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TAGORE TODAY – SCRIPTING “NEW WOMEN” IN HIS SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: -

Rabindranath Tagore’s feminist short stories, including ‘streer patra’, *aparichita*, *nastoneer* challenged patriarchal norms by portraying women seeking agency, autonomy, independency, and voice. His narratives often focus on the psychological and societal struggles of women, highlighting their intelligence and resilience in breaking free from domestic confinement. *Strrer Patra* (a wife’s letter) widely regarded as a pioneering feminist text in Bengali literature, the protagonist Mrinal writes a scathing letter to her husband, denouncing her suffocating life, highlighting the unfair treatment of women, and declaring her independence. In *Aparichita*, the story features Kalyani, a strong woman who refuses to marry her fiancé after his family humiliates her father, asserting her self-worth and choosing to devote her life to educating other women. *Nastoneer* focuses on Charulata, an intelligent housewife who finds her own voice and intellect, navigating emotional turmoil and ultimate isolation, choosing to live on her own terms. *Shasti* depicts Chandara, a woman who breaks social codes and chooses to take the blame for a murder she did not commit, rather than serve a husband who betrayed her. In *laboratory*, Tagore depicts Sohini, a woman who is assertive and capable in taking charge of her life and her husband’s scientific legacy. In *Giribala* explores a woman’s defiance against her circumstances, emphasizing her desire to escape, as seen in the *Women of Rabindranath Tagore*. Tagore female characters portraits protest and defiance, new identity of women, female characters as critique of patriarchy and patriarchal society these stories marked a significant shift in Bengali literature allowing women to take active role in social transformation and to place themselves in a new identity of women.

Key Words: - Women, Self-Identity, Struggles, Sufferings, Oppression, Feminist Ideas, Optimism.

I. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (7 May 1861 – 7 August 1941), sobriquet **Gurudev**, was a Bengali polymath who reshaped Bengali literature and music. Author of *Gitanjali* and its "profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse", he was the first non-European Nobel laureate. In translation his poetry was viewed as spiritual and mercurial; his seemingly mesmeric persona, floccose locks, and empyreal garb lended him a prophet-like aura in the West. His "elegant prose and magical poetry" remain largely known outside Bengal.

A Pirali Brahmin from Kolkata, Tagore wrote poetry as an eight-year-old. At age sixteen, he cheekily released his first substantial poems under the pseudonym *Bhanushingho*: "Sun Lion"), which were duly seized upon by the region's obligatory literary grandees as long-lost classics. Tagore graduated to his first short stories and dramas—and the aegis of his birth name—by 1877. He came to denounce the British Raj and he supported Indian independence; his efforts endure in his vast canon, comprising paintings, sketches and doodles, whimsy, hundreds of texts, and some two thousand songs, and in the institution he founded, Visva-Bharati University. Known mostly for his poetry, Tagore wrote novels, essays, short stories, travelogues, dramas, and thousands of songs. Of Tagore's prose, his short stories are perhaps most highly regarded; he is indeed credited with originating the Bengali-language version of the genre. His works are frequently noted for their rhythmic, optimistic, and lyrical nature. Such stories mostly borrow from deceptively simple subject matter commoners.

The "Sadhana" period, 1891–1895, was among Tagore's most fecund, yielding more than half the stories contained in the three-volume *Galpaguchchha*, itself a group of eighty-four stories. They reflect upon Tagore's surroundings, on modern and fashionable ideas, on mind puzzles. Tagore associated his earliest stories, such as those of the "*Sadhana*" period, with an exuberance of vitality and spontaneity; these traits were cultivated by *zamindar* Tagore’s life in villages such as Patisar,



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Shajadpur, and Shelaidaha. Seeing the common and the poor, he examined their lives with a depth and feeling singular in Indian literature up to that point.

