Sucharita, Tagore rebutted the theory.

Gora was brought into the narrative through his argumentative discussion with Binoybhusan. He opposed Binoybhusan's decision of visiting his Brahmo neighbour, Paresh Babu. Gora could smell the reasons that were driving Binoy to the house of Paresh Babu ---- his lovely daughters. Then he stated his concept of womanhood that rightly smacked of patriarchy:

"The altar at which Woman may be truly worshipped is her place as Mother, the seat of the pure, right-minded lady of the house." (*Gora*, p. 12).

By using the familiar image of the moth and the candle, he denigrated Binoy's love for Sucharita. In Gora's fundamentalist ideology, women could only be deified as Goddess Kali or Goddess Durga, ever ready to step out of the home and crush the forces of evil. Gora's peculiar mindset made him ungrateful in acknowledging the services of the Christian domestic help, Lachmiya. Lachmiya mothered him in as much as Anandomoyi and nursed him back to life during a bout of small pox. Gora's thought-process was so warped by his fundamentalism and shaped by his patriarchy that he betrayed the impotency of his mind, particularly in his interactions with women ----- his initial dialogues with Sucharita being an illustration in point.

Tagore depicted Anandamoyi in such a way that she became his idea of ideal womanhood. In undergoing a transition from an orthodox, Bengali, Brahmin woman to a non-sectarian woman, she had to discipline herself mentally, but that in no way suppressed the mother in her. She was always hounded by the fear "that if I looked down upon anyone for being of low caste or a Christian, then God would snatch you away from me." (Gora, p.17) Anandamoyi had all the graces befitting a mother despite her not being the biological mother of Gora. Gora was downright in declaring, 'How many possess a mother like mine!' (Gora, p.18) In his thoughts, Binoy addressed her 'Mother' and both Sucharita and Lolita addressed her so.

Tagore created the orthodox Barodashundari as a foil to the liberal Anandamoyi. By portraying Barodashundari, Tagore was trying to show how gender-stereotyping damaged both men and women. Through Paresch Babu's marriage with Barodashundari, Tagore proved how defective education could lead a man to choose a wrong partner in marriage and that could be the root-cause of a great many social and personal problems. Her detestation of idolatry, traditional outfit, religious Hindu names and anything that smacked of non-Brahmoism, was used by Tagore to pillory the hypocrisy of the pseudo-educated Brahmo women. Barodashundari like Mrs. Bennet of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was completely lacking not only in knowledge of her daughters but also in knowledge of her husband. Austen humorously commented how the long twenty three years of their matrimonial life were "insufficient to make his wife understand his character" (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 7). Such was Paresch Babu's wide tolerance and implacable faith in the unity of all religions that even Gora turned to him for his guidance in secular philosophy. But Barodashundari looked down at Paresch Babu as a simpleton: "Mistress Baroda regarded Paresch Babu as being devoid of all practical commonsense and knowledge of the world." (Gora, p.266). By pointing out the defective education of women, Tagore made his novel a good illustration of Wollstonecraft's thesis.

Paresch Babu's study of Lolita's character was both insightful and authentic. In his opinion, she was conspicuous by her "firmness of strength, the brightness of independence ---- characteristics which attract a chosen few, but repel most others." (Gora, p. 231). Those traits of character were also common in Elizabeth Bennet of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth was characterized by her scintillating wit, an independent mind and above all an ability to admit her mistakes. Of her fallacious judgements on both Wickham and Darcy, she made the candid admission:

"How humiliating is this discovery! --- Yet, how just a humiliation! ----Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.---" (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 202).

Similarly, Lolita, who displayed her independent decision by staying away from the programme of the English magistrate, was the last to shy away from admitting her wrongs that had brought endless humiliation to her family:

"Father, I know I've done wrong, but I've now come to understand one thing clearly ---- the relationship between the magistrate and the people of our country is such that his patronizing hospitality does us no honour." (Gora, p. 231)

Tagore portrayed Lolita in order to make her an embodiment of morality and conscience. When Haran Babu spoke disparagingly of her unrestrained freedom in the company of Binoy, she voiced her concept of liberty which is 'freedom from the slavery of falsehood.' (Gora, p.344)

