Fifth Chapter

Tragic Women Characters in the Epics and in Tagore
5.1. Tragic Woman Characters in the Epics

Women in Indian society are always inferior to men. This was the case in both the epic age and Tagorean Age. Because of their inferior position in the society and in family, they were insulted and persecuted and became the first to be affected. In spite of classes, backgrounds and even castes, women experienced different tragedies. But usually, those in poor backgrounds and in low positions sustained more. If there was any difference between the epics and Tagore, it was that the tragic women in the epics were almost all from noble families while those in Tagore were from all backgrounds so that they were of course more in number. Their tragedies were first caused by the society and somewhat by family and also to some extent from themselves, namely their own shortcomings.

5.1.1. Kaikeyi—a woman greedy for power interest but spurned by public

Kaikeyi was the second and the favorite queen of Dasaratha. Under instigation of Manthara, her nurse, she forced King Dasaratha to crown her son Bharata and send Rama in exile to the forest for 14 years. But Bharata refused to supplant Rama and went after Rama to bring him back and place him on the throne. Rama refused and he returned to Ayodhya as Rama’s representative setting up a pair of Rama’s shoes as a mark of his authority. Bharata ruled the country in his brother’s name. Kaikeyi wanted to enjoy glory and wealth as the king’s mother. But Bharata refused the throne. Her husband, King Dasaratha, soon died. She was spurned by the public, almost by all in the court and coldly treated by her own son. She became a lonesome widow. The rest of her life was spent in a deserted state. It is clear that her greed resulted in her own tragedy.

5.1.2. Surpanaka—A Rakshasa deformed for her passion and cruelty

Surpanaka was the sister of Ravana. The sight of Rama made her a victim to carnal passion. She submitted her desire to him. But he turned down her prayer. She then turned to Laksmana and again was rejected. Disappointed Surpanaka left the ashram at once. But she appeared again in front of Sita. Thinking that so long as Sita was alive, Rama would not be prepared to court her, Surpanaka advanced furiously at Sita. Laksmana, who was watching the whole thing, suddenly rushed to the spot and pushed her out of the ashram. He cut off her nose, ears and breasts. It was normal for a woman to love a handsome man. But she should not have rushed to kill Sita to get her own desire fulfilled. Here Laksmana also did too much. He should not have cut her nose, ears and even her
breasts. It was unimaginable for her to spend rest of her life as a young woman. This was a terrible tragedy. Her tragedy was partly due to her cruelty intending to kill Sita and also to Laksmana who deformed her.

5.1.3. *Gandhari*—A wife who covered her own eyes the whole life and was swallowed by fire in forest ashram

Gandhari was wife of the blind King Dhrtarastra and mother of his hundred sons. She was so devoted to her blind husband that she willfully made herself blind by tightly covering her eyes with a silk shawl. After the great Kuruksetra battle, she accompanied blind Dhrtarastra to the forest. When a fire broke out, she was burnt to death along with his blind husband. Her tragedy was due to her “devotion” to her blind husband. She not only sacrificed her sight but also sacrificed herself.

5.1.4. *Satyavati*—A lone widow who spent the rest of life in forest

Satyavati was the mother of Vyasa who was born before she got married. The king Santanu fell in love with her when he was hunting. But the fisherman, her foster father had a precondition that the son born by his daughter must be the successor of the king. The king had a son Bhismä by his first wife Ganga. Bhismä made it easy for the king to marry by swearing that he would not marry all his life. She gave birth to two sons, Citrangada and Vicitravirya. Citrangada was killed in his boyhood. Vicitravirya became a youth and married Ambika and Ambalika, the daughters of the king of Kasi. Vicitravirya met with untimely death before a child was born to him. When Satyavati saw that the family was about to become extinct, she thought of her son Vyasa who instantly arrived at the place. From Vyasa, Amblika got the son Pandu and Ambika, the son Dhrtarastra. Both the sons Dhrtarastra and Pandu got married. Pandu died. The death of her son struck heavily at the heart of Satyavati. She did not wish to live much longer after this. She mentioned about the fearful things yet to happen. Then taking her daughters-in-law with her, Satyavati went to the forest to do penance and finally attained heaven.

