

# A Herança de Tagore



# FRESH AIR AND FREEDOM

## Rabindranath Tagore's Portrayal of Women as Agents of Change in Society and Culture

### AR FRESCO E LIBERDADE: A REPRESENTAÇÃO DAS MULHERES COMO AGENTES DE MUDANÇA NA SOCIEDADE E NA CULTURA EM RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to explore Rabindranath Tagore's vision and views on women as reflected in his writings. After a discussion of the writer's family background and of his relations with women both in his family and as friends, this essay focuses on Tagore's perception of the birth of the "new woman", that is, a woman who challenges convention, and seeks to establish a new form of social order.

#### KEYWORDS

Rabindranath Tagore, women in Tagore's writings,  
the "new woman"

#### INTRODUCTION

A poet, a playwright, a novelist, a musician, an artist, a philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a "myriad-minded man."<sup>1</sup> He wrote extensively in various creative genres, took part in the freedom movement, thought about colonialism and nationalism, rural reconstruction, environment and nature, and established a university in West Bengal. Critics have written so much on so many aspects of Rabindranath that it is hard to discover an area to write on. And yet not much attention has been devoted to his thoughts on women, although he wrote extensively about them. This paper proposes to explore his vision and views on women as reflected in his writings. However, in this brief article, my focus will be limited to only to a few of them amidst the vast literature. The reason for my choice is his theories on women and his perceptions of women's future role were best exemplified in them. While Rabindranath was not comfortable with strident assertions of women's rights, and was not a "feminist" in the sense we use

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<sup>1</sup> DUTTA; ROBINSON. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man*, p. 1.

the term today, he showed a remarkable understanding of woman's psyche, perceived the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocated for greater freedom and decision-making power for women in the family and larger society. His writings on women can be seen as representing three facets of women's lives: i) the romance between men and women; ii) social oppression of women; iii) the birth of the "new woman" – that is, a woman who challenges convention, and seeks to establish a new form of social order. It is the third theme only that this paper is concerned with.

To comprehend fully the main theme of Tagore's constantly evolving thoughts on women, we will first need to turn to his family and his time.

## THE FAMILY

Born in 1861 into an illustrious family, Rabindranath grew up at Jorasanko, in the heart of Calcutta. A few words about the Jorasanko family may not be out of place here, because the Tagores left an indelible stamp on the social and cultural history of Bengal. Indeed, few Bengalis could have claimed to have contributed as much to the cultural efflorescence of Bengal as the Tagores did. Dwarakanath Tagore, Rabindranath's grandfather, was a pioneer industrialist. His son Debendranath was a leading social and religious reformer. Almost all his sons rose to fame. The eldest, Dwijendranath, was a philosopher and a nationalist; the second, Satyendranath, was the first Indian member of the Indian Civil service, and a champion of women's freedom from the confinement within the four walls of the home; the third son, Hemendranath, was a businessman; the fourth, Jyotirindranath, was a writer, musician, industrialist and nationalist. However, outshining all brothers, reigning over the cultural terrain of India, was Rabindranath. His nephew Abanindranath was a most celebrated painter. Thakurbari, as the Tagore family home at Jorasanko was known, became the meeting point of many a brilliant contemporary mind.

The women of the Tagore family also made history. Debendranath's daughter Swarnakumari was a celebrated author; daughter-in-law Gyanadanandini, one of the most "modern" women of her time, innovated the "modern" style of wearing saree and started a children's magazine. Another daughter-in-law, Kadambari Devi, used to ride on horseback wearing tailored clothes, was a highly talented actress participating in family plays and the source of inspiration to young Rabindranth.

It was a joint family. In an Indian joint family the number of members depended on how many people a particular family accommodated. Besides the three biological generations, a household would often accommodate, in terms of the relationship to the *karta*, widowed aunts, grand aunts, siblings, siblings' children, cousins, their children, widowed daughters-in-law of siblings or cousins, distant relations, and sometimes even friends/ people acquainted but not related by blood, needing food and lodging. Listen to Hemlata Tagore (b.1873) married to Dwipendranath Tagore, nephew of Debendranath Tagore, describe the Tagore household at Jorasanko:

After my marriage, I entered our house at Jorasanko. It is an understatement to say that it was a huge family. In his household, there were altogether 116 people. ...Nobody could dream of separation.<sup>2</sup>

