Chapter One

Introduction

Literature can have the breadth and throb of life only when it keeps pace with changing image of the women. (Bhatt 9)

The ever-changing reality of life inevitably reflects itself in literature. The position of women in society is no exception to this phenomenon. The status of women all over the world, particularly in India, changed between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. The personality of the typical Indian woman was overwhelmingly swamped by the male-oriented culture. She was left with no mind or personality of her own. She was even glorified in the suffering inflicted upon her by the wanton male. The glorification of the Sita image, particularly by women, the “pativrata” ideal, and the craving to be a mother of sons are the reflections of the male attitudes to which she was succumbed through ages. She was defined as the centre of culture, but actually imprisoned in walls of the family and shackled by tradition.

The change in the position of woman in any society is a reliable index to social change in general. The extent of change in her status in life and society could be assessed
by reference to her image in literature. In this research, an attempt has been made to explore the metamorphosis of Indian womanhood in Rabindranath Tagore’s fiction.

Rabindranath Tagore is a pride of India, and a jewel in the crown of Indian English Literature. His creativity has manifested itself in a variety of literary forms like poetry, essay, novel, short story, drama, dance drama, music, and painting. He was also a social reformer and educator. He was a proponent of the freedom of individuality.

To understand Rabindranath Tagore, it is necessary to know about the age in which he produced such a vast literature which has become the golden heritage for the generations to come. In his autobiographical writings Tagore says that he was born at the confluence of three major historical movements in Bengal; religious, literary and political. These upheavals ushered in a period of Renaissance. In Indian history, it is customary to refer to the period from 1815 to 1860 as the period of Renaissance. According to the eminent historian Jadunath Sarkar, which R.C.Majumdar quotes, Renaissance in India was “... wider, deeper and more revolutionary than that of Europe after the fall of Constantinople” (1).
The period of Indian history preceding the birth of Tagore (1861) was full of convulsions and tensions arising out of the conflict between the foreign invaders of the country and the old rulers. The Sepoy Mutiny (1857) was followed by a total crushing of all oppositions, but at the same time new forces of oppositions were forming and the equilibrium seemed to be sustainable. The year 1860 is important for national and international reasons. It introduced a decade during which the alignment of world powers was drastically transformed, new rivalries were born, and especially in the East, there began a social change which had hardly any parallel in the past. From one aspect, Tagore’s Bengal fully shared the stability which is associated with Victorian England; while both Bengal and India were subject to the same disintegrating forces that broke up the Victorian cult.

Tagore appeared on the stage of Indian history at a time when India was undergoing a remarkable cultural revolution. The expanding middle class was experiencing a new kind of consciousness which was felt not only in the literary and intellectual activities, but also in the fields of socio-political movements.

Raja Rammohan Roy (1722-1833) is described as the foremost among the builders of modern India. He was very
susceptible to Western influences, but his roots were firmly embedded in India’s past and he achieved a sort of synthesis between the East and the West which is so far beyond the average Indian social consciousness. He was the first spokesperson of the new middle class, of its urge for freedom, knowledge and power. He was “the first thought-leader of India in modern times, who had also turned his attention to the Bengali language” (Reminiscences, 247). He initiated the movement for the abolition of “Sati.” He advocated the introduction of modern education. He championed the freedom of the press and raised his voice for reforms in the fields of the judiciary. Roy has been called “the Pathfinder” of modern India by Tagore and his influence was the greatest on the development of his personality.

Between Raja Rammohan Roy and Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, though there was a great difference in their family background, both were inspired by one ideal, Humanism. Roy by his tireless efforts abolished the practice of “Sati”, by an enactment of law in 1829 by the then British government. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar also contributed in making law for the legal sanction of widow remarriage in 1856. Among the social reformers after Raja Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar there comes the names of
Dwarakanath Tagore, grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore. He was a great admirer of Roy and believed in a complete revolution in India and the consequent progressive changes in the society, especially in Bengal society. In social reform work, it was the joint appeal of Prince Dwarakanath and Raja Rammohan Roy which made Lord William Bentinck to pass the law prohibiting “Sati”—the burning of Indian widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands.