5.1.5. *Ambika and Amblika*—The forlorn sisters

Ambika and Amblika were two daughters of the king of Kasi. They were brought by Bhismä from *svayamvara* and married to Vicitravirya. Vicitravirya died before children were born to his wives. To avoid extinction of the family, Satyavati, mother of Vicitravirya, summoned Vyasa, her pre-marriage-born son and asked him to beget a son
for Ambika. Vyasa obeyed his mother half-heartedly. Ambika did not like the dark complexioned, crudely attired Vyasa. Still owing to the mother’s pressure she passively submitted to the act. As a result of their union, Dhrtarashtra was born and was blind from his birth. The grief-stricken mother called Vyasa again and asked him to have union with Amblika this time. As Amblika’s face was pale at the time of their union, a child with pale complexion was born to her. He was named Pandu. Having thus failed in both attempts, Satyavati asked Ambika to go to Vyasa again. At night Ambika secretly disguised her waiting-maid to experience exquisite pleasure in Vyasa’s company and as a result a very intelligent son was born to her. He became the renowned Vidura. When Pandu died, they followed their mother-in-law Satyavati, to forest to have a life of penance. Their tragedy was that, firstly, they didn’t have a long happy time before their husband Vicitravirya died young and secondly, they spent rest of life lonely in the forest.

5.1.6. Amba— The most tragic woman

Amba was the most tragic woman in the epics. She and her sisters Ambika and Ambalika were carried off by Bhisma to be the wives of Vicitravirya. Amba had been previously betrothed to a king of Salva and Bhisma sent her to him, but the king rejected her because she had been in another man’s house. She asked Bhisma to marry her but Bhisma had sworn never to marry. She retired to the forest and engaged in devotion to obtain revenge on Bhisma who she thought brought her adversity. Siva favored her and promised her the desired vengeance in another birth. Then she ascended the pyre and was born again as Sikhandi. She changed her sex with a yaksa. In the great Kauravas-Pandavs battle he became a great chariot rider. It was Bhisma who led the Kaurava forces. It was the tenth day of the battle and Sikhandi shot three arrows at Bhisma’s breast. Bhisma with a smile of contempt said to Sikhandi, “Sikhandi! Brahma created you as a woman. You may do as you like.” Hearing his taunt, Sikhandi became more infuriated. Arjuna inspired him with greater encourage. After that, keeping Sikhandi in front, Arjuna began to fight with Bhisma. Sikhandi also showered his arrows on him. Bhisma even disregarded those arrows. At last he said, “I can not kill the Pandavas because they are invulnerable. I can not kill Sikhandi because he is neither a woman nor a man.” Meanwhile Sikhandi and Arjuna were discharging a continuous and heavy shower of arrows at Bhisma. At last Bhisma fell down. Although she avenged and in some sense won, but as a woman she lost
love, youth and all the pleasures of family love and comfort. She won nothing but the downfall of Bhisma. What she lost was greatly more than what she gained. And she herself was murdered by Asvinthama before she was aware of what happened. She was a model who didn’t yield to her tragic fate. But she was the most tragic woman character in the epics.

5.2 Tragic women characters in Tagore

In Tagore, the tragic women were those who were neglected, deserted, insulted, persecuted and even murdered.

5.2.1. Kamala—A helpless girl

In The Story of A Mussalani drafted in 1941 shortly before the author’s death, Kamala’s parents had died and "it would have pleased her other relatives if she had died at the same time." She became an orphan and was brought up by her uncle. Her aunt was a very stingy and cruel woman. She was engaged to a profligate Seth. On the way of their wedding, Kamala was kidnapped by dacoit Madhu but was rescued by Habir Khan, an influential Moslem saint. She implored Habir to return her to her uncle. Habir told her that she would no longer be taken back in the fold of her family, but just to satisfy her fully, he escorted her back to her uncle’s house and waited outside. Her uncle and aunt refused to take her back for fear of losing their caste. Tagore lashed out at the cowardice and prejudice of a society that could not protect its women but was inhumanly rigid about their purity.

5.2.2. Amiya—A deserted girl

Amiya of The Unapproved Story written in 1925 was a kahar girl. She was fostered by Pisiına. She became a college student and also an activist in Non-Cooperation Movement. She dedicated herself to orphanage. A young man named Anil desired to marry her and she was not unwilling. But when he knew her kahar status, he deserted her.