Saral Devi Chaudhurani, Rabindranth's niece, too, tells us in her autobiography that Jorasanko was:

a place of great magnificence, every corner teeming with people, humming with endless activities. The sons and daughters of my maternal grandfather had their separate quarters where they lived with their respective families. [...] A dozen Brahmin cooks were kept busy since early morning in the central kitchen cooking for the entire family and other residents. Cooked rice would be piled high almost touching the ceiling on one end of the huge kitchen.<sup>3</sup>

In this joint household Debendranath was the head. Usually, the children of the family as well as elders participated in various celebrations and performances. It was among such extraordinarily gifted men and women that Rabindranath had fortune of growing up.

## THE TIMES

He came of age at a time when the currents of three movements had reached the shores of India: i) the religious: Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) had founded the *Brahmo Samaj* (1828), which emerged as a protest against the prevalent evils of Hindu society, went back to the classical Hindu society as embedded in the *Upanishads* and at the same time recognised modernity as brought by the West; it had a great impact on a section of *bhdrolok* (educated middle class) community, including Tagore's family;<sup>4</sup> ii) the literary: "a literary revolution" had been pioneered, especially in Bengal, by men like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894); iii) the political: a nationalist movement had started to "give voice" to Indian people's discontent against British colonial rule. The poet's mind and sensibilities were shaped by these influences.

Rabindranath lived for eighty eventful years in colonial Bengal, and his views about women changed over time — naturally, because there were fast changes in India, which inevitably left a footprint on his thoughts. When Rabindranath was born, India was smarting under British colonial rule. Soon, however, the freedom movement started and originated in Bengal in the form of an agitation against the partition of Bengal, designed by Viceroy Curzon to destroy political opposition in the province, in 1905.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> TAGORE, H. *Purano Katha*, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> CHAUDHURANI. *Amar Balyojibon*, (My Childhood). In: *Bharati, Baisakh*, 1312 BS, CE, 1905.

<sup>4</sup> See KOPF, David. *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> See SARKAR, Sumit. *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1905*. Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973.

The movement, though initiated as a protest against a political move, was also motivated by the urge of the aspiring Bengali middle class to break British monopoly control over the Indian economy and to create new opportunities for their own participation in commerce and industry. This motivation explains the widespread propaganda against the use of British goods and the promotion of indigenous products (which provided the context for Tagore's novel *Home and the World*). As the movement evolved, its leaders subtly turned the politico-economic struggle against the British into worship of the motherland, which was in its turn transformed into a mother goddess. The intellectuals who helped achieve this transformation included Rabindranath. The Swadeshi upsurge began to decline after 1908, and in 1915 Gandhi arrived from South Africa to engineer and lead the mammoth non-violent mass movement. Tagore did not agree with all of Gandhi's strategies, but he was a fervent patriot and supporter of the freedom movement.<sup>6</sup>

While politics and economy were changing radically in Bengal, the field of literature could not remain static. Rabindranath dominated the literary field in Bengal, but other major writers appeared during his time, including his critics, especially in the 1920's and 1930's. Women, too, had begun to write and publish since the late nineteenth century; the majority of them upheld traditional values. Such was, very briefly, the literary environment during Tagore's time

## SITUATING TAGORE'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

How do we situate Rabindranath in terms of his own life and literary career from the middle of the nineteenth century? The poet grew up, as he himself recognized, as a lonely child —“there was no bridge of intimacy between adults and children”— spending much of his time on the rooftop of his home, until the arrival of Kadambari Devi, the wife of his elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore. He writes:

In the midst of this monotony, there played one day the flutes of festivity, a new bride came to the house, slender gold bracelets on her delicate brown hands. In the twinkling of an eye the cramping fence was broken, and a new being came into view from the magic land beyond the bounds of the familiar... And so began a new chapter of my lonely Bedouin life.<sup>7</sup>

A new chapter had indeed opened for the poet. Kadambari was a great lover of literature and young Rabi became a partner in her literary enterprise. She herself became his chief inspiration, as the little boy, growing into manhood, was composing his first poems. Once he was done with a new poem, he would first read it out to her, and most of his early publications were dedicated to her. We do not know with certainty what the nature of their relationship was. It could have been “love” or perhaps simply the joy of

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<sup>6</sup> For a succinct account of the freedom movement, see BANDOPADHYAY, Sekhar. *From Plassey to Partition*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004. See also BHATTACHARYA, Sabyasachi. *The Mahatma and the Poet*. Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997, for letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore. Despite some differences regarding strategies, the two remained lifelong admirers of each other.

