

Chapter Four

Emancipated Women: The New Women of Tagore

She is not in the world of the fairy tale where the fair woman sleeps for ages until she is touched by the magic wand. . . . At last, the time has arrived when woman must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power. (Tagore, *Selected Essays* 226)

Tagore's family, right from his grandfather, Prince Dwarkanath Tagore, was influenced by the Western culture. Women of Tagore's household were all educated and progressive in their outlook. Tagore's stay in London to study from 1877 to 1880 made him aware of the freedom women were enjoying in London and enabled him to compare their status with the Bengali women. He sent articles appreciating the above impression to be published in **Bharathi**, the family journal of Tagore. However, it was not received well by its editor-brother Dwejendranath Tagore. As a Hindu Revivalist himself, he wrote a rejoinder to counter the radical views of Tagore on women's freedom which had offended the orthodox Hindus.

After Tagore got the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, he went on a tour of Western countries at the

invitation for lecturing. There he became aware of the women's liberation. Naturally, the emerging New Woman concept in the Western society had its impact on his fiction writings also. The writings of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, and Cornelia Sorabji in the Indian scenario awakened the spirit of emancipation of women of that period. Tagore's different experiences, ever-growing knowledge, travels and political experiences continually reshaped and recreated him.

The social reformer in Rabindranath Tagore gave priority to women. They took the centre stage in his prose works. Tagore's portrayal of women characters in his short stories and novels changed consequent to the contemporary changes in the society. Due to English education and the influence of Western culture, women characters were no longer the submissive sufferers of patriarchy. They started to assert their individuality. The heroines created by Tagore during the third phase of his literary career (1913-41) are bold to have a futuristic outlook. They are more emancipated and empowered to transform themselves in the twentieth century. They are all forerunners to the later day women characters depicted by the so-called staunch

feminist writers. This made Tagore a visionary for the cause of feminism.

Tagore's short stories and novels of the Post-Gitanjali period portray the emancipated women. His heroines of this period become a vehicle for the attack of male-domination, advocacy of women's education, and cause of the emancipation of women. Santosh Chakrabarti observes:

Rabindranath Tagore's socio-familial concept took a new turn as he began to probe the husband-wife relationship within the joint family set up. Gone is the tyrannical in-law and submissive son syndrome in which subservience to the patriarchal norm is the rigour, as Rabindranath Tagore sets out at the beginning of the 20th century, to apply his mind to the taboo subject of women's emancipation. (94)

Tagore's writings also made its impact on the traditional and social orders and quickened the spirit of social and cultural criticism in a section of Bengali intelligentsia. This spirit found a most articulate representative in Pramadha Chowdhri's (1868-1946) journal **Sabujpatra (Green Leaves)** founded in 1914. The journal became the principal organ of the new intellectual radicalism. Chowdhri and the

group of writers who gathered around him championed the rights of youth against the traditional gerontocracy. They poured scorn on Hindu orthodoxy and its time-honoured customs, habits and institutions. They were ardent individualists and accepted no authority other than reason. They expressed themselves not in English, but in Bengali. The most gifted among them combined creative writing with social criticism.

In this endeavour, throughout **Sabujpatra's** brief literary career (1914-22; 1925-27) Chowdhri's principal literary associate was Tagore. Interestingly, Tagore became more radical as he grew older. In 1914 when he was already past fifty, when most people resign themselves to pragmatic acceptance of the status quo, Tagore became closely involved with the avant-garde journal **Sabujpatra**. His writings during this period show very strong revolutionary features. Tagore's "Balaka" poems (1916) have movement change as their central theme. The poems are strikingly different in temper and style. His short stories of this period, e.g. "Haimanti", "Streer Patra", "Aparachita", "Tapasvini", make a devastating exposure of traditional Hindu family life and of the Hindu attitude to women.

His novels *Home and the World* (1916) and *Chaturanga* (1916) are very unorthodox in the treatment of the heroines. The change in Tagore's outlook in the direction of radicalism continued until his end. Nevertheless, it is particularly pronounced in his writings of **Sabujpatra** period, which present a significant contrast to the relatively more traditional temper of his earlier writings. In the mature period (1913-41) the heroines of Tagore's fiction do not hesitate to voice their feelings openly against the ills of the society like widow remarriage, the caste system and religious hypocrisy. Cenkner remarks, "They advocate higher education and woman's emancipation and empowerment" (106).

In this chapter, how Tagore's conception of womanly perfection is characteristically unfolded from exploitation to emancipation in the evolution of the Indian womanhood in select fiction is discussed. The women protagonists of his fictional writings from 1913 to 1941 are all self-assertive, liberated and emancipated. How Tagore envisioned the new ideal womanhood in the creation of women characters is scrutinized through the short stories "Giribala" (1895), "Woman Unknown" (1914), "Letter from a Wife" (1914), "The Laboratory" (1940) and a novel *Chaturanga* (1916).

"Giribala" (1895) is the first short story, in which the protagonist raises her voice of protest against her uncaring husband and takes revenge upon him. Giribala, the heroine is the first liberated woman character depicted by Tagore, much earlier than his other more radical women characters of **Sabujpatra** period beginning from 1913.

Giribala is the beautiful, young, and the childless wife of a wealthy husband, Gopinath, ". . . who was not under her control" (EWRT 316). Her husband does not notice her bloom from a child-bride to a beautiful woman. She is well aware of her beauty, but that is of no use to attract her husband who has deserted her in his infatuation for a stage actress Lavanga. This is reported to Giribala by her maid Sudha who is her only relief to escape from her loneliness.

One evening on a full moon day, Giribala, dressing elegantly, sits on her terrace. At that time, Gopinath rushes in and demands the keys of the cash box. However, Giribala pays no heed and unable to get the keys, he "pinned her to the wall", takes away the jewels from her forcibly, gives her "a parting kick" and goes out. (EWRT 321)

Gopinath becomes a slave to the stage actress Lavanga. This is reported to Giribala by Sudha. One day, Giribala visits the theatre stealthily without her husband's knowledge as it is felt by him that the theatre is a place not fit for any woman of a decent family. She witnesses her husband's lust for the stage actress. His indecent behaviour in the theatre disgusts her. She gains courage to teach her husband a lesson. Nevertheless, her husband Gopinath does not return home for some time with no intimation as to where he has gone. Giribala also leaves home when she hears Gopinath has eloped with the actress Lavanga. The proprietors of the theatre have introduced a new actress in her place and staged it successfully. Gopinath happens to see the new play "Manorama". He finds out to his dismay the new actress is none other than his own wife Giribala. She takes revenge on her husband by joining the same theatre as an actress. Moreover, the theatrical profession was not considered as a respectable one for a family woman in those days.

Giribala's emancipation is the first step towards Tagore's experimentation with a chain of liberated women. Through Giribala's character, Tagore has suggested a solution to women's oppression. "Tagore conceives of this

solution on the pay-you-back-in-your-own-coin formula, for Gopinath's chief intoxication lies with theatrical performance" (Chakrabarti 85-86).

Women's identity is not shaped individually, but in relation to others around them. The gender pattern of socialization in the society has resulted in forming different patterns of identification for men and women. Men learn self-reliance and self-dependence while women learn to take care of others and to thwart themselves. Giribala breaks the rigid old tradition of passivity of wifedom. As an emancipated woman, she becomes an initiator as a defender on the part of the wife in this social scenario.

Giribala's emancipation has not happened suddenly. Giribala derives inspiration from the story of Krishna and his consort Radha played on the stage. Krishna has not visited Radha for some days. His absence makes her feel lonely. When Krishna arrives to see Radha, she does not respond to him. By way of expressing her grief, she ignores his presence. Krishna's effort in entreating her by "abasing himself at her feet" (EWRT 319) does not soften her heart. Seeing this, Giribala imagines herself as an offended Radha and she realizes her womanpower to vindicate her pride.

Tagore's portrayal of Giribala's character is to kindle the awakening of womanpower in the minds of other women. Her maid Sudha is also the root cause for the awakening of self and to revolt against her husband's male oppression, right from the beginning of the story. Sudha kindles the sexual identity of Giribala by praising her beauty, which arouses her pride as a woman. After Giribala's realization of her husband's betrayal, she sits on her terrace dressed in her cream coloured robe and decked herself with jewels, looking gorgeous as she used to do every evening. Sudha, ". . . sitting near her bare feet admiringly touching them with her hand expressed her wish that if she were a man privileged to offer her life as homage to such a pair of feet" (EWRT 320).

