



# New Woman ideology in Tagore's Fiction

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**Abstract**— *There has been a whole range of both male and female writers who have advocated the cause of women and portrayed the diverse shades of their personality in inventive works. Rabindranath Tagore has been the most countless-minded personality of modern India. He was the first writer to give equal or perhaps more place to women in his writings. The wave of new woman ideology was not only limited to the Western world. It affected women around the world and even men who were sensitive to women's issues. Rabindranath Tagore was a personality who clearly dealt with issues like women's will, their rights and freedoms in his novels. The approach adopted in the present study is not a follow-up to Western feminist ideas, but a synthesis of the concepts available within the Indian sociological system. In India, feminism is a debatable concept. Indian feminist researchers or women studies researchers have not been able to define what Indian feminism exactly is? Indian feminists are not very comfortable in creating a strict definition of theories such as writing and Western feminism. He was a personality who dealt with issues such as women's will, their rights and freedoms clearly in his novels. In Tagore's narrative, there is a reflection of courageous women in women. One can call them the 'New Women'.*

**Keyword**— *Rabindranath Tagore, feminism, India Society, Women.*

## INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects the ever-changing reality of life. Society and creative sensibility of the writers come into collective play to present an authentic picture of social, cultural, economic and psychological set-ups of the inhabitants of any place and era. In *'The Image of Woman in Indian Literature'*, Yamuna Raja Rao stated, "Literature can have the breadth and throb of life only when it keeps pace with changing image of the women" (09).

The social set-up of any society is an important aspect that allows or inhibits participation in the process of creation of the image. Human history is full of events, ideas and movements which have triggered momentary or long-lasting effects on the fate of both dominant as well as subjugated sections.

## NEW WOMAN IDEOLOGY

The woman is one such section of the society which has been subjugated for centuries irrespective of caste, creed, era and race. The images of women are captured by the writers. These writers have witnessed the continuity of life cautiously and have foreseen the consequences. Writers are the first to capture it, whenever an upheaval in the ranks of society is witnessed. In the book *'Image of Women in Literature'* Mary Anne Ferguson stated:

"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 relationships to men" (4-5).

The status of women in India can be traced back to the early Vedic Age. During the Rig Veda period,

women were given equal rights and status with men. In her thesis work *'Images of woman in the selected fiction of Rabindranath Tagore'*, Ms Sonia Soni stated:

“Religious documents have 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 is declared blasphemy by the dominant section leading to negative image creation. All this leads to suppression of women at the hands of men.”(2)

The real condition of women of all times was presented by Kailasbasini Devi in her celebrated book *'Hindu Mahilaganer Hindbastha (The Degraded Condition of Hindu Women)*. She said:

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 marks 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? (02)

It is only in the later Vedic period, *'Varna Ashrama Dharma'* and the 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 an article *'An Ecumenical Question: The Status of Women'* Arlene Swidler said, “Man is the principal and end of woman, as God is the principle and end of man . . . Woman exists for the man, not man for the woman” (115).

Women were allowed all liberties which were permissible to men and no discrimination based on sex existed. In *Women in England 1760-1914: A Social History*, Susie Steinbach revealed:

“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” (141).

Education was denied to women in general as it was a luxury available only to men. It was considered useless

to waste time and money on the education of a girl-child because she was destined to serve the powerful male in all spheres of life. Atin and Sudhir said:

“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 A / Na (No More) or similar such appellation. A sole sister among many brothers may receive some attention from the family. And if a brother does not follow a sister's birth, then very often the unfortunate sister is blamed for the calamity” (119)

In her book *'Abarodhbasini (The Women Confined)'*, Begam Rokeya stated:

“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. She was secretly taught by her brother, whom she refers to as her only instructor '. He taught English to her as he believed, —If you can learn English, the doors of the world will be wide open to you” (11).

The Indian socio-cultural arena of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century was the transition phase when different pulls were active. English education brought rational attitude and individual. In the book *'A History of Indian English Literature'* M. K. Naik stated, “[. . .] the Indian ethos gradually underwent a sea-change from the shock of defeat and frustration and the trauma of inferiority feeling to a newfound self-awareness and self-confidence” (35).