<sup>7</sup> In: DAS GUPTA (Ed.). *The Oxford India Tagore*, p.25-6.

that rare commodity, understanding and true companionship? But undoubtedly she was his inspiring angel and a strong influence on him. She committed suicide a few months after Rabindranath's marriage to Mrinalini when Rabindranath was 24. "With her suicide it felt as though the earth had moved away from under my feet," Rabindranath later wrote to Amiya Chakravarty — once his personal secretary and himself a poet — "and the light had gone out from the sky, my world felt empty."<sup>8</sup> There was "darkness" all around him. Yet Kadambari's death had, in his own words, enabled him to attain his "freedom from life," as he realized that "life must be seen through the window of death." Poetic talent combined with philosophical realization to take him forward. He went on writing and his career reached its peak when he was given Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

The other woman with whom Rabindranath developed a deep friendship and attachment was Victoria Ocampo. The poet met Victoria in 1924 when he visited Argentina. She was the "*bideshini*" (foreigner) to whom the poet refers in his writings, and to whom he dedicated his book of poems, *Purabi*, as well as other poems and songs.<sup>9</sup>

There were obviously many a woman who was drawn to the poet, and he had a good understanding with his wife, but Kadambari remained throughout his life as his "*jeevaner dhruvatara*," (the pole star of life) and his Muse. She appeared repeatedly through his poems, songs and stories, and most prominently in his paintings. He wrote about her long after her death, "You are not before my eyes; you exist within them."<sup>10</sup>

When Tagore arrived into the world in 1861, the elements of romance found in European literature had become a pervasive theme in Bengali creative writing. Romantic notions permeated almost all Tagore's early writings. While young Tagore, imbued with romanticism, looked at women as sources of inspiration and imagination — "*ardhek manabi tumi ardhek kalpana*" (you are half real and half imagination), he wrote. Romantic love between a man and a woman is the basis of a few of his short stories and women's role as lovers received primacy in many of his poems. In *Sonar Tori* and *Chitra* romanticism dominates, and the beautiful woman finds her ultimate expression in the poem "Urvashi": "For ages you have been the world's lover,/ Oh you, Urvashi of unparalleled beauty."<sup>11</sup>

Though this romanticism did not quite leave him altogether, he gradually learned to situate women in their real worlds, to see them as reasoning and desiring subjects who were constrained by social rules and norms. It started mainly from the 1890's. Tagore had been sent by his father to supervise the family estates in Selaidah and other places in what is today Bangladesh. (This is the Bangladesh connection and the reason why Bangladesh considers him as its poet). There the son of the aristocrat landlord came into contact with the common people, the peasants and the middle class and

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<sup>8</sup> In: DAS GUPTA (Ed.). *The Oxford India Tagore*, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> For details, see DYSON, Ketaki Kushari. *In Your Blossoming Flower Garden: Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo*. New Dehi: Sahitya Academy, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 2, p. 477. All translations from the text are mine, unless otherwise mentioned.

<sup>11</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 1, p.511.

came in direct touch with their life, their joys and sorrows, troubles and solutions.<sup>12</sup> He also perceived women's status and problems. And — apart from other things — he began to give voice to women's subjectivities; the theme was developed roughly from 1891-92 onwards.

## RABINDRANATH'S VIEWS ON WOMEN

As mentioned earlier, one cannot call Tagore a “feminist” — in actual life he did much that feminism does not approve of — and yet he showed a remarkable empathy for women, appreciated their sufferings, struggles and sacrifices, and paved the way for an ideology for the women's movement. Primarily a romantic to start with, Tagore increasingly became a candid and forceful spokesman for women's rights. This focus became the emergence of what I call the “new woman,” that is, a woman who challenges convention, makes decisions about her own life and even seeks to bring about changes in society, and culture. This was powerfully expressed in his poems published in *Balaka* (1916, A Flight of Swans) and *Palataka* (1918, The Escaped One). While *Balaka* was a recognition of the value of women, *Palataka* embodied the song of “liberated” women. What *Balaka* and *Palataka* announced in poetry, contemporary short stories, novels and plays declared in prose, while his essays laid down theoretical constructs.

