

# Rabindranath Tagore and Feminism

Y Monojit Singha

## **Abstract**

*Rabindranath Tagore, through his body of work, introduced the idea of feminism in India. His female protagonists talked about individuality, liberty, freedom, justice, power, dignity and rights. Often they would challenge patriarchy and talk about practices which are considered taboo even today. Feminism in Rabindranath Tagore challenges the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex. This is the challenge which is undertaken by most of the supporter of feminism. Thus the paper analyses the philosophical spirit of Tagore as an advocate of feminist in his dramatic and poetic writings.*

**Keywords:** *Feminist, Hinduism, Spiritual, Philosophy, Liberty, Equality.*

## **I. Introduction**

Tagore was known as a poet rather than as a formal philosopher. However, an implicit philosophy can be seen in Tagore's poetry. Nothing, perhaps, expresses his values as clearly as a poem in *Gitanjali*:

Where the mind is without fear  
and the head is held high;  
where knowledge is free;  
where the world has not been  
broken up into fragments  
by narrow domestic walls; ...  
Where the clear stream of reason  
has not lost its way into the  
dreary desert sand of dead habit; ...  
Into that heaven of freedom,  
my Father, let my country awake

Rabindranath's passion for freedom underlies his firm opposition to unreasoned traditionalism, which makes one a prisoner of the past (lost, as he put it, in "the dreary desert sand of dead habit") (Amartya Sen, 2005). For Tagore it was of the highest importance that people be able to live, and reason, in freedom. His attitudes toward politics and culture, nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernity, can all be seen in the light of this belief.<sup>1</sup> His believed in freedom, individual freedom and freedom for the oppressed and the

---

<sup>1</sup>URL of the review article: <http://rupkatha.com/V2/n4/30reviewOxfordIndiaTagore.pdf>

uniqueness of every individual belief led him to protest against any kind of systematic standardization of human endeavours and strengthen the logic of cosmopolitanism. From his strong dislike for the aims and objectives of colonial creed of the *charkha*, a mass of people blindly following a unitary principle; from his championing the cause of awakening *atmashakti* to his trenchant critique of the use of violence in achieving political independence-Tagore the polemicist as well as Tagore the activist always stood firm in his faith that each single individual is a unique creation of the Almighty. To him, it is for the best possible interest of all concerned that the individuality of each human being must not be curbed or moulded into a predetermined pattern but be given adequate opportunity to flourish to his full potential. It is this faith in the inscrutable marvel called 'man' that, like a common thread, binds many varied ideas and activities of Tagore. Among them is his foregrounding of *samaj* in the nation-building project during the imperial rule, his experiments in a holistic system of education through the establishment and development of Visva-Bharati, his theories and practice in rural reconstruction and most importantly his continuous attempts to outgrow any form of parochialism, be it nationalist or of other types. His ultimate goal was to arrive at an inclusionistic cosmopolitanism, a scheme of things in which the best and the greatest thoughts and achievements of both the 'East' and the 'West' be offered to the welfare of humanity (Uma Das Gupta, 2009).

Tagore was known as a poet rather than as a formal philosopher, but these two arts are rarely far apart in Indian civilization, just as in France, for example, philosophy seems closely tied to drama. In India, especially in Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore has transcended, as often happens in the Indian paradigm, the simple position of 'writer-philosopher.' Since great thinkers, who are often religious in their purview, are seen as gurus and close to *Bhagavan* (God) by Hindus, Rabindranath Tagore is especially revered. Hindus believe that by listening to the words of such wise and enlightened men, people are brought closer to Bhagavan. For this reason, he is affectionately known as Gurudev (or Gurudev in Hindi), which means, literally, Teacher-God. For this reason, many Indians hang his picture in their houses, equal among sages and other holymen of the nation. He wrote over one thousand poems; eight volumes of short stories; almost two dozen plays and play-lets; eight novels; and many books and essays on philosophy, religion, education and social topics for which he is considered the greatest literary figure of India of all times.

In most of his writings, Tagore tries to depict the character of role woman and they are no more less than man. But in good olden days, a woman was considered as subordinate and parasite. She was not independent to lead her life. The rights of woman were completely neglected. Throughout human history, the female person has been portrayed as a symbol of fertility, a Goddess representing the Motherland (Bengal's adoration of Goddess Kali), or even as a class of people who'd best place is in the kitchen and within the home, "ranna gharer pratibha" (the talent of the kitchen). In each of these cases the woman is not viewed as an individual, but she is a part of a whole symbolizing one philosophy or the other (Sujit Mukherjee). Rabindranath Tagore has brought out his women out of the kitchen and placed them in the active stream of life. Feminism in Rabindranath Tagore challenges the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex. This is the challenge which is undertaken by most of the supporter of feminism. As Segal (1987: xii) contends: 'There has always been a danger that in re-valuing our notions of the female and appealing to the experiences of women, we are

reinforcing the ideas of sexual polarity which feminism originally aimed to challenge.’ Before we go in-depth towards Tagore’s feminism, it is discernible to understand about what feminism stand for.

