

WOMAN IN THE PLAYS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE: A STUDY

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Creative expressions attain their perfect form through emotions modulated. Woman has that expression natural to her- a cadence of restraint in her behaviour producing poetry of life. She has been an inspiration to man, guiding, most often unconsciously, his restless energy into an immense variety of creations in literature, art, music and religions. This is why, in India, woman has been described as the symbol of shakti, the creative power.

Tagore feels the undeniable presence of women in society and their significant role. In one of his discourses on women's place in the world he owes his endless debt to womankind specially to those women who helped him in shaping his dreams and destiny. "They came to me as the seasons come to the earth, with varied urgings of flowers, and fruitfulness; they brought to my life, the inspiration of love and beauty, invocation of the power that lies dormant until touched by womanly grace." (Rabindranath Tagore, "Woman 's place in the world" in English writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. III ed. Sisir Kumar Das. (New Delhi: Sahitya academy edition, 1996, 677) His plays are unconventional in portraying women and here he surpasses Bankim Chandra and Sarat Chandra.

Rabindranath Tagore was the most brilliant creative genius of the Indian renaissance. He preferred values; as a visionary he sought to foresee the future. His non-conformism was more radical and consistent that made him a fearless critic of social practices and religious belief, such as denunciation of caste system, the world denying streak of ascetics, the role of priests etc. His plays are basically expressions of the soul's quest for beauty and truth. There are certain traditional national attitudes; some unshakable obscure racial memories and quite a few perennial recurrent archetypal human patterns and these are the stuff out of which he creates his dramatic world. The progressive and feminist outlook of Tagore espousing women's emancipation was not only the result of his personal thinking it imbibed also the progressivist thinking of the west. He seems to promote a dynamic code of relation based on the ideal of democracy and humanism. The circumference of human relationship determined by society is significant only to the extent that they do not diminish the eternal glory of human spirit.

Like RajaRam Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Tagore seems to be the champion of the emancipation of women. Most of his works concentrate on the plight of widows, the anxiety of modern educated woman for equality and freedom, the complications

arising out of prevalent orthodoxy and conservatism, and the social problems inflicting the mental domain of the fair sex. A study of Tagore's dramatic world reveals the finality of his creativity, innovation and experimentation. It is the culmination of his quest that establishes besides so many things, his venture to recognize the status of women in society, which M.K.Naik calls "Tagore's insight into the feminine mind." (. Rabindranath Tagore, Collected Poems and Plays (London: Macmillam & co., 1955, 477) He probed into deeper recesses of women's mind and presented a wide range of women characters. The women characters of his plays represent different facets of Indian woman-hood, as varied as life itself. His vast range comprises who symbolize humanity, love and beauty like —Vasanthi, Nandini, Malini and Aparna; ideal women who embody nature and epitomize the beauty and splendor of the earth like Chitra, (Nandini) Prakriti. If there are traditional women-silent submissive and manifestations of Earth-like magnanimity in their mother hood like Kunti, Gandhari, there are women who are bold and defiant, selfish and assertive like —Gunwati, Sumitra and Devyani (as well as Nandini.) Tagore's women assert their individuality and fight for their right to love and family happiness. Gunwati is self —centred and assertive and she becomes morally blind moral insensitiveness, indifference to other's pain are in view of Tagore the root of folly. The rapid stride in women education brought to the fore a class of women not prepared to accept the moral and social code of the decadent male —dominated bourgeois society, asserting their individuality and fighting for the equality of sexes as revealed through the character of queen Sumitra, Devyani and Nandini. If woman as a source of creation and inspiration and a divine energy's is epitomized in 'Safi' and Malini; Srimati of Natirpuja exemplifies in her life and deeds the majesty of the human spirit which refuses to be cowed down by the tyranny of authority and power. A detailed analysis of his dramatic world reveals his insight into feminine mind.

