

## FROM DEAD TO DREAD: A SURVEY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

**Soham Pain**  
Research Scholar  
Centre for English Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi, India

The present paper aims at a comprehensive presentation of the range and diversity of Tagore's insight into the feminine self, with respect to his short fiction. Tagore's attitude towards women can be better understood by locating him in the socio-political matrix of his times.

### **The Woman Question in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India**

It cannot be gainsaid that English education was the major force which triggered off intellectual preoccupation with the woman question in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India. Enlightened men like Raja Rammohun Roy and IshwarchandraVidyasagar questioned the abject state of dehumanization to which widows were subjected in the Indian household, and their agitations finally prodded the British government to abolish the *Sati* system in 1829 and establish the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. Along with the social reforms, there was an urge felt for the intellectual emancipation of women, and the first positive effort was undertaken by Peary CharanSarkar, a former student of Hindu College, Calcutta, and a member of "Young Bengal". He set up the first free school for girls in India in 1847 in Barasat, a suburb of Calcutta, later named Kalikrishna Girls' High School. The endeavour did elicit criticism from orthodox sections of society. Resistance towards affirmative action was voiced through circulation of superstitious notions that educated women were entitled to inevitable widowhood or that education tempts women towards promiscuity. Women, as it were thought, should be shorn of pride, and the very label of being an 'educated woman' was deemed as threatening to the social hierarchy.

However, in spite of all these hazards, emancipated women did make their presence felt in the forefront of the Indian intellectual scenario. Rasasundari Debi, HaimavatiSen, Jyotirmayi Devi, PanditaRamabai and many other erudite women carved their destiny through trials and tribulations, and extended their empathy to the fellow women of the country. Their writings are replete with strident protests against social, economic and intellectual deprivation of women.

### **Evolution and Ambivalence in Tagore's Attitude towards Women**

An important starting-point for any discussion of Tagore's vision of the feminine is perhaps his much-debated response to a lecture by PanditaRamabai.<sup>1</sup>

From whichever angle you may see, it is Nature's dictum that women are not meant for work other than the domestic. Had Nature's intention been

otherwise, girls would have had born strength. You may say that the weakness of women is accounted for by masculine oppression, but that is not good logic. Because, had men and women been equally strong from the very beginning, then how could masculine strength ever subjugate women in the first place?<sup>ii</sup>

This is an early Tagore who had failed to come to terms with the feminist assertions of a woman who had dissociated herself from the traditional patriarchal codes of 19<sup>th</sup> century India. The urge on the part of the early Tagore to endorse the stereotyped notion of women being inferior to men, characterized through the faculty of emotion rather than reason, and born essentially to be a dedicated helpmate for man is also evident in “Woman and Home”, a lecture delivered during his third visit to America in 1920-21, Tagore envisages the roles of the two sexes not only as given but also as complimentary:-

If woman's nature were identical with man's, if Eve were a mere tautology of Adam, it would only give rise to a monotonous superfluity. But that she was not so was proved by the banishment she secured from a ready-made Paradise. She had the instinctive wisdom to realize that it was her mission to help her mate in creating Paradise of their own on earth, whose ideal she was to supply with her life, whose materials were to be produced and gathered by her comrade... From the beginning of our society, women have naturally accepted the training which imparts to their life and to their home a spirit of harmony. It is their instinct to perform their services in such a manner that these, through beauty, might be raised from the domain of slavery to the realm of grace. Women have tried to prove that in the building up of social life they are artists and not artisans... Woman has to be ready to suffer. She cannot allow her emotions to be dulled or polluted, for these are to create her life's atmosphere, apart from which her world would be dark and dead. This leaves her heart without any protection of insensibility, at the mercy of the hurts and insults of life. Women of India, like women everywhere, have their share of suffering, but it radiates through the ideal, and becomes, like sunlight, a creative force in their world. Our women know by heart the legends of the great women of the epic age - Savitri who by the power of love conquered death, and Sita who had no other reward for her life of sacrifice but the sacred majesty of sorrow. They know that it is their duty to make this life an image of the life eternal, and that love's mission truly performed has a spiritual meaning.<sup>iii</sup>

The implicit naturalization of woman's interpellative acceptance of the patriarchal order through the political strategy of glorification, definitely lines up the early Tagore with the conservative 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali Hindu intellectual, part of whose vision of womanhood is derived from a dominant reading of the epics. The value of woman, within this framework, is not established in her own right, but is summed up in the two aspects of ‘mother’ and ‘beloved’. Such a vision is perfectly encoded in the poetic piece, “Dui Nari”, wherein these two selves are symbolically represented through the mythical figures of Lakshmi and Urvashi.