What were the basic tenets of the thoughts he advocated? There were three. First, he asserted that in Indian — especially Hindu — society, the relationship of marriage between men and women was utterly unequal. For instance, a chaste and devoted wife occupied a glorious status in Indian society. A cult of veneration surrounded her. But there was little effort to foster the concept of the sanctity of conjugal love on a husband. Overriding the instinct of affection between husband and wife, age-old cultural prescriptions were imposed on a woman. To her “husband was an idea” to which she surrendered. It was all one-sided, and this discriminatory practice had existed “complacently in our society for ages. Men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this.”<sup>13</sup>

It may not be out of context to mention here that in his novel *Home and the World* Tagore proclaimed that conjugal love was at its best when mingled with freedom.

Bimala was confined to my home, restricted within a small space, ruled by a series of small duties. [...] I did not want to decorate my house with her, I wanted to see her against the backdrop of the world fully blossoming out with wisdom, brimming with energy, filled with the intensity of love.<sup>14</sup>

It is perhaps the most “modern” construction of love and wifhood articulated by a man in contemporary Bengali literature.

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<sup>12</sup> His letters to his niece Indira Devi beautifully describe his experiences. These letters have been published in TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v.11.

<sup>13</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 13, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 9, p. 428.

Second, men and women were not the same, but merely complementary to each other. But it was the woman who was the source of life, and her strength was indefinable sweetness and tenderness embedded in her heart. Without its touch, a man cannot realise his potential. In the words of Tagore, “It is like a beacon, sort of a force. It is not tangible, neither is it measurable, and yet in the absence of this vital elixir human existence cannot find its ultimate fulfilment.” To drive home the point, Tagore takes recourse to poetic imagery.

Plants derive their sustenance through moisture and food through their roots. We have an idea about this. But the effect of sunlight cannot be encompassed in a mathematical formula. If that light does not generate any energy, then all the struggles of the plants to survive will flounder.<sup>15</sup>

Tagore bitterly regretted the fact that men believed themselves to be the only beings that mattered, and had failed to realise that women were “the greatest assets of mankind.” Perhaps this was at the root of all pervasive social debility. The message was clear. Women would have to be accorded the key role, for social regeneration.

Third, women were going to play that key role, because they would be the vanguard of change in the coming age. Tagore visualised: “A noticeable powerful modern movement these days is the propensity of those who had long been marginalised to thrust forward and emerge. [...] The day has come when women are claiming their full right as human beings.”<sup>16</sup> Aware of the worldwide women’s movement that was gradually taking shape in the UK, USA and France, Tagore realised that women were coming forward to build a new society, a new culture, and for this task they were preparing themselves all over the world. In India, “[i]t is not just that they have literally dispensed with the veils that had earlier hid their faces. They have now effectively banished the subliminal veil that shrouded their mind and kept them away from the outside world.”<sup>17</sup> There was, therefore, scope for hope. As women — free from the man-made fetters — would begin to go forward and find their own fulfilment, they would also lend men their fulfilment.

What he theorised in essays, he articulated through creative writings. I will choose only four pieces to prove my point, two short stories and two plays, although references will be made to a number of others. I chose short stories because next to his poems and music, short stories are widely acknowledged as the best expressions of Tagore’s creativity. He started writing short stories quite late in life when he was about thirty and had already matured into a powerful writer. It was as if, with this form, “he arrived in his own special field”.<sup>18</sup> The period of writing these stories stretched from 1891 to 1941, and they captured the experiences during the last fifty years of his life. I have chosen two which portray women’s challenge against tradition within the familial set up. The

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<sup>15</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 13, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 13, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 13, p. 380.

<sup>18</sup> BISHI. *Rabindranather Chhotogalpo*, p. 1-2. Bishi was a reputed author and literary critic and wrote extensively on Tagore.



choice of plays is because they were written ten years apart from each other and they dealt with women's activism in the social arena.

