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## **Tagore's Literary Reverie: The Luminous Tapestry of Women Characters**

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**Abstract:** The paper highlights Rabindranath Tagore's profound impact on literature and his portrayal of female characters within the context of societal norms of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Bengal. In his literary works, Rabindranath Tagore delved into universal themes like love, nature, spirituality, and humanism, leaving an indelible mark on 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature. However, his portrayal of women reflected the societal norms of his time, as highlighted by Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women as the "other." Despite these constraints, Tagore displayed a profound understanding of the female psyche, skilfully conveying their emotions. His literary legacy vividly depicted the multifaceted struggles of women, challenging established norms and amplifying their experiences. Tagore's narratives served as a powerful chorus that validated women's voices within society, emphasizing his commitment to women's equity, agency, and empowerment during an era when such narratives were often neglected. Tagore's portrayal of women's lives stands not only as a testament to his literary prowess but also as an enduring tribute to his commitment to advocating for equity, agency, and empowerment for women in an era where such narratives were often overlooked.

**Keywords:** Feminist, gender, patriarchy, identity.

### **Introduction**

Rabindranath Tagore, also known as Gurudev, was a prominent Indian poet, philosopher, musician, and artist. Tagore's literary works spanned various genres, including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, and essays. He wrote in Bengali and was the first non-European awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, primarily for his anthology of poems called "Gitanjali" (Song Offerings). The collection highlighted his profound spiritual and philosophical insights, lyrical beauty, and sensitivity to human emotions.

Tagore was not only an artist but also a social reformer and educator. His educational philosophy focused on an integrated approach that combined academics with arts, music, and nature, emphasizing the importance of creativity and individuality.



Tagore's works often touched upon universal themes of love, nature, spirituality, and humanism. He aimed to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western cultures and fostered a sense of pride in Indian heritage and identity. His writings and ideas continue to inspire people around the world and is considered one of the greatest literary figures of the 20th century.

Rabindranath Tagore's treatment of women in his novels is complex and multifaceted. While he was a progressive thinker for his time, his portrayal of women reflects the societal norms and conventions prevalent during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Bengal, where traditional gender roles and restrictions on women were common.

In many of Tagore's works, women are depicted as individuals with their own desires, emotions, and agency. He often presented strong and independent female characters who challenged societal norms and expressed their opinions. These characters sought personal freedom, questioned patriarchal structures, and aspired to fulfil their dreams and aspirations. Notable examples include characters like Binodini in "Chokher Bali" and Bimala in "The Home and the World." Tagore has been able to explore the untouched aspects of women in his works like, Nastanirh, Chokher Bali, Samapti, and Giribala.

In his book *Raga Mala*, Ravi Shankar, the great musician, argues that had Rabindranath Tagore "been born in the West, he would now be as revered as Shakespeare and Goethe" (Sen, 2023)

In this respect, one can say that Tagore's novels also reflect the cultural and social context in which he lived. Women in his works often face restrictions imposed by society, traditional gender roles, and the expectations placed on them. They are bound by familial and societal obligations, and their choices and actions are often influenced by these constraints.

### **The Women in his Works**

In "Chokher Bali," Binodini is a young widow who becomes entangled in a web of relationships and emotions. She is not only restricted by traditional expectations placed on widows but also by the societal perceptions of her status. Despite her intelligence and aspirations, Binodini's options are limited due to her widowhood. She's initially drawn to the charismatic Mahendra and Asha, a couple whose relationship is strained due to societal pressures. As Binodini navigates her feelings for Mahendra and her friendship with Asha, her decisions are influenced by the norms and expectations of society.



When Binodini realizes that Mahendra's marriage is at stake due to his inappropriate relationship with her, she decides to leave his house, upholding a sense of morality and societal propriety. Her decision to remove herself from the situation is driven by her awareness of how her presence could harm Asha's marriage and reputation, showcasing her adherence to societal norms despite her personal desires.