The portrayal of Sudha's attraction to the female body of Giribala is a significant bold construction of Tagore. He has touched the chord of Lesbian Feminism, which evolved in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Martha Shelly, a Lesbian Feminist urges, "Lesbianism is really the heart of the women's liberation movement. For, in order to throw off the oppression of the male caste, women must unite" (Tandon 56). Tagore was well aware of the fact that women themselves should create a space for their survival. He

knew that the social system was against women's emancipation and therefore he relied heavily on women's wish to make them free from the bondages. Tagore has created a woman character from a feminist perspective nearly nine decades before the ideology was evolved. This reveals how Rabindranath Tagore justly interpreted the female psyche.

The positive image of the lesbian as a woman of strength and independence continued as a central thesis of the Lesbian Feminist theory. As Elsa Gidlow, an elderly Lesbian poet puts it: It usually included erotic attraction to women, although we know there have been many women of Lesbian personality who never had any sexual relations with one another. What is strongly a part of the Lesbian personality is loyalty and love for other women. (Tandon 55)

Tagore introduces Sudha as a person capable of singing, dancing, and improvising verses. She never feels tired of showering praise on her mistress. She freely gives expression to her regret that such a beauty as her mistress has been "dedicated to a fool who forgets to enjoy what he owns" (EWRT 317). She starts to hum a love song to her.

Tagore unquestionably describes Sudha's love and loyalty to her mistress. From the Lesbian Feminist ideological perspective, Sudha's characterization belongs to Lesbian feminism. Sudha fulfills the emotional and the sexual void of Giribala and thus, is a cause for her liberation from the male oppression.

There is a striking affinity between Tagore's portrayal of Sudha's character in "Giribala" and the character Shug Avery depicted by the popular Black Feminist writer Alice Walker in her novel, *The Color Purple*. Even though Tagore's is a short story and Alice Walker's is a novel, the characters Sudha and Shug Avery belong to the category of liberated women of the Lesbian feminist ideology. Tagore wrote the short story "Giribala" in 1895 and Alice Walker wrote the novel *The Color Purple* in 1983. In the creation of these two characters, there are some striking similarities. Shug Avery is a professional singer and a paramour of Albert, the husband of Celia, the protagonist. Shug Avery is a strong-minded woman by polygamous nature. She sings a song named after Celia by way of expressing her gratitude and love for Celia who nurses her during her illness. Her performance makes Celia elated, whose self-esteem is at the lowest ebb because she

is sexually abused by both her stepfather and also her husband who used to beat her frequently for no reason.

Sudha is also a good singer and a lyricist. She has composed a song in admiration of Giribala's beauty. Sudha is a source of inspiration to Giribala in her emancipation, just as Shug Avery is to Celia. Humming a love song, Sudha touches the feet of Giribala. Shug Avery also educates Celia on love affairs by physical touches. Sudha helps Giribala to take revenge upon her husband Gopinath. Shug Avery also encourages Celia to take revenge upon Albert, her abusive husband, by leaving him.

Both Tagore and Alice Walker do not use the word Lesbianism anywhere in their writings. It is only a description of a woman-love-woman affair. The messages conveyed by both are the same, that women should take care of women in order to liberate themselves from male oppression and attain self-fulfillment. Tagore has realized that it is the women themselves who are responsible in many ways for the denigration or improvement of women from sorrows and problems inflicted upon them. A woman like Giribala gets confidence from the support received from the same sex.

A real life character who felt distressed due to lack of women's support is found in Tagore's sister-in-law, Kadambari Debi, wife of Jyothindranath Tagore. Her suicide after six months of Rabindranath Tagore's marriage in 1884, is still a mystery. It is reported that Jyothindranath's failure to fulfill the marital companionship of Kadambari was one among the causes of her suicide at the age of twenty-three. Jyotindranath was too busy involving himself in multifarious activities and in staging dramas at home and outdoor. Kadambari also took part in Jyotindranath's dramas, enacted in "Andharmahal" of Jorasanko Mansion. She was appreciated for her ability in acting and singing. She was the first woman to inspire Tagore in becoming a poet.

Tagore wrote this story after eleven years of Kadambari's death. As Tagore is best known for choosing the title of the story and also for naming the characters, it was initially titled as "Manbanjang" which means "Breaking the Ice". Tagore perhaps remembered his sister-in-law, a sensitive, beautiful compassionate woman. She was childless for more than fourteen years. Her husband was more attached to Sathyendranath's wife, Jnanandanandini, who, as a second daughter-in-law of the house was dominating after her foreign tour. "He certainly failed in his duty as a husband

to alleviate the loneliness of his wife" (Deb 89). Other women of Tagore's household envied Kadambari's talents in creation and home decoration. She was left companionless. She spent her life lonely as childless mother. "She was being excluded; edged out of the mainstream" (Chakrabarthy, *Jorasanko* 218).

Kadambari could not reveal herself as ". . . her mother had told her that a girl must never be too forward with her husband or make claims on him. Men didn't like pushy women" (Chakrabarthy, *Jorasanko* 184). Devoid of her husband's company, she became more depressed. Added to that the immediate cause for the successful suicide attempt was the detection of a love letter of a stage actress, Binodini, to Jyothindranath. The demise of Kadambari, who lit the literary fire of Tagore, greatly affected him. Tagore realized that Kadambari out of hurt self-pride had decided to end her life.

Tagore had thought that had she been aware of her womanpower, and received good support from other women she might have been relieved of her depression and survived. A little effort might have helped her to express herself and made Jyothindranath to understand her as wife. Tagore strongly felt that woman bonding might help women to become

more assertive and empowered. That might be the reason behind writing the story by Tagore. Tagore's immediate aim was to expose the repression of women. By disclosing his opinion that women showed no mercy for women and opposing the prejudice and narrowness it fostered, he emphasized the need for woman bonding which the later day Lesbian Feminism, a branch of Radical Feminists also advocated.

Feminism itself stands on the premises that women are inhumanely treated and pushed to the secondary position by men. In "Woman Unknown" (1914), the bride and her father are humiliated by the maternal uncle of the bridegroom who checks the weight and purity of the gold ornaments given to the bride by way of dowry. They thwart the act of humiliation in a more humane way of rejecting the marriage itself. Anupam, the fiancée of the protagonist, Kalyani, narrates the story. His widowed wealthy mother and his maternal uncle brought up Anupam. He is a postgraduate, an obedient son and an "eligible bachelor" because he lacks "the quality to disobey. . . and has been trained to follow the orders from the women's quarters" (SSS 219). His engagement to the daughter of a doctor, Sambunath Babu of Kanpur, is fixed. The cash and quantum of gold ornaments to be given to the bridegroom's family by way of dowry is also

settled to the satisfaction of the bridegroom's maternal uncle.

When Sampunath Babu seeks Anupam's opinion in the matter of verification of the gold ornaments, he realizes that Anupam is under the control of his uncle. Tagore unfolds the fact that patriarchal dominance under the joint family system is harmful not only to the women, but also to the younger male members of the family, as it blocks their individuality and growth. The goldsmith certifies that the jewellery is all pure gold. However, after the dinner is over, Sampunath Babu announces, "I cannot give my daughter in marriage to a family that considers me capable of stealing her gold" (SSS 224). The marriage is broken off. By refusing to give his daughter in marriage to a member of the dowry-gluttonous family, the bride's father asserts his self-dignity. Tagore the humanist reveals his concern for the bride's father by this sheer conception.

Everyone in the family of Anupam is enraged at the audacity of the girl's father. They threaten that it would be difficult for Sambunath to get his daughter married. The breaking down of so many marriages at the time of the ceremony, because of non-fulfillment of dowry commitments happens even in the twenty first century. Tagore asserts

the self-dignity of the father Sambunath who refuses to give his daughter in marriage to a member of such a mean minded family, even a century before, and secondly on the part of bride Kalyani, who remains a lifelong spinster by way of protest against such an ugly insult. It is a revolutionary thought conceived by Tagore in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Tagore suggests that to eradicate the dowry menace, the first step should be initiated within the bride's family itself. The rich artefact of Tagore is present in this masterly production. On one hand, there are several nuances of gender bias regarding masculine and feminine attitudes of contemporary society; on the other hand, there is a progressive thinking father who takes a decision regarding his daughter's marriage that could have effectively ruined her chance of ever getting married.