II. Scope of the Study

This article investigates Rabindranath Tagore’s perspectives on women as seen through his short stories. While his poems primarily describe beauty, nature, and his search for what is beyond mundane life, his short stories deal with the lives of ordinary people. Woman’s struggles and sufferings are particularly highlighted. This article argues that while on one hand Tagore reveals the unequal social structure that oppresses women, on another, he creates courageous women who challenge tradition. His short story “Laboratory,” written a few months before his death, expresses his latest views on women and gives shape to the “new woman,” whom he perceives as arriving in India soon. In so doing, Tagore urges women to find an identity of their own, and realise that wifehood and motherhood are but fractions of their whole being. Tagore in his short stories focused on women’s education and empowerment, her identity or womanhood. Tagore’s writing reveals a mix of twentieth century feminism with orthodox Indian mindset a kind of progressive feminism. In the following short stories **Haimanti, Laboratory, Samapti, Sasthi, Strirpatra, Nastanir, Denapaouna, Shuva, Khata, Dristidan, and Aparachita**, we will try to explore Tagore’s feminist ideas.

The Bengali Renaissance brought with it a new approach to the concept of women in society. In the flood of writings, inspired by the various movements that sought to redress the condition of women in society like, widow remarriage, abolition of sati, abolition of child marriage and *kulinism*, the initiatives taken for women’s education, the whole socio-cultural and familial view of women underwent a drastic change. The writings of Rabindranath Tagore were no exception. Much has been said about the way Tagore views his women in his poems, essays, novels and drama. Yet it is the dance dramas of Tagore, a genre quite unique in his time and milieu, which portray the radical nature of Tagore’s conception of women and the maturation of their selfhood. The dance dramas Chitrangada, Shama, and Shama illustrate Tagore’s bold and perceptive experimentation with various literary forms and techniques and the radical nature of his ideological orientation.

It is the While Rabindranath was never comfortable with strident assertions of women’s rights, and was not kind to those who were known as feminists (Tagore, *Chithipatra*), 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 the larger society. Tagore’s short stories can be seen as representing three facets of women’s lives: **i) the romance between men and women, ii) social oppression of women (brilliantly portrayed in stories like “Haimanti”) and iii) the birth of the “new woman” – that is, a woman who challenges convention and seeks to make decisions third theme only that this paper is concerned with.** My aim in this essay is to examine different facets of women as portrait by Tagore in his Galpaguccha (a bouquet of short stories).

According to Pramatha Nath Bishi, Tagore’s writings in the last phase of his life increasingly gave calls for liberation of the individual: He has repeatedly sent forth summons to free individuals from bondages overcoming hurdles. At one end of this invocation for women is the poem “Mukti” and at the other end are stories like “Haldar Goshthi” (The Haldar Clan), “Streer Patra,” “Poila Number” (Number One), etc. The last such invocation is in the story “Laboratory.” (Bishi, *Rabindra Sarani* 236)

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

III. The Social Scenario During the Era of Rabindranath

Born in 1861 into an illustrious family, Rabindranath grew up in the heart of Calcutta. He came of age at a time when the currents of three movements had reached the shores of India: i) the religious: Rammohan Roy had founded the “New Woman” in Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories Brahma Samaj (1828), which had a profound impact on a section of Bhadrolok community, including Tagore’s family; ii) “the literary revolution” had been pioneered, especially in Bengal, by