### PROTEST AGAINST FAMILY NORMS: "SHASTI" (PUNISHMENT) AND "STRIR PATRA" (A WIFE'S LETTER)

Chronologically the first of the four, written around 1900, before the *Balaka-Palataka* period, "Shasti" is considered one of the most brilliant stories in the Bengali literary canon. In the story, Chandara, an innocent village wife much in love with her husband Chhidam, is requested by Chhidam to confess that she killed her sister-in-law, who was in fact killed by her husband (Chhidam's elder brother Dukhi) by accident. The idea behind this request was that the courts would be more lenient if a woman had committed the murder. Chandara is stunned by her husband's plea, but without saying a word accedes to the request. In court, before the judge, she refuses to plead not guilty or give the excuses that her husband and the lawyers had provided for her. She says instead that she had deliberately killed her sister-in-law because she disliked her.

When Chhidam appears in court the judge asks her "Look at the witness and say what is he to you?"

Chandara covers her face with her two hands and says, "My husband."

"Doesn't he love you?"

Chandara answers, "OOH, very Much."

Pouring as much sarcasm into the three words as she was capable of. When the judge tells her that the punishment for the crime is death penalty, Chandara cries out, "I beg you, my lord, give me that... I cannot bear it anymore."

In other words, she chooses death over a return (at some point) home. On the day before she is to be hanged (a sentence handed to her for her deliberate murder), she is asked whether she wants to see anyone. She asks only to see her mother. When told that her husband was waiting to see her, she dismisses him with a single word: "*maran*", she utters.<sup>19</sup> This is a term almost impossible to translate, but can be read here as a contemptuous dismissal of hypocrisy.

The story, an unfettered assertion of a woman's right to selfhood, was far ahead of its time and created a furore among the reading public. Pramatha Nath Bishi has observed that "Shasti" depicts a "woman's quiet courage" and that Chandara "is an example of a woman's quiet fulfilment of duty. [...] Chandara silently sacrificed herself so that she was deprived even of public appreciation."<sup>20</sup> My reading of this story diverges sharply from that of this reputed Tagore-scholar. Chandara did not do her duty; it was certainly not her duty to shoulder a false charge. Nor did she sacrifice herself for the family; surely it was not her intention. Author Anita Desai is more accurate in commenting that she acted "out of pride and fury."<sup>21</sup> Chandara was outraged by her husband's request.

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<sup>19</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 7, p. 188-189.

<sup>20</sup> BISHI. *Rabindranather Chhotogalpo*, p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> DESAI. Introduction, p. 11.

As Tagore describes it, when her husband asks her to confess to the crime, Chandara is shocked and disbelieving. The “idea of husband,” the ideal nourished since childhood collapses completely. She glares at her husband; her dark and fiery eyes seem to be scorching him. Her body and mind shrink in horror and every bone in her body rebels against him. The “ideal” of a husband is broken. The story was later made into a drama under the title of *Abhimanini* (The Woman with *Abhiman*), and ran at the popular Star Theatre for many evenings.<sup>22</sup> Certainly there was an element of *abhiman* present, but I argue that Chandara’s was much more than mere *abhiman*. It was a reaction to the bitter realisation that a man’s love for his wife could never match his loyalty to his brother. It was this realisation of the patriarchal bond against which she did not matter that drove Chandara to choose the scaffold in place of him.

In other words, Chandara left her husband, as Norah in Ibsen’s *Doll’s House* had done, because they both realised at the time of a serious crisis that the husband they dearly loved did not reciprocate their love. For Norah, it was the revelation of the selfishness of the man she loved; for Chandara it was the revelation of betrayal by the man who had taken an oath during marriage to protect her but was now pushing her to long-time imprisonment. Chandara decided, very much like Nora, to have nothing more to do with the man. Technically, of course, she did not commit suicide, nor did she declare that she had left her husband, but for all practical purposes this is what she did. The title, “Punishment,” refers to both her undeserved punishment and the punishment she gave to her husband.