Anupam comes to know that the girl has turned down many proposals offered during the one year. He imagines that the reason for the rejection by Kalyani is that she languishes for him. He dreams that the girl's father ". . . swallows his pride and comes to our doorstep" (SSS 226) with all humbleness and seeks his acceptance for marrying his daughter. However, nothing happens as he has dreamt. He

feels an endearment for the girl: "My heart had gone out to the unknown girl: I could not call it back. She was just one step away from me, but suddenly the distance stretched out into infinity" (SSS 225). In the traditional description, it is the woman who dreams, longs and waits for her suitor to marry, and the man is always meant to make reasonable decisions. Here Tagore has deconstructed the conservative description of masculine characterization. Anupam's character is marked not only by his weakness and indecisiveness, but also by his imaginative bend of mind.

One year has passed; Anupam is travelling in a train, accompanied by his mother on a visit to Kanpur. When the train stops at a station, he hears a girl's voice in Bengali says, "Hurry up, there's room here in this carriage" (SSS 227). He is very much impressed with the voice. He tries to know the person to whom the voice belongs but in vain.

Next morning they have to change trains at a junction. When he is searching for a comfortable compartment, there is a call in the same voice heard by him during the previous night, which asks his mother "Why don't you come here? There's room" (SSS 228). It is a sudden surprise for him to hear the same voice. He and his mother board the

same compartment. Two or three girls younger to her, playing games, surround the girl. She then reads a story in her magical voice from an illustrated children's book that the little girls seem to enjoy. When the train stops at another junction, the stationmaster approaches Anupam with a request to vacate the compartment since some English men has already reserved berths in that compartment. Anupam is about to oblige, but he is stopped by Kalyani. She argues in English with the station master, that it is not a reserved compartment at the boarding point and it is not necessary to vacate. An extra coach is added to accommodate the uniformed English officials.

By refusing to vacate the railway compartment as it may cause inconvenience and insult to the fellow passengers, she fights against racial discrimination prevailed at the colonial time. The amazing characteristics of Kalyani's forwardness, courage, and self-assertion were not common among the girls then. Anupam feels inferior before her because of his inability to defend. Moreover, he feels that Kalyani has recognized him and in spite of that, she is so magnanimous that she does not show any aversion for him. Anupam is very much impressed by the humanistic approach of Kalyani.

Kalyani's blooming persona is perhaps a reflection of Tagore's vision of the emerging New Women in India. At the age of sixteen, she is still a girl, but in the process of becoming a woman, she is developing a personality. While at once she is a commanding adult, she is also a child with the other young girls who is accompanying her. Anupam's mother, loyal to her generation and customs, disapproves Kalyani's nature. Yet the same also fascinate her. A strangeness perhaps makes her wonder if she herself could ever have the courage to defy her own traditional upbringing and become like Kalyani. She feels torn "between fascination and disapproval" (SSS 229).

Kalyani's strength of identity gives the courage to Anupam to overcome his repressed and inactive self. As a result, after returning to Calcutta, Anupam goes to Kanpur without the consent of his mother and his uncle. He repents for the insult caused to Kalyani's family and asks earnestly for the hand of the girl in marriage. Sampunath Babu does not object, but Kalyani turn down his request as she wants to remain a lifelong spinster, by dedicating herself to the cause of women's education.

However, Anupam, who has given his heart to Kalyani, on his part, decides to remain a bachelor, singing a song

of which the refrain is "There's room here." Through the character of Anupam, Tagore wishes to convey the message to the menfolk that "Nevertheless, neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man" (Denny 95).

Kalyani's identity-formation begins when she is confronted with a crisis of her wedding. Although Tagore does not dwell upon it in detail, it can be assumed that such an event could have triggered Kalyani's self to emancipate.

Kalyani as a woman is devoid of womanly characters like coyness, delicacy, and timidity. She is bold, independent-thinking, and possesses self-esteem, which is uncharacteristic of women of those days. The culturally constructed identities of masculinity and femininity are broken down in the portrayal of Anupam and Kalyani. Anupam is brought up by his mother. He is obedient, anxious, indecisive, and fantasy-prone. He possesses the passive nature of that of a woman. On the contrary, Kalyani, a motherless girl, is brought up by her father. She is rebellious, fearless, resolute, and practical in her outlook. Tagore has deviated from the traditional way of constructing a female character. In the traditional way a woman is often portrayed with all feminine qualities like calmness, coyness, etc., which is taught to be the

compulsory characteristics a woman should possess in order to identify her in the society. Tagore has broken this and has proved that the binary oppositions of man and woman for active and passive qualities are constructed by patriarchy. The characterization of Kalyani is similar to the opinion expressed by Simon De Beauvoir in her groundbreaking feminist text *The Second Sex* (1942), who declares, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (234). Beauvoir declares that the inequality of the sexes is not nature's design, but a result of various social forces created by patriarchy.

Most men like Anupam think that by accepting to marry a girl they are doing her a favour. Tagore wants to make men to remove such a wrong notion from their mind. Here Tagore speaks on behalf of women. Anupam, a highly educated man, realizes that "In a full heart there is room for everything and in any empty heart there is room for nothing" (Prochia 1498). Anupam recognizes that people like Sampunath Babu and Kalyani have full hearts in which there is room for love of people, whereas people like his uncle has an empty heart in which affection for people is missing. That is why Anupam gives him up at the end of the story. Kalyani has a secured room in his heart and he

decides to live his life throughout with her thoughts.

Tagore makes the character Anupam repent for his action and turn him humane.

Tagore gives a solution to eradicate the dowry problem from the feminine perspective. A man should also take action and should not be a weakling just like Anupam in this story. Tagore emphasizes that a man should get to know the mind of his woman and then only would he be able to treat her equally. Through Kalyani's character, Tagore emphasizes the necessity of education for women. Her decision to remain a lifelong spinster is one way of solving the dowry menace.

Celibacy was important to the feminists because it attempted to set up an alternative role for women apart from the traditional female sphere of marriage and motherhood: an alternative, indeed, that was followed from choice by many of the pioneers. It enabled them to avoid the sexual and economic subordination of marriage, while at the same time pursuing for them an interesting and challenging career. (Banus 97)

During the period of writing this story women started participating in the Swedeshi Movement in response to the

clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi. "The sight of unmarried Bengali women coming out of their sheltered house, discarding all old inhibitions does inspire every person" (Kumar 82). Increasingly, women students came forward to hold street corner meetings, to travel unaccompanied in trams and buses, to collect party funds, and organize strikes and agitations, violating all traditional norms of womanly conduct and derecognising the domestic-public lines of demarcation. For the more sensitive women participating in the freedom movement meant a protracted struggle against two different badges of servility, colonialism and patriarchy. In the then prevailing scenario only Tagore has created Kalyani as a role model, a marvellous New Woman who rejects the notion that a woman's only future is that of a housewife, and that motherhood is the supreme fulfillment of her life. She asserts herself against the racist humiliation in a public railway carriage. She startles men, who are not yet familiar with such a type at that time. The voice of Kalyani does not find resonance in the ordinary middle class household. In Kalyani, the emergence of a new type of personality and a new form of feminist consciousness linked with political awareness can be detected. Tagore delineates Kalyani as a representative of

the emerging emancipated New Women, who breaks the age-old traditions and conventions set up by patriarchy.

Radical Feminist theory holds that marriage is the major cause of women's oppression. "Since marriage is a primary formalization of the persecution of women, they consider the rejection of this institution of marriage, both in theory and in practice" (Tandon 45). That Tagore has reflected the same in this short story "Woman Unknown" even three decades before Radical Feminism itself evolved exemplifies Tagore as a visionary of feminism in India.