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the charismatic writer Bankimchandra and iii) the political a nationalist movement had started “to give voice” to Indian people’s discontent against colonial rule. The poet’s mind and sensibilities were shaped by these influences (Das Gupta 8-10). Rabindranath lived for eighty eventful years in colonial Bengal, and his views about women changed over time. There were fast changes in India which inevitably left a footprint on his writings. Any modern history book will tell us of the shifts in political, economic, and social circumstances from the middle of the nineteenth to the 1940s. When Rabindranath was born, the elements of romance found in European literature had become a pervasive theme in Bengali creative writing (Sen 378). It was Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94), who had introduced the concept of romantic love into Bengali literature. Rabindranath took the romantic tradition to great heights. Although Rabindranath dominated the literary field in Bengal, other major writers, such as Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1898-1976) also appeared during his time. In the mid-1920’s, there emerged a powerful group of younger writers, who considered themselves modernists and gathered around the journal, *Kallol*. Although admiring of Rabindranath, this group tried deliberately to break away from his influence (Ayub 18). Some of these writers espoused women’s sexual liberation and freedom from male control. Rabindranath was criticized for the absence of realism and physicality in his writings. The criticism of this new generation must have affected the poet, but the attack was not fully justified. For example, in Binodini of *Chokher Bali* and the nude “Urvashi,” as well as in his short story “Laboratory,” we find women as seductress and physically awakened. It needs to be mentioned here that with the introduction of women’s education, women, too, had begun to write and publish since the late nineteenth century. The majority among them advocated traditionally prescribed values for women. But and this is more to our purpose, there emerged another trend, though not yet prominent among female writers. Some of the newly educated women, earlier illiterate and superstition-riddled, raised the banner of self-respect and self-confidence. A more rebellious note emerged with the advent of the freedom movement. Not just the educated elements, but women from all sections of the society *en masse* jumped into the fray of the independence movement. Till then political activities were the domain solely of men, but with the nationalist movement, the barrier broke down. The effect of this change was felt in the domestic arena, women for the first time saw themselves reflected through a public mirror. In fighting against the British domination, many of them also began to resent their domestic bondage. They started to question the inequality that existed between men and women. Even some housewives, ordinary and relatively unknown, started writing boldly in women’s journals about women’s marginalization in society. The brilliant writer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), for example, questioned in a forceful voice: “I ask you, Mr. Astronomer, you are gazing at the sky, but why is your wife not by your side?” (*Rokeya Rachanabali* 30). Liberal men also raised their voices on discrimination between men and women. Kazi Nazrul Islam proclaimed: “I sing the song of equality. In my eyes there is no difference between men and women”. (“Naari,” *Nazrul Rachanabali*, Vol. 1: 241) Such was, very briefly, the literary environment in the first three decades of the twentieth century in Bengal.

In the background of this new social awakening, Rabindranath initiated a new wave in his writings. His message was: The discriminatory treatment of women had existed, complacently in our society for ages. Men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past. (*Rabindra Rachanaboli*, Vol. 13: 24)

IV. Feminist Thought and Selfhood in Tagore’s Writings

Romantic Relationship of Men and Women is depicted in the following short stories along with Tagore’s depiction of women’s identity and selfhood mainly in *Samapti* and *Nastanir*.

Tagore constructs Mrinmayi in **Samapti** in the image of a restless urchin - one who can create ripples in an otherwise unperturbed life of her locality. Unlike other maidens of her age, “her enormous black eyes held no shame or fear, and not the slightest coyness. She was tall, well-built, healthy, strong.” Her first meeting with Apurba provides her an ample scope to ridicule the educated Babu Apurba Krishna. Apurba's uneasy steps on the muddy riverbank and his subsequent fall are greeted by Mrinmayi's “melodious peel of high-pitched laughter.” His conscious decision to marry this unusual Mrinmayi shatters his mother’s hope for a calm and quite daughter-in-law. The third person narrator of the story hints at the existing power equation in the relationship between husband and wife. Apurba chooses to marry Mrinmayi probably to tame her



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otherwise indomitable spirit: “Nevertheless whatever common sense might say, Mr. Apurba Krishna Roy was definitely unprepared to admit defeat at the hands of the flighty rustic girl.” Even after marriage, Mrinmayi retains her strong adherence to her pre-adolescent self. Her efforts to restore the days of her girlhood encounter insuperable impediments. The story explores this tension as it takes us into the girl’s inner realm where we find her constantly tussling with the changing situation, with her new ‘self’ on its way to the domain of maturity. The social scripting ultimately succeeds and therefore undermines her individual efforts. Her gullibility, already indicated by her name ‘Mrinmayi’ (a figure made of clay and therefore can easily be molded according to the creator's whim), is reinstated as she succumbs into the realm of patriarchal expectations.

Thus, social inscription trespasses the individual space and influences individual scripting. The ‘maturity’ makes its appearance suddenly: “Mrinmayi was unaware when the Creator’s sword severed her childhood from her youth. She looked around her, astonished and bruised, and saw herself anew.” The former unruly Mrinmayi emerges as a docile wife, one that society appreciates and values. Mrinmayi’s maturity, in a way, implies a loss of freedom, a sort of self-confinement. The title *The Conclusion (Samapti)* hints at the completion of the process where the girl’s individuality undergoes transformation owing to repeated social interventions. The concluding part of the story presents a glimpse of Apurba’s passionate physical encounter with Mrinmayi: “He was about to climb into it when with a sudden sound of bangles, a soft arm took him in its embrace, and a pair of lips like a flowering bud smothered him with a flood of passionate