However, recent researches tend to unveil that Tagore had voiced his protest against gender inequality in the most strident fashion as early as 1914. Sutapa Bhattacharya draws our attention

to a strong passage in the sixth letter in *Europe-ProbashirPatra*, which was, however, deleted from the standard version of the text, possibly because it had invited strong criticism from Dwijendranath. Another powerful piece published in *Bharati* during this time, which too ignited controversy, was an essay named “ParibararDasatva” (Family Service), wherein is registered Tagore’s ire at society’s tolerance of transgressions by men, and the dire consequences women have to face for the slightest deviation.<sup>iv</sup> It is significant that in these pieces, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali intellectual, has gathered up the courage and historical sense to dub the family as a man-made construct that operates within a system of power-relations.

In this context, it is also interesting to note that while in his *Sadhan* phase Tagore had been disdainful of the ideology that underscored the Western feminist movement, his essay, “Jhansir Rani”, composed at a very young age and published in *Bharati*, is replete with unscrupulous acknowledgment of women’s capability for so-called ‘manly’ faculties of valour and martyrdom. The range and diversity of Tagore’s experiments with form and content allows for some degree of oscillation and inconsistency. Tagore was also free from a commitment to any specific social, political, philosophical or religious ideology. Therefore, an attempt to trace any ‘development’ or ‘evolution’ of Tagore’s attitude towards women might be too simplistic, and to some extent misleading; ‘ambivalence’ may be a safer term. While in his heart of hearts he never approved of stereotypes, Tagore had nevertheless to carve his niche through a society which carries the imbalances.

A beautiful example of this tension between an inherited patriarchal ethos and a rational understanding of the politics of gender-bias, is Tagore’s vehement disapproval of Krishnabhabini Devi’s argument in favour of imparting job-oriented education for women in order to make them financially self-sufficient. Tagore, however, also accommodates the following satiric observation of domestic incarceration of women:-

But we generally feel that being human is not worth it, we can’t meet the debt; as though somehow an entry into the office is the ultimate achievement of human life. And therefore we think it is unnecessary to educate the women; let them suckle their infants and attend to the culinary, works which we would describe as spiritual in order to console them, and purchase them free of cost by deifying them instead of sharing the gifts of knowledge, health, joy and comfort.<sup>v</sup>

In Tagore’s works, we simultaneously encounter the maiden, physically weak but rich in her emotional content, and powerful women like Chitragada, Sudarsana and Malini. In his novels like *Jogajogand Ghare-Baire*, we find Kumudini fighting her husband single-handed, and Bimala asserting her individuality by taking a markedly different position from her husband with regard to the nationalist movement. In works that post-date 1930, women are already out of their domestic internment. Though such a paradigm applies to some extent to Damini of *Chaturanga* (1914) as well, yet she is not a political activist like Ela of *Char Adhyayor* an accomplished mathematician like Urmimala of *Dui Bon*. The most revolutionary of all the women characters created by Tagore in this last phase is perhaps Sohini of ‘Laboratory’, for whom no social taboos apply. This story depicts women smoking in public, thereby implicitly problematizing the relation between women’s freedom and women’s sexuality.

## Death Becomes Them: Kusum, Nirupama, Kadambini, Chandara

The short stories that the present writer would like to focus on are representative in the sense that they offer a compact but panoramic view of the diversity of women characters that Tagore has been able to create. We must assume that the term ‘feminist’ is misleading when applied to Tagore. While Tagore *has* created rebellious women who can destabilize the normative hierarchy, stories like ‘Samapti’ project marriage as a sacred bond to which women are finally to conform, even by mortifying their pre-marital selves, if required. Though the stories belonging to the latter group may invite strong feminist insinuation for conforming to patriarchal stereotypes, the question that can be raised is whether defiance is the sole parameter for womanhood. If that is so, it must be said that feminism is constructing its own stereotype, and in the process ignoring the diversity of character, which is so important for a comprehensive understanding of the works of Tagore.

The first short story that we shall have a look at, is, ‘Ghater Katha’ (The Ghat’s Story). It was influenced by his perception of the lifestyle on the Ganges in Peneti-Chandernagore. Critics have surmised a possible correlation between the theme of suicide in this story and the actual suicide of Tagore’s sister-in-law and Muse, Kadambari, in 1884. Though widely hailed as the first short story to come from Tagore’s pen, SukumarSen has dismissed the claim and argued it to be later than ‘Rajpathar Katha’ (The Story of the Highway), on account of the latter’s smaller scale and use of lesser words.<sup>vi</sup> Both the stories were published in *Bharati*(1885).