Tagore takes up one of the major evils of the society the question of dowry and suggests an alternate solution to minimize the problem of dowry to some extent in "Woman Unknown". In this story, he deals with the feminine problems of dowry, the need for better understanding of wife by a man, celibacy and the importance of women's education. Having dealt with all the female problems and finding solutions to them, Tagore becomes a crusader of feminism. P. K. Dutta observes:

Rabindranath's literary thought was developed and intensified in the Sabujpathra years. Most of the stories that Rabi wrote for that journal dealt with women as individual subjects engaged in

negotiating with a problematic relationship in their marriages and with their household, but also women who created alternate life, some of which involved being single. (9)

Being a true feminist, Tagore sends his message through this story that gender equality can be achieved only by educating the women. In creating Kalyani, Tagore has envisioned the New Women of India. The character of Kalyani provides another testimony to Tagore's feminist approach. Tagore has pooh-poohed the patriarchal notion that women are innately unfit to assume responsibility and require masculine guidance and protection. Given proper training that women themselves can act independently is Tagore's strong message sent out to men. Tagore deconstructs the social roles, which represents the patriarchy defined female and male traits. He has inverted the active male and passive female syndrome. This strategic decision helps the artist to achieve space for female growth, which is the tenet of feminism.

"Letter From A Wife" (1914) is an epoch-making short story which Tagore himself had admitted that this short story was his ". . . first attempt at writing a pro-woman text" (Ray 181). It is a treatise on the liberation of

women. It is a powerful story about an emancipated woman, Mrinal, in an epistolary form. A woman depicted as writing a letter itself was a revolution in those days. Then it was thought that, according to Hindu religion a woman who took up writing was a prelude to becoming a widow very soon.

Tagore portrays Mrinal as a child-bride of twelve years entering as the second daughter-in-law into an orthodox family. After fifteen years, at the age of twenty-seven, she leaves the house forever to Puri, determined not to return. She relieves herself from the shackles of patriarchal oppression. How the metamorphosis of womanhood of Mrinal, from the status of a traditional wife to that of a freedom-seeking woman happens is forcefully expressed by Tagore.

Tagore artistically uses the strategy of epistolary form to get into the mind, voice, and experience of Mrinal. Tagore hitherto has dealt with the problems of female oppression by patriarchy and advocated women's upliftment through the third person narration in his short stories. Here he chooses the first person narration. In making Mrinal the protagonist to narrate her own experience in writing, Tagore has foreseen the new age of emancipated women that was to emerge in the next few decades. Mrinal's

attempt in writing this letter is in agreement with the view of Helen Cixous, the French Feminist, who, in ***The Newly Born Women*** (1987), advises women;

She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing, which, when the moment of liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history. (18)

Mrinal is the first woman character in Indian literature who rebels against the patriarchal exploitation of women through her powerful writing. She records her protest against all sorts of male oppression courageously in her letter addressed to her husband. Tagore's concern for the womenfolk comes through the writings of Mrinal. Her own voice is more assertive and confident. Mrinal writes this letter from Puri, where she has gone forever at the age of twenty-seven after fifteen years of married life. B.R. Agarwal rightly observes that, "A woman's story, inevitably silenced by androcentric culture, narrated from a woman's point of view by women writers in itself is a challenge to the male power" (96). Mrinal was the prototype of what Mary Wollstonecraft, the first popular feminist writer, described in her ***Vindication of the Rights of Women*** in

1791. Mrinal speaks out, tells her own life story, articulates her feelings, and acknowledges both her own hopes and her sense of having been cheated, as put forth by Mary Wollstonecraft.

As the Feminist Betty Frieden has observed in ***The Feminine Mystique*** (1963), the impulse for freedom must come from each individual woman who must find her own answers and her own experience and strategies for liberation. Mrinal acts on her own for her liberation. Through the letter, Mrinal reminds her husband that he is unaware of her talent in writing poetry for fifteen years. She recalls that she has been selected as the second daughter-in-law of the family for her good looks. Moreover, her beauty has only earned the jealousy of other women in the family. Her inborn intelligence is the least asset to be accepted by his family. Even her own womenfolk construes her intelligence for arrogance. She remembers that they use to abuse her by calling her brash. "Abusiveness is the consolation of weak. I forgive you" (SSR 191). In such a conservative patriarchal set up, she feels suffocated. She charges that women's quarter is besides the cattle shed, in an unhygienic condition, which even annoys the family doctor.

As a true feminist, Tagore is very much concerned about the denial of even the basic amenities for the lives of women. In making a female to voice against the degraded status of women and patriarchal oppression, Tagore makes a clarion call to all the womenfolk to realize their status of subordination and to fight for their rights. Here Tagore speaks through Mrinal to awaken the conscience of women for their emancipation. Tagore brings in all the pathos of women who suffer in the high caste system. During Tagore's days, though born into the higher caste, the status of women was no better when compared to the lower caste women. Suffering was even worse with no basic requirements to be fulfilled. The men's room was well furnished whereas the inner quarters of women were devoid of ventilation, with stained floors and walls. As women of lowest self-esteem, they were unable to raise their voice against this inhuman treatment meted out to them.

Mrinal's hard-hitting writing in the letter on the fundamental problems of patriarchal oppression in its different forms like dowry, denigration of womenfolk, inhuman treatment in providing accommodation, denial of women's education, the loss of identity, and lower self-esteem attempts to make men understand the sufferings of

women. In Helen Cixous' encouraging words, "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. It is time for women to start scoring their feats in writing and oral language" (***The Newly Born women*** 23). Tagore's text enables a woman to tell and write her story about the culture of the times and to unravel the story of gender relationships. Mrinal is a New Woman envisioned by Tagore who challenges the patriarchal oppression and gets liberated from the same. However, this does not happen all of a sudden.

Having lost her first girl child immediately after giving birth, she has lost the privilege and status of a mother. Motherhood denotes security for women. Here Tagore mirrors the miserable mindset of childless women who feel their womanhood unfulfilled. It is noteworthy that most of Tagore's female protagonists are childless. Mrinal would have continued to live in such a condition throughout her life. Nevertheless, her enlightenment for emancipation and liberation from this situation comes to her aid with the arrival of Bindu, a twelve-year old sister of the first daughter-in-law of that house. Bindu lost her mother and was driven out of her house by her cousins. She has taken shelter in her sister's house as an uninvited guest. Mrinal is anguished by the ill treatment meted out to Bindu, who

is lesser than an unwanted garbage by all the family members, including Bindu's sister. Bindu takes refuge in Mrinal's love and considers her as a guardian. She continues to write in her letter: "Bindu came to me with a lot of apprehension" (SSR 195). It takes some time for Mrinal to bring Bindu to find her own self. Bindu is overwhelmed by Mrinal's empathy that she falls hopelessly in love with her. Mrinal records in her letter:

She began to love me with such fervour that I was scared. I have not seen a comparable face of love. I have only read about it and that also between man and woman. . . . She would gaze upon my face as if she could not have enough of it. . . . The girl was obsessed with me. . . . At times I was exasperated with her, I admit, but through her love I could get a glimpse of my own self, of which I had not been aware. This was my unencumbered self. (SSR 197)

That Tagore has taken up the subject of romantic love between two women was a significant step in a radical approach to women's issues. As an offshoot of the later day Feminist theory, Lesbian Feminism came into prominence in the early 1970s. The central point of Lesbian Feminist

theory is the positive image of the Lesbian as a woman of strength and independence. Martha Shelley, a Lesbian feminist remark, "We must learn to love ourselves and each other; we must grow strong and independent of men so that we can deal with them from a position of strength" (Tandon 56).

Bindu's infatuation for Mrinal helps her to rediscover her individuality and assert her independence. Betty Frieden, a popular feminist writer called this as, "Woman-Identified Woman" (Walters 107). Later Bindu is married to an insane man. Tagore contrasts between the status of men and women in patriarchal society. A woman is hollow if she lacks beauty or wealth, whereas even if the man is a lunatic the qualification of being a man is more than enough to be married. Bindu's elder sister also declares, ". . . It's her blighted fate. There is no point in ruing it. Mad or moron; he's her husband after all" (SSR 202). The torture and tribulations inflicted by a woman on a woman left a deep impression on Tagore's mind. His compassion for womenfolk is reflected through Mrinal's feeling that a woman shows no mercy to another woman. In ***The Laugh of Medusa*** (1975), Helen Cixous also sends a hard-hitting message to womenfolk ". . . don't denigrate woman,

don't make of her what men have made of you" (339).

Tagore's thinking was very similar to the later day feminist ideology and it reveals his feminist consciousness.

