



Rabindranath Tagore's Background and Sensibility

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Mary Anne Fergusson observes:

One peculiarity of the images of women throughout history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes. Another way of putting this would be to say that in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex-object—their role in relationship to men. (qtd. in Shirwadkar)

Literature plays an important role in reflecting the ever-changing reality of life. Society and sensitivity of the writers come into collective play while presenting an authentic picture of social, cultural, economical and psychological set-ups of the inhabitants of any place and era. In the same line, the image of women is captured by the writers who have witnessed ever changing stream of life cautiously and have foreseen the consequences. Whenever an upheaval in the ranks of society is witnessed, writers are the first to capture it. Human history is full of events and ideas movements which have triggered momentary or long lasting effects on the fate of both dominant as well as subjugated sections. Woman is one such section of the society which has been subjugated for centuries irrespective of caste, creed, era and race. There is no gainsaying in the fact that “Literature can have the breadth and throb of life only when it keeps pace with changing image of the women” (Bhatt 09). There has been a whole range of writers both male and female who have championed the cause of women and have portrayed diverse shades of their personality in creative works.

It is the image that defines the position in any situation and it is worth accepting that the creation of image at any level is not equally participated by both the parties since equal participation denies authority as well as subjugation. The social set of any society is also an important aspect which allows or inhibits the participation in the process of creation of the image. So, only one party is there to act as creator of the image, and the benefit and liberty of creation of the image lie with this party only. This is the basis of all patriarchal societies where woman have always been in the background and all images have been created by men who acquired the superior or first position themselves and designated everything secondary to women. The creation of this hegemonic power set up is controlled and affirmed further with the help of religion which is a sacred tool to govern everything, again designed by only one party, i.e., men. Religious documents hailed men as powerful and all encompassing in the image of God himself, thereby fit to be worshipped by the devotees who have only one choice, i.e. to accept the role handed over to them for the smooth functioning of the society since any deviation will be declared blasphemy by the dominant section leading to a negative image creation. All this leads to suppression of women at the hands of men. Philosophers and scholars most of whom have been men hijacked all major streams of knowledge to pronounce that only men have the right to be the leaders and guides of the world. As Aristotle claims, “Woman was not completely developed as human beings; she was a ‘misbegotten’ or defective male” (qtd. in Swidler 114). Arlene Swidler also shares similar views and throws light on the psychological perception of male dominated society, “Man is the principal and end of woman, as God is the principal and end of man . . . Woman exists for the man, not man for the woman” (Swidler 115). Women only cherish the image of the patient followers without questioning any verdict of men.

Indian image of women is very different from the Western image. The status of women in India can be traced back to the early Vedic Age. In fact, during the *Rig Veda* period women were given equal rights and status as men. Women were allowed all those liberties which were permissible to men and no discrimination on the basis of sex existed. It is only in the later *Vedic* period, ‘*Varna Ashrama Dharma*’ and caste system became prominent in society and women were pushed back which resulted in the degradation of their position in the social set up. In the four divisions of the caste system ‘*Brahmins*’ were at the top of the hierarchy, while ‘*Shudras*’ were at the lowest pedestal. Women were designated a place equivalent to *Shudras*. Moreover, they were

not allowed to recite the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. Even the beating and physical abuse of wives were permissible to husbands. Condition of widows was even worse as they were considered worthless creatures or burden on the family. For them any pleasure or luxury of life was considered sin for them. Manu in clear terms asks a widow to “continue till death, forgiving all injuries, performing austere duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure and cheerfully practicing the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed by such women as were devoted to one husband only” (qtd. in Sarkar 281):

आसीतमरणात् क्षान्ता नियता ब्रह्मचारिणी 11

यो धर्म एकपत्नीतां काङ्क्षन्ती तमनुमम 11

Yajnavalkya also indicates the same doctrine, “A widow shall live under care of her father, mother, son, brother, mother-in-law, father-in-law or uncle; since, on the contrary, she shall be liable to reproach.” (*Vide Mitakshara*) (qtd. in Sarkar 281):

पितृमातृसुत भ्रातृश्वश्रूश्वशुरमातुलेः 1

हीना न स्यात् विना भर्त्री गर्हणीयान्यथा भवेत् 2

Smartta Raghunandana, one of the latest commentators of Hindu law of Bengal, goes a stephead expounding the passage of Angira, “there is no other course for a widow besides concretion” (qtd. in Sarkar 281):