Epitome of Humanity. Love and Beauty

In *Sanyasi* (Prakritir Pratisodh) Tagore belittles the life of renunciation and upholds, the dignity of everyday life. He himself says about this play: "It may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work, or rather, this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt the joy of attaining the Infinite within the finite." Rabindranath Tagore, Collected Poems and Plays (London: Macmillam & co., 1955, 477) Vasanthi the female protagonist of the play makes the *Sanyasi* realize that true freedom lies in love and not in emptiness of soul and hatred of worldly things. It is through the love of the little girl that the contempt of the ascetic is transformed into love. In *Sanyasi*, the girl Vasanti is portrayed by Tagore as symbol of humanity and love. She asks for bread, but in his obtuseness he gives her a stone instead. Yet the girl awakens in his heart the dormant springs of humanity. Vasanthi's little trusting hand seems to touch his soul with the wand of the eternal, she is to him the moth of the day light. Before *Sanyasi* adopts her lessons, she is dead. And Tagore questions if the giver of new life to the *Sanyasi* be really dead? But her death enables him to awaken from the nightmare of egotistic possessiveness and go through the baptism of regeneration as a human being she symbolizes that true love far from binding, can emancipate and enlarge. She is the vehicle of Tagore's basic tenet of life that love liberates purities and intensifies human understanding and reveals infinity in a grain of sand, and heaven in flower. In one of his lectures on woman's place in the world. Tagore speaks of woman's capability to "import her life -rhythm to this reckless movement of power" in today's world. He says, "Her exuberance of vital interest is spontaneously expressive: it makes

her speech her laughter, her movement, graceful and picturesque(Rabinadrath Tagore, "Women's place in the world", 477.)

In the comparison play **Sacrifice**, Tagore creates Aparna as an emblem of love and duty. Through her appeal, the king has a realization of the heinousness of the practice of animal sacrifice. She acts as the chorus and agent of conversion: it is also the manifestation of the aggressive character of Queen Gunwati. Aparna and Queen Gunwati represent two aspects of the character of a woman. Aparna is in the background all the time. Tagore has skillfully delineated Vasanti, Malini and Aparna as symbols of humanity, love and beauty. Their innate goodness triumphs over the cruelty, hatred and arrogance of the world.

Embodiment of Nature:

Chitra is Tagore's attempt to justify the role of woman, not only as a beautiful agent of Nature but also an interpreter of truth. Tagore's **Chitra** is like Kalidasa's **Shakuntala**, epitome of youth, love and romance. **Chitra** is the quintessence of romance. The speeches burn with passion, and light up the way from truth to illusion, and again the arduous climb from illusion to truth. Tagore portrays Chitra as a bare simplicity of truth', when she throws her ornaments and veils and stands clothed in naked dignity, she is a woman and a mother, and Arjuna is content; he says simply, "Beloved, my life is full." (English writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. II, 59) When the borrowed beauty is cast aside, Chitra continues to be graceful as she has known love, because she is now a prospective mother.

Chandalika is not a voice against untouchability rather a story of Prakriti's spiritual rebirth,' her redemption,' a message of liberation' and the second coming of lord Buddha (in the name of Ananda). Her wild physical desire surrenders before Ananda resplendent with the light of truth; perhaps Tagore wants to highlight the enigmatic character of women, the character of being all -dominating and over possessive to devour all that stands before her, precisely, her excessive materials approach that ultimately fails before spiritual manifestations. Tagore presents a psychological study of a young woman who suffers on account of her vanity and self-consciousness. Her chance meeting with him inflames in her devouring fire of love which is beyond the understanding of him. But the fever of love captures her and she sends her mother to work the primordial earth spell on Ananda so as to drag him towards her. She succeeds in it but at a heavy cost.

The agony of defected love and her heart-rending cry has been laid bare before the readers. The retribution takes place in the end with the depth of mother, Ananda's release from spell and Prakriti's spiritual rebirth.