Mrinal writes in her letter that such a type of traditionally devoted women have been brainwashed by the patriarchy by citing the examples of Nalayini and others in the Hindu scriptures. Being a sensible woman, she cannot tolerate all these tales of morality. Tagore, through Mrinal, ridicules the preaching of moral values, which sanctifies women and makes them unaware of their victimization. Mrinal can no longer live in that situation. She decides to leave her house forever to Puri, a holy place. When she desires to take Bindu also with her, in order to free her, she comes to know that Bindu has burnt herself to death. In this news, Mrinal's comment seems to be shared by Tagore, "At last there was peace" (SSR 204). Even Bindu's death is criticized: "It has become a fashion with women to die by setting their saris on fire" (SSR 205). Mrinal asks why it is happening to the Bengali women's sari only and not with the dhotis of Bengali men.

Mrinal informs that she has come to the holy place Puri and declares, "I will not return to your 27 Makhan

Boral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have known the value women are given in your world. I have had enough" (SSR 205). Bindu's cruel death has awakened her sensibilities. It makes her to assert herself, and turns her into a liberated woman. After fifteen years of life as a wife suffering endless anguish and indignity as a human being, Mrinal realizes that her fulfillment cannot be attained as a wife but as a woman. She declares that, she will live like Meerabai. She concludes her letter as, "Breaking free from the shelter beneath your feet, Mrinal" (SSR 207).

Mrinal breaks free from the shackles of the patriarchal oppression and emerges as an independent woman. It is to be noticed that she signs the letter in her own name and not in the nomenclature attributed to her as "Mejo Bou", the second daughter-in-law. By this Mrinal announces that she has discarded her identity as the second daughter-in-law of the family. The acquisition of name is symbolic of the individuality. It is a violation and subversion of social identity inflicted upon her.

The story "Letter From A Wife" revolves around three women. Mrinal, the second daughter-in-law of the house is an emancipated woman. The first daughter-in-law is a traditional woman, who cannot come out of the enslavement

of patriarchal persecution. Her younger sister Bindu is a victim of patriarchy. Mrinal's acute observation, her profundity and her independent spirit are scripted in each line of this letter of power. She questions, destabilizes and finally rejects the tyrannical and ". . . callous citadel of patriarchy" (Ray 184).

Tagore has advanced the women's cause for emancipation by the portrayal of Mrinal. He breaks the traditional image of the Indian woman. Mrinal's is an integrated Indian woman's voice against the age-old practice of patriarchy. At the end of the story, Mrinal finds her individuality. She is an emancipated woman who becomes aware of her right to live. "I too shall live. I am living" (SSR 207). Mrinal is a successor to Nora of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). The young Tagore in his late twenties was annoyed with the ending of *A Doll's House*. At the age of fifty-three, the matured Tagore, as a crusader for individual freedom of woman created Mrinal. (Ray 189)

Tagore indicts the drawback in the system of arranged marriage and its consequent oppression of women in the name of tradition. In the evolution of Mrinal, from a traditional housewife to a human being, Rabindranath Tagore's progressive and feminist outlook supporting

women's emancipation is explicit and complete. Simon de Beauvoir, the most popular French feminist writer of the twentieth century, has argued; "for women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women but of becoming full scale human being" (Walters 99). Mrinal has asserted her right to live as a human being. She is a precursor to the woman idealized by Simon de Beauvoir. Tagore a true reformist, believed that the gender inequality prevalent in the society can be eradicated only when the women are able to confront their fears and insecurities, and thus able to create new and strong identities of their own.

Twelve years after writing the novel *Binodini* Tagore wrote the novel *Chaturanga* in 1915, in which the central theme is again widow remarriage but the setting is different. In *Chaturanga* Tagore explores the issue of sexuality once again with boldness hitherto unprecedented in Bengali fiction. Tagore locates the question of identity and sexuality in relation to contemporary debates about religion, interpersonal relationships and widow remarriage.

Damini, the young widow remarries unlike Binodini in the novel *Binodini*. Damini is a rebel. She refuses to follow the rigid life ascribed to a young widow by the Hindu code of conduct. She registers her protest in every

stage, struggles to lead a life of her own without fear of the taboos of Hindu society, and succeeds in the end. In this aspect Damini is an emancipated woman, who achieves the conjugal life, which is forbidden for a Hindu widow like her by the society. In the struggle for widow's self-actualization, she comes out victoriously. The novel was first serialized in four consecutive issues of **Sabujpatra** magazines from December 1914 to March 1915.

According to Adrienne Rich a Radical feminist, which Robbins quotes "The patriarchal strategy against women is massive, but it includes social and economic deprivations, sexual subordination, denial of female sexuality" (201). Damini is a typical victim of patriarchal oppression as described by Adrienne Rich. She is denied of marital bliss in her life by her husband Sivatosh, who renounces conjugal life as part of his act of abstinence from a life of earthly delights, owing to the influence of his Vaishnavaita Guru, Leelananda Swamy. Sivatosh tries to spiritually discipline his wife Damini by giving away plenty of jewels given to her as dowry to his Guru Leelananda Swamy. Damini is not only sexually repressed by her husband while he is alive, but also is deprived economically after his death. He wills all his properties

to his master, including the guardianship of his young childless wife by way of penalizing for her defiance of religiosity. This hurts her self-pride tremendously.

Damini, who has a mind of enjoying life to its fullest with all her desires and wishes, rebels against the deceitful Guru. She not only non-chantingly defies Leelananda Swamy's instruction, but also mimics the effusive unction with which he treats her. She openly disobeys his orders.

The story of **Chaturanga** begins with Jagmohan the uncle of the central character Sachish. Sachish is an idealistic young man in search of spiritual fulfillment. Initially, his uncle Jagmohan, an atheist who espouses a form of rationalistic humanism, influences him. Sachish rejects his father's narrow-minded orthodoxy and adopts his uncle's worldviews. Purander, Sachish's elder brother, seduces a young widow Nanibala. She is driven out when she is pregnant. To save her from this predicament, Sachish offers to marry her under the Civil Marriages Act with the support of his uncle Jagmohan whose mission in life is to help others. Jagmohan gives shelter to her and makes arrangement for the marriage of Nanibala. She does not refuse to the proposal initially, but commits suicide on the day of marriage, because she is still in love with Purander, her

seducer. It is beyond the imagination of both Sachish and his uncle that Nanibala can possess any feeling of love for the rascally Purander. For them Nanibala is more conceptual in their larger project of social upliftment than a creature of flesh and blood.

Here Tagore points out the mistake of even the social reformer failing to understand the mind of woman as an individual. Nanibala cannot be openly rebellious like Binodini or Damini, but she makes her silence heard through her suicide note. She is a typical traditional woman who renounces her life for her master. For people like Purander young widows are merely unclaimed, unprotected female bodies to be enjoyed without any subsequent burden of responsibilities. Tagore portrays the plight of the young widows, who are left helpless realistically. Tagore observes rightly in his essay on women,

Wherever there is something which is concretely personal and human there is a woman's world. My contention is that, the act of looking at women as a conceptual problem is symptomatic of the anxieties of the colonial male during the advent of colonial modernity. (*Women in Personality* 191)

Soon after, an epidemic of plague breaks out in Calcutta. Jagmohan who turns his house into a hospital for the poor, dies of a dreaded disease. This creates a void for Sachish who finds his fulfillment in the emotional communion with God, by becoming an ardent disciple of Vaishnava Guru Leelanada Swami. The narrator of the story, Sribilas, an admirer of Sachish, and the closest friend from his college days also joins him. They settle down with their Guru in his Ashram in Calcutta, where their encounter with Damini occurs.

Damini has an attraction for Sachish and falls madly in love with him. Sachish too finds it difficult to withstand her charm, but is determined to eliminate woman as "Maya" i.e. illusion. He begs her to free him from her spell by going away to stay with a relative, but she refuses to go. She raises her voice in protest against the male dominated world in which she finds herself and affirms her right to choose. She rejects the patriarchal deciding authority of her life; "Some of you will decide this for me, some that, to suit your convenience-am I a mere pawn in your game?" (56). Damini in Bengali means lightening. Tagore creates Damini as an extraordinary woman of

individuality who could not be cowed down by the patriarchy.

