

# Status and Destiny of Indian Women in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*

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### Abstract

Tagore, a great thinker and writer, is preoccupied with the mixed status and destiny of Indian women who have been the objects of reverence as well as the victims of gender discrimination and inhuman social practices. His poetry portrays women as creatures of beauty and divine grace but his dramas and novels present them as creatures of flesh and blood subject to harsh human and social conditions. He sees women as mothers of humanity having greater interest in the race than men. He finds them patient, passive, tolerant, loving and self-sacrificing but he is at pains to see their exploitation, oppression and deprivation in family and society. Among his fourteen novels, *The Home and the World* deals with the issue of the women's status and destiny at length and seeks some solutions.

**Keywords:** Status, Destiny, Patriarchy, Domination, Discrimination, Compensation, Bondages and Exploitation.

### Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore is primarily known as a poet and dramatist but for a few last decades, his novels have attracted readers' attention thanks to the increasing popularity of fiction among the modern readers and the popularity of the films made on Tagore's novels. As a novelist Indian women's status and destiny has always been a matter of concern to him. He acknowledges that women are exploited and oppressed, denied basic human rights, subjected to gender discrimination and inhuman social and religious practices. He finds that the prevailing condition of women has upset the social balance which needs to be restored for the sake of social harmony and human progress. But he does not approve of women's protest and self-assertion to seek the restoration of their rightful place in the society to attain balance in human civilization. This paper is a modest attempt to investigate Tagore's views on the status and destiny of Indian women in his novels in general and in *The Home and the World* in particular and find out the alternative solution which he suggests to restore women's dignity and achieve balance in society.

### Objectives of the Study

As Indian society has yet to do justice to its women who constitute almost half of the population, their status and destiny has always been a matter of concern for the writers and researchers. The broad aim and objective of this paper is to study Tagore's *The Home and the World* in light of this problem and offer solution of far reaching consequences.

### Review of Literature

Tagore deals with the status and destiny of Indian women in his writings like *Bharatvarshiya Vivaha* (Indian Marriage, 1925), *Narir Manusatva* ( Women as Human Beings, 1928), *Nari* ( Women, 1926) and *Strishiksha* ( Women's Education, 1915). His novels *Nashtanir* ( 1901), *Chokher Bali* (1903), *Nauka Dubi* (1905), *Gora* (1910), *Jogajog* (1929), *Dui Bon* (1933), *Malancha* (1934) and *Char Odhe* (1934) are also seized with the various aspects of women's issues. Critical books like Bimanbehari Mazumdar's *Heroines of Tagore* (1968), Richards Kennedy's "Attitude Towards the Independent Woman in Five Bengali Novels" (1979), M. Sharda's *Rabindranath Tagore : A Study of Women Characters in His Novels*(1988), K Singhania and S Vaidy's *Recasting Women* (1989), Sarala Devi's "The Rights of Women" (1996), Jane O Grady's "Introduction" to J.S. Mill's *On Liberty and Subjection of Woman* (1996), Satyananda Swain's *Female Paradigms of Love* (2013), Sanjukta Das, Sudeshna Chakravarti and Mary Mathew's *Radical Rabindranath* (2014), Arif Hussain's "Interrogating Nationalism in *The Home and the World*" (2014),

Negin Karami, Sohila Faghfori and Esmseil's "The Image of Motherhood in Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora*" (2016), Adila Matra's "How Rabindranath Tagore Disappointed the women in His Life?" (2016) Sanjana Ray's "Rabindranath Tagore's Portrayal of the 'Empowered Woman' Show Us a Man Far Ahead of His Times" (2017), Suchita Chandhok's "Is this Liberation? Literature Now and Then" (2017) and Neha Ghatpande's "*Ghare-Baire: Bimala's Transgression of Boundaries between the Home and the World*" (2017) offer insights and understanding of the issue at hand and pave the way of elaborate analysis and a new perspective.

### Hypothesis

This paper presumes that even after several decades of independence, there has been no marked improvement in the status and destiny of Indian Women and this issue remains an important area of investigation. Tagore's novels deal with the status and destiny of Indian women and his particular novel *The Home and the World* presents his in-depth view of this issue and offers fresh perspective. Its findings will help in understanding the current status and destiny of Indian women and offer proper direction to society in achieving gender equality and gender justice.