kisses that left no space to express surprise. Mrinmayi projects her own identity, she wants her husband as an ideal companion equal to her in all respects, someone who will respect her for who she is. But later on, she changes herself to woo her beloved man, she acts as the agent rather than a goal and her decision to change herself is her own. Samapti reveals the character of Mrinmayi the exemplary women in tune with her own identity, her desires, and her womanhood. She possesses the power and agency to determine her own fate. Thus, if we frequently encounter her tomboyish laughter at the opening of the story, the laughter appears no more in the end. In its place, we have her squeamish, feminine sobs. Within the conventional romantic closure there is therefore an effacement of personality to accommodate a socially scripted version of normative feminist.

Tagore in his short story **Nastanir** project the heroine Charulata, a sensitive, educated, upper class women, suffers from an internal conflict between her romantic needs and her duty to love her husband, who obviously is not satisfying such needs. Her husband who is very kind, is always busy with his press and publishing business and has little time for her. She has no children or housework to keep her busy. She reads a lot of Bankim and other authors including Tagore and becomes bored and lonely. Her husband’s cousin comes to visit them and she showers her affection, love and attention to him. He is her only companion and friend, but the story ends with the cousin’s leaving for his higher studies in England and the husband and wife finding themselves in an empty world with a gap between them. The story depicts a familial and psychological situation in which a woman becomes romantically involved with her relative of her husband. Tagore who brought his women out of the kitchen and bedroom and into the parlor where they argue with men and exchange ideas while remaining very feminine. **Nastanir** deals with the psychological conflict of a women who must determine her allegiance to one of the two types of men in her life; the quiet, apparently indifferent, ascetic, but stable husband and the restless, attentive, exciting, but unstable lover.

V. Social Oppression of Women is Depicted in his Work like Denapaouna, Shuva, Khata and Dristidan.

In **Denapaouna** through the character of Hindu bride Nirupama he showed how a bride was forced to accept death by her in-law’s house in a neglected condition since her father failed to pay the requisite amount of dowry in her time of marriage. Here Tagore portrait social oppression and unsaid helpless condition of women in Indian society.

In **Shuva** similar uncanny and helpless condition were depicted by him through the character of Shuvashini who is very pretty in outlook but a mute girl who cannot speak and married by her parents without unfolding the truth about her. Tagore showed the tragedy of this mute girl that after the marriage ceremony her parents left her in her own fate and they never come back.



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Exercise-Book (Khata) explores another forceful interruption of social norms, thereby, curbing the spirit of Uma the child bride. Though named after the warrior goddess of Hindu mythology (*Durga*), Uma fails to imbibe the deity's strength. However, Tagore takes Uma a step further. Unlike Mrinmayi, Uma temporarily enjoys the scope to bask in the realm of education. Her whimsical scribbles on the wall, the new almanac, her father's daily account-book, or, even on her brother's thesis amply hint at her unconscious self-assertions. However, Uma's individual scripting echoes social scripting to a great extent. If she acquires the power of writing, her writing fails to transcend the boundary of social dictates. Her inscription from *Barnaparichay*: "So well-behaved is young Gopal/Whatever you give he eats it all" delineates woman's dependence on male rhetoric to justify own presence. In fact, Uma's creativity is less explored. Her exercise-book, too, houses several quotations from the texts she read. Like her scribbles on

the margins of texts, her voice, too, continues to preside upon the margins.

Consequently, her unconscious identification with Joshi, the maid-servant, goads her to contribute a line on this marginalized figure of her household. Joshi succeeds to find a place in Uma's exercise-book. Uma's *khata* becomes an embodiment of her extended self. The buried-life within her finds its expression on the pages of her *khata*. With this girl, her exercise-book, too, receives an intense humiliation in the sarcasm of her in-laws and nonchalance of her husband, Pyarimohan. Pyarimohan voices the prevalent social norm despising female education. For a Hindu wife, to wield paper and pen was considered a sure prelude to widowhood. Pyarimohan's objection becomes reminiscent of