Damini adopts different strategies to win over the heart of Sachish. She makes a show of love to Sribilas in order to arouse jealousy in Sachish. For Damini, it is an unrequited love. Sribilas too loves Damini. For Sribilas, ". . . she (Damini) is like the lightening in the heart of Shraavan rain clouds, having the youthfulness to outward view, but flickering with restless fires within" (37). Sachish secretly writes in his diary,

In Nanibala I saw one arch type of womanhood, the woman who took her upon herself the stain of impurity who gave her life for a sinner, and by her death fitted the cup of life to overflowing. In Damini I have seen another arch type of womanhood who refuses to have any truck with death, she is soaked in the sap of life. She is vibrant and forever filling herself with grace and fragrance like flowers in the spring. She is anxious to miss nothing, reluctant to admit the hermit in her home, stubbornly denying the smallest tithe to the north wind. (37)

There are two dimensions of women characters always travelling in parallel. One submits to patriarchy and the other succeeds at the end. Nanibala is a victim, whereas Damini is a winner in a similar situation. Perhaps with the death of Nanibala, Tagore wants to display the feminine value and the traditional Hindu woman who loves only once. With the character of Damini, Tagore completely inverts the picture of the traditional Hindu woman. Damini is the embodiment and reflection of the latent desires that a person conceals within. She is epicurean in her attitude and forever anxious to leave nothing in life.

She has been willing to delight life to its fullest, with all her hopes and wishes fulfilled, due to which Sachish finds in her the symbol of the archetypal woman. She is so dashing and daring that there is nothing forbidden or rather unattainable in her moral code. Moreover, being young, she has yet to celebrate her marital bliss to the most beneficial, which finds vent in reading romantic novels. She is obstinate enough to question the status quo of the Hindu society. Nevertheless, the only person to whom she can give her life is Sachish.

Sachish-Damini relationship forms the central theme of the novel. It is intended by Tagore as an attempt to trace

the complex issue of the spiritual Vs sensual. Sachish feels that Damini's love for him causes a distraction in his devotional path. He does not reciprocate her love. In order to remain in Sachish's presence, she decides to accompany the Guru and his disciples to the cave. During their stay, Damini stealthily enters the cave at night where Sachish sleeps and falls at his feet as a token of expressing her love-surrender. He at that time is dreaming that a primordial beast is attacking him and kicks her number of times until she leaves him. The scene is rendered in moving imagery. He records:

Then something which I imagined to be a wild beast grabbed my feet. But a wild beast has fur, this had none. . . it was horrible precisely because it was so soft and clammy, that's a heap of hunger. . . its breath was heavy and fast I did not know what the face was like I kicked and kicked, throwing my legs above. . . . I perceived a heap of shaggy mane over my feet. (44)

Tagore is at his best in describing the feelings of a sexually starved young widow, and makes men realize that sexuality in women also should be recognized as a basic instinct equal to that of men. Damini's character has to be

studied against the background of sexual repression inflicted on her by her husband Sivatosh. She is the victim of the specific hegemonistic modes through which patriarchal power operates and castrates female individuality. Damini is like Binodini. Both are full blooded and eager to enjoy what life has to offer. Both the widows refuse to be condemned to a bleak and humiliated existence. Binodini consciously and Damini instinctively, both have a strong personality which nobody can trifle with or ignore. Tagore was the first novelist in Bengali literature to declare that sexual passion of a widow is not to be abhorred. Tagore sublimates both their passions into spiritual level.

Sachish realizes that he cannot avoid reality while treading on the spiritual path. Sribilas also enlightens him by saying that the true way of spiritual discipline is to acknowledge nature and yet rise above it. He compromises with Damini not to leave the "ashram" and in return, she promises to obey him. Damini plays a vital role in Sachish's quest for truth.

The wife of Nabin, one of the disciples of Swami Leelananda, commits suicide following her husband's illicit relation with her sister. Damini points out to Sachish the

limitation of Vaishnavism through this episode. She questions the earthly use of the religion, which tries to replace earthly passion with the passion for the lord. She openly confesses; "your Guru has given nothing at all. He has not been able to give a moment's calm to my troubled soul; you can't put out fire with fire. . . . I beg of you, please do not throw me to that demon" (65). Sachish is convinced by Damini's words. She is responsible for turning him away from the path of Vaishnavism to self-realization through meditation. Thus, Tagore satirizes the hollowness of religion in the name of which women alone are repressed.

The purpose of Tagore's creation of Damini is to insist that a balance must be maintained between spiritual and earthly goals. Shunning away from life will not lead to spiritual enlightenment. According to Tagore, "spirituality" means "living to the fullest". It cannot be attained through the blind faith or adherence to a set of dogmas. It is possible only through self-realization. Damini enables Sachish to realize himself and thus, Tagore elevates Damini to the level of a "spiritual guru".

Damini takes on the role of a true devotee, serves him, and thereby facilitates his quest for truth. Damini is grateful to Sachish for saving her soul from the passion of

the flesh and the imminent moral ruin thereby. She narrates to Sribilas the incidents at the caves, and how she regards the injury, she received from Sachish as sacred. Damini wants to free Sachish. Then both Damini and Sribilas have the identical interest of helping Sachish in his quest for truth. Getting to know each other, and out of societal compulsion, she marries Sribilas who is deeply in love with her from the very beginning. They pass their days in the ecstasy of delight, but not for long. She dies a little more than a year after.

Although Damini appears to embody the idea of woman as an enchantress, she does not remain confined to that stereotype. Tagore lets Damini to develop according to the logic of her own character and often seems to represent the very idea of marital reality. She seeks liberation through her relationship with a man because no other form of freedom is possible within her mental horizon. However, she is much more self-aware. Hence, she becomes Leelananda Swami's prime adversary.

Damini has the courage and intellectual independence to stand up to Leelananda Swami. When he questions her need to re-read the romantic books, she demands; "Your needs are never questioned. Am I alone to be denied any needs of my

own?" (72). Through the narratives of Sribilas and Damini, Tagore questions the institution of marriage. Sribilas-Damini marriage is one of the most striking aspects of the text's modernity. In fulfilling the marriage of Damini, Tagore breaks the convention of the then Hindu society, which allowed the young widows turn to a secluded life in Kashi or selfless service or in premature death. For one thing, it is an instance of widow remarriage and it draws dissension from the newspapers for this reason. It is also an inter-caste marriage. It is a challenge to the social taboos. Although Sribilas and Damini may face social pressures, their own attitude remains liberal.

Sribilas' understanding of her true self is greater than the limits of this relationship. This is the truly unusual feature of their marriage. Sribilas rejects the institutionalized version of marriage, for he marries without claiming the right to happiness. Because it is free of such claims, the Sribilas-Damini marriage is free of normative restraints. It is founded on truth. Damini can love Sribilas and enjoy a happy marriage with him while she is still in love with Sachish. This unconventional understanding of love belongs to the twentieth century

because sociologically and psychologically this is a modern concept. According to Dipanker Roy,

When Damini accepts Sribilas's proposal of marriage, she neither remains a mere widow an 'unclaimed' female-body of people like Purander - nor an ideal feminine principle in the act of creation as in the eyes religious fantasies. . . . but a 'complete' woman. (3)

Damini is an extraordinary creation by Tagore. She differs from the protagonist in *Binodini* in that Damini is more rebellious against customs and traditions and more determined to establish a widow's right to love and conjugality. She asserts her individuality in her marriage with Sribilas. She is the symbol of the social change and advancement of women that had started taking place in the early decades of this twentieth century. She is an emancipated woman.

Tagore's conceptualization of widow remarriage ends in success in this novel, because, Damini the repressed wife of Sivathosh is denied the right to conjugal life by her husband, and Tagore has sanctified the womanhood of Damini by this unconventional marriage with Sribilas. Tagore makes Damini to reach the destination in the journey of

emancipated womanhood. *Chaturanga* can be considered as the last novel of Tagore in which he boldly attacks the worn-out idea of the Hindu traditional views on the institutions of marriage and widow remarriage in particular. His protagonist Damini represents the advent of individualistic, emancipated New Woman of the upcoming progressive new age.

Throughout Tagore's lifetime, his perception of woman was changing over time. There were fast changes in India that inevitably left footprints in his writings. Tagore's changing concept of woman finds its fulfillment in the creation of the character Sohini. Between the two perspectives of Tagore as a romantic writer and as a mystic, his visionary perspective is expressed in the prose writings. In addition to the role of mother and lover, he has unveiled another aspect of woman.