As Mother and Protector:

If Tagore's women are embodiment of love and humanity, of Nature's spirit, his women manifest Earth mother like magnanimity in their maternal love. A study of his dramatic world reveals that Tagore takes mother and son relationship also as a significant aspect of man-woman relationship. In the plays Karna and Kunti and Gandhari's prayer, he dramatizes the inherent properties of this relationship. In these plays, Tagore deals with the conviction that a mother, by nursing a child in her womb, makes the greatest sacrifice and deserves the dues of it. But Tagore's mother characters manifest the truth that the bond of affection determined by birth is not the end of maternal affection. Her probes into the mother's psyche and unravels the crisscross movements

of their impulses and instincts. Two contrasted manifestations of maternal love are presented in these plays. In *Karna and Kunti*, he portrays Kunti who gave birth to a child before marriage, by blessings of sun God. She suppresses all her maternal instincts and sentiments and deserts him to avoid social calumny. Karna, brought up by foster parents becomes the leader of Kauravas against the Pandavas (sons of Kunti), in the Mahabharat war. In the play, Tagore dramatizes the moments of intense emotional crises, when Kunti goes to Karna to demand the lease of Arjuna's life. She asserts her lost motherhood and reveals hesitantly her identity to Karna. She admits that because of her cowardice, Karna suffers the pangs of humiliation in society. But the power of her love fails to capture his love and duty. When she fails to persuade Karna by her sentimental appeal, she tempts him of the mighty kingdom. Neither her appeals nor the glamour of kingdom, motivate Karna to betray his foster mother. And here Tagore conveys that affection determined by birth can survive only for a definite time. Kunti is told by Karna that the roots of affection of his birth have dried and they cannot be revived by the sudden revelation of 'forgotten motherhood.' "The quick bond of kindred which you severed at its root is dead, and can never grow again On the night, of my birth you left me naked and unnamed to disgrace; leave me once again without pity to the calm expectation of defeat and death!" (Collected Poems and Plays by Rabindranath Tagore, p.64-65)

Women: Defiant and Assertive:

Most of the times, Tagore rushes to Indian ethos and classics in search of theme and character, to prove his conviction regarding the psychological constitution of woman. But at the same time, he is quite unconventional in portraying women in the tradition of Bankim Chandra and Sarat Chandra. His non-conformism was more radical and consistent with his father's spirit of enterprise. He felt that a patriarchal society is not liberal in conceding its women segment any right and so women's dignity is a glorious exception in a conservative patriarchal set up. Tagore's epoch making short story 'Stree patra' (The Wife Letter) Invited protest letters from the conservative sections of society. His progressive and feminist outlook is very well revealed in his plays in the portrayal of defiant and assertive women probably the result of his personal thinking and the progressivist thinking of the west.

In the play **Sacrifice**, Tagore projects a conflict that goes on within the mind of everybody irrespective of any sect or religion, "between temporal and spiritual authority, between brothers and between husband and wife, between humanity and the inhumanity of animal sacrifice before the goddess Kali ." (S. Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore, (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1986), .59-60) out of these conflicts emerges the conflicting character of woman full of love and hatred, selfish and selfless, rational and superstitious, literally, all the contraries of the world. The play highlights the clash of personal loyalty and professional ethics. Gunwati being governed by personal interest fails to have an insight in to the significance of the decision of her husband. Under the sweep of passions she neglects her duty both as a queen and as a wife. In *King and Queen* the defiance of Sumitra is aimed at rescuing the nation from the orthodox King's negligence. But here Gunwati puts up an arrogant defiance to continue an inhuman custom, which is detrimental for the whole society. And Tagore through the character analysis presents his regret over the perverted assertiveness and defiance of Gunwati. The queen can think only of the anticipated joys of motherhood. She sends "red bunches of hibiscus and beasts of sacrifice" (English Writing of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. II, p.89) to be offered to the dread

mother, Kali and Raghupathi. the Orthodox priest assures her that the queen's sacrifice would please the Goddess. He conspires with the queen to dwarf the liberal King's plan to abolish the practice of sacrifice, until the priests own son, Jai Singh immolates himself on the altar. Raghupathi realizes at last the vanity of priestly megalomania and the criminal folly of blood sacrifice. Even Gunwati is redeemed, for the old Goddess is no more she has burst her cruel prison of stone and come back to the woman's heart. Gunwati is depicted by Tagore as a good woman within limits, but frustrations give her life a wrong turn. She becomes morally blind, piles blunder upon blunder, and is partly instrumental in driving Jai Singh to suicide. Moral insensitiveness, indifference to other's pain, assertion of one's ego — these are in the view of Tagore the root of folly, which is but another word for crime and Tagore has deftly conveyed it through the portrayal of Gunwati.