vehement oppositions to female education voiced by eminent newspapers like *Samachar Chandrika*, *Sambad Prabhakar* at the instigation of orthodoxy and fundamentalism. If periodical like *Bamabodhini Patrika* housed a plethora of women writers like Hemnalini Basu, Hemantakumari Devi, Manika Roy, a cursory glance at their articles consolidates society's constant interference into woman's thought process. Their articles like *Narir Kartavya*, *Streer Kartavya*, *Banga Badhu* only echo the social dictates regulating the ways of woman's existence. In a way, such a submission facilitates the long sustenance of the articles as well as the writers. Uma's exercise-book, however, encounters a harsh predicament. *Khata* endures its physical distortion at the hands of her husband. The moment she realizes her entrapped situation and begins to sense the pathos involved in her incarceration, she seeks refuge in her *khata*, the only space allotted to her. Thus, she finds her own tears in *Durga's* tearful complaint to her mother in the *āgamānī* song. "With the same soreness of heart, Uma's eyes filled with tears." This process of rediscovering herself, completely lost in the tops of her husband's realm, remains incomplete. Pyarimohan encroaches upon Uma's private space and dismantles her brain-child, the *khata*. "The girl held the exercise-book to her breast and looked at her husband, entreating him with her gaze ... She hurled it down, covered her face with her hands, and fell to the floor." Her self-assertion fails to endure the blows of social admonitions leaving Uma to accept subjugation with all her passivity. But the narrator's final comment: "Pyarimohan also had an exercise-book full of various subtly barbed essays, but no one was philanthropic enough to snatch his book away and destroy it," implies Tagore's critical (Rupkatha Journal Vol 2 No 4) response. The comment hints at Tagore's ruthless irony at his depiction of how the female self is curtailed by forceful interventions of patriarchy. Writing becomes metonymic of the autonomous self-hood of Uma. Probably, her husband could sense this and seeks to efface every possibility of Uma's self-expression. However, while the protagonist's individual assertion encounters a defeat, the narrator, in a way, succeeds to retain a resoluteness in his protest, muted but bold in its character.

In **Dristidan** Tagore portrays the picture of silent submissive selfless women who were considered the epitome of virtue, the idyll of the eternal feminine, the perfect women that was inculcated in women in contemporary India. Women is torn between her pity for the sinking fortunes of her progressive and compassionate elder brother and rakish and patriarchal husband. In it Tagore demonstrates his feminist leanings, using pathos to depict the plight and ultimate demise of Bengali women trapped by pregnancy, duty, and family honor. The story *Dristidan* (The Offering of Eyesight) also deals with the complexity of a women's love. Kumo the wife in the story goes blind; since she loves her husband very strongly and wishes not to deprive him of all the material pleasures, she makes a great sacrifice by requesting him to remarry. Her pains are compensated for by the pride and satisfaction she receives from being a martyr. She thus becomes an ideal wife in the eyes of others and herself. Later she becomes heartbroken when she finds out that her husband has deceived her through lies.



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Her love for her husband is shattered when her husband decides to marry another lady named Hemangini and she can no longer respect him.

VI. Tagore's Creation of New Women is depicted in his work like *Haimanti, Laboratory, Shasti, Strirpatra, and Aparachita*

However, while the protagonist's individual assertion encounters a defeat, the narrator, in a way, succeeds to retain a resoluteness in his protest, muted but bold in its character. A more prominent note of protest characterizes Tagore's *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra)*. Though the title pronounces the 'wife' as its central emphasis, the story follows an unconventional path. The 'wife' in *The Wife's Letter* finds her own voice. The writer's experimentation with the form is noticed in his departure from the conventional third person mode of story telling to an incorporation of the female voice assuming a first-person assertive tone. The entire tale is enveloped in an epistle written by the protagonist to her husband. The story delineates a radical approach of its protagonist as well as the writer himself. The pathbreaking radicalism is voiced in the very opening: "... to this day I have never written you a letter. I have always been at hand—you have heard so many words from my lips, and I too have listened to you—but there has never been an interval in which a letter might have written." This boldness offers a prelude to the protagonist's autobiographical mode of narration. Mrinal surpasses both Uma and Mrinmayi in her ability to endure. She neither submits nor transforms herself. Rather, as her name suggests (Mrinal refers to lotus-stem), Mrinal stands erect. She crosses the confines of her married life and obscuring her parasitic identity as a wife, she declares: "It is not a letter from the second daughter-in-law of your family." The story encompasses Mrinal's girlhood, her state of deprivation as a daughter, a wife as well as a mother. It is this deprivation that could almost solely bedeck the then autobiographies of women. Published in 1876, Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, too, echoes her deprived condition, her disillusionment with her own existence: "Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offense." However, what the real-life women like Rassundari or Nistarini Devi could not perform, the fictional characters are empowered to do so. Thus, Mrinal interrogates the falsifications everywhere circumscribing her existence, while seeking to transcend them by crossing the superficial limits that patriarchy deliberately set before women. Her yearning to taste freedom is aggravated by