The love plot in this story is reminiscent of that of *Chitrangada* and *Chandalika*, but unlike *Chitrangada* or *Prakriti*, Kusum does not undertake any specific endeavour to attain union with her lover. But she is characterized by nonchalance towards theism, the sole recourse for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali widow. The deity that she finally adores is not a divinity but a human being, and there is not the slightest indication anywhere in the narrative that she ever felt an inner turmoil due to this apparent transgression of social norms prescribed for the widow. The ascetic’s sudden disappearance from the village after ordering Kusum to wipe out his memory from her heart bears the deplorable character of a flight, which indirectly portrays Kusum in a comparatively better light. Kusum does not show any promise as *Chitrangada* does, but her suicide is itself an act of self-assertion which reveals her contempt for any kind of compromise. An important symbol that characterizes ‘GhaterKatha’, is that of water. The river appears in the role of the nurturer, the witness and the final resort of peace for the human self. The eternity of Nature as opposed to the ephemeral human world, is deftly captured in the following lines:-

For me, the days toss by on the waves of the flowing Ganga- and so the time seems short. For me the light of day, the shadow of night, falls daily on the surface of the river, and is daily erased, leaving no impression behind.<sup>vii</sup>

The transition of human life from the natural, rural mode of existence into an urban lifestyle dominated by material pursuit and removed from the bounties of Nature, is metaphorically expressed through the gradual change of riverine course “Every day the Ganga moves a step further away from me; every day I too become a step older”.<sup>viii</sup>

The relation between man and Nature attains a climactic height as the maternal role of the river is reaffirmed by its act of drawing Kusum, its child, back into its womb:-

From her earliest youth, she had lived beside these waters; now that she was weary, if the water were not to reach out to draw her to its lap, who else would do so?<sup>ix</sup>

Following the publication of the first two stories in 1885, Tagore had taken a long break from this genre until in 1891 he once again realized a strong urge for experimenting with it. In this mode that continued up to 1896, Tagore produced 42 stories, seven of which were published in the weekly, *Hitabadi*, and the rest in *Sadhana*. Eight of the stories selected for the present study belong to this phase. Barring 'Denapaona' (Debts and Dues), all came out in *Sadhana*.

'Denapaona' addresses the issue of dowry. The fact that the bride is a commodified entity is Nirupama's mother-in-law's remark that she "has more than enough," - implying that if the girl's father had paid full price she would have received full care."<sup>x</sup>

Nirupama's spirited appeal to her father to take his money back delineates a strong defiance of the accepted norm, and throws a challenge to the social determinants of a woman's value:-

'The shame will be greater if you pay the money,' said Nirupama. 'Do you think I have no honour? Do you think I am just a money-bag, the more money in it the higher my value? No, Father, don't shame me by paying this money. My husband doesn't want it anyway.'<sup>xi</sup>

Nirupama emerges as a foil to her brother whose self-centered behaviour momentarily reverses the normative gender-roles in the context of Ramsundar's household. Nirupama's in-laws, who had deprived her in her lifetime, ironically organize a magnificent funeral once she is dead. This grand farewell is immediately followed by her mother-in-law's plan of a second marriage for her son.

While in 'Denapaona', her in-laws could not dispense with their unwanted bride without a show of charity, in 'Jibito O Mrito' (The Living and the Dead), Sharadashankar's family shows negligence and indifference at the supposed death of their widow Kadambari:-

For some strange reason her heartbeat stopped... Keeping the matter quiet, in case the police took notice, four Brahmin employees of the zamindar quickly carried off the body to be burnt.<sup>xii</sup>

Therefore, the question that arises is whether she was ever alive for her family. When Kadambini returns to her senses, she mistakenly imagines herself as dead. The crematory ground where she has been is a parallel to her household where she was a living dead, and her emergence from that depth and re-entry into the world of compassionate human beings (the gentleman who helps her and her friend who lovingly keeps her in her house) may be read as her rebirth. These instances make her conscious of her earlier dehumanization, fill her with the required indignation, restore her self-respect and teach her to value herself. It is ironical that when she herself is under the impression that she is dead, people know that she is not, and when she is finally convinced that she is still living, people in Sharadashankar's residence think her to be an apparition. Tagore's genius lies in the twist that abruptly alters the possibility of a conventional ending with Kadambini restored to her space of widowhood. Sharadashankar's appeal to the supposedly demised Kadambini to turn her sinister gaze away from the household, brings about an epiphanic disillusionment in her, extinguishing the momentary craving for life which she regained after her reunion with her beloved nephew. However, it must be said that in spite of the protagonist being a woman, the satire in this story is directed primarily at the blind superstitions and notions of ritual purity nurtured by the orthodox Hindus.