Anandamoyi allowed the love of Binoy and Lolita to blossom fully and she even assisted them in the solemnizing of their marriage despite the obstacles raised by the Brahmo society. Her logic based on her humanism was also evidence of her enlightened mind. While speaking of marriage as a union of hearts she asked Suchitra: "Will your society keep apart, by its external decrees, two by whom God has made one in heart?" (Gora, p. 361)

Tagore's praise of Lolita was never lopsided and he rightly gave her the stamp of maturity when it was needed the most in the plot. He was alive to her failures as well. Though he presented Lolita as an independent and spirited lady, yet he exposed the flaw in her exhibition of feminism. While making plans for setting up a Girl School, Lolita did not examine the pros and cons of the plan. Small wonder, her plan ended in a fiasco. The affluent class did not favour the idea of sending girls to schools. Though feminism was trying to make steady progress in 1910 when *Gora* was serialized, yet the entire society was not prepared to accept it.

Lolita's failure at the social level was no indicator of her lack of maturity. When Binoy was in a quandary

regarding the question of his converting to Brahmo, Lolita convinced the sensible Anandamoyi that such a change was not incumbent upon him in the light of Binoy's mutual relations with another person.

Tagore showed Gora moving from his rigid, fundamental Hinduism to universal brotherhood after his travelling a full circle. His encounter with the family of the poor barber, who took care of a Muslim boy, in the event of Ghosepara was the first of his many encounters that made him understand the principles of liberal humanism. The events culminating at Nanda's death and the Brahmin cab driver's total nonchalance to the Muslim trader's shopping basket which turned turtle were some events that made him see the liberal face of Hinduism. His incarceration made him see Suchaitra in the eye of his mind with all her tenderness. She was the real embodiment of grace for she could attend the sick, look after the afflicted and bless even the insignificant persons with love. The novelist Conrad found such zeal in social service in his leading lady, Miss Haldin in *Under Western Eyes* (1911). The same Gora, who was opposed to the participation of women in national life, realized that, " *the smaller the place we give to her in our lives, the weaker does our manhood become.*" (*Gora*, p.384) Tagore gave vocal expression to Vivekananda's teaching which underscored the truth that without bringing women into the mainstream of public life, India's history would remain incomplete.

Anandamoyi certainly enriched Gora's growth as a human being. It was from her that Gora learnt how to acquire true freedom from orthodoxy and superstition and adopt a true, secular outlook. In the epilogue, Tagore's vision of the women who would usher India into the next century found eloquent expression through Gora: *You have no caste, you make no distinctions, and have no hatred ---- you are only the image of our welfare! It is you who are India!* (*Gora*, p.570)

In nineteenth century Bengal, there was a wave of emancipation of women and Tagore could not help swimming on its crest. In many of his short stories, he represented female voices without any inhibition. But there was no trace of extremism in his representation. Whether we looked at Mrinmayi of *The Conclusion (Samapti)*, Uma of *Exercise-Book (Khaata)*, Chandara of *Punishment (Shasti)*, Mrinal of *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra)* and Dakshayani of *Taraprasanna's Fame (Taraprasanna's Kirti)*; we found Tagore showing the confrontation between social dictates and individual assertions of femininity.

The patriarchal society of the nineteenth century Bengal was in favour of the repression of the feminine psyche, but Tagore was vehemently opposed to it. He had to counter stiff opposition from both Bipin Chandra Pal and C.R. Das, who, in their periodical, *Narayani*, pilloried Tagore for his radical views on women, but Tagore was unfazed by them. While taking up the female question, Tagore was torn between radical thought and traditional beliefs. One could wish to agree with the observation of Uma Dasgupta who stated that Tagore stood somewhere between "radical modernism and proud traditionalism" (*Tagore and Modernity*, p. 1).

As we study Tagore's novels and short stories, we begin to recognize that images, themes and plots emerge from women's social and psychological experience in patriarchal societies. Tagore's study of women could give fresh direction to two classes of feminists: the socio-feminists and psycho-feminists. Socio-feminists study the images of women in different literary types and then examine their roles in the society. The Psycho-feminists on the other hand, try to decipher the unconscious expressions of feminine desire and the way the feminine psyche has been curbed by patriarchal mores. In this way, both the socio-feminists and the psycho-feminists help in evolving a concept of female aesthetic.

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