To justify his progressive and feminist outlook, Tagore looks upon great and bold women. In his preface to *Red Oleanders*, Tagore speaks of our great epic Ramayana and compares the 'Yakshatown' to the 'Swarnlanka' of Ravana which was demolished because of the great woman Sita. If Ravana is an epitome of material power and prosperity and evinces the evils of materialism, Sita, actually a daughter of earth, a 'Bhumi Kanya' represents the strength as well as majesty of human soul. She shows a remarkable spirit of defiance against Ravana, the king of Swamlanka. For Tagore, it implies the triumph of the values of an agricultural society over those of an industrial system through a lone woman's integrity and moral protest. Like Balmiki's epic, Tagore's play, too, has a woman, at the center, who manifests the spirit of defiance against the dictates of this powerful killer. Sita's spirited defiance started the process of and ultimately brought about Ravana's down fall. In Tagore's play it is just a frail girl, the daughter of this earth, symbolically suggested through the ripe-corn-ears colour of her dress, who refuses to comply with the dictates of the Yaksh's regime. There is a hint towards the end that this refusal will finally snow ball into a revolution that will shatter the walls of this demonic palace. Nandini, represents the negation of all the values that the Yaksha Kingdom stands for, as Sita rejects the norms (greed- luxury —voluptuousness) of Swarnalanka. Nandini is depicted by Tagore as a defiant lonely woman fighting against the king of dark chambers. By the end of the play, we find that the king has been moved by the spirit of Nandini that there is a clear hint that ultimately the order will be restored and the human values will triumph.

Triumph of Creation and Inspiration:

Tagore, in his plays, has presented his ideal concept of womanhood as motivating primal 'force' as shakti-the living symbol of divine energy which created, inspires as well as fights against and triumphs over the evil.

In *Malini*, Tagore has presented a vision of "Shakti", a symbol of divine energy whose inner shrine is in the subconscious depth of human nature and outer manifestations in sweetness to triumph over the evils of bigotry, fanaticism and orthodox religion and its conventions. She generates love in the heart of orthodox Brahmins, Supriya, Kemankar and everybody. She symbolizes the majesty of human spirit as Srimati in *Natir Puja* does symbolize the affirmation of the spiritual powers of Buddha. Both reveal Tagore's mastery in bringing out the blessed eternal feminine.

Natir Puja is a real drama of passion and action, where Tagore succeeds in giving a faithful representation of life at a definite period in the history of India. Apart from delineating

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psychology and majestic spirit of Srimati, the dramatist creates a deep psychological interest in the character of queen mother who is torn between two equally strong impulses- the religious impulse and impulse of womanhood.

Tagore's success lies in delineating women than men. His *Stree patra* voices protest against marginalization of woman's rights and interests and the contemptuous refusal to look at her point of view. To justify his stand, he goes to the Hindu scriptures, borrows stories, fits into dramatic framework and presents before us, to revise our opinion about women. The above study of his female characters shows that he has drawn his women with a purpose to stress upon the spiritual powers of love, dignity and grace which they symbolize, with his firm conviction in woman's innate divinity and spiritual power. Tagore has delineated them as an incarnation of the evolution of human love from the physical to the spiritual. They tend to be symbolic and allegorical and sometimes archetypal of humanity, love, beauty and nature's splendor and majesty of human spirit. He fills his dramatic canvass with a wide range of women characters drawn from the society around him and makes them represent varied facets of human life.

NOTES

1. Rabindranath Tagore, "Woman 's place in the world" in English writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. III ed. Sisir Kumar Das. (New Delhi: Sahitya academy edition, 1996), p.677
2. M.K. Naik, A History of Indian English Literature (New Delhi: Sahitya academy,1992), p.102.
3. Rabindranath Tagore, Collected Poems and Plays (London: Macmillam & co., 1955), p.477.
4. Rabinadrath Tagore, "Women's place in the world", p. 477.
5. English writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. II, p. 59.
6. Collected Poems and Plays by Rabindranath Tagore, p.564-65.
7. S. Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore, (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1986), p.59-60
8. English Writing of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol. II, p.89.