Tagore has recounted the inception of this story to Maitreyee Debi and Sita Debi, who have recorded the reminiscences in *Mangpate Rabindranath* and *Punyasmriti* respectively. The following extract is from the first:-



One day, many years before in our Calcutta house, I don't remember the exact time, but *Chhotobau* was alive then; due to a sudden arrival of relatives, there was an arrangement for me to sleep in the outer apartment. I was inside till late, and finally I was heading towards the prescribed bedroom- I crossed the inner part of the house, and stood at the verandah. The clock struck two. The entire house was silent. All the quarters were asleep, and it was a deep night formed of the huge shadows created by the blend of light and shade. You could call it a true night. I stood for a while in the verandah, and a fancy came to my mind- as if, this 'I' is not myself. Not the 'I' that I was; as if there has been a bifurcation in my present and past selves. How could it have been, if this was true? It came to me that how it would be if I tiptoed back into the house, and suddenly awakening *chhotobou* from sleep, said: 'Look, this is not me... not your husband'... But I did not do so. Went to bed, but it was that night when this plot came to my mind, about a person roaming directionless. The person himself and others too are thinking that he is not he himself.<sup>xiii</sup>

Dr. Sisirkumar Das has cited Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Premature Burial' as a possible inspiration behind this story.<sup>xiv</sup>

In both 'Denapaona' and 'Jibito O Mrito', are scripted the predicaments of women who are located in the affluent section of society. With Chandara of 'Shasti' (Punishment), it is both financial constraint and conjugal treachery that bring about her doom. While in this story Tagore returns to the theme of suicide which he had explored in 'Ghater Katha', the suicide of Chandara is different from that of Kusum because while Kusum could not bear the separation from her loved one, Chandara is disillusioned by the spinelessness of her husband. His decision to lay the blame of murder on his wife, shreds his conjugal tie. The following exchange between Ramlochan and Chhidam is pivotal for an understanding of the dynamics:-

Reflecting further he said, 'I think I know a way. Run to the police station: say that your brother Dukhi returned in the evening wanting his food, and because it wasn't ready he struck his wife on the head with his knife. I'm sure if you say that, she'll get off. Chhidam felt a sickening dryness in his throat. He stood up and said, 'Thakur, if I lose my wife I can get another, but if my brother is hanged, how can I replace him?'<sup>xv</sup>

Chhidam's words make him the spokesperson of a patriarchal society, where the conjugal bond is of lesser value than bloodline. The notion that a wife is 'replaceable' harps on the typical *Manava* dictum that wives are mere agents of procreation. Critics have not pointed out that Chhidam's remark seems to carry an implicit reference to Rama's lamentation over the wounded Lakshmana.<sup>xvi</sup> This conjecture is all the more strengthened when we notice that the phrase that Tagore attributes to the disillusioned Chandara, is *swami-rakshasa* (the demon husband). Chandara's act of shrinking away from Chhidam is also reminiscent of Sita's resistance to Ravana:-

When her husband asked her to admit to the murder, Chandara stared at him, stunned; her black eyes burnt him like fire. Then she slowly shrank from him, as if to escape his devilish clutches.<sup>xvii</sup>

By conflating the traitor husband and the demonic abductor, Tagore not only problematizes the uncritical glorification of the archetypal conjugal pair in Indian epic, but also

identifies the relation between the sufferings of women in the past and the present. Chandara's willingness to embrace the punishment for a crime she has not committed, her rejection of Chhidam's appeal to grant him a last meeting, and her request to the authorities to allow her to meet with her mother, seem to replicate the epic scene of Sita's decision to reject the world and take shelter in her Earth-mother. The story terminates with a single, poignant expression from Chandara. When asked if she would let Chhidam have a glimpse of her, she says, '*maran!*' This one word has been translated variously in the English versions, ranging from Radice's 'To hell with him' to Joyasree Mukherjee's 'Incorrigible', but none seems adequate enough to contain the irony of the Bengali original. Radice's elucidation tries to explain the cultural nuances:-

The complex implications here include Chandara's rejection of the husband she still loves, the *abhimān* that prevents her from backing down, and a shy reluctance to display her true marital feelings in public.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **The Silent Woman: 'Subha'**

'Subha' is a pathetic story of the suffering of a dumb village girl. Though marred to some extent by predictability, lack of suspense and clichéd ending, the silent suffering of Subha certainly evokes the sympathy of the reader. Subha's verbal paralysis is compensated by her intuitive faculty, and she can readily identify with the world around her. Though her name, 'Subhasini' (sweet-tongued) is apparently ironical, it definitely befits a soul who can readily communicate to the silent world of Nature, to the domestic animals, and to the young man, Pratap. Tagore also puns on her father's name, 'Banikantha' (eloquent/ garrulous). His (and his wife's) reprimands constantly remind Subha of her being an unwelcome liability on her parents.