## **II. Feminism: Way to Equal Stand**

If it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to define feminism in terms of a set of core concepts then can feminism be defined better or further in terms of its historical origins and development? The term feminism is a relatively modern one – there are debates over when and where it was first used, but the term ‘feminist’ seems to have first been used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a cessation in development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients, who were perceived as thus suffering from ‘feminization’ of their bodies (Fraisie 1995). The term was then picked up by Alexandre Dumas fils, a French writer, republican and anti-feminist, who used it in a pamphlet published in 1872 entitled *l’homme-femme*, on the subject of adultery, to describe women behaving in a supposedly masculine way. Thus, as Fraisse (1995: 316) points out, although in medical terminology feminism was used to signify a feminization of men, in political terms it was first used to describe a virilization of women. This type of gender confusion was something that was clearly feared in the nineteenth century, and it can be argued that it is still present in a modified form in today’s societies where feminists are sometimes perceive as challenging natural differences between men and women. It is interesting to note, though, that feminist was not at first an adjective used by women to describe themselves or their actions, and one can certainly say that there was what we today would call ‘feminist’ thought and activity long before the term itself was adopted. In the 1840s the women’s rights movement had started to emerge in the United States with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and the resulting Declaration of Sentiments, which claimed for women the principles of liberty and equality expounded in the American Declaration of Independence. This was followed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony’s founding of the National Woman Suffrage Association. In Britain, too, the 1840s onwards saw the emergence of women’s suffrage movements. But even before the emergence of organized suffrage movements, women had been writing about the inequalities and injustices in women’s social condition and campaigning to change it.

Feminism is thus a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an amelioration in their social position. Even after the word feminism was coined, it was still not adopted as a term of identification by many of those who campaigned for women’s rights. Even many of the women’s rights organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not call themselves feminist: the term feminism had a restricted use in relation to specific concerns and specific groups (Delmar 1986). It is only more recently that the label feminist has been applied to all women’s rights groups indiscriminately, and this non-coincidence between these groups’ self-identification and subsequent labeling as feminist clearly relates to the problem of what criteria are to be used in deciding whether a person, group or action is ‘feminist’.

In this regard as Delmar (1986: 13) points out: There are those who claim that feminism does have a complex of ideas about women, specific to or emanating from feminists. This means that it should be possible to separate out feminism and feminists from the multiplicity of those concerned with women’s issues. It is by no means absurd to suggest that you don’t have to be a feminist to support women’s rights to equal treatment, and that not all those supportive of women’s demands are feminists. In this light feminism can claim its own history,

its own practices, its own ideas, but feminists can make no claim to an exclusive interest in or copyright over problems affecting women. Feminism can thus be established as a field (and this even if scepticism is still needed in the face of claims or demands for a unified feminism), but cannot claim women as its domain. (Jane Freedman 2001)

In an attempt at some kind of classification, histories of feminism have talked about the historical appearance of strong feminist movements at different moments as a series of ‘waves’. We shall focus our journey on the modern feminist waves from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and underscore continuities as well as disruptions. Our starting point is what most feminist scholars consider the “first wave.” First-wave feminism arose in the context of industrial society and liberal politics but is connected to both the liberal women’s rights movement and early socialist feminism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States and Europe. Concerned with access and equal opportunities for women, the first wave continued to influence feminism in both Western and Eastern societies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We then move on to the second wave of feminism, which emerged in the 1960s to 1970s in post-war Western welfare societies, when other “oppressed” groups such as Blacks and homosexuals were being defined and the New Left was on the rise. Second-wave feminism is closely linked to the radical voices of women’s empowerment and differential rights and, during the 1980s to 1990s, also to a crucial differentiation of second-wave feminism itself, initiated by women of color and third-world women. We end our discussion with the third feminist wave, from the mid-1990s onward, springing from the emergence of a new post-colonial and post-socialist world order, in the context of information society and neo-liberal, global politics. The third-wave feminism manifests itself in “grrl” rhetoric, which seeks to overcome the theoretical question of equity or difference and the political question of evolution or revolution, while it challenges the notion of “universal womanhood” and embraces ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in transversal theory and politics.

Third wave feminists generally see themselves as capable, strong, and assertive social agents: “The Third Wave is buoyed by the confidence of having more opportunities and less sexism” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000: 83). Young feminists now reclaim the term “girl” in a bid to attract another generation, while engaging in a new, more self-assertive—even aggressive—but also more playful and less pompous kind of feminism. They declare, in the words of Karen Mc Naughton (1997), “And yes that’s G.r.r.l.s which is, in our case, cyber-lingo for Great-Girls. Grrl is also a young at heart thing and not limited to the under 18s.”