Rabindranath Tagore's time was the time of great convulsions in the Indian political arena. He has been the most myriad minded personality of modern India. The wave of New Woman ideology was not only limited to the Western world. It influenced women around the world and even men who were sensitive to the issues of women. Rabindranath Tagore was one such personality who frankly dealt with issues like women's desire, their rights and freedom in his novels. In the book *'Problems of Indian Creative Writer in English'* Paul Verghese marked about the genius of Tagore:

“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." (52)

In her famous article, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" published in the *North American Review* in 1894, Sarah Grand coined the term "New Woman". In the book *'The New Womanhood'* Winifred Harper Cooley asserted:

"The new woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages, has come to say – if civilization is to endure. The sufferings of the past have but strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her—and she now knows that she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her work." (31).

Diverse channels of liberalization were claimed by women, some in collaboration with men and some against the conservative spheres crafted by men. The New Woman could survive even after shunning relationships and still maintain social status protected by legal rights. She was intelligent, confident, educated and self-supporting. In an article 'The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle', Sally Ledger said:

"The New Woman was a very fin-de-siècle phenomenon contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism. She was part of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880s and 1890s" (12).

Sally Ledger further stated:

"The elusive quality of the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* marks her as a problem, as a challenge to the homogeneous culture of Victorianism which could not find a consistent language by which she could be categorized and dealt with. All that was certain was that she was dangerous, a threat to the *status quo*." (11)

Tagore's personal life shows how difficult it would have been for him to deviate from the compelling pressures of traditional and social conditions of the conservative society of his time. He had sensed the changing stream of time much ahead of his contemporaries. He trenchantly puts in *Rabindra Rachna Vali Vol. 13*:

"She [woman] is not in the world of the fairy tale where the fair woman sleeps for ages until she is touched by the magic wand (. . .) At last, the time has arrived when woman must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power" (226).

His radical attitude gave him the courage to swim against the current. He was the first writer who gave equal or perhaps more space to women in his writings. This liberal-minded writer had no objection to women performing on the stage, which was a highly controversial issue in contemporary society. Bandyopadhyay said:

"The Brahmo women had started to become unorthodox several years earlier, but this was the first well-known example of traditional Hindu women disregarding the custom of female seclusion. Jagadanada and his family were severely criticized by both the traditional Hindus, for having violated *purda* and by educated young men who had recently become imbued with a strong sense of nationalism, for having invited the Prince into the *zenana*." (172-73).

In Tagore's fiction, Women have a reflection of courageous women. One can call them the '*New Women*'. Several women of remarkable traits encouraged the novelist to give a new vision and scope through his social work as well as creative writings. In Tagore's narrative, his women stand apart from contemporary women of society and slowly and steadily pull out the conservative track of traditions. That is why their women are considered more modern than contemporary women of Bengali society. In '*Swadesh O Samaj*' (*Rabindra Rachnavali Vol. 06*), Tagore said:

"Of course, women do resort to a deception that is also another aspect of women's strength. The demands of men when they exceed the women's resources are often met by machinations. It is we men who have dubbed women as an enchantress. Indeed, we wanted them too so. If they come short, we give them a bad name, when they are useful, we sing their praise." (21)

Though he was against any direct participation of women in the national movement, his heroines like Bimla and Ila are brave enough to participate in the mainstream of the national movement. The multi-dimensional interests and intellectual engagements of their female characters challenge the shibboleths and stereotypes of Bengali culture and thus they become spokespersons of the author.

Tagore's narrative and non-fictional views of gender equality and justice. He also felt that women should first fulfil their roles and responsibilities towards their

families. Tagore emphasizes having a balanced perspective to fulfil the interest of the masses. No common girl of a Hindu family could dare to register her objection so vividly but Lolita is courageous in this regard and quite eligible to be Tagore's, new woman. She openly calls Binoy, Gora's satellite:

"Gora, Gora, Gora day in and day out . . . His friend Gora may be a great man. But isn't he a man also? His friend has overshadowed him so completely . . . It is as though a cockroach had swallowed a midge. I have no patience with the midge for allowing itself to be caught, and it does not heighten my respect for the cockroach." (G 89-90)

He, undoubtedly, achieves an intended goal to make people believe what he tries to put in words. The identity of a woman in our society is of weak, insignificant and delicate creature that needs to be protected. However, sometimes woman uses certain tricks to axe her grind. Interestingly, Tagore has no disapproval for the tricks employed by women. In his essay '*The Nation and its Women*', Partha Chatterjee said:

"Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of day-to-day living separates the social space into *gharand bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. And so, one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *gharand bahir*." (120)