There is one more point to be noted. Chhidam had hoped that Chandara, being a woman, would be given a light punishment. But the humiliation that Chandara would have to undergo because of this false charge did not occur to him. Tagore was at his most powerful when he wrote:

Chandara, an innocent, bubbly, fun-loving village bride was now being led as a prisoner by constables along the village pathways, past Rathtala, through the market square, skirting the post office and the school, along the edge of the river-*ghat*, past the house of the Majumdars. A bunch of young boys trailed her, village girls and their friends watched her, some through their veils, some from their doorsteps, others hidden behind the trees. They all drew back from her with a feeling of shame and abhorrence towards a girl who was leaving the village forever, stamped with the stigma of having committed this heinous crime.<sup>23</sup>

In “Shasti,” Chandara protests against her personal injury; in “Strir Patra,” (1914) Mrinal protests the injustice done to another woman and, therefore, the women in general. Mrinal is a housewife, endowed with beauty, brains, courage and an independent power of judgment. Her elder sister-in-law, scared of her husband and completely subservient to him, lacks the courage to welcome her own sister Bindu when she comes to her for shelter. Mrinal comes forward to give Bindu protection, but it is fleeting, for

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<sup>22</sup> *Abhiman* is a word difficult to translate into English. Perhaps “sulk with hurt feelings” carries the sense to some extent.

<sup>23</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 7, p.187.

Bindu is forcibly married off to a man who is mentally deranged. Fleeing from her marital home, Bindu comes back to Mrinal, but upon being compelled to go back, ends her own life. Through Bindu's life, Mrinal realizes the truth about women in society: "I will not return to your No 27 Makhan Boral lane home. I have seen Bindu and realised the worth(lessness) of a woman's life in our society. I want none of it any more." She leaves her home, her husband and his family, and goes alone to Puri. Having left home, facing the unfamiliar world, having abandoned the cage and breathing fresh air, Mrinal discovers herself and her true worth: "*Aaj baire eshe dekhi amar gaurav aar rakhbar jayega nei, Ami bachbo, ami bachlum.*" (Now that I am out on my own, I discover that I have my own space now and am gloriously free. I will survive. I have been saved.)<sup>24</sup>

It has been aptly commented that in terms of its content, the title of the story could have been "A Letter from a Woman to a Man." In her letter Mrinal clearly spells out the reasons for her leaving home. She had seen Bindu and realised the worthlessness ascribed to a woman's life by the society. She realised that "discriminatory practice had existed complacently in our society for ages" and that "men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this." She wanted to see whether women could have a better place in the world and also whether she herself could achieve a higher purpose in life. Through her suffering and experience, and out on her own, Mrinal comes to realise that the role of a wife was but a fraction of a woman's life. The ultimate search was for the development of the whole and not of the part of a human being. The *mejobau* (second son's wife in a joint family) in Mrinal was dead, but Mrinal was reborn as a woman and had the blissful feeling of liberty.

### LEADERSHIP OUTSIDE THE HOME: *RAKTA KARABI* (RED OLEANDERS) AND *TASHER DESH* (HOUSE OF CARDS)

*Rakta Karabi* (Red Oleander—a common flower in India) was published in 1924. In its context we must remember two things, First, by that time Tagore's views on women had progressed far, and he had begun to see women as the source of life and energy in human society. Second, Tagore was not against western civilisation per se, but was always a strong critic of industrialisation and capitalism which looked at the world only as a place for extorting profit and gold. The First World War, a shattering experience, had confirmed his belief.

The theme of *Rakta Karabi*, an allegorical play, is modern industrialisation, its harmful and dehumanising effect and its remedy Here is a land, *yakshapuri* or the Town of accumulated wealth and greed and power. Its ruler, the King, lives in an impregnable fort, surrounding himself by a wire fence outside which he never shows his face. There is just one small window covered by a net, from behind which he issues his orders and talks, if he so wills. His one passion is to accumulate gold from the bowels of the earth. In his inordinate greed the King has become dead to all human sensibilities. He represses

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<sup>24</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 7, p. 647-8.

life and with the help of his Governor and a few bureaucrats controls his workers with inhuman rules, compelling their obedience by the twin use of force and fear. His workers have no names, but are known through numbers like 47 F, 69 T, and so on. Watched by spies, day in and day out, they dig and come out with dead weight of gold on their heads, and have lost the will as well as the way to return home. Nandini, a young girl, the very spirit of life and liberty, comes to the Town. On meeting her, the Professor of the Town, is at once startled and fascinated, and says, "In this Town all our treasure is of gold, the secret treasure of the dust. But the gold which is you, beautiful one, is not of the dust, but of the light."<sup>25</sup>

Nandini is determined to break the oppressive system and free the people as well as the King. She succeeds in awakening in most men—even the King — the desire for freedom. It was harvesting season. She called the King: "Come out , King—out in the open field."<sup>26</sup> The King falls in love with her, and wants to possess her, because the only thing he knows is possession: "Nandini... mystery of beauty. I want to pluck you, to grasp you within my closed fist...to scrutinise you or to break you into pieces."<sup>27</sup> But you cannot bind or enclose freedom or the spirit of joy. The King slowly realises that he is himself imprisoned within his own net.

