

Letters of Tagore and his Notion of the Feminine

Let me start with an episode that took place in Sahitya Akademi many years ago. Mahasweta Devi was delivering a speech about Indian women when from the audience, one girl wearing a half pant, though it was nothing wrong but only a little uncommon in 1986 , asked a straight question but in a rough tone in Hindi to Mahaswetadi, can you tell me why a woman will have to wear a *mangal sutra* and put a *bindi* on her forehead. Mahasweta di, as we all know, a feminist and a social activist to the core of her heart, looked straight in her eyes and said in her broken Hindi, when someone's relation with the earth is broken they talk like this.

I was completely befuddled as those were the days under the influence of post colonial studies we were mostly absorbed in the discussion of Dalit movement and feminist discourse and with the help of Kate Millet, Mary Anne Ferguson, Mary Ellmann, Elaine Showalter, Mary Eagleton, G Greerson and many others involved in examining the oppressive representation of patriarchal power , social injustice towards women and discrimination between sexes and slowly moved towards western feminist discourse without realizing that the case studies which are furnished in these books are far from Indian realities concerning women and the example of Mahaswetadi given above substantiates it rather forcefully. At a later stage we came across a term monolithic feminism given by Ann Kaplan in Journal of 2003 International women studies which endorsed our view that there could be an Indian feminist discourse. In this context let me refer to an essay

‘Why not worship in the nude?’ by U. R. Ananthamurthy where he describes an age old practice of worshipping in nude the deity of Renukamba Devi by hundreds of women devotees in the village Chandragutti in the district Shimoga in Karnataka. The rationalist women activists with the concurrence of Social Welfare Department of Karnataka went to the spot along with police force to tell the naked women that it was not only wrong but inhuman to act like this but the women devotees not only ignored them but broke the cameras of the media people, undressed the women police and took with them to the temple to worship the deity together.

On one side the women rationalist said that worshipping in nude is in fact sexualizing the women body and is insulting and humiliating for a women. On the contrary Vrinda Bose in her ‘Translating Desire’ said, it is an immoral attitude and in favour of patriarchy and slavish support of stereotypical role of a woman. Others said, if you think it is sexualizing the body means you are abhorring the role of sex in human life and declaring that the woman’s body is dirty and it is to be covered. The comment by Ananthamurthy in this regard is really revealing. He said, I am a democratic socialist but in cultural matters I find myself in a very painful ambivalent situation because we have no right, as the anthropologists say, to interfere with anybody’s belief patterns.

Imbalanced and unfair treatment of women in many cultures led to the formation of the Feminist movement. The goal of this movement was to correct imbalance and injustice.

However, the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of the feminist movement preventing a balanced view and moreover women discourse is not a clash between men and women but it is a special discourse related to women and in

Indian context it is different than the western feminist movement and hence if you are looking at Tagore from the gender lens, one will have to make it clear that it can't be anything but an Indian gender lens which does not focus at man as woman's enemy, her rage and anger towards man is not shown as a strategy and the result of that is not confrontation with man. Tagore describes social atrocities towards women and suppression of women, social injustice and gender discrimination with great sympathy and rare psychological insight. He does not believe in outright condemnation and hence in a Bengali essay "*Narir manushwattva*" he says that in the various writings of women writers about women I find not insights (*uddipana*) but excitement (*uttejana*) nor enlightenment but only fire. Tagore's camera lens exposes his notion of women but only through the "exposures" of his inner eye. This inner eye is most important for Tagore which distinguishes him from other novelists of just sheer realism. He is a novelist like John Steinbeck who says, "I hate cameras. They are so much sure than I am about everything." His women discourse is not a limiting factor but an expanding one— holistic, eclectic, trans specific and encompassing of diverse stirrings and hence his notion of the feminine is based not only on the totalized oppression of women but also a display of great hope that in our country when the Indian women will move from their artificial liberated self to attainment of the glory of perfect human self only then the man will also achieve completeness.

A literary work, once published, belongs in the public realm of language, which gives it an objective existence distinct from the author's original idea of it: 'The literary texts are not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and go about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The literary texts belong to the public.' This can be said about the Tagorian Oeuvre and hence any effort to draw a meaning on the basis of its authorial intention or what the critics think about it is always fraught with danger but then what about his letters? Tagore wrote thousands of letters which reveal many facets of Tagore's experiences and his ideas about different issues literary, social and political and impart an understanding of the complexity of his personality. My endeavour is to find how Tagore conceives his notion of the feminine mostly with the help of his letters and one or two texts.