Many of his essays such as '*Indian Marriage*', '*Women*', '*Hindu Marriage*', '*Women's Education*' and '*travel narratives* like '*Diary of a Traveller to Europe*', '*Diary of a Traveller to the West*' and '*Letters from Europe*' interrogate the role of women, their liberation and criticism of patriarchy in a humorous manner. Chatterjee stated:

"But the crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose

their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized . . . There would be a marked difference in the degree and manner of Westernization of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation." (126)

Women characters of Tagore's novels always play a vital role in the development of male characters. Sucharita's contribution in making Gora realise the true meaning of nationalism and patriotism cannot be overlooked. She drags him from the suffocating and stiff boundaries and transfers to a new vision. With her support, Gora leaves the imaginary burden of staunch notions and says, "*Today I am free. I need no longer fear being contaminated or becoming an out-caste I shall not now have to look on the ground at every step to preserve my purity.*" (G 405). Tagore has highlighted the strong individualistic personality of Anandamoyi, but this individualism has nothing to do with the image of patriarchy. While describing the modern attitude of Anandamoyi, the novelist deliberately highlights her dress sense, she is a 'new woman' even the way she dresses:

"One thing about her struck all her acquaintances, namely, that with her sari she wore a bodice. At the time of which we are speaking, though certain modern young women had begun to adopt it as part of their dress, ladies of the old school looked askance at the wearing of a bodice as savouring of Christianity. Anandamoyi's husband, Krishnadayal Babu, had held a post in the Commissariat Department, and Anandamoyi had spent most of her days with him, from childhood, away from Bengal. So, she had not the idea that to cover the body properly was a matter to be ashamed of, or to laugh at." (G 11)

Another woman character 'Kumudini' in Tagore's fiction '*Relationships*' stands apart from the common Bengali women. She emerges as a winner or what we call Tagore's 'New Woman'. She has strong willpower and firm determination. Tagore said:

At the time, he had thought Kumudini was like ordinary girls, easily tamed by discipline—even, perhaps, liking to be disciplined, he had realised today that there was no telling what Kumudini might or might not do. There were only one means of trying Kumudini's life securely to his own; by making her the mother of his children. This dream was his consolation. (R 111-12)

Tagore's new woman:

". . . When the day comes. Dada, make me free as well. By then I'll have handed over their child to

them. There is something one can't lose even for the sake of one's child . . . Do you remember our mother? She died of her own free will. She could not find her place in her household, so she could easily leave her children behind and go. When a person wants to be free, nothing can stop her. I am your sister, Dada, I want freedom. One day the bond snaps. I can assure you of that." (R 252)

Tagore projects a very bold image of the woman through the character of Mrinal in "Letter from a Wife". Tagore has taken up the women's cause for emancipation with the portrayal of Ela's character. He breaks the traditional set of images of the Indian woman. Ela is an integrated Indian woman's voice against the age-old practices of patriarchy. Tagore exposes the lack of decision-making power in Bengali *bhadralok* boys through Anupam's character, which added to the miseries of young girls. In song XXXV of *Gitanjali*, defines Tagore's views about freedom and this quest for freedom is also reflected in his image of women.:

Where the mind is without fear and the head  
Is held high, where knowledge is free,  
Where the world has not been broken up in  
Fragments by narrow domestic walls,  
Where words come out from the depth of Truth,  
Where tireless Striving stretches  
its arms towards perfection,  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost  
Its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my father,  
Let my country awake. (01-13)

### CONCLUSION

Tagore's women are not passive characters; They stand for justice and truth and if they make a mistake they feel and try to rectify it. Bina Biswas remarks in this regard, "Tagore's heroines and his feminism stance did not bring forth any cultural and social revolution in the society but it successfully stirred the thought process of the elitist society" (188). Tagore's heroines outdo his heroes in the declaration of love. We witness this courage in the character of *Binodini* and *Saudamini*. The women of Tagore's narrative fall prey to situations and suffer a lot but once they realise their mistake, they take no time to fix it.

The unique imaginative power of Tagore's New Woman is a touchstone of sorts to humanity.

The women of Tagore's narrative are not ready to accept any fear or bondage. They are courageous like *Sucharita* and *Lolita*, educated like *Charu* and *Binodini*, truthful like *Kamala* and *Mrinal*, innocent like *Kalyani* and *Haimanti*, rebellious like *Kumudini* and *Ela*, benevolent like *Bimala*, smart like *Sohini* and lovable like *Annapurna* and *Anandamoyi*. They are all intellectuals and know the difference between right and wrong. Their female characters have the reasoning mind and want to keep their heads held high in dignity.

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