5.2.3. Karuna and other insulted and persecuted women

In short story Karuna written in 1878, Karuna was the daughter of a rich man. She was married to Narendra who was reared by her father. But her ungrateful husband took to evil ways and neglected her. Karuna’s father Anup was a rich Zamindar. He gave shelter to Narendra and bore the expenses of his education when his parents died. Karuna was married to Narendra after her father’s death. Soon after their marriage, Narendra became
a drunkard. Often he went to Calcutta leaving Karuna alone at home. When he was in deep debt there, he escaped to home, and forced Karuna to sell her jewelery. When Karuna gave birth to a son, he did not care for the child. The child was seriously ill, but Karuna did not have money to send for doctor. And the child died. He turned Karuna out of her own house and the poor girl went away without a word of protest. With the help of some kind-hearted person, she came back and was sick on bed. Narendra still drank and did not come to her bed. Karuna died before her husband. She never said a word of protest when her husband ill-treated her and in a sense she spoilt the rascal husband.

In the *Atonement of Expiation* written in 1894, Bindyabashini married a frivolous husband who stole all her money and married an English lady. In the *Folly* written in 1900, a peasant’s daughter was killed by a snake. The police wanted to blackmail him before the incident was reported and the body was allowed to be cremated. In *The wife’s Letter* written in 1914, Bindu, the first daughter-in-law’s younger sister who was driven out by her cousins after the death of her parents and took refuge in her elder sister, the whole family but the sister who was too timid to protect her publicly and the second daughter-in-law who sheltered her forced her to be married to a lunatic. Dubin escaped from her husband but neither her sister’s family nor her cousins would take her in. She had no way out but to set herself afire. Her sister said numbly, “she is an ill-fated girl. What’s the point of being sorry for her? He might be a madman or a stupid goat, but he’s her husband all the same.” Bindu’s suicide was a woman’s protest against oppression and her tragic fate. Binodini, a wife in the *Putrajajna* written in 1898, was pregnant when her husband drove her away because a young man attempted to kiss her. She was just like Ahalya in the epics who was cursed by her husband Sage Gautama because she was lured by Indra. In *Devatar Grash Kahini* written in 1897, Mokshada was a superstitious lady who threw her child into the confluence of the Ganges and the Bay of Bengal. She was traveling in the same ship with some people when a storm arose and the ship was overturning and the other people thought that they were fatally unlucky because she was on the ship. Finally she had to throw the child into the sea to quell the wrath of both God and the people. Dakshinas in *In the Middle of the Night* written in 1894 committed suicide when she learned that her husband loved another girl. In *The Devotee* written in 1914, the devotee had only one son who was drown in Ganges. When she was almost
mad with grief, her husband's Guru Thakur came back. She showed him veneration and had peace. She saw her God in the form of that Guru. He used to come to take his meal at their house every morning. The first thought that would come to her mind on waking up of sleep was that of his food as a sacred gift from God. When she prepared the things for his meal, her fingers would sing for joy. But beneath the surface some stealing was going on some where in secret. Then came a day when, in a moment their life was turned upside down. It was a morning in midsummer. She was returning home from bathing, her clothes all wet, down a shady lane. At the bend of the road, under the mango tree, she met her Guru Thakur. He had his towel on his shoulder and was repeating some Sanskrit verses as he was going to take his bath. With her wet clothes clinging all about her she was ashamed to meet him. She tried to pass by quickly, and to avoid being seen. He called her by her name. She stopped, lowering her eyes, shrinking into herself. He fixed his gaze upon her and said, "How beautiful is your body." She called on her God in her dismay, and he kept His face away from her. She made up her mind to leave the world and told her husband to marry another wife. The world was no more to her. In her world, there were only two who loved her best—her boy and her husband. That love was her God, and therefore it could brook no falsehood. One of these two already left her, and she left the other. Now she must have truth, and truth alone. Khiroda, who was named Hemishashi before she degenerated, a 14 year-old beautiful widow in The Judge (Vicharak) was lured, insulted and then mercilessly forsaken by anonymous college student Vindchandra. She became a prostitute. When she was at the age of 38 she had lost all her youth, beauty and charms. She would have to wipe her tears and put kajal in her eyes, paint her lips and cheeks, conceal the deficiencies in her physical attractions by different means and try to win over a new man's heart with a smiling face, definite patience, and new tricks. At the end of her youth, Khiroda woke up one morning to find that her lover had taken all her ornaments and money and fled the previous night. There was no money even to buy milk for her three-year-old son. The baby cried and cried of hunger and had gone to sleep under the bed. In that motion he woke up and in the darkness started crying and calling out Ma! Ma! In a broken voice, Khiroda clasped the wailing infant to her breast, ran out like lightning and jumped into a nearby well. Hearing the noises the neighbors took lanterns in their hands and went to the well. Without delay
they lifted up Khiroda and the infant but Khiroda was unconscious and the baby had died. Khiroda recovered in the hospital. The magistrate committed her to the sessions on the charge of murder. Judge Mohitmohun was a statutory civilian. By his severe judgment, Khiroda was sentenced to be hanged. He used to believe that women were eager to sever family ties and if discipline was relaxed even slightly, then not a single housewife would remain within society's confines. A day or two after condemning Khiroda to be hanged the judge Mohitmohun went to the jail garden to collect vegetables. He was curious to know if Khiroda felt remorse after recollecting all the wrong doings of her past life. He entered the jail. Khiroda begged the judge to return her ring snatched by the guard who gave it to the judge. He was so startled; it was as if suddenly he had taken a burning coal in his hand. On one side the tiny portrait of a mustached young man was painted with oil color on ivory and on the other side was engraved in gold—Vinodchandra, his anonymous name. He was just the man who lured Khiroda and now sentenced her to be hanged. From this case we know that tragedies of women in some sense were caused by evil men and society.