In a letter to her niece, Indira Devi Chaudhurani, in the year 1891 Tagore aged 30, describes his notion of women 'a novel blend that combines an air of unconscious independence with feminine sweetness.' It is difficult to say how he conceptualized this notion of a woman. Before that he already had had some very tragic and at the same time sweet experiences with women.

During the 1870s, a highly affectionate, teasing, somewhat childish relationship grew up between his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi and Rabi, the budding poet and it became deeper after the death of Tagore's mother, Sharada Devi in 1875. Rabi

named Kadambari, Hecate, after the Greek goddess associated with night, and dedicated a number of poems and books of poems to her. There is no doubt that Kadambari had the deepest female impact on the youthful Tagore. Kadambari's contribution in moulding Rabindranath's mind was incalculable. Chitra Dev in her fascinating narration of 'Women of the Tagore Household' says that Kadambari not only nurtured the lamp of Rabi's genius but lit up the wick and disappeared into the darkness. Tagore would always say with a deep tinge of sorrow and tenderness, 'I was very fond of her. She also loved me a lot. It is this love that has attuned my heart to the Bengali women.' He wrote:

Nayano samukhe tumi nai

Nayanero majkhane niyechho je thnai

You are no longer before my eyes

You have taken up abode in the midst of my eyes

It was Kadambari's image that impelled Tagore to describe a woman as half human and half imagination— a romantic dreamgirl.

There are many who think that his idea of femininity shows a remarkable fusion of Western and Eastern ideas in his reconstruction of the character of Chitrangada, published in 1891, in the same age of 30 (English translation Chitra 1915). An oft quoted statement of Chitrangada is generally referred to make this point:

‘I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self.... To-day I can offer you Chitra, the daughter of a king.’

This is Chitra's defiant cry of womanhood, a request that she be understood not as a goddess, nor an object of self-pity, but simply as woman, as the daughter of a king. Chitra's momentary fling with glamour only takes her back to her duty and her role as someone who, born a woman, had to live the life of a man for men as a partner in their trials and tribulations.

Since Chitrangada is the subject of this play one cannot help but feel that what Tagore is foregrounding is in fact the primacy of woman. It is the woman's ‘fleeting steps’ which transform the ‘dust of this world.’ It is said more explicitly in a verse

‘You, like the lightning's flash slender and keen;
pierce the heart of the turbulent darkness, to
disappear in a vivid streak of laughter.’

Tagore deploys this contrastive pattern over and over again to bring forth a new sensibility that seeks to bring women like the women of Kalidasa into the

very centre of the discourse and also make women the centre of his great creative moments.

Many have observed in Chitra the older Indian idea of a wife as a partner in the duties of family life (sahadharmini) and also the influence of the western romantic concept of a comrade in perilous action. But in a letter to his niece, Indira, Bibi /Bob Tagore, by quoting the swayambar of Indumati from Raguvamsa of Kalidasa clearly displays his apathy towards the egocentricity of the Western women. 'Suddenly with the blasts of conch shell and bugle sound Indumati, in bridal finery supported by Shundada, enters and stands between the rows of the suitors. What a superb picture! Then she is introduced by Shunanada to the princes one by one, and to each of them Indumati makes a courteous namashkar, and passes on. How beautifully she does it! Though she has her individual power to reject each one, at the same time she is so respectful that her gesture seems like reverence. This is far superior to the haughty vanity of an English miss.'

This female power embodied in the feminine form is offered as the triumph of the human spirit and Tagore returns to this metaphor over and over again. It is not the Western concept of comradeship as found in today's language of radical feminism but representation of women of the rich and diverse pan-Sanskritic tradition of Hindu culture.

One can find at the same time this imagery in his relation with Anapurna(Ana), the sophisticated daughter of a Marathi gentleman, Atmaram Turkhud, who was a friend of his ICS brother Satyendranath. Tagore stayed with the family to learn the western ways of life, and renamed the girl as Nalini and sang for her occasionally. Tagore, did not mention anything about her in 'My Reminiscences' but in his sixties and seventies disclosed it more openly, particularly Nalini's deep love towards him and said that once Nalini told him, 'Poet, I think that even if I were on my death-bed your songs would call me back in life.' She again made a very personal remark to Tagore, 'you must never wear a beard. Don't let anything hide the outline of your face.' Was Tagore 'extravagantly dreamy, shy and self-obsessed' that he was never inclined to summon a typical masculine response to Anna's unabashed but sincere gesture to get him to hug and kiss her?