न्यान्यो हि धर्मो विजयों मृते भर्तरि कर्हिंचित्

यामिमां पुष्पितां वाचं प्रवदन्त्यविपश्चितः 1

वेदवादरताः पार्थ नान्यदस्तीतिवादिनः 2

This advocator of concretion quotes passage from *Vedas*, “Oh fire! Let these women, with bodies anointed with clarified butter, eyes coloured with collyrium and void of tears, enter thee, the parent of water that they may not separated from their husbands, themselves sinless and jewels amongst women” (qtd. in Sarkar 282). While recommending the practice of concretion, Angira again says, “that a woman who, on the death of her husband, ascends the burning pile with him, is exalted to heaven as equal to *Arundhah*” (qtd. in Sarkar 282). Vyasa holds similar views, “A pigeon devoted to her husband, after his death, entered the flames and ascending to heaven, she there found her husband” (qtd. in Sarkar 283). These quotes highlight that the woman who ends her life with her husband would dwell in glory even after her death.

And, in order to obtain further carnal fruition, concrementation is the sole object for widows.

In this way, not only society, but myths and legends also view the supremacy of men over women. It is not limited to Indian *Vedas*, but Western myths and scriptures also have given sanction to the female's subjugation to the male members of society. Highlighting this fact, Susie Steinbach in *Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History* has revealed the historical truth, "Most theology and religious practice ... was unkind to women or even misogynistic; many religious leaders held that, spiritually and otherwise, women were probably subordinate to men; most faiths had explicit bans on women as leaders of any kind" (Steinbach 141). Similar expressions can be traced in Western mythologies also. *The Holy Bible* in 'Ephesians' clearly orders women: "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord" (5:22). *The Holy Bible*, in "Genesis" states that woman is regarded subordinate to man because "it is believed that she was made out of man" (2:13). In *The Holy Bible* also, at several places, man is shown superior to woman. Adam is "the master who gives names to all beasts and animals" (2: 20) and gives name to his wife as Eve. Man is considerate master, the image of God, who controls the whole Universe" (2:21). St. Paul renders the secondary position to women and asserts, "A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man" (Corinthians 11: 7). From many centuries, women have been forced to find expression in several sayings: "as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their husbands" (Camus 20) or "the head of every man is Christ, but the head of woman is man" (Camus 20).

Here, the question arises whether women are still under compulsion to blindly follow all the religious comments or explanations issued by the male dominated society? Sucheta Mazumdar draws our attention towards the worn out, but glorious terms of religious tradition regarding women:

By choosing this terrain on which to introduce concepts of women's equality, as the Indian women's organizations who use term such as '*Sakti*' or '*Kali*' as part of their nomenclature seems to have done, the women's movement seems to have entered the arena with one hand tied behind their backs. (Mazumdar 266)

There has been a series of inhumane inequalities against women in the Indian society. The practice of 'Sati' was one of the greatest evils of the early nineteenth century. Derived from Sanskrit word 'Sat', *Sati* means pure and chaste. According to V. N. Dutta, "*Sati* is a misnomer – it had come to signify both the act of immolation of a wife on the funeral pyre of her husband (in some areas a widow was buried with her deceased husband or took poison) and the victim herself rather than its original meaning of a virtuous woman" (Dutta 01). Generally, a woman was burnt with her dead husband, but if pregnant, she would wait till after delivery and burn with husband's ashes or something representing him afterwards.

The condition of women in Indian society has always been sorer than of the Western nations and the root of the evil have been lying in the social model. Along with *Sati Partha*, polygamy, especially in Bengal, was one of the major evils responsible for the lower status of women. In Bengal, the upper class *kulin Brahmins* carried the act of polygamy not only to produce more sons, but also to gratify their limitless sensuality. Reformists raised their voice to enlighten women to recognize their worth and reject the evil tradition of polygamy. While talking about the practice of polygamy, Rakhmabai, an activist of women's rights from Maharashtra, asserts:

Marriage does not interpose any insuperable obstacle in the course of their (husband) studies. They marry not only a second wife, on the death of the first, but have the right of marrying any number of wives at one and the same time, or any time they please. If married early, they are not called upon to go and submit to the tender mercies of a mother-in-law; nor is any restraint put upon their actions because of their marriage. But the case for women is the very reverse of this. (Rakhmabai 04)

Early marriage even before puberty, much older groom than child-bride, sale of young girls to older men, physical maltreatment of child-brides, prohibition of widow remarriage have been some of the major evils against women. Women were always considered burden, first on their fathers, then on brothers and after marriage on their husbands, that's why parents always remained in a hurry to marry them off to any suitable or unsuitable boy so that the prestige of the family might be preserved. The normal cry of a pregnant woman on the verge of delivery is that "Pray! If only the

good Lord grants me: a boy child, how happy I'll be, how my kin will love me” (Bhattacharya and Sen 25-26).