5.2.4. Chandara—The most tragic character

The most tragic character was Chandara, in the most saddening story Sentence Punishment written in 1893. Chandara found herself accused of the murder of her sister-in-law although it was committed by the woman's husband before Chandara's very eyes. Chidam Rui, brother of the murderer, had put the story to public in order to save his brother—"If a wife goes I can get another, but if my brother is hanged, I can't get another". She preferred to go to the gallows rather than plead for mercy from the one who had humiliated her so terribly. Her unflinching determination made a steely contradiction to the waywardness and witlessness of the men in the story. It could have been trite and melodramatic if it had showed the long-suffering wife of Hindu tradition, but Chandara was seen to act not out of self-sacrifice and devotion but out of pride and fury. Her feelings had been so deeply wounded that she refused to take one step to help herself out of the predicament in which her despicable husband had cast her. The ending of Punishment was as unfathomable as it was celebrated. Damned by her own husband, sentenced for a murder she did not commit, Chandara's last wish was to see her mother. This might be woman bonding, or a more primordial wish to return like Sita to the earth-
mother. Her utterance in the last line consisted of a single Bengali word, Maran (death!). It conveyed bitter rage at her husband's perfidy.

5.2.5. Srimati ---A religious heroine who dared to sacrifice her life to defend a new religion—Buddhism

In the Natir Puja (The Worship of the Dancing girl) written in 1926, Srimita was a dancing girl. The character of Srimati had been portrayed in the drama in the background of a great psychological tension, arising out of a social upheaval, religious conflict and political turmoil. No other drama of Tagore had got such a background of political revolution pulsating with life and intense activity. Finding his son Ajatasatru covetous of the throne, Bimbisara abdicated. His queen Lokeswari thought that Buddhism was responsible for the emasculation of her husband and the sacrifice of all the worldly prospects by her son Chitra, who had taken the robe of the hermit. Ajatasatru was bent upon rooting out the new religion. Princess Ratnavali felt nothing but utter contempt for it because it had given scope to the low caste people to rise to eminence in the spiritual sphere. A great commotion had arisen amongst the women, many of whom had taken to the path of renunciation. The new religion was preaching love and non-violence. The people of the fighting caste considered it a challenge to their position and the Brahmins were apprehensive of losing their supremacy. The ladies of the royal household were beset with doubts. Their loyalty was swerving from the new religion to the old. In the midst of universal chaos and confusion, Srimati alone was calm and steadfast. Her serenity of mind provoked jealousy and derisive remarks from princess Ratnavali and some of her companions. The spirit of earnest search for the eternal truth was also represented by Malati, a village girl, whose brother and fiancée have taken the yellow robe, and she herself had come to the palace so that she might have an opportunity of being near the platform on which the Buddha had once taken his seat. Srimati at first thought that Maliti was one of those unfortunate girls who sold their future for the transient pleasure of high life. But when she learned the truth about her, she welcomed her as an associate in the path of salvation.