### Main Text

As a novelist, Rabindranath Tagore's mind was preoccupied with the status and destiny of Indian women who were suppressed and oppressed in the Indian society predominated by male Chauhanism. He felt devastated when he observed that women in India were looked down upon as baser animals and subjected to male domination and subjugation and treated as objects of entertainment. He saw with scorn and derision the discriminatory social practices like denial of education to women, early marriage of girls, inhuman treatment of widows and the cruel social customs like *Sati* and *charakapuja*. In his early poems, Tagore presented women as creatures of divine virtues but in his novels he projected them as fallible creatures of flesh and blood. He saw through the pretense of Hindu religion and culture which projected a woman as an epitome of beauty and goodness and an object of worship declaring: "*yatra narstute pujiyante ramante tatra devata*" ("God lives where women are worshipped") but let her groan under masculine subjugation and suffer as the victims of inhuman social customs.

Tagore believes that man and woman are different and they should remain so. In his essay "Woman and Home", he says that if woman's nature were identical with man's it would only give rise to monotonous superfluity. It was because of this difference that Eve exited from the ready-made paradise and helped her mate, Adam, in creating paradise of their own on the earth. Obviously, he holds woman's rebellion, her self-assertion and demand of equality and uniformity is "rebellion against necessity". He writes, "When woman refuses to acknowledge the distinction between her life and that of a man, she does not convince us of its truth, but only proves that she is suffering. All great sufferings indicate some wrong somewhere". *The Home and the World* (1916), written during the hectic time both for

India and the world-the freedom struggle in India and World War-I in the world at large, is one of the most complex, most controversial and widely debated novels of Tagore. In this novel Tagore deals with the status and destiny of the Indian woman represented by Bimala and points to the dichotomy forced upon Indian Upper-class women.

But before we proceed to examine the status and destiny of the Indian women in this particular novel of Tagore, it would be pertinent to have an idea of Tagore's views on Indian women as reflected in his non-fiction writings before *The Home and the World*. Right from time Tagore was able to observe and reflect on worldly life as he saw it, but he could not reconcile himself with male domination and subjugation and exploitation of women, which created imbalance in Indian social structure and brought about a setback in Indian civilization. He observed:

"This one-sided civilization is crashing along a series of catastrophes at a tremendous speed because of its one-sidedness. And at last the time has arrived when women must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power (*Personality*, 172)."

However, he did not seek women's active role but their passive function: "For women's function is the passive function of the soil, which not only helps the tree to grow but keeps its growth within limit (*Ibid*)."

In fact, Tagore sees a woman as a mother of humanity who has greater interest in the race than her masculine counterpart. She breeds, nurses, procures and heals up. She stores life and restores it in the event of exhaustion. Her strength lies in sacrifice, fortitude patience and passivity and it is in the depth of passiveness in her nature that the personality of life is stored. A true woman is like a flower that emits fragrance and exhausts itself without complaint. Flower like she withers in fruitation He elaborates:

"They are the mothers of the race, and they have a real interest in the things that are around them, that are the common things of life; if they did not have that, then the race would perish (*op cit*, 174)."

To Tagore, it is in giving that a woman flourishes. It is her self-sacrifice that softens male chauhanism creating a sense of adoration and admiration for her. Through self-extinction a woman gains her real power. The man is enraptured by her. In addition to self sacrifice, she is also an embodiment of love in which there is no place for greed and violence and she does not desire anything smaller than love. Neither the golden wands of wealth nor the iron rods of power can awake a woman's heart; only love can awake her. And this woman is struggling "against man's monopoly of civilization where he is breaking her heart everyday and desolating her life (181)".

Tagore's attitude to women is reverential but he does not approve of women's assertion and protest as a solution to their problems: "For women who want something special and violent in their surroundings to keep their interests active only prove that they have lost touch with their own true world (*Personality*, 174)". Tagore who pleads for a historic compensation for the exploited women in the

patriarchal Indian society and feels certain that the men will give way to women, foresees the women's place restored in the society and balance attained in human civilization: "And just because woman has been insulted, has been living in assort of obscurity, behind men, I think she will have her compensation in the civilization which is waiting to come (183)". He further adds, " And in future civilization also, the women the feebler creatures, feebler at least in their outer aspects, who are less muscular, and who have been behind-hand, always left under the shadow of those huge creatures, the men, they will have their place, and those bigger creatures will have to give way (184)".