Daughters were denied even of the barest of rights and liberties. The majority of Hindu women lived in undesirable conditions because of the highly complex and age-old traditions. In a family, a son was considered an integral part, while the daughter was *praya dhan* (another's property). Highlighting the reason, the poet Kamini Roy says, “Because she is a liability to her parents. A son is likely to look after his parents in their advanced years. A married daughter is unable to do so. She belongs to another family and all her time and energy is devoted to that family” (qtd. in O Bartaman and Sen 21). At another place, she opines:

Discrimination between a son and a daughter is almost universal. In our country, if a couple is successful in producing a series of sons, the sons attract the benediction of long life from friends and relations. On the other hand, just two successive daughters are so unwelcomed that the last born daughter is named either Khanto (stop) or Ar Na (No More) or similar such appellation. A sole sister among many brothers may receive some attention of the family. And if a brother does not follow a sister's birth, then very often the unfortunate sister is blamed for the calamity. (qtd. in O Bartaman and Sen 119)

The situation of women was equally worse in the joint families of upper-middle class. In these families, women were neither allowed to earn their living by gainful employment, nor could they inherit anything from her father or husband's property. Moreover, “an army of religious texts imposed on them an ideology of domesticity and *pativartya* (physical and mental chastity). They had forfeited the right to formal education in the distant past when they had lost the right to ritual initiation *or upanayan* without which there was no formal education” (Ray 28). Women were the source of domestic and sexual satisfaction of men either in the form of polygamy, prostitution or extra-marital affairs. There were different moral codes of behaviours for men and women. In her celebrated book *Hindu Mahilaganer Hindbastha (The Degraded Condition of Hindu Women)*, Kailasbasini Devi presents the real condition of women not of that time but of all times, not of the Bengali society, but whole of the nation:

The birth of a boy is heralded with music; offerings are made to Brahmins; the poor are fed; many rites and rituals are observed; gifts are widely distributed, all in the hope and prayer for the boy's long life . . . No such celebration mark the birth of a daughter; on the contrary, much is said and done lamenting her arrival. Dear God! Are women such inferior creatures that their birth and death are treated in the same mournful manner? Such is the contribution custom of our country, a custom that bewitches and blinds our people. Alas! When will our Bengal be a land of joy and happiness? When, oh when, will this despicable discrimination be eliminated? (Devi 02)

Education was denied to women in general, as it was regarded a luxury that was available only to men. It was considered useless to waste time and money for the education of girl-child because she was destined to serve the powerful male in all aspects of life. Moreover, in Bengali society it was a popular notion that if educated, woman would soon become a widow. Along with this, the burden of joint family and fear of mother-in-law left no spare time for getting education after marriage even if the husband was willing to educate his wife in order to uplift his social standard in the upper-middle class of the society. All these compulsions were deliberately imposed on women to condition their mind to accept all orders silently. In fact, famous writer and philosopher, Rousseau was also not in favour of women's education and said that the major duty of a woman is to serve her man:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honoured by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to make life sweet and agreeable to them, these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them from their infancy. (qtd. in Millett 74)

It should also be noted that the condition of Muslim women was no better than their Hindu cousins. Begam Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain in her book *Abarodhbasini (The Women Confined)* clearly indicates towards the position of Muslim women at that time. Begam Rokeya says that Muslim women were only allowed to cram *Koran* like a parrot and they did not have the liberty to go to school, while Muslim men were free

to learn Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English. Begam Rokeya was secretly taught by her brother, whom she refers as her 'only instructor'. He also taught his sister English and used to say, "If you can learn English, the doors of the world will be wide open to you" (Hossain 11). Though, Begam Rokeya did not participate actively in political episode, but she was a great advocator of the right to vote for women. In fact, she was an active member of the delegation led by Kamini Roy to support women's right to vote in elections. The injustice against women opened her eyes and incited the urge to fight against the ingrained flaws of the society. Thus, one can clearly perceive that there was a remarkable difference in the status and position of women of the high society and rest of the society whether it was Hindu or Muslim women.

In Indian socio-cultural arena of the later 19th and the early 20th centuries, it was the transition phase when different pulls were active. People were facing conflicts at many spheres of life such as East-West, liberal-conservative, modern-traditional education, English-regional language etc. Gainful employment was possible in the colonial Government and many middle class people, working with the Britishers were in their direct contact. They were highly influenced by their masters' ways of life which led to conflicts in their own lives. It was at this important junction of conflicts that Rabindranath Tagore appeared on the scene.