An important aspect which characterizes this story is the tension between an urban, pragmatic world order and an idealized rural abode. With an instinctive understanding of the world, the silent Subha had identified with the matrix of rural Bengal, and her transgression of this boundary is facilitated by the deception of her would-be in-laws by her parents, thereby driving home the metaphorical suggestion that any nexus between the village and the town is necessarily built on falsehood, and is to be inevitably met with failure. The urban household of Subha eventually discovers her inability to speak, and immediately arranges a second marriage of the groom, thus undermining the value of Subha's emotional capability.

### **The Love Triangle: 'Nishithe', 'Madhyabartini' and 'Drishtidan'**

'Nishithe' (In the Middle of the Night), 'Madhyabartini' (The Girl Between) and 'Drishtidan' (The Gift of Sight) share the common element of a love-triangle, but the approach is distinct in each, and so is the outcome. While the element of macabre in 'Nishithe' subdues the earthliness of the transgressions, the second marriage of Nibaran in 'Madhyabartini' creates a permanent rift in his relationship with his first wife Harasundari, and the second marriage is averted altogether in 'Drishtidan'. The stories may be distinguished with respect to the diversity of the narrative technique as well. 'Nishithe' is narrated from the first person point of view of the gentleman Dakshinacharan, 'Madhyabartini' is in the omniscient mode, and in 'Drishtidan' it is again the first person narrator, this time the lady, Hemangini.

A. K. Mishra, in his fine analysis of 'Nishithe', argues that Dakshinacharan cannot be held solely responsible for the tragedy of his nameless first wife, because though jaded by the long futile attention to her incurable malady, he might not have transgressed the border of

monogamy if she had not committed suicide.<sup>xxix</sup> The proximity between Dakshinacharan and Manorama might have been a source of resentment for his first wife, which triggered off her drastic decision, but it might also have been her altruistic urge to relieve him from the clutches of a matrimonial bind where the wife is merely a living corpse. By the end of the story, it is evident that the macabre is part of Dakshinacharan's hallucination induced by his own sense of guilt, and his first wife never insinuated disloyalty. We can infer that she was shocked by Manorama's sudden appearance, and disillusioned by Dakshinacharan's refusal to accept his acquaintance with the new visitor. However, it is incredible that a woman with so firm a grip on her mind, a fine penchant for humour, and a consistent awareness of the absurdity in the world, would take her life out of despair.

The benign implication of the symbol of water in 'Ghater Katha' is replaced by the macabre in 'Nishithe'. An incident which exposed Tagore to the hazard of the sandbanks of the Padma near Shelidah, is recorded in a letter to Indira Devi.<sup>xx</sup> The Tagores were in the habit of taking strolls in the sandbank in the evening, and it so happened one day that when Tagore returned to the boat, he found Mrinalini, Balendranath and the maid missing (Rathindranath and Bela were safe). When none returned after a long interval, Tagore went out searching for them along with Prasanna and Gofur, and finally they were rescued from 'the other side of a channel', where 'they had crossed by using bits of sand as stepping-stones, and now could not get back'.<sup>xxi</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri argues that this treacherous sandbank of the Padma determines the macabre element in the story 'Nishithe'.<sup>xxii</sup> Dakshinacharan's act of betrayal conjures up the sinister element of Nature rendering his love for his second wife Manorama ineffective:-

At once a voice resounded through the empty waste, saying three times, "Who's she? Who's she? Who's she?" I started in alarm, and my wife shuddered too. But the next moment we realized it was not a human voice, not a supernatural one either- just the call of the water-birds scouring the sandbanks. They had been startled by the sight of people approaching their safe retreat.<sup>xxiii</sup>

It is not simply the guilty mind of Dakshinacharan that superimposes this spectral aspect on the fauna, but it is Nature which responds back to his latent consciousness through its agents of astringent, malevolent ridicule. The intervention of Nature in this story is reminiscent of the role that Nature had played in the famous boat-stealing episode in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. In 'Madhyabartini', Harasundari, herself barren, arranges a second marriage for her husband Nibaranin order to save the family line. Thus the young bride Shailobalasteps into their family and complicates their relationship. Shailobala dies a premature death but the reunion of Nibaran and Harasundari is eternally frustrated by the gulf created. The closeness of Nibaran and Shailobala keeps Harasundari in the margins, and her inner turmoil is portrayed through the ingenious device of mind-body dualism. Harasundari's silence, patience and mature abstinence, adorn her with the glory of suffering.