The princess, however, could not bear the idea that a common dancing girl like Srimati should have some followers attached to her. They did not like her calm look. Even the elderly queen, Lokeswari, regretted that a time had come when a fallen woman brought
the message of redemption. She made a direct fling at Srimati and asked, “Has Srimati become a chaste woman all on a sudden?” She recalled that when the Buddha came to the palace he was kind to send for her, but the wicked Srimati did not care to present herself before him. She wondered how the monk Upali took alms from her hands alone and from none else in the palace. One of the princesses observed that whereas they themselves wanted to see the Lord, the Lord appeared before Srimati’s mind. At this Ratnavali insultingly asked the dancing girl to be modest enough to deny the aforesaid statement. But Srimati replied: “If the Lord puts his feet on my heart, does that indicate my superiority or his magnanimity?” When all were afraid of celebrating the birthday of the Buddha violating to the orders of the king, Srimati alone stepped forward with all the accessories to perform the worship. The female guard posted at the platform snatched away these. Yet she was undeterred. She frankly told Ratnavali that the king could not prohibit the worship which really took place in the heart. Her firm conviction and genuine devotion melt the heart of the female guard, too.

At the suggestion of Ratnavali, the king issued orders to Srimati to perform a lascivious dance at the broken altar of the Buddha. She agreed and this antagonized those female guards who were sympathetic to her. When she took an inordinately long time to dress herself for the dance, Ratnavali taunted her as the chaste courtesan. She came with resplendent dress and decked with glittering ornaments. Lokeswari was so much staggered by what she considered as sacrilege on Sarimati’s part that she might secure deliverance from the impious ordeal. But Srimati insisted on dancing first. Her dance symbolized her worship, without Mantram. With the rhythm of the dance she threw her ornaments one by one on the broken altar. She discarded the dress of the dancing girl in course of the dance and the yellow robe of the nun which laid hidden became visible. She then recited the hymn to the Buddha, despite the requests of the female guards to stop it. She was executed even when she was engaged in saying the prayer. But the female guards including the executor herself asked her forgiveness and took the dust of her feet. The queen saluted the hem of her yellow garment and resolved to become a nun herself. Even the indomitable Ratnavili fell down on the dust and admitted that she was now afraid of her conduct. Every woman in the royal household now entered the Buddhist prayer and even Ratnavali saluted the feet of the body of Srimati.

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Tagore knew that in some degree, the tragedy of women was the result of their own weakness. In the Chaturanga (The broken Ties) written in 1916, Nanibala, a helpless girl who was seduced, made pregnant but was thrown out by Purandha, son of zamindar. Sachis, the younger brother of Purandha, who was a nationalist and atheist and just opposite to his elder brother in personality, lodged Nanibala in his uncle Jagmohan's house. To save the helpless girl, with the help of his uncle, Sachis was prepared to marry her. The girl committed suicide. But the reason was much beyond the expectation of the readers: She could not forget the seducer who raped her and threw her out of his room!

In the epics, we can see the tragedy from only some plots of heroines. There was no specific chapter that told us a complete tragic story. But we can still know these tragic women from the lines. Kaikeyi lived a lonely life when she made her husband, king Darasatha died. Surpanaka was deformed for her passion and cruelty. Gandhari lived her whole life in darkness when she covered her eyes for her blind husband and ended her life in a forest fire. Ambika and Amblika were young when their husband Vicitravirya died and they were taken to forests by their mother-in-law Satyavati and spent their lives in loneliness. Urmila lived lonely when her husband Laksmana followed Rama to the forest in their exile and at last jumped onto his funeral pyre. Amba was the most tragic woman. She lost her love and imposed her hatred on Bhisma. She changed into a man and killed Bhisma in Kuruksetra War. But she lost all his love, youth, sex and even her life. In Tagore, being different from the epics, almost every tragic woman character was a heroine in his story. Kamala was an orphan. When she came back from robbery of dacoit, her uncle refused to keep her. Amiya was deserted by her playboy husband. Birdyabashini committed suicide when she heard that her husband loved another girl. Srimati sacrificed her life to defend a new religion. The most tragic woman was Chandara who was sentenced to death for the murder she did not commit at all. Tagore frankly pointed out that in a sense the tragedy of women was resulted from their own shortcomings. Nanibala, an innocent girl, fell in love with the man who raped her. The tragedies of Kaikeyi and Surpanaka were also resulted from their greed and passion.