On the other hand, Binodini's decision to explore a romantic relationship with Behari, an outsider who respects her individuality, demonstrates her willingness to challenge societal conventions. In this instance, she is willing to confront social expectations to pursue a relationship that aligns with her feelings and desires.

"Chokher Bali" illustrates how women like Binodini must navigate a complex landscape shaped by societal norms. Binodini's choices, whether aligning with or diverging from those norms, highlight the intricate interplay between individual agency and the constraints imposed by the society in which she lives. This reflects Tagore's keen awareness of the challenges women faced in making decisions that often-carried significant social consequences.

It is important to remember that Tagore was writing during a time when gender roles and societal expectations for women were vastly different from today. While his works may not fully align with modern feminist ideals, they can be seen as progressive for their time, offering glimpses of women's agency, resilience, and the challenges they faced in a patriarchal society.

Overall, Tagore's treatment of women in his novels reflects a blend of the cultural context of his era and his progressive thoughts, capturing the complexities of women's lives and their pursuit of personal freedom within the confines of their society.

"Nastanirh" explores the complexities of marriage and relationships, questioning traditional notions of duty, fidelity, and love. Charulata's emotional connection with Amal challenges the prescribed boundaries of a married woman's relationships and highlights the need for emotional fulfilment and companionship beyond societal norms. Her intellectual pursuits and her desire for personal growth defy the expectations society places on women, providing a critique of the prevailing patriarchal order.

Charulata, the central character, is a young, intelligent woman who feels lonely and neglected within her marriage. Her husband, Bhupati, is engrossed in his newspaper business and political activities, leaving her



emotionally unfulfilled. The arrival of Amal, Bhupati's cousin, brings a spark of intellectual and emotional connection into Charulata's life.

Through Charulata's journey, the novel explores the importance of self-realization and the development of an individual identity for women. It highlights the significance of women discovering their own passions, talents, and desires outside of societal roles and expectations.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*, argues that ‘throughout history, woman has always occupied a secondary role in relation to man, being relegated to the position of the “other,” i.e., that which is adjectival upon the substantial subjectivity and existential activity of man. Whereas man has been enabled to transcend and control his environment, always furthering the domain of his physical and intellectual conquests, woman has remained imprisoned within “immanence,” remaining a slave within the circle of duties imposed by her maternal and reproductive functions.’

As Charulata and Amal spend more time together, they develop a deep friendship and share their love for literature and intellectual pursuits. However, their relationship becomes more complex and emotionally charged, blurring the lines between friendship and romantic affection. The novella delves into Charulata's internal struggles, her longing for companionship, and her conflicted feelings about societal expectations and fidelity.

In *Nastirh* Tagore discusses the problems of women being confined to her space which is limited to her household. But he does not restrict her women in their thoughts. He gives them the freedom to select a life for their own. The women are empowered with emotions and their understanding of their happiness. Charulata in *Nastirh* finds her happiness outside her marriage and she who is treated as “*other*” ruptures the boundary laid and stays with her desires.

Neither Amal nor Charu noticed that their dream of creating a garden had dissolved, like so many other such schemes, somewhere in the depths of their imagination. (Tagore)

Tagore's Charulata subverts patriarchal norms by presenting her as an intellectual, introspective woman who challenges traditional gender roles.



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Another work of Tagore, "Samapti" explores themes of love, courtship, and transformation. The story portrays the clash between traditional rural values and urban modernity. Amulya's pursuit of Mrinmayi challenges societal expectations and norms, as he goes against the conservative traditions of arranged marriages and seeks love and companionship based on personal choice.

Through the characters of Amulya and Mrinmayi, Tagore explores the transformative power of love and its ability to break down barriers and create new possibilities. The story also touches upon the themes of freedom, individuality, and the conflicts between different social classes.