Tagore wrote the short story "The Laboratory" (1940) in the twilight years of his life. It is an interesting story about a typical emancipated modern woman. Tagore has envisioned the ideal New Womanhood in the portrayal of the protagonist, Sohini. Tagore creates Sohini as a model of the modern woman of a self-assertive and independent nature with a futuristic outlook who believes in women's

empowerment. She is a woman with the social consciousness of spreading scientific knowledge among the youth, which she inherits from her husband.

Sohini is a Punjabi girl, twenty years old, with sharp, bright eyes, and a lingering smile on her lips. She has strong, beautiful features of a North Indian cast. As a daughter of poor, underprivileged family, Sohini lives with her grandmother. She has a magnetic personality. She walks in a sari with a knife hidden at her waist. Once she comes across a Bengali civil engineer Nandakishore, who has a laboratory in Calcutta and has a passion for scientific research.

In Sohini's first meeting with Nandakishore, she tells him what the local trading community thinks of him. As he is a Bengali, has no sense of business, it is the Punjabi traders will succeed. Sohini the shrewd woman estimates, "Well, I found, that none of their intrigues worked" (SSS 263). Nandakishore is taken aback by her observation and pleased to have come across such an intelligent girl. "The spirit of her character comes shining from inside her. It is clear that she knows her worth" (SSS 263).

With the request that Nandakishore should settle her grandmother's debt of seven thousand rupees, she proposes

to him. He is stunned by her daring approach. He agrees to it and asks her what could be the reward for doing so. She replies that she would always remain by his side and would see to it that no one tries to cheat him, except herself. Nandakishore laughs at this and gives his ring to wear as a token of marriage. He saves her grandmother from selling the house. Tagore seems to advocate a simple marriage of contract and a marriage for which the bridegroom gives the dowry to the bride. Through Nandakishore, Tagore suggests that women should not be humiliated for their economic dependence on men. Nandakishore makes an unconventional marriage with Sohini, by breaking all the norms and strictures of the society.

Here Tagore stresses the companionate marriage hitherto unexpected in Bengali Literature. Woman as mother, wife, mistress, and goddess are stereotyped. However, friendship between husband and wife is first introduced by Tagore in this short story. Nandakishore used to say, "An engineer husband and a wife only a home maker minding the kitchen are not acceptable. The knots that bind them are not the same. I will make them uniform" (SSS 264). He claims that he and Sohini belong to the same caste by temperament. This is the only character in Tagore's short

stories, where the woman selects her man. The man is not the suitor. Even though Nandakishore knows that she is an unchaste woman, he accepts Sohini not for her good looks but for her emancipated personality. In Tagore's words "The situation from which Nandakishore had raised her was neither secluded nor very pure. But this obstinate and indomitable man cared nothing for society's norms and strictures" (SSS 264). They share a common faith. He makes her also involve in his scientific research activities. She is a woman with an individuality of her own. Nirmal Kumar Sidhanta observes, ". . . Sohini, an unchaste woman, according to conventional standards, a tower of strength to the man of action she has chosen, faithful to his memory in trying to build up the institution (Laboratory) he had started" (18).

Equality of the sexes, casteless society, and mutual faith between the couple in marriage, and profession and position of power for women are the messages conceptualized by Tagore through the characters Sohini and Nandakishore. Their love is not restricted to a mere physical relation between husband and wife. There is a bond of respect and gratitude which takes their conjugal life to a higher plane. Tagore has shown a remarkable understanding of a

woman's psyche, perceives the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocates for gender freedom and decision making power for women in the family and the larger society. What Tagore realized has become a subject of debate in the twenty first century and then it is accepted that housekeeping should also be considered as a job, which should be paid suitably by the husbands. Tagore has gone into the crux of the problem several decades in advance.

An accident that occurred in his laboratory while doing a daring experiment leads to the sudden demise of Nandakishore in his late middle age. Sohini has to close down the laboratory, and face a number of litigations. She gets back the possession of the laboratory after winning all the cases using her charm and womanpower. In Tagore's times, The "Mitakara" school of thought was prevalent in North India other than Bengal. It held that only male descendent acquired the right to receive the ancestral property and a widow without a son was entirely dependent on the joint family for maintenance. Tagore was very much concerned about the economic deprivations of widows on this account. Tagore makes Sohini the New Woman to fight for her husband's property both legally and using her womanpower

and ultimately wins. Sohini not only uses her feminine weapons whenever she needs to, more importantly applies her analytical mind and sharp intellect. Sohini confesses: "How else have women survived through the ages? Feminine wiles need clever planning, just like the rules of battle; but of course one need to top it up with some honey as well. That is a woman's natural fighting style" (SSS 268). Tagore believes that by natural instinct women are creative and graceful. Indeed Tagore approves the tricks women sometimes employ. He names it as "woman's strength". He writes,

Of course, women do resort to deceptions that are also another aspect of women's strength. The demands of men when they exceed the women's resources are often met by ruses and machinations. (Tagore, **Rabindra Rachnabali** 21)

There is a similarity to the woman character of empowerment portrayed by Namitha Gokhle (1956-) a modern Indian feminist novelist. Criticizing Namitha Gokhle's novels N. M. Nigam observes: "Namitha Gokhle, in her novels, has tried to illustrate how a woman can use her power to create a space for her existence. She has shown two ways to empower her womanhood. One is through female bonding and another is by using her sexuality" (56).

The similarity of ideas obviously differentiates Tagore from the conventional writers and explicates his feminist consciousness. Though brought up in an orthodox family, Tagore does not treat widows as a curse in the society. He creates a space, even for a fallen woman to look beyond the ordinary households. Tagore allows them to participate not only in the freedom struggle, but paves a way towards scientific temperament to aspire beyond the ordinary restrictions.

Normally women, moreover, majority of widows, of Tagore's time does not find any pleasure in impersonal ideas or in an existence of action detached from the daily chores of life. While widows of Sohini's age spend thousands of rupees on the agents of various gods and goddesses to ensure the souls of their husband's enter into heaven, she does not have any belief in such things. Here Tagore indicts at the Hindu rituals of "Shraddha", a ceremony done in paying homage to the departed soul of dear ones. As a true Brahmo, he does not believe in wasting the human power and resources in the superstitious rituals. A woman in Indian society is more obsessed with such rituals. Instead, Sohini likes to spend the money in the development of scientific research among the Indian youth in memory of

her husband, which could be the true tribute to her husband's soul. Tagore delineates Sohini as a representative of ideal womanhood who withers all the superstitious inhibitions, which tie up the Indian women. This embodiment of Sohini is the little step towards tapping the rational mindset among women. Tagore might have thought that by making a widow to ridicule such hypocrisies would make a powerful impact on the other widows.

Tagore creates Sohini as an awful woman who is compassionate towards animals, unlike other ordinary women who would sacrifice the animals in the name of religion. Sohini treats the dog, which has broken its leg in a car accident. She has a firm determination to build a hospital for the lame and blind dogs and rabbits in the biology lab. Sohini is full of affection. Sohini loves her grandmother and she rushes to look after her during her illness, leaving behind the laboratory. The tenderness and humanity of Sohini make her a complete woman.

Sohini is not frail. She wants to spend every rupee of the property on the laboratory. Finding a person to continue the research in her husband's laboratory has become her sole aim in life. As a determined person she does not allow any hindrance to thwart her mission. Through

Sohini's allegiance to her dedication, Tagore portrays the strong bond and loyalty of an exceptional lover.

He initiated her into the path of salvation through learning. . . . The good that he saw in me far outweighed the bad. Where he trusted me most—a foundling like me—that's one trust I've never betrayed, and that I'm trying to maintain still with my heart and soul. . . . I didn't have to go by the scriptures to play the devoted wife.
(SSS 284)

Sohini reveals herself as a devoted wife, but not as exemplified in the Hindu scriptures. Tagore destabilizes the traditional purity and virtuality assigned to a wife. Here Sohini's devotion towards her husband lies in her prime duty to fulfill his aim and not merely in doing ceremony. Tagore believes in the solemnity of marriage, based on harmony and not on biased sacrifice and possession.