### **III. Tagorean Feminist Idea**

Tagore’s abstruse philosophy underwrites his well-known brand of “feminism.” Tagore sees evolution as a process of refinement, of ascent from the material through the animal towards the spiritual – there is some influence coming from Bergson in shaping his thought in this regard – and thinks that just as *Homo sapiens* has superseded bigger and physically stronger species; within this species a similar supercession will place women ahead of men. Which feminists have also pointed to the way in which, historically, a natural difference between men and women was assumed, and have analysed the ways in which this difference was given various social, political and economic meanings in different societies and civilizations. As Sherry Ortner (1998: 21) argues: ‘The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact.’ And as she goes on

to explain, this secondary status of women can be explained by the fact that within the multiplicity of cultural conceptions and symbolizations of women that exist and that have existed in different societies, there is a constant in that women are seen as being 'closer to nature' in their physiology, their social role and their psyche. Whereas women have been seen as 'closer to nature', men have been perceived as 'closer to culture', more suited for public roles and political association. Since power – Foucauldian power – has so far been wielded chiefly by man, it is always blames them for “building up vast and monstrous organizations” – such as the nation. For this reason, women have been relegated to a secondary status in society, often confined to roles in the home rather than able to accede to powerful public positions. It is understandable, then, that, as soon as feminists began to campaign against women's secondary social status, they began to question the assumed natural differences between men and women, and the consequences of these assumed differences on social organization.

But now, “woman can bring her fresh mind and all her power of sympathy to this new task of spiritual civilization.” Whether this is to come about or not, I was reminded of his general prophecy that women “will have their place, and those bigger creatures [men] will have to give way” (BBC TV documentary). And the boys gradually lost interest in studies, set their sights on semi-skilled occupations and began cultivating a semi-moronic demeanour. Their female peers worked hard, went on to university or professional schools and entered lucrative careers. Here of course the girls' success is in the world of Foucauldian power rather than the world of Spirit (Kaiser Haq1).

Tagore's 'Gora' is brought out to the readers as a voice for the reformist Brahmins rather than that of an enlightened individual. This tragedy of Gora's fate is comparable to the fate of Indian women- who could at best be the home maker, or a force like Kali, or Shakti ready to step out of home to destroy all evils, but never as an ordinary woman in the then educated Bengali society. Tagore utilizes the importance of idea of Swami Vivekananda, who highlighted the importance of women as he makes us realize that history of India was incomplete without any understanding of the trials and tribulations of women. Women constituted half of Bharatborsho, that is- India as a nation of people. But the character of Sucharita in 'Gora' does not have violence in her blood- nor does she have this streak thanks to her training at the care and concern of Paresh Babu. She is a quieter and more humane character than Draupadi. Tagore gives feminism a meaning of his own- he provides his feminists leads to find themselves in the face of society without hurting others. It should be noted that Draupadi's feminism cost the lives of the Kauravas, and many others both royals and paid soldiers of the Kaurava family (Sujit Mukherjee).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Rabindranath Tagore's women characters are as conscious as modern ladies. They try to gain self-improvement. Tagore has given priority to his female characters. As the modern women have crossed the barriers of society and entered into several sectors and working respectfully equal to their male counterparts. Chitra's desire of challenging Arjuna in single combat shows her modernity. She loves her people like her children. As modern women are serving the country joining defence services, she too was defending her people. Most feminist feminists have pointed to the ways in which women's physical ability to produce children has had

some influence on their social position. Although for some, like Shulamith Firestone (1979), it is this biological capacity to reproduce that is the key to women's oppression; for others, this capacity and the social roles and skills which it entails contain some valuable elements that constitute the core of women's difference from men. Mothering is not only about biological reproduction but about a set of attitudes, skills and values that accompany it, and some feminists argue that it is these attitudes, values and skills which constitute the distinctness of femininity and which should be given a more central place in our societies. This attitude is also found in Tagore's work. In his character Chitra, she had never thought herself inferior to male. So she learnt the duties of male. She proves that a woman has equal right to choose her life member. She does not care for caste, creed, and religion for the fulfillment of her ambition.

## References

1. Amartya Sen (2005) *Tagore and His India*, Mukto-Mona
2. Baumgardner & Richards (2000) *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
3. Chodorow, Nancy (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering*
4. Delmar, Rosalind (1986) 'What Is Feminism?' in Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley, eds. *What Is Feminism?* Pantheon Books, New York.
5. Firestone, Shulamith (1979) *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Bantam, New York.
6. Fraise, G. (1995) *Entry egalite et liberte in La Place des Femmes*, La Decouverte, Paris.
7. Segal (1987) *Is the Future Female? Trouble Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, Virago, London.
8. Jane Freedman (2001) *The Social Sciences Feminism*, Open University Press, Buckingham, Philadelphia
9. Karen Mc Naughton (1997) *Three Waves of Feminism*.
10. Kaiser Haq1, The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Asiatic, Volume 4, Number 1, June 2010.
11. Sherry Ortner (1996) *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston.
12. Sujit Mukherjee (1913) *The Feminine Individual In Tagore's Gora* Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Laureate in Literature.
13. *The English Writings*, Vol. 2, 416, by a BBC TV documentary comparing the careers of boys and girls of comparable general intelligence in a British school.