Rabindranath Tagore (May 07, 1861- Aug., 1941), the first Nobel Laureate of India, a poet, dramatist, novelist, short-story writer, musician, painter, philosopher and above all a great philanthropist has been acknowledged as the ambassador of Indian culture to the modern world. What Coleridge said about William Shakespeare can also be applied to Rabindranath Tagore that he has been the most 'myriad minded' personality of modern India. Talking about the genius of Tagore, Paul Verghese makes an apt remark:

Its humanistic essence combined with spirituality, a love of nature and man and the expression of the beauty and splendour of the earth. The poet's spiritual message does not however, enjoin us to run away from the 'fret and fever of life' and seek shelter in a hermitage, but insists on our full participation in the joys and sorrows of life. Stress on Tagore's mysticism has led to a neglect of his poetry as poetry; it has tended to obscure his greatness as a poet and artist. He perfected a kind of incantatory rhythmic prose

and demonstrated that Indian sentiment, thought and imagery can be as well expressed in English as in any Indian Language. (Verghese 52)

To understand Rabindranath Tagore and the literature he produced, it is necessary to understand the age in which he lived and produced such a vast literature which has become the golden heritage for the generations to come. He was born at the confluence of three major movements in Bengal- Religious, Literary and Political which ushered in the period of Bengali Renaissance (1815-60). R. C. Majumdar quotes historian, Jadunath Sarkar, “Renaissance in India was wider, deeper and more revolutionary than that of Europe after the fall of Constantinople” (Majumdar 01). Born in a Brahmin family in the city of Calcutta, Rabindranath enjoyed both the Hindu and British cultures. After a long period of social, political and religious chaos, Bengal was emerging as a powerful Hindu kingdom and the family of Tagore had a strong say over the Bengali society. The Tagore family was one of the most ancient families of Calcutta, where culture and prosperity had room in equal proportions. In that house, two distant notions matched together and very soon, the Tagore family headed the elite class (*Bhadralok*) of the Bengali society, “a self-reflective, knowledge seeking progressive group” (Mukherjee 31). In the beginning of the 20th century, there was mark difference between the rural and urban set-up of Bengal. Some groups of Bengalis claimed to have a superior social status than the rest of the people. It was *bhadralok*, literally gentleman and respectable people of the society. Their life style, habits, social propriety, cultural values and bent of mind were more modern in many respects or one can say closer to the Britishers. Tapti Das Gupta remarks in this regard:

The most basic and most rigidly maintained distinction between *bhadra* and *abhadra*, between high and low, was the *bhadralok*'s abstention from manual labour and their pernicious social ideology about the inferiority of manual occupation, people practicing these occupations were called *chotolok*. The three upper class castes of Bengali Hindu society, *Bhramin*, *Baidya* and *Kayastha*, constituted most of the *bhadralok*. The term *Bhadralok* was frequently used in the late 19th century as a synonym for upper caste. (Das Gupta 05)

A whole range of influences worked together in shaping the personality and creativity of Rabindranath Tagore who was later hailed as a world phenomenon. Prior to him, there were many reformists and liberals at work who prepared the ground for his creativity in one way or the other. Raja Ram Mohan Roy ensued the religious reformist movement to eradicate the social evils prevalent in contemporary Bengal. He failed to prevent his brother's widow Alokmanjari committing *Sati* in 1811. This incident shocked young Roy and he began his battle against the social evil. The evil of '*Sati Partha*' was eradicated with the agenda of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, under the regulation act XVII of 1829. Deeply rooted in native soil and values, Roy was highly influenced by the Western science and technology. He advocated the advancement of Indian mind and thinking with the Western progressive ideology and established Bhramo Samaj in 1841. The synthesis of the East and the West in the sphere of religion and life attracted Rabindranath Tagore towards Brahmo Samaj. Rabindranath Tagore praised Roy and his works saying, "He is the path-maker of his century, who has removed ponderous obstacle that impeded our progress at every step and initiated us into the present era of world-wide co-operation of humanity" (qtd. in Sinha 157).