Critics have drawn a connection between Kumudini's eventual loss of sight in 'Drishtidan' due to her husband's insistent faith in his own capability as a physician, and the gradual deterioration of Mrinalini Devi's health owing to Tagore's own method of diagnosis.<sup>xxiv</sup> Kumudini, initially torn between husband and brother, chooses to comply with her husband's decision, and is never resentful of her husband's callousness even after she is blind. Her zeal for domestic service drives her even without her visual faculty, but things take a turn when an aunt contrives a second marriage for Abinash. While Kumudini sees through the plan, a



spineless Abinash evades acknowledging the truth, until Kumudini finally breaks her silence and confronts him. Though she does not prevent him, the very gesture of her confrontation reveals strength, in comparison to Abinash's timid, cowardly figure. Hemangini, the proposed bride who finally marries Kumudini's brother, is also a strong figure who sees through the game involving Kumudini, and declines to participate in the heinous plan. Kumudini's plight is abated as the storm blows her husband's ship awry, thereby averting the second marriage which he had contrived. The final reunion of Kumudini and Abinash emerges as a truer relationship, based on understanding and sacrifice. The pun on the word *drishti* (vision) is deftly handled by the author.

### **A Happy Ending: 'Samapti'**

'Samapti' (The Ending), which chronologically pre-dates 'Drishtidan', shares with its *Bharati* counterpart a happy ending, but betrays the traditional Tagore of the *Sadhan* phase. The specific incident which triggered off the story 'Samapti' is known from at least three sources, which vary only in minute details. The following is an excerpt from Tagore's conversation with Mr. Chandragupta, Mr. Sudarshan, Satyavati Devi and Mr. Banarasidas Chaturvedi, as published in the journal entitled *Forward*:-

I actually saw the girl of the type, described in the story, in a village. She was quite wild and extraordinary. There was nobody to curb her freedom. She used to watch me every day from a distance and sometimes she brought a child with her and with finger pointed towards me she used to show me to the child. Day after day she came. Then one day she didn't come. That day I overheard the talk of the village women who had come to fetch water from the river. They were discussing with anxiety about the fate of that girl who was now to go to her mother-in-law's house. 'She is quite wild. She doesn't know how to behave. What will happen to her!' they said. The next day I saw a small boat on the river. The poor girl was forced to go aboard. The whole scene was full of sadness and pathos. One of her girl companions was shedding tears stealthily, while others were persuading and encouraging her not to be afraid. The boat disappeared. It gave me the setting for a story named: The Ending (Samapti).<sup>xxv</sup>

This story, along with its famous cinematic version by Satyajit Ray, has elicited a lot of critical scrutiny, especially from the feminists, who have registered their ire at the process of normalization of the initially tomboyish girl into the stereotyped figure of the romantic heroine. To quote Swati Ganguly:-

In fact nothing could be less true of *Samapti* in terms of its ideological underpinnings—it is conservative (not necessarily in a pejorative sense) in positing marriage as the ideal and desired condition of companionship, a realization that slowly dawns on Mrinmoyee, the adolescent heroine. Her transformation into a woman capable of romantic emotions is hinged on her acquiring normative femininity befitting a young wife.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **La Belle Dame Sans Merci: The Strange Case of Manimalika and Nrityakali**

Though poles apart in terms of style, technique and content, 'Manihara' (Woman Bereft of Jewels) and 'Durasa' are kindred texts so far as the contexts of their origins are considered. Both were composed by Tagore at the court of queen Suniti Devi of Coochbehar in Darjeeling, in

order to gratify her thirst for stories.<sup>xxvii</sup> Hailed as one of the finest ghost stories in the entire corpus of Bengali fiction, ‘Manihara’ is also a study of the darker terrains of human psyche. Replete with subtle hints, this story could lend itself as readily to an analysis from a Jungian perspective as Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. It is also important to note in this context that the candid confession comes from Tagore himself that he had gone through W. Gregory’s *Animal Magnetism*.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The story opens with a solitary man musing on his evening surroundings, and the real plot commences when the second person, the school-master appears and wishes to share with him a history of the mansion. The peculiar thing which arrests the attention of the reader in this meeting, is the comparison that the narrator draws between the school-master and ‘Ancient Mariner created by the English poet Coleridge’.<sup>xxix</sup> The story itself bears a remarkable similarity with Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in its recourse to the supernatural. The protagonists of both the pieces are devastated both mentally and physically, and are lonely figures in an eerie world haunted by spectral denizens.

The listener who is revealed at the end to be the protagonist himself, and the schoolmaster who narrates the story to him, may be taken as the two selves of Phanibhushan. Dr. Mishra borrows Julia Briggs’s definition of *doppelganger* (a powerful symbol of unresolved inner conflict) in order to elucidate the relation between the two.<sup>xxx</sup> There are also suggestions that Phanibhushan’s visions of the deceased Manimalika are projections of his repressed desires in a state of somnambulism.