As the King comes under Nandini's spell the die-hard conservatives in his own ranks rebel against him and without his permission kill Ranjan, who Nandini is in love with and who is, like her, a symbol of freedom. The King is shocked and feels deceived. He invites Nandini to join him against the rebels. Nandini runs in advance of the King against the rebels, and is killed. The King comes out and the network is torn.

In this play Tagore wanted to emphasise the power of love to change even Mammon into a human being and the power of youth and joy to humanise inhuman capitalism. Nandini, indeed, is the name for the "elixir" of life that Tagore discusses in his essays. She symbolises woman as "a beacon, sort of a force. It is not tangible, neither is it measurable." That is why the professor calls her "Sunlight" and the bewildered and fascinated king King cries out, "I want to see what is inside you. I want know you."

About his own interpretation of Nandini, Tagore says,  
Nandini, the heroine of my drama is the type of life and love and joy. [...] Man is a seeker, searching without pause, be it for gold in the bowels of the earth, or be it for hidden power in the depths of his mind. Up and down he rushes endlessly [...] finding never a gleam of happiness. To add power to his desperate search, he goes on building machines, each one more monstrous than the other. Then comes woman to him, bearing the gift of her love, her centripetal urge balances the centrifugal urge of the male.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, it is the triumph of woman power, her force of creativity and love that wins over the triangular network of power, fear and greed. Listen to the piece:

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<sup>25</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 652.

<sup>26</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 655.

<sup>27</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 656.

<sup>28</sup> ROY. *Rabindranath Tagore: The Dramatist*, p. 208.

King — I, who am a desert, stretch out my hand to you, a tiny blade of grass, and cry: I am parched....  
Nandini—What is it that you see in me?  
King—The dance rhythm of the universe.<sup>29</sup>

The underlying message is that the greed for power and wealth is never satisfied. In their futile pursuit the greedy and the powerful feel unfulfilled and internally exhausted. Ultimately they collapse, but in this collapse and in creating a new happy egalitarian social order women have a crucial creative role to play.

*Tasher Desh* (The Kingdom of Cards) is another short allegorical play published in 1938. It is a satire on the hierarchical and rigid caste system in Indian society of the 1930s. Here a prince yearns for the unexplored and, along with a friend, a Merchant, sails to a distant, unknown land. Their boat sinks on the way and they swim ashore to an unknown land. The inhabitants, the *Tash* people, are bound by inexorable customs and conventions. They rise and sit, move and walk according to a rigid code of conduct.

The *Tash* people are divided into four classes: Hearts, Diamonds, Spades and Clubs. Everything goes on with precision; obedience is the only virtue and any deviation is punishable. The watchword of the *Tash* people is “convention.” Looking at them and their rigid meaningless movements, the Prince tells them,

Prince, “What you have been doing is so pointless.”  
Six of Card replies, “Pointless? What is the point of a point. Who cares for that? All we need is the rule of regulation and control. Anyway, who are you?”  
Prince, “We are from a foreign country.”  
Five of Cards, “Enough! That means you have no caste, no clan, no lineage, no kinship, no class, no status.”<sup>30</sup>

The Prince and Merchant sing the song of freedom. The people complained to their king,

Six of Cards, “Did you hear him, Your Majesty? This man wants to push ahead, and advance forward. You will not believe me when I tell you that he laughs. Yes, he actually laughs....  
Five of Cards, “Your Majesty, Just banish him.”  
The King, “Banish him? My queen, what do you think? Why are you keeping quiet? Do you agree to banishment?”  
The Queen, “No banishment, none at all.”  
All the Ace of Cards maidens one after the other, “No banishment. None at all.”<sup>31</sup>

So the Queen did not co-operate. She was the first to respond to the call of change. Then her associates, the cards women of the land, joined her. The exasperated King announced,

King, “I will enforce the law of compulsion.”  
The Queen, “Let us see who banishes whom.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 657-8.