*The Home and the World* presents three major characters –Nikhil, Sandip and Bimala–each revealing his or her own thoughts in a diary. Bimala is an Indian woman at the crossroad deep rooted in traditional values of home and husband. Nikhil whom she married nine years ago is not the man of her dream, but as a devoted Hindu wife she follows the custom of loving and worshipping her husband. She hesitates in crossing the boundaries between the inner courtyard and the outer part of the household. What seems to have in mind the nationalist movement's claim to have solved the woman's question by assigning 'spiritual home' to woman and 'material world' to man. The spiritual home holds India's superior culture in need of preservation and women who are the care-givers of the society represent it. But Bimala, with the active cooperation of her husband, Nikhil, crosses the boundary of patriarchy and comes into contact with the young and eloquent nationalist leader and her husband's friend, Sandip. She is swept by Sandip's passion and is tempted to the alluring world outside. Her admiration for Sandip warms into attraction. She writes in her diary,

"So long I had been like a small river at the border of a village. But the tide came up from the sea, and my breast heaved; my banks gave way and the great drum beats of the sea waves echoed in my mad current (23)".

Nikhil watches the developments but does so without interfering as he does not subscribe to the traditional notion that a woman should love the man she marries and bestow her unconditional love on her husband. He refuses to be her fetters as a husband. Instead of enjoying the love of his wife in the customary manner, he wanted to test their conjugal love by giving her freedom from conjugal surveillance and exposing her to the outer world. He lets Sandip take hesitant Bimla out of home into the world and win her heart with his gift of the gab. Highlighting this aspect of Nikhil's character, Krishna Kripalani observes:

"Nikhil knows what is going on between his wife and his friend and could easily put a stop to it, but he values love only when given out of free will and in open competition with the outside world and not as an obligation or under duress (1961: 149)".

Unlike a traditional husband who wants to keep his wife as a personal possession/a trophy, Nikhil encourages his wife to come out of her 'closet'

to interact with the world outside. His act is a reflection of Tagore attitude to women as Dr. Satyananda Swain puts it:

"He (Nikhil) rejects the traditional notion that a woman should have unquestioned unreserved love for husband, and that she is expected to love the man she marries. Tagore does not find any reason behind such tradition-bound practices (2013:114)".

Sandip who poses to be a patriotic firebrand but is a shameless seducer, tries from the very outset to arouse her passion and her vanity. He contends that women are strong but men have made them weak as he tells Bimala:

"Men belaud you as delicate and fragile, so as to delude into thinking yourself as weak. But it is you women who are strong. Men make a great outward show of their so called freedom, but those who know their inner minds are aware of their bondage. They have manufactured scriptures with their own hands to bind themselves; with their very idealism they have made golden fetters for women to wind round their body and mind. If men had not that extraordinary faculty of entangling themselves in messes of their own contriving, nothing could have kept them bound. But as for you women, you have desired to conceive reality with body and soul. You have given birth to reality. You have sucked reality at your breath (49-50)".

Bimala, too, favours freedom, "I want the country to be free. I want human relations to be free (50)". So Sandip nudges her to shake off her man-made bondages and assert her need, will and true status. He sees parallels in Bimala and his country, India. Bimala as a wife is in chains and so is India. Both need to shake off their bondages. India cannot be free from the British slavery without freeing the Indian women from domestic slavery. He says:

"I shall simply make Bimala one with my country. The turbulent west wind which has swept away the country's veil of conscience, will sweep away the veil of the wife from Bimala's face, and in that uncovering there will be no shame (79)".

He adds:

"If only women could be set free from the artificial fetters put round them by men, we could see on earth the living image of Kali, the shameless, pitiless goddess. I am a worshipper of Kali, and one day I shall truly worship her, setting Bimala on her alter of destruction (80)".

He also writes in his diary: "Woman knows man well enough where he is weak, but she is quite unable to fathom him where he is strong. The fact is that man is as much a mystery to woman as woman is to man. If that were not so, the separation of the sexes would only have been a waste of Nature's energy (112)".

He adores women as 'true givers' as he tells Amulya, "We men can at best give of our power. But women give themselves. Out of their own life they give birth, out of their own life, they give sustenance. Such gifts are the only true gifts (155)".

But Sandip's tall talks of woman freedom and empowerment sound hollow *vis-à-vis* his underlying intention of beguiling the innocent Bimala to his own

selfish end. His relationship with Bimala is tinged with sex and his attitude is "all is fair in love and war". Bimala exposures to the world outside help her see through the real character of her enchanter, Sandip, and retrace her steps in time. She undergoes many trials and tribulations, and ultimately emerges as a self-realized soul. In the process of realization, she is able to see through the evil intentions of Sandip-his greed, jealousy and violence-and understand the selfless love and trust of her husband. She withdraws from Sandip, from the world outside devastated by violence and the intricate machinations of greedy and corrupt people, and comes back to home and husband. A transformed and self-realized Bimala is able to enjoy love with freedom instead of conjugal slavery. To her love is no longer an obligation but an inner urge, a heart's desire.