Be that as it may, the character of Manimalika is essentially defined through her lust for valuables, and there seems to be no corner in her heart for human affection. A shrewd woman, she apprehends the ulterior intentions of her cousin Madhusudan, and puts on the entire jewelry while leaving the home, so that the only option that remains with Madhusudan is to kill her before acquiring them. She can go to any length for gratifying her penchant for jewelry, and her ghostly form adorned with ornaments apparently suggests that her cousin Madhusudan failed to execute his plan.

The passage which describes Manimalika’s form of a bedecked skeleton recreates a paradoxical juxtaposition of lifelessness and desire, fear and lure, disillusionment and enchantment. While the waters have consumed her body, her ‘unwaveringly firm and placid gaze’ metaphorically represents the persistence of her attachment with mundane wealth. Her insatiable pursuit of wealth is also symbolized in the paradox that ‘the ornaments were loose-fitting, and flapping from side to side, yet not slipping off the limbs.’<sup>xxxi</sup> The irony is also brought out in the last sentence of the story, where the mysterious listener says that her name was not Manimalika but ‘Nriyakali’. This nomenclature, with its esoteric and crematory associations, immediately conjures up the image of a ferocious, emaciated figure who revels in her orgy, and it certainly befits a bedecked skeleton.<sup>xxxii</sup> ‘Manihara’, is yet another instance of Tagore’s strategic use of the retributive aspect of water, which apparently punishes Manimalika for her obsession with jewelry.

### The Two Charu-s: ‘Atithi’ and ‘Nashtanir’

It is now time to talk about the two Charu-s. One is the young girl Charusashi of ‘Atithi’ (The Visitor), and the other is the mature Charulata of ‘Nashtanir’ (the Broken Nest). These two stories were written in an interval of seven years.

While stories like ‘Kabuliwala’ and poems like ‘The Postmaster’ are outstanding specimens of Tagore’s understanding of the young feminine mind, discussions focusing on women characters in Tagore’s fiction, lamentably restrict themselves to the adult women. The character of Charusashi, driven by jealousy and resentment, is a remarkable creation which challenges the stereotyped notion of a child’s mind being innocent. However, Tagore avoids the other extreme of demonizing the child as a savage to be normalized.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Charu’s envy has its rational antecedents, and it conflicts with her germinating love for Tarapada. The immature Charu fails to express her disturbed feelings and somehow liberates her repressed desires through what a Freudian critic would call a sadomasochistic mechanism. Her oscillation between thoughts of revenge and upsurges of remorse provide a clue to the confused mental state that she is living through. The focus of the story is, however, on Tarapada, and his last act of quitting the proposed marriage unnoticed, an outcome of his penchant for freedom, is not criticized. At the end of the story, the reader is left to ponder if Tagore could be so unjust as to grant Tarapada his freedom at the cost of Charu’s plight, which does not surface in the narrative.

‘Nashtanir’ has been described by Bisi as the ‘draft of *Chokher Bali*’, and he calls it ‘perfect’ while reserving the term ‘great’ for its novel counterpart.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The plot revolves around the kinship between Charulata and her brother-in-law, Amal, and its repercussions on Bhupati’s household. In the joint family system of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, aristocratic families allowed for considerable interaction between male and female members of the family. A careful reading of the story will suggest that there was nothing very extraordinary in the fondness that emerged between Amal and Charu. The description also hints that Bhupati, Charu’s husband, never resented their friendship, and the plot takes off from a point when they had been already established in a close relationship. The aesthetic element in their kinship is expressed by their joint efforts at gardening and creative writing, and is highlighted through the contrast with Manda’s mundane relationship with Amal, which makes Charu register alarm. The epiphanic realization of a romantic affection for Amal in her heart, dawns on her only when Amal starts ignoring her. Bhupati’s negligence had taken her close to Amal, and now with Amal’s avoidance, she is left with an insurmountable void.

The most potent symbol in the story is creative writing itself. This activity not only brings Charu closer to Amal, but empowers her to assert her individuality over her one-time teacher, as is evident from her choice of themes markedly different from Amal’s. However, she is ready to relinquish the praise she has earned for the merit of her works, lest it disturbs the stability of her friendship with Amal. At the end of the story, Bhupati has also tried to employ the craft of luring Charu by his creative writing, but he has failed to win her heart. His gesture seems preposterous and childish to Charu. Critics have inferred a parallel between the love-triangle in ‘Nashtanir’ and the controversial triangle in the Tagore household, which consisted of Jyotirindranath Tagore, his wife, Kadambari Devi, and Rabindranath himself.<sup>xxxv</sup>

## Conclusion

The complexities and diversities of the feminine self did not escape the vision of the myriad-minded Tagore. Unlike his novels which are almost invariably woven around characters that are located in the affluent section of the society, Tagore’s short fiction takes its material from a wide

variety of rural and urban lives. Therefore, the intersections of class and gender are much more pronounced in these pieces. Alongside the struggles of ladies from aristocratic, the predicaments of ordinary women are also documented with remarkable credibility.