He was similarly unresponsive to the erotic advances of the Scott sisters of Bloomsbury, London where the young poet had been a paying guest.

...The poet registers almost a similar feeling of unrequited passion because of his timidity and bringing up within the orb of a different culture towards the independent-minded, and intellectual Victoria Ocampo, whom he named Vijaya, who confessed candidly in one of her letters to Tagore, 'Let me tell you Gurudev that I love you'.

But in all these cases Tagore never laughed at their love for him and mentioned about Anna in his old age as quoted by Dutta and Robinson, 'I have never made light of the love of a woman no matter how she had loved me. I have always been grateful for it all, always looked upon it as a grace – a favour...Her gift of blooms may fade with time, yes, but the memory of their fragrance, never.'

About the Scott sisters he told Dilip Ray many years later, he had little doubt that the girls, his "lovers in former life" (*purba janamer priya*). There is no doubt that Tagore sought 'the abstract and idealized woman of his fancy.'

But how one can describe his ambivalent relation with Ocampo? In one of his letters to Ocampo Tagore says,

'I am not free to give up my freedom - for this freedom is claimed by my Master for his own service.....Your friendship has come to me unexpectedly. It will grow to its fullness of truth when you know and accept my real being and see clearly the deeper meaning of life.'

It was in 1925 but within 15 years in the year 1940, just one year before his death it was a complete round about turn.

He wrote to Vijaya, 'Often (there) comes to my mind the picture of that riverside home and the regret that in my absent-minded foolishness I failed to accept

fully the precious gift offered to me. However the time favoured by destiny is passed and it will never return.'

But then what about Ranu Mukherjee? During his long life, Tagore received the devotion of many women, a few of them such as Ranu Mukherjee was remarkable in her own right. If his relation with Ocampo was ambivalent with Ranu it was multivalent. On one side Ranu Mukherjee's memoirs give us the information that after the cremation of Bela, the first child of Tagore, who died untimely at the age of 32, the heart broken father came to the doorstep of Ranu's father calling out, 'Ranu, Ranu, where are you?' Chitra Dev in her book 'Women of the Tagore Household' analyses that it would have been clear to those who knew Rabindranath well that it was at this moment of profound grief that he wanted to see Ranu, aged 12 as an alternative to his own daughter. A few days later he wrote to Ranu,
You came to me at a very heart breaking juncture.....my daughter who left this world was my eldest child. I had nurtured her myself. Rarely does one come across such beauty and loveliness on this earth. You arrived just when she left me I felt as if the departing glow of affection lit up a similar one before being extinguished.

He wrote more than 200 letters to Ranu and out of that 69 were published under the title 'Bhanusimher Patravali'. These letters implicitly reveal the slow

transformation with the passage of time of fatherly love for a girl of angelic simplicity into an indescribable love for a woman of stunning beauty who, came first as the messenger of the poet's Jibandebata reminding him of the playmate of his early youth Kadambari—

‘Morning star of his life transformed into the evening star of his old age.’

‘Bhorer tata elo sanjhher tarer beshe’

In Ranu's blossoming into exquisite womanhood, Tagore felt once again the presence of his Natun Bauthan.

I would not like to buy the Freudian and Nabokovian ideas and explain this relationship, however the jealousy of a lover old in age could easily be ascertained when Tagore saw his young friend Leonard Elmhirst, pining for female company showing his deep fondness towards Ranu. Tagore was relieved when he came to know that Elmhirst had proposed to Dorothy Straight and wrote to him in Nov. 1922:

‘Your marriage proposal has my hearty approval and blessing. It will take a huge load off my mind when it happens, for I have discovered that lately you have been paying an alarming amount of attention to a certain Brahmin maiden, diverting her heart from its previous course.’

Tagore's strong attraction towards the Brahmin maiden, Ranu Adhikari, then 16 years old, was further displayed, as accounted by Krishna Kriplani in his biography of Tagore. Kriplani writes, 'In the following year, 1923, he wrote a play eventually titled Rakta Karabi based on the triangle between himself, her and Elmhirst.'