Thus, "Samapti," penned by Tagore, stands as a masterfully woven short story that navigates the intricate tapestry of love, courtship, and societal norms. With exquisite finesse, Tagore sketches the evolving emotional landscape of its characters, particularly Mrinmayi, as she undergoes a profound journey of the heart. The tale's brilliance lies in its depiction of how love can unravel the threads of conventional arrangements, showcasing the potential for transformative change and challenging the rigidity of arranged marriages dictated by societal conventions. Through Mrinmayi's shifting sentiments towards Amulya, Tagore masterfully explores the spectrum of human emotions and the depth to which love can influence personal choices. Amidst the delicate dance between tradition and modernity, "Samapti" prompts readers to contemplate the essence of love, the autonomy of individual decisions, and the pursuit of joy amidst the confines of societal expectations.

Mrinmayi's character transformation can be seen through a feminist lens. De Beauvoir's idea of "the other" refers to how women are often perceived as "*The Second Sex*," defined in relation to men. Mrinmayi starts as a traditional representation of a woman, bound by societal norms and expectations. However, as the story progresses, her evolving feelings for Amulya empower her to break free from this role.

Mrinmayi's transition from obedient daughter to a woman making her own choices challenges the traditional patriarchy. Initially, she is subjugated to her father's wishes for an arranged marriage, reflecting the societal view of women as passive recipients of male decisions. However, her growing attraction to Amulya awakens her sense of self and autonomy, and she eventually asserts her agency by choosing to love over convention.



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By embracing her desires and asserting her individuality, Mrinmayi subverts the conventional gender norms that seek to confine women to predetermined roles. This transformation aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that women must overcome the position of "the other" to realize their full potential.

In "Samapti," Tagore's portrayal of Mrinmayi's journey reflects a feminist perspective by challenging the prescribed gender roles of the time and highlighting the transformative power of self-discovery and choice. It showcases how love can be a catalyst for women's liberation from traditional confines, aligning with de Beauvoir's notion of women claiming agency and subjectivity beyond their societal roles as "the other."

In conclusion, "Samapti" is a well-crafted and thought-provoking short story that explores themes of love, courtship, and societal expectations. Tagore's skilful characterization, narrative structure, and use of symbolism make it an engaging read. The story's examination of the clash between tradition and modernity provides readers with insights into the complexities of human relationships and the pursuit of personal happiness.

Tagore in his writings has explored the unexplored aspects of womanhood. He in his work gives his women the first sparks of freedom, identity, and self-sufficiency.

Elaine Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* puts forward the idea of the female writing whose inclination is towards the feminine introspection. She discusses the writings of women for the women, thus coining 'Gynocriticism'. Being concerned with the specificity of women's writings (gynotexts) and women's experiences, it focuses on female subjectivity, female language, and female literary career, and attempts to construct a female framework for the analysis of literature.

In the realm of literature, Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of female characters stands as a testament to his ability to do justice to their complexities. Despite his own identity as a male writer, Tagore exhibits a remarkable understanding of the female psyche, effectively conveying their thoughts and emotions with precision. This proficiency is subtly demonstrated in his short story "Giribala," where the central character finds herself married into opulence but overlooked by her husband. The initial courtship period, filled with love notes infused with fragrance, fades away after Gopinath's father's demise, leading to a shift in their relationship dynamics. Gopinath becomes increasingly preoccupied, moving away from his wife's presence, and in doing so, Tagore skillfully captures the intricacies of the female mind through the lens of his narrative.

'From now his movements took the course that led him in a contrary direction from his wife'(Tagore).

Amidst the changing dynamics in the short story "Giribala," the protagonist finds solace in the company of her maidservant, Sudha, who possesses artistic talents in singing and reciting verses. In contrast, Gopinath, the husband, immerses himself in his newfound wealth, indulging in lavish spending. His fascination with an actress at the theatre becomes all-consuming, leading him to frequent her performances, ultimately falling under the captivating spell of her charm. As the narrative unfolds, Tagore skillfully portrays the diverging paths of Giribala and Gopinath, offering a poignant exploration of their evolving relationship and the profound impact of external influences on their lives.