<sup>i</sup>PanditaRamabai was a Chitpavan Brahmin by birth. Her father, AnantShastriDongre, had tutored her in Sanskrit at home, and the proficiency she acquired in the language left intellectuals petrified when she arrived in Calcutta with her brother after being orphaned. Having earned the titles of ‘Pandita’ and ‘Sarasvati’ from Calcutta University, she had gone into an inter-caste marriage with BabuBipinBehariMedhavi, and left for Britain on a scholarship after his demise in 1882. During her stay in Britain, she converted to Christianity, and composed *Upper Caste Hindu Women*, which sold over 10,000 copies, and the lump sum royalty enabled her to extend shelter to widows in India.

<sup>ii</sup>*Rabindra-rachanavali*, Kolkata: Calcutta Publishing Syndicate, 2002, Vol. II, p. 183 (Translation by me)

<sup>iii</sup> “Woman and Home”, <http://tagoreweb.in> [Accessed 27-4-2012]

<sup>iv</sup>Sutapa Bhattacharya, *RabindranatherKathasahityeNari*, Kolkata: EbongMushayera, 2011, p. 72-3

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-8. (Translation by me).Krishnabhavini’s article is entitled, “SikshitaNari” (Educated women).

<sup>vi</sup>Sen, “RabindranatherGalpaShilpa: PasyaDevasyaKavyannaMamarnaJiryati”, in Majumdar, Ujjwalkumar, ed., *Raater Tara Diner Rabi*, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1416 B. ed., p. 35

<sup>vii</sup> Translation by SupriyaChaudhuri, in Chaudhuri, Sukanta, ed. *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, p. 32

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>x</sup>Radice, *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories*, London: Penguin Books, 2005 ed., p. 49

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., p. 52

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>xiii</sup>*Mangpote Rabindranath*, p. 182.extract cited in appendix to Rabindranath Tagore, *Galpaguchchha*, Kolkata: Visva-BharatiGranthanaVibhaga, 1405 B., p. 856 (Translation by me)

<sup>xiv</sup> Quoted in A. K. Mishra, *RabindrachhotogalperRuprekha*, Kolkata: Deys’ Publishing, 2012, p. 123

<sup>xv</sup>Radice, p. 128

<sup>xvi</sup>*desedeseikaltrani dese desecabandhavah/ tan tudesannapasyamiyatrabhratasahodarah,Ramayana*, 6.101.15

<sup>xvii</sup>Radice, p. 130

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid., p. 133n.

<sup>xix</sup>Mishra, p. 189ff.

<sup>xx</sup>*Chinnapatravali*, LetterNo. 3, Shelidah, 28-30 November, 1889

<sup>xxi</sup>Radice, p. 273-4

<sup>xxii</sup>Chaudhuri, *BangaliJiboneRamani*, Kolkata: Mitra O Ghosh, 1417, p. 94ff.

<sup>xxiii</sup>Radice, p. 160

<sup>xxiv</sup>Mishra, p. 53n.

<sup>xxv</sup> February 23, 1936. The other two sources, as mentioned above, are *Santiniketane Rabindranath* (May 2, 1909) and one of his letters (dated July 4, 1891) in *Chinnapatra*.

<sup>xxvi</sup>Ganguly, “Fashioning the Feminine: Gender, Sexuality and Conjugalities in *Samapti*”, [www.museindia.com](http://www.museindia.com) [Accessed 27-2-2012]

<sup>xxvii</sup>BipinbihariGoswami, *Rabindranath-Prasanga*, extract cited in appendix to *Galpaguchchha*, p. 862

<sup>xxviii</sup> Mishra, p. 43

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- <sup>xxix</sup> Ratan K. Chattopadhyay, *Rabindranath Tagore: Selections from Galpaguchchha*, Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010, Vol. 2, p. 257
- <sup>xxx</sup> Mishra, p. 43
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Ibid., p. 271
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Tagore reared a typical disdain and disgust for the goddess Kali and the mode of her worship. His memoirs testify that he had subscribed to the facile conflation between the saner and cruder cults of Kali, and it is this sinister image attributed to Kali that is represented in the play, *Balmiki-Pratibha*. Tagore registers his ire at the crudity of Kali worship in his travelogues as well. (*vide Chhelebel* and *Java-Jatrir Patra*, <http://tagoreweb.in> [Accessed 27-4-2012])
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the emergence and growth of the second tradition, see Ashcroft, Bill, Ch. III, “Primitive and Wingless: The Colonial Subject as Child”, in *On Post-Colonial Futures*, New York: Continuum, 2001
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Bisi, p. 37ff.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, p. 159
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