Later Rabindranath's father Maharishi Debendranath Tagore reformed the tradition of Brahmo Samaj and named it Brahmo Dharma. Debendranath was the true spiritual successor of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's moral and social vision. The charismatic and glorious personality of Debendranath left a deep impression on the intellectual and psychological development of young Rabindranath which he cherished forever in his life. He denied the Hindu tradition of idol worship, but simultaneously stated that Bhramo Dharma was an integral part of Hinduism. Tagore family was the centre of religious and political discussions and young Rabindranath was inhaling that vibrant air. While talking about the personality of his father and culture of his family, Rabindranath Tagore himself wrote:

There was something remarkable about our family. It was as if we lived close to the age of pre-*Puranic* India through our commitment to the *Upanishads*. As a boy, I grew up reciting *slokas* from the *Upanishads* with a clear enunciation. We had no experience of the emotional excess prevalent in Bengal's religious life. My father's spiritual life was quiet and controlled. Along with that, there was a genuinely deep love of English

literature among my elders. Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott had a strong influence over our family. (qtd. in Das Gupta 04)

Another visionary who made the difference in the spiritual and social life of the Age was Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar with whose earnest efforts the act of 1856 legalized the widow-remarriage, but Vidya Sagar failed to see many widows getting remarried and could not make this act socially acceptable. Later on, Tagore handled this theme in some of his novels and short-stories. An equally important religious movement was founded by Rama Krishna Paramhansa that changed the socio-religious life of Bengal. His favourite disciple, Swami Vivekananda, further stimulated the spirit of this movement.

Tagore's time was the time of great convulsions in Indian political arena as well. After the failed Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the establishment of Indian National Congress in 1885 by a bunch of progressive Indians and Western activists recharged the political atmosphere. In the first decade of the 20th century, a number of political agitations for different reasons were witnessed among which anti-partition movement in Bengal were prominent. A band of highly spirited young men and women were also active with their violent nationalist activities. Gandhi appeared on the Indian political scene in 1917 with his Satyagrah movement based on the ideals of truth and non-violence. It was the time in Indian political scenario, when many educated women of elite class left schools, colleges, burnt foreign clothes and appeared in streets shouting the fervent slogans of national freedom. Tagore's niece, Sarla Devi, actively participated in the freedom struggle movement and organized "Sakhi Samiti" for the education of poor young widows and simultaneously, preparing them for the movement. She may be hailed as the first female activist of modern Bengal who initiated women organization named "The Bharat Stri Maha Mandal" in 1910 at all India level. Tagore was highly influenced by her dauntless personality and moulded the character of Kalyani in the short-story "Woman Unknown" on Sarla Devi. One of other popular activist, Kumudini Bose, also worked in the line of Sarla Devi. Pandita Rama Bai of Maharashtra founded the Arya Mahila Samaj and presented the evidence for the education of women in front of the then established commission by British Indian Government. Gandhi emerged as a great name on Indian political scenario. Though, Tagore was not very comfortable with the political philosophy and practice of Gandhi; still, he was an admirer of his personality and human values. However,

there was a complete line of disagreements between Tagore and Gandhi. Amartya Sen brings to the fore the range of incompatibility of the two great souls of India saying:

Tagore greatly admired Gandhi but he had many disagreements with him on a variety of subjects, including nationalism, patriotism, the importance of cultural exchange, the role of rationality and of science, and the nature of economic and social development. These differences, I shall argue, have a clear and consistent pattern, with Tagore pressing for more room for reasoning, and for a less traditionalist view, a greater interest in the rest of the world, and more respect for science and for objectivity generally.

Tagore never took active participation in political and revolutionary activities; however, in his works, he celebrated the all-encompassing spirit of India. As a great humanist, he had not in the least belief in any kind of communal violence, blood-shed and chaos involved in it. In fact, he never allowed any student of Shantinikatan to participate in nationalist movement.

Numerous offshoots appeared on the Bengali literary scene during the Literary Renaissance. The establishment of the first printing press in 1778 by Charles Wilkins acted as a stimulus for the established as well as budding writers. This movement produced a great number of writers like Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and Saratchandra Chatterjee. All these writers had a remarkable impact on Tagore's creative genius. Referring to the Bengali literary Renaissance, Charles Andrews comments ". . . if Rammohan Roy may be linked to the roots of the tree of literature, planted deep in the soil, Debendranath may be compared to its strong and vigorous stem and Rabindranath to its fruits and flowers" (qtd. in Sarada 08).

Famous as a writer, Tagore enjoyed the friendship with a band of eminent scholars and writers who enriched Bengali literature in several ways. Among them, the most prominent were Ramendra Sunder Trivedi, the scientist and philosopher and Hara Prasad Sastri, the historian and archeologist. Along with this, the writings of Micheal Madhusudan Dutt, who introduced blank verse in Bengali literature, deeply influenced the creative genius of Tagore. He also admired and got influenced with the poetry of Toru Dutt, Parsad Ghose, Sarojini Naidu as well as of Ishwarchandra

Vidyasagar who contributed a lot to the setting of new cultural background of Bengal in particular and India in general. Thus, all predecessors and contemporaries of this great writer contributed a lot in moulding his intellectual and creative abilities.

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