<sup>30</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 1171.

<sup>31</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 1176-1177.

<sup>32</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 1176-1177.

Thus change was ushered in into the kingdom: “The Hearts Woman told the chief priest, ‘You have kept us deluded for a long spell, but no more.’”;<sup>33</sup> “And the Cub Woman asserted, ‘I have given up my caste.’”<sup>34</sup>

When the rigid order of the island is disturbed, it is women again who come forward in responding to the call of freedom. The Queen gives the lead in changing the tash society and culture and breaks the bondage. Finally, the mechanical structure breaks apart. The island of cards is shattered.

In this allegory the land is India and the society of cards is Hindu society; the four types of cards are the four major Indian castes. The unquestioned adherence to old customs and traditions has made their life and society stagnant. The Prince and the Merchant represent social reformers like Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Gandhi and the card men and women’s acceptance of the new way of life is the regenerated Hindu society. The poet’s belief in the value of liberty for the individual and his faith in women as harbingers of change provide the motive force of this play. The system imposed from above by a few interested people centuries back needed to be torn asunder because it was an obstacle to progress and liberty.

Tagore was not a soothsayer, nor was he clairvoyant. The caste society is still prevalent in India, though its rigidity is no longer what it used to be, and women are yet to come out to take the lead in breaking it. But lower caste people are coming up, and lower caste women are taking up leadership in more areas than one. Capitalism and industrialism still have their strangle on India, waiting for the arrival of a Nandini. Tagore, a visionary, mapped out the ridiculous and self-destructive adherence to antiquated customs that breed inequality and kill freedom of thought as well as the dehumanising impact of industrialisation, and advocated a new social architecture: “Where the mind will be without fear and the head of every individual will be held high, where small conventions will not obstruct justice.”<sup>35</sup> *Tasher Desh* as well as *Rakta Karabi* are dramatic representations of Tagore’s dream. What is important for us is to note that in both women performed as the vanguards of change. The new age that Tagore foresaw coming may or may not be far behind.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I need to point out that the women’s movement in India owed its origin to the freedom movement. I have argued elsewhere that as women joined the political agitation against colonial subjection, they became aware of another form of colonialism: at home under patriarchy. Women’s organisations formed and led by women had also begun to appear in India in the early twentieth century. But their focus was

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<sup>33</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 1179..

<sup>34</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 6, p. 1184.

<sup>35</sup> TAGORE. *Rabindra Rachanavali* v. 1, p. 894 .

primarily on education and vocational training. There was no question of a movement for complete social overhaul.<sup>36</sup>

The “new woman” as depicted by Rabindranath was, therefore, fairly new in Bengali society. Rabindranath’s early perception of women, as mentioned previously, was born out of romanticism. During the later period of his life he discovered that women were individuals on their own right. True, Tagore’s views often drifted between the traditional and the modern. He often referred to women as tender and nurturing lovers, but he also saw the rebel and the leader in them. His Chandara ruptures her bond with her husband, Mrinal leaves hers, Nandini humanises the inhuman and the card women break down a stagnant social structure. It will be unhistorical to claim that he alone during his time contemplated the plight of women. Women had been the focus of discussions, writings and reforms since the mid-nineteenth century. But few writers envisioned women leaving their husbands or leading rebellions. Tagore’s four women were bold in terms of their protest against women’s position in the family and the unequal structure in the larger society. Rabindranath created some very powerful women characters. With that he assaulted unobtrusively in his own way the established social system and notions inimical to the advancement of women. He understood the need for change and contributed to it. This was his priceless contribution to the vision and practice of the women’s movement in India.



#### RESUMO

Este trabalho investiga a escrita de Rabindranath Tagore, focalizando sua visão e opiniões sobre as mulheres. Após uma apresentação do contexto familiar do autor e de suas relações com as mulheres, tanto na família quanto no ambiente cultural, este ensaio discute sua percepção do surgimento da “nova mulher”, isto é, aquela que desafia as convenções e busca estabelecer uma nova forma de ordem social.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Rabindranath Tagore, mulheres na escrita de Tagore,  
a “nova mulher”

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<sup>36</sup> See my essay, *The Freedom Movement and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal, 1905-1929*. In: RAY, Bharati (Ed.). *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

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