'But the woman to whom her husband Gopinath has surrendered himself as a slave is Lavanga, the actress...'  
(Tagore)

In a later part of the story, we witness Giribala's visit to the theatre, where she, too, becomes entranced by the actress's allure. This experience makes her acutely aware of the limitations that have hindered her personal growth. In this setting, she finally finds the freedom to connect with her true self. Completely absorbed and captivated by the music, which was previously forbidden to her, she is taken aback and stunned to witness her drunken husband's submission to the actress.

The blood began to throb all over Giribala's body, and she forgot for the moment that her life was limited to the circumstances and that she was not free in a world where all laws had melted in music. (Tagore)  
Feminism may explore whether "Giribala" challenges or reinforces traditional gender norms, such as the roles of women as caretakers or men as dominant figures.

A room of one's own 'Woolf equates having such a room with living "in the presence of reality." The writer, she says, lives more than others in the presence of reality and attempts to convey it to the rest of us.' This suggests that when a woman has a space of her own, this space not only restricted to the four walls of a home but a mental space where she can come in terms with the reality, where she is an individual taking onus for her existence and happiness. When they have this, they are free of the patriarchal structure where only a man takes a decision for a woman, or he is the master of the woman.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book 'The Second Sex' discusses the Master- Slave dialectic by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher.

This master–slave dialectic represents an important stage in Hegel’s account of the development of human consciousness, and de Beauvoir skillfully bases the entire argument of her book on this intersubjective model of human consciousness and humanity. She views Hegel’s master–slave dialectic as peculiarly applicable to the evolution of the male–female relationship. (Fan)

Thus, suggesting the treatment of women as slave who is expected to follow the instruction by the man or husband or the ‘master’.

This is seen in a scene where Gopinath reaches home drunk from the theatre and asks Giribala for the keys, which she refuses to give. It reaches to a point where Giribala seeks assurance from her husband to stay with her. But it is met with a refusal.

Giribala said, I will give you the keys and everything that is in the safe, but you must not leave me.'

Gopinath said, 'That cannot be. I have urgent business.' (Tagore)

This was followed by cold behaviour which resulted in strike/stifle.

'Give me your keys or you will repent. 'Giribala did not answer and Gopinath, pinning her to the wall, snatched away by force her bracelets, necklace and ring, and, giving her a parting kick, went away.' (Tagore)

This master–slave dialectic represents an important stage in Hegel’s account of the development of human consciousness, and de Beauvoir skilfully bases the entire argument of her book on this intersubjective model of human consciousness and humanity. She views Hegel’s master–slave dialectic as peculiarly applicable to the evolution of the male–female relationship.

Thus, without their relation to the male sex weighing down their judgment; they will be able to “think of things in themselves” (Room, 110–111). And “reality,” according to Woolf, comprises the “common life” we lead, not “the little separate lives which we live as individuals.” She stresses that our essential relation is not to the world of men and women but to the “world of reality.” Women need to see “human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality” (Room, 113–114). Then, Woolf ’s call is for women to

redefine their relationship to reality independently of prior definitions by men; their relation to men is but one element in this newly broadened vision of reality.



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In conclusion, Rabindranath Tagore's literary legacy shines as a testament to his profound comprehension of the intricate struggles and aspirations that defined women's lives in his time. His literary canvas vividly depicted the multifaceted emotions of his female characters, capturing the essence of their internal battles between personal yearnings and the weight of societal conventions. Through their stories, Tagore embarked on a mission to dismantle the limitations imposed on women by boldly challenging established norms. His narratives serve as a resonant chorus that amplifies women's experiences, offering them a voice and validating their narratives within the broader social discourse. Tagore's portrayal of women's lives stands not only as a testament to his literary prowess but also as an enduring tribute to his commitment to advocating for equity, agency, and empowerment for women in an era where such narratives were often overlooked.

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