Sohini's beauty is permeated by intelligence. She has the power of enduring pain as well as intellect. She is not the ideal of womanly perfection in the conventional sense. The ideal of chastity, which has always been held high in the country, has not been her guiding principle. She is

prepared to flout it out, when that serves her purpose. She confesses, “. . . women were not lifelong ascetics” (SSS 272). She hints that women “. . . have a tough time to keep up their pretence. Draupadis and Kunthis have to pretend like Sitas and Savithris” (ibid) of the Hindu epics. It is bold statement not only about her but about womankind in general. It is the society which has forced women to suppress their physical desires and pretend indifference to the sexual passions. Draupadi and Kunti are characters in ***The Mahabharata*** the Hindu epic. Draupadi had five husbands. Four different men were the fathers of Kunti's four sons. Tagore makes this reference through Sohini for the reason that she has Nila an illegitimate daughter not born to Nandakishore, thereby making the patriarchy, not to denigrate Sohini's womanhood. Interestingly, Kunti and Draupadi are highly regarded in Hindu mythology because of their other eminent qualities. Just like them Tagore wants to posit Sohini in a high pedestal in the upcoming new age. Through Sohini's character Tagore envisioned a new age where men would initiate women's education and women would contribute their might in social service like the development of scientific research.

Sohini agrees that she might be impure in body, but pure in mind. Her bad "desires and heaped-up sins" (SSS 272) are burnt on the funeral pyre of her husband. She claims: "The sacrificial fire is burning right here in this Laboratory" (SSS 272). Sohini's courage in admitting her weakness and her determination in carrying out the research in the laboratory to accomplish the ambition of her husband is a bold construction of Tagore. By Sohini's plurality of sex, Tagore attacks the men who practiced polygamy.

Sohini has a detached outlook towards her life and role as an individual and dedicates herself in scientific improvement. She defies the social restrictions imposed on her as a widow. She does not succumb to the mere sentiments of motherhood in fulfilling Nila's wayward and wanton life in enjoying Nandakishore's property. She dares to unveil Nila's birth identity, which any ordinary woman will never dream to do so. She reveals the fact that Nila is not Nandakishore's daughter and cannot inherit his property. An illegitimate child is a disgrace for a mother. To admit her sin in public is a challenge to the then contemporary society. Tagore has intended to do that through Sohini. Sohini does not behave as a conventional mother. Tagore through Sohini announces to the womenfolk that a woman's

identity lies not as a mother or a wife but as an individual human being.

Tagore makes Sohini repeatedly declare that she is a Punjabi woman who is determined to achieve her aim. She will not spare even her own daughter if she is a hindrance to her aspiration. She also announces that she is not a Bengali woman to weep and stay quiet. By these comparisons Tagore wants Bengali women to realize their individuality and womanpower and to become emancipated like Sohini.

Sohini's promiscuous daughter is diametrically opposite to the idealistic, social conscious mother who does not hesitate to violate all the traditional values for the sake of science. Commenting on the story Tagore himself has written, which Majumdar quotes,

I have done it deliberately. . . . The episode of . . . bodily affairs are secondary. Nila the daughter will pass quite easily, but Sohini will be difficult to accept. Yet I have shown with emphasis the great difference, the mental make-up between mother and daughter. (142)

The above statement clearly delineates his aim in creating Sohini, a more powerful female character dear to his heart. She represents the New Woman heralding the new age, who

challenges the conventions of the society. Tagore is quite accustomed to the adverse criticism of his literary and political thoughts by the Hindu Revivalists. Naturally, he suspects that his Sohini belonging to the future world may not be acceptable to the then prevailing conservative society.

Tagore delineates a situation where the male character is guided and controlled by womanpower. When Sohini strives hard to bring Rebati Bhattacharya to continue the research work in her husband's laboratory, it is told that the aunt who with her superstitious belief can prevent his initiation towards research. In Tagore's words, "You know what matriarchal society means. The woman is superior to man in such societies. The wave of that Dravidian culture once flowed through Bengal" (SSS 267). Tagore, suggests for a matriarchal system in lieu of patriarchy.

Sohini's character speaks about using womanpower to face the patriarchal suppression. Here the same womanpower through Rebati's aunt is a hindrance to his taking charge of her husband's laboratory. Her own daughter Nila's womanpower also has its own influence in distracting Rebati's research. Sohini makes it clear to Nila that she would not allow her marriage with Rebati Bhattacharya.

Pishi the aunt in mother figure dominates and controls Rebati. She stops the marriage of Nila and Rebati. Just when Rebati is getting ready to marry, Pishima comes in and calls, "Come with me Rebati, and Rebati like an obedient boy follows her out. He did not look back for once" (SSS 269). By breaking the marriage, Sohini's laboratory is saved from wayward Nila. The matriarchal force of his aunt wins at last.

Sohini is the prototype of Rabindranath Tagore's ideal, emancipated woman, who asserts her individuality and wields power on men. From the feminist perspective, Sohini's character possesses the qualities of women of Post-Feminism. Post-Feminism in Indian English Literature is a byproduct of Western Liberalism in general and feminist movement in particular.

Post-Feminist fiction is an attempt to achieve a balance between the sexes by recognizing the bond of symbiosis between men and women. With new perceptions and attitudinal changes in society, the impact of girl power has been recognized. . . . Women are represented as more assertive, self-assured and confident. Women claim an equal footing with men. They voice forth Betty

Friedan's feminist discourse in *The Feminine Mystique*, 'For women, as for man the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need'. (Tandon 97)

In the short story "Laboratory" Rabindranath Tagore has depicted a new age where there is no more patriarchal oppression. There is the reversal of role to that of matriarchal force, where women gain the upper hand. Beyond physical charm and chastity, a man attempts to perceive the intelligence and spiritual beauty of a woman. A woman has the choice of selecting her man. Equality of the sexes is maintained. A mother and a daughter break all the social conventions and values with regard to sexuality. Sohini the protagonist is a rare woman character with a social consciousness who violated all traditional values for the sake of her idealism. As a widow, she regains her right to the property of her husband through a legal battle. In uniting individualism and idealism, Sohini is the New Woman of Tagore. Considering the fact that this was his last short story just a few months before his demise, it is obvious that Tagore has envisioned the advent of Feminism in Indian society by the creation of such a bold woman with

a futuristic outlook. She challenges the conservative society, with the unconventional marriage, with her open views on women's sexuality and by her untraditional devotion to her husband in carrying out his scientific temperament. She stands on a higher pedestal than other men and women. In creating Sohini, Tagore's experimentation and ideas for women comes to a complete shape.

In the selected short stories and a novel analysed in Chapter Four under the title "Emancipated Women: The New Women of Tagore", it is observed how Rabindranath Tagore has depicted his female characters as very bold, courageous, assertive, self-reliant and conscious of their identity. They are unconventional in the sense that they are no longer passive, suppressed suffering women of the traditional type. His emancipated women characters seem to follow what Naomi Wolf, the later day feminist writer, who writes in *Fire with Fire* (1983), "Women must give up what she styles 'victim' feminism, stop complaining, and embrace 'power' feminism" (Walters 139).

Woman's liberation from the sexually indifferent husband in the story "Giribala", Kalyani's celibacy and devotion to social work as a mission of her life and as a way of protest against dowry system in "Woman Unknown", the

asserting individuality of Mrinal in "Letter from a Wife", the determined widow Damini who achieves her right to love and conjugality in *Chaturanga*, Sohini's woman empowerment to save her husband's laboratory in "The Laboratory" are all exemplary characters of Tagore as defined in the later day Feminist ideologies. In these Fiction, Tagore's women protagonists come forward to maintain their equal rights and positions in the society. They pose a challenge to men. By rejecting the patriarchal influence, they refuse to be humiliated. They come forward to educate themselves and pursue a career. They rebel and revolt against the patriarchy and come out victorious.

Tagore gives solutions to the problems of dowry, sexual oppression, arranged marriage and suggests for regaining individuality, freedom from the patriarchal set up of the family system, and the need for women empowerment, through the women characters of the selected short stories and a novel analyzed in the Chapter Four. Tagore's creation of such emancipated women characters several decades before the Feminist ideologies were evolved goes to prove that Rabindranath Tagore was a harbinger of Feminism far ahead of his time.