After her marriage to Biren Mukherjee in 1925, also to be later knighted for his services to the British Empire, Ranu noted in her diary, "I cannot give the poet what he wants". It is obvious that she shared with him an intimacy that could be called love but was unable to help him consummate it. Was it for social reasons or there was some other reason, one can't say anything definitely. Ten months after Ranu's marriage in the one hundred and fiftieth letter to Ranu Tagore wrote, 'your husband's forgiveness and love is your priceless treasure'. On the next day he wrote addressing her 'tui' for the first time, 'Ranu, tui mane korishne toke kau amar sneha theke bonchito korte pare'.

This multivalent relationship inspired the old poet in his creativity in significant ways. Even Tagore's relatives as mentioned by Krishna kriplani wondered about the 'new inspiration' and 'cause' of the 'outpouring of new poems of a fine and noble vintage. Ranu was that time in the eyes of the people close to him, his muse. Even Ketaki Kushari Dyson in her book 'In your Blossoming Flower –Garden'

maintains the same feeling about Ocampo who became a Muse for the poet's creative corpus after 1924. Same could be said about many other women including his child-bride whom he married when she was 10 and Tagore 22. She gave birth to Bela, the first child of them at the age of 13 and subsequently four more children and died at the age of 29 within 19 years of their marriage.

Tagore had deep love for his wife whom he called 'chhoto bau' (little bride), 'chuti' (holiday) and 'my little wife' and wrote in a letter in 1890 from Europe, 'I became restless thinking of seeing you again.' In another letter in 1898 he said, 'May the two of us remain to the very end sure refuges for each other's world-weary heart' and in another letter in 1900, 'if you sweeten my life with your love and care... your efforts will be precious to me.'

She definitely made some efforts and shone forth in all the glory of a traditional Indian woman particularly when she stood by her husband to help him achieve his great ideal. From the cocoon of the ordinary, as Chitra Dev says, emerged the extraordinary. Tagore called her seema swarger Indrani, queen of heaven and in the emerging Shantiniketan she became the benevolent Annapurna, the universal mother. However her life was shortlived and died in 1902 when she was bare 29.

Tagore's family life was, for the most part, tragic.

After the death of his wife his daughter, Renuka, died in 1903. Later he lost his youngest son, Shamindranath, his eldest daughter Bela, and his only grandson.

In all these deaths particularly in his wife's death Tagore saw death as conjoined with life which triumphed so beautifully (amrita se-mritu hote daao tumi ani) but it would be a travesty of truth if I would not say that Tagore at the same time found himself to be very lonely and helpless and felt that his Ashram School was incomplete without Mrinalini: 'I can give them everything but not a mother's love and care.' The feminine image which emerged from this so intimate relationship is described by Tagore in the poem 'raate and prabhate':

Rate preyasir rup dhari/Tumi esechha
praneswari,/Prate kakhan debir
beshe/Tumi samukhe udile hese/Ami
sambhrambhare rayechhi dandaye dure
abanata
shire/Aji nirmalbay shanta ushay nirjan
naditire

You came to me at night in the/Guise of a lover./At
dawn you appeared smiling,/Decked as a
Goddess./And awestruck, I remain standing on the
desolate riverbank yonder/With my head hung low
in wonder ("Rate O Prabhate")

But the feminine ideal which Tagore ultimately created was not exactly a transgression of the

traditional womanhood but an image of the totality of a woman inspired both by the oceans of the West and the mighty peaks of Himalayas which imparted her full self confidence to be on a wide road to march ahead.

She is the woman who like a torrent tufan/yahare chanchal kare se- tarike kare khan khan, pulverizes the boat she shakes, she is a charmer, yadukari bachane chalane in her gait and speech and also an adept chatura in prasadhan sadhane at making herself up and yet the same woman lights and puts out a small lamp in her room after her morning bath, unlocks her hair and meditates her silent prayer, grihakone chhoto deep jvalay nebay snan saanga kari elochule prabhate nirab nibedane stab kare ekmane.

This mélange of opposite attitudes bears testimony to the poet's explicit and undoubted thesis that she is God's greatest gift, Tagore wrote in a poem:

"Woman is God's greatest gift descended on earth to bestow dignity and honor upon man “ Nari se ye mahendrer dan,/esechhe dharitritale purusere sampite sanman, and in his love for her man finds his freedom
(‘je bhalobasha mukta take ami bidhatar dan bale grohan kari,’ from one of the letters of Tagore to Ranu).