the presence of two suppressed female figures - her sister-in-law and Bindu. Mrinal's sister-in-law is an epitome of ideal Hindu wife. "She lacked the courage to show her love openly, from the heart, to her orphaned sister. She is an obedient wife." The docile housewife acts as an anti-polar contrast to Mrinal, in a way, aggravating her desire to assert herself. But the initial stir in Mrinal's heart is caused by Bindu, the hapless orphan, whom she endeavors to protect and preserve. Soon, they begin to share a companionship. Their undefined relationship takes up an anonymity with Mrinal's contemplation: "She developed so great a love for me that it made me afraid. I had never seen such an image of love in my household. I had read of such love in books, but that was love between men and women ... after so many years, this ugly girl became obsessed with my beauty ... She loved to handle the weight of my hair ... The girl was infatuated with me." The possibility of an independent scripting of a tale of love between two women is interrupted by society again. Bindu is compelled to embrace the conventional life of a wife. Disenchanted with her hasty marriage, the girl returns but fails to mend the severed tie with her former love, Mrinal. However, society fails to undermine the spirit of both Bindu and Mrinal. Bindu's suicide is condemned by many but Mrinal interprets it as an act of assertion, one which enables the girl to transcend her imprisonment. The suicide becomes a text, an individual scripting, that Bindu writes from her body. Mrinal's sarcasm directed towards the society lies in her cautionary comment: "But one should reflect why this play-acting takes its toll only of the saris of Bengali women, not of the dhotis of brave Bengali gentlemen." In interpreting Bindu's self-immolation, Mrinal, shares the sensitivity of the author, who manifested an equal admiration for his deceased *Notun Bouthan*, thereby, identifying her with the 'life's deity' (*Jiban-Debata*). In Tagore's own words, this deity linked his life "to the vast, the Immense through separation and deep pain." A similar realization preoccupies Mrinal as she speaks of Bindu with a deeper admiration: "There she is infinite." As for her own scripting, Mrinal opts for something more radical. She resolves astutely: "But I will never again return to your house at number 27, Makhn Baral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it." She never seeks solace in the deathbed. Rather, Mrinal



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chooses a life that would be her own. Instead of searching security within the confines of four walls, Mrinal tends to justify her position in the vast cosmos.

In **Haimanti**, Tagore takes on the institution of Hindu marriage, describing the dismal lifelessness of married Bengali women, hypocrisies plaguing the Indian middle classes, and how Haimanti, a sensitive young woman, must—due to her sensitiveness and free spirit—sacrifice her life. In the last passage, Tagore directly attacks the Hindu custom of glorifying Sita's attempted self-immolation as a means of appeasing her husband Rama's doubts.