Nikhil experiences untold pain at heart while watching his wife drifting away from him but he faces truth quite calmly: He writes in his diary:

"This cry of pain must be silenced in me. So long as I continue to suffer, Bimala will never have true freedom. I must free her completely, otherwise I shall never gain my freedom from untruth...(80-81)".

He believes that love is the matter of heart, and heart realizes truth in its own way. He waits with great patience to see his distracted wife to come out of her infatuation with Sandip and return to her senses. She is neither forced nor taught, but allowed to work on her own. Thus, giving her freedom, Nikhil finally wins her back to his loving fold. His victory in love is closer to sacrifice. True love can face distraction and win in the long run. Hiren Mukherjee observes in this context:

"Husband and wife could come closer to each other only after a strenuous ordeal and Sandip moved out of their life as abruptly as he had entered. This is the theme of the woman emerging from the home into the world, but it has much larger connotation, that of India herself, emerging into a restless world and yet making sure of her home (1986: 84-85)".

Negin Karmi, Sohila Faghfori and Esmaeil Zohdi think that Bimala exposure to the outside world was a part of her necessary education and they echo Tagore's views when they say, "If woman is not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue (2016:1843)".

But the credit does not go entirely to Nikhilesh for setting Bimala free for her exposure of the world outside. Credit also goes to Bimala to avail that freedom and thrive and sustain herself during the pulls and pressures of the world outside. She herself says, "And then the other day in the garden, how easy my husband found it to tell me that he set me free. But can freedom-empty freedom-be given and taken so easily as that? It is like setting a fish free in the sky-for how can I move or live outside the atmosphere of loving care which has always sustained me? (183)".

Bimala's returning home may be seen as her inability to break the shackles of traditional patriarchy but to Tagore it is quite natural and inevitable. He says in his essay "Woman and Home" that love that

bind women to their children binds them to their homes. Man is not handicapped by the same biological and psychological responsibilities as woman and, therefore, he has the liberty to give her the security of home. However, the balance of power between man and woman in a measure is established when home wields a strong enough attraction to make men accept its obligations. Simple comfort of home is made precious by the touch of love. But the material ambition of man and woman and their cravings for luxuries, loveliness of home is giving way to isolation of hotels. Return of Bimala seeks to restore the value and sanctity of home and strike a balance between the home and the world.

According to Mohit K. Ray and Rama Kundu, "Tagore's women protagonists seem to carry all along a wonderful fine fragrance of an ethereal essence; "His women, exceptional by any standard, get transformed from the domain of mundane realism to another elevated finer realm of poetic truth." ("Translator's Notes" to *Gora* (2008) P. XXIV)

### **Findings**

Tagore's views are different from his contemporaries and successors who advocate equality between man and woman as the panacea to all existing women issues. He looks beyond social, political and constitutional provisions of rights, freedom and empowerment for women and finds the solution in women's personal endeavours in the open world, which may termed a 'spiritual endeavour'.

### **Conclusion**

The predicament of Bimala in *The Home and the World* suggests that Tagore does not want women to be rebels and self-assertive; he wants them to be self-realized persons who could offer and enjoy love and freedom in true sense of the words. And this self-realization will happen to them at their own selves; it can happen through the process of "learning by doing". Tagore's vision is that Indian society with self-realized women will be an ever better society for human beings on this earth.

### **Suggestion**

Some modern critics and thinkers basking in the western culture of women's rights, women's freedom and women's empowerment may be tempted to dismiss Tagore's views as empty spiritual talk. But it need to be given a serious consideration in the light of the fact that that increasing rights, freedom and empowerment to women have not brought the desired dividend of peace and harmony in family, society and human relationships.

Tagore's views on status and destiny of women are quite relevant in the present day world of working women and home-stay husbands. Modern Indian women are climbing the ladder of power and polity as bureaucrats, politicians, Governors, Presidents, Prime-Ministers and Chief-Ministers, climbing the Everest and touring the space. Modern Indian women have entered all sectors and excelled in all fields but all these have hardly translated into proportionate gain on the scale of social and human development index. The rising trends broken homes, nucleus family, live-in-relationships, hasty divorces, fight for the custody of children, neglect of the old

parents and relatives are reaching an alarming level badly affecting the peace and harmony in family and society. The time is to look back to Tagore and give his solution a chance.

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