Shasti is the story about two brothers, Dukhiram Rui and Chidam Rui and their wives, Radha and Chandara. It was not only impoverished cultivators and tenants who suffered from Bengal's land problems, since most landlords or zamindars had tiny landholdings, and struggled to realise their due rent. So, in Tagore's stories featuring zamindars or the gentry class. The basic plot of 'Punishment' is as follows. The two brothers return from a long day working on the zamindar's office-building, having been forcibly withdrawn from cutting paddy by the bailiff to find their wives idling at home. Dukhiram, the elder brother, demands food from his wife, and when she protests mockingly that he has not provided any food for her to cook, he loses his temper, lashes out and kills her with his knife. Ramlochan arrives to collect his overdue rent and Chidam, the younger brother, tries to cover up his brother's deed by blaming it on his own wife. He then tells Chandara she is to admit to the murder, but to say it was in self-defense. Out of stubborn pride she simply tells the police and later the magistrate, 'Yes, I killed her,' and denies there was any brawl or attack to provoke or excuse the crime, and she is condemned to death. Before the hanging she is asked if she will see her husband, who wants to see her, and she refuses by uttering the word "maran". Her utterance to this word 'maran' at the close of the story mentions *abhiman* again – a common ironic expression particularly among village-women. The complex implications here include Chandara's rejection of the husband she still loves, the *abhiman* that prevents her from backing down, and a shy reluctance to display her true marital feelings in public. Tagore admires Chandara's 'unflinching determination', her 'pride and fury,' and her being other than 'the long-suffering wife of Hindu tradition'. But Chandara is no longer to be taken for granted. She decides to give herself in as the murderer to show Chidam that she is not to be played around with – to be called the murderer when Chidam wanted it, to make up stories again when he wanted her to be free. She now had to prove that she is "someone" too, not just a woman who danced to her husband's tunes. Given the time and circumstance, the only way she could do it was by accepting the punishment for a murder she did not commit – and be hanged! Chandara remains invincible till the end. She "wins" by treating death as a choice rather than as a punishment. Her self-sacrifice becomes revenge and a kind of victory. She proves her dignity and worth by refusing to save herself from the false accusations. She is a woman of substance who demonstrates far more worth than one would expect from someone in a low position as she was in the society of that day.

In **Aparachita** Tagore draws the character of Kalyani, a self independent girl who freed herself from all social customs and prejudice and later dedicate her life in social service. After her marriage negotiation has broken off over a disagreement between the two families on the amount of dowry, the women accidentally meet her would have been husband on a trip. She feels very close and tender to him. She makes believe that she is living as the good wife for the satisfaction of her own self image, even though the wedding has not taken place.

In **Laboratory** Tagore projects three feminine character let me recount the story briefly. Nandakishore, a Bengali scientist, marries a young Punjabi woman, Sohini, for love. A daughter of a poor, underprivileged family, Sohini lived with her elderly grandmother. Nandakishore appreciated her personality, married her and in exchange received her unstinted regard. Nandakishore had a laboratory which he set up single-handedly. It became his place of devoted work, almost an obsession with him. After his death, Sohini dedicated herself to preserving and developing the laboratory, and in this she took the help of their friend and her admirer Manmatha Chaudhury. She decided to put Rebati Bhattacharya, a meritorious student of Nandakishore in charge of the laboratory. Earlier, she had some plan to get her daughter, Nila, married to Rebati, but Nila had neither any depth of character, nor did she have any respect for the laboratory. Her aim was on the one hand to marry Rebati, a good soul, and on the other hand to continue with her wayward and wanton life with Nandakishore's money. Sohini saw through her daughter's motives. Instead of being blinded by mother's love, she frustrated Nila's plans. The laboratory



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was saved. This, in a nutshell, is the tale of “Laboratory.” Sohini, Nila, and Rebati’s *pishi* (aunt) are the three principal female characters of this woman-centric story.

Pishi: The Mother

Pishi is Rebati’s mother figure. A woman of powerful personality, she is unwilling to see Rebati go out of her control. Rabindranath had scant regard for a character like her. His sympathy lay with the sort of mother who is a fountain of love, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Such mothers were portrayed, as has been mentioned earlier, in the story “Rasmonir Chhele”: Bhabanicharan’s mother Brajasundari looked upon her stepson as her own and his wife Rasmoni single-handedly assumed the responsibility for an encumbered and wretched, poverty-stricken home. In the story “Shesher Ratri” (The Last Night), Jatin’s loving *mashi* (aunt) has been immortalised. Rebati’s pishi is not like them. Nevertheless, she is also a very affectionate aunt in the role of a mother, a mother power. She is the one who triumphs at the end of the story. Just when Rebati was getting ready to marry Nila, Pishima came in and called: “Come with me, Rebati.” And Rebati, like an obedient boy, followed her out. He did not look back for once. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol 7: 1010) Thus Nila’s marriage with Rebati broke off at the last moment, and Sohini’s laboratory was saved.

Nila: The Lover

Nila, the daughter of Sohini, extremely beautiful (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol7), and well conscious of her good looks perfectly skilled in wiles and deception. When Rebati was engrossed in his work in the laboratory Nila used to walk in her night clothes to seduce Rebati though Nila had no love for him, all she wants to enjoy her life like a free bird. Her scheme was to marry an innocent man and then do what she pleased. With the help of lawyers Nila tried to access her father’s money against the desire of her mother.

Sohini: The New Women

Sohini possesses a magnetic personality. She applies her penetrating analytical mind and her razor-sharp intellect. The spirit of her character comes shining from inside her. Sohini is fully aware of her merits. Tagore portrays Sohini’s love is that of a strong woman. According to Tagore by natural instincts women are creative and graceful. It is the women who makes them home which is no way less valuable or easier than running a business. The motivating force that shapes a home is a women’s love. (*Rabindra Rachanabali* Vol 10) That love is exemplified in Sohini’s character. Nandakishore has trained her in his own branch of discipline; she is not home maker minded but she claims a place beside her husband. This modern concept of love comes out much forcefully in Tagore’s *Laboratory*. (*Rabindra Rachanabali* Vol 7) Sohini and Nandakishore’s love is not restricted to a mere physical relation between husband and wife. A bond of respect and gratitude takes their conjugal love to a higher plane. After her husband’s death she proclaims, “The *Laboratory* was my husband’s sacred place of meditation. If I can find a suitable person to occupy the place beneath his altar and keep the lamp burning, then my husband wherever he is will be at peace”. (*Rabindra Rachanabali* Vol 5,7) Rabindranath portrays the strong bond and loyalty of an exceptional lover.

Sohini does not allow any impediment to frustrate her mission. This fear makes her mind change about Nila’s marriage with Rebati. When Sohini came to know about Nilas marriage with Rebati and her plan to grab Nandakishore’s money she publicly declares that Nila is not Nandakishore’s daughter to save her laboratory. Sohini has no inhibition in admitting her infidelity. She says that Nandakishore was aware of it: “He received everything from me that he wanted ... he was not bothered about anything else”. (*Rabindra Rachanabali* Vol-7) She told that even women like Draupadi and Kuntis have to behave like Sita, Sohini had earlier disclosed her infidelity to Manmatha Chaudhury her husband’s friend.

It is certainly a bold statement not only about her, but about womankind in general. It is society which has forced women to suppress their physical desires and pretend indifference to the temptations of the flesh. In their hearts, however, the flame of desire has existed as strong as that of any man. And since Sohini had not suppressed her desires earlier in life, she had given birth to Nila, an illegitimate child.

Sohini’s character is unique in Rabindranath’s writings as well as in contemporary literature. Written at the end of the nineteen thirties, Sohini’s forthright disclosure of infidelity was indeed startling and revolutionary. None of the detractors of Rabindranath, not even the “modernist” Kallol writers, had created such a character. A child out of wedlock is a disgrace for a mother – this was the entrenched view at the time as it is even today. For an Indian woman to admit her “sin” in public is a challenge to the establishment. Rabindranath probably intended to do that through Sohini.



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VII. Conclusion

Rabindranath in his feminist idea projects women as a lover, then women's subjection to social oppression and lastly, he curved the picture of new women through Sohini to present her as a role model for women in India. In this context we can mention another short story Badnam published in Journal Prabasi in 1941. The female character Saudamini loves her husband and yet deceives him to continue her life's work. She told her husband the arduous mission that she chooses leaves no room for love it asks only to sacrifice oneself. Sohini's objective in life is to save the laboratory and Saudamini's is to strengthen the struggle for freedom movement. Saudamini attacks the patriarchal tradition and Tagore does it through her. Portrayal of these characters only show how far ahead of his time Rabindranath was in visualizing the "new women." Tagore could see that a new age was replacing the existing one: I can feel that a new age has dawned in the world... Women are coming forward to build the new civilization. The purdah over their faces has vanished, and along with it has gone the purdah that kept their mind away from exposure to the outer world. (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 13: 380) Rabindranath gave us some very powerful women characters befitting the new age. With that he assaulted unobtrusively in his own way the established social system and notions inimical to the advancement of women in society.

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