Tagore’s religious life was shaped by the teachings of Upanishads from which he learnt that life should be lived as close to nature as possible. He was born in Brahmo community. However, his father Debendranath never severed his relation with Hinduism. He saw that his sons were invested with the sacred thread and all his children were married in the Brahmin caste. A religion based on The Upanishads, abandoning the ritualistic worship of Hinduism was the primary object of Brahmo Samaj. Raja Rammohan Roy started his Brahmo Samaj to spread the social reform among the people, particularly to ameliorate the condition of women in the society. Maharishi Debendranath joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1841, Women’s education, widow-remarriage, abolition of “Sati”, were the important task of Brahmo Samaj. Brahmo Samaj represented the most popular movement of the period. Yet it did not produce more than a ripple on
the surface of the larger contemporary society. The 
movement acted as a powerful lever to all progressive ideas 
and movements initiated and organized by the intellectual 
middle class. The impact of Brahmo Samaj upon the society 
of those times is thus described by Sisir Kumar Ghose, “The 
impact of Brahmo Samaj was changing Hindu society in many 
directions. Just as the young progressives were eager to 
get rid of outworn beliefs, the orthodox fondly hoped to 
preserve the past” (49).

During the post Sepoy Mutiny period, the political 
awareness gained momentum. The reactionary activities of 
British rulers made the Indians to organize their political 
life. Rajnarain Bose established the society for the 
promotion of national feeling among the natives of Bengal. 
Jyothindranath and Rabindranath Tagore also joined the 
secret society formed by Rajnarain Bose. The Indian 
National Congress was established in 1885. Gandhiji entered 
the political arena in 1917.

Tagore did not fall in line either with Gandhian 
political philosophy or practice. But he greatly admired 
Gandhiji and respected his personality. He did not support 
revolutionary terrorists, though he had a regard for their 
courage and conviction. Human values were to him more than 
the power and the glory of the nation. He was suspicious of
violent political action and he felt that if people did not hold human value as paramount they would be surely degrading and destroying themselves.

The Bengal Renaissance produced such a great writers like Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, (1820-91), Michael Madusudan Dutt (1824-70), Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94), Toru Dutt (1856-77), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), and Saratchandra Chatterjee (1876-1938). Referring to the Bengali literary Renaissance, Charles Andrews commented which Sarada quotes, “... if Rammohan Roy may be linked to the roots of the tree of literature, planted deep in the soil, Debendranath may be compared to its strong and vigorous stem and Rabindranath to its fruits and flowers” (8).

Among his contemporaries, Tagore made a friendship with a band of eminent scholars and writers who enriched Bengali literature in several ways. Among them, the most prominent were Ramendra Sunder Trivedi, the scientist and philosopher and Hara Prasad Sastri, the historian and archeologist.

Tagore was equally influenced by the writings of Micheal Madhusudan Dutt who introduced blank verse in Bengali literature. The writings of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar which contributed to the setting of new cultural background in India exerted tremendous influence on him. He liked and
appreciated the poems of Toru Dutt, Prasad Ghose and also of Sarojini Naidu. Thus, Tagore learnt from each and every one of his predecessors and contemporaries who appeared on India’s cultural field and tried to reshape it on modern lines. In shaping new cultural, social and political background of modern India, Tagore stood as the chief guardian and the Great Sentinel to the Last day of his life.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Bengali literature was nearly eight hundred years old. It had a rich literature, solely in verse. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, prose was never used except for writing letters or legal deeds. However, the far-reaching political and social changes that took place in Bengal with the establishment of the British rule created favourable conditions for the growth of Bengali prose. Charles Wilkins, a British Civil servant of the East India Company established a Bengali printing press in 1778. It printed *A Grammar of The Bengali Language* written by another Civil servant, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed. William Carey dignified the Bengali prose. Carey was a great scholar of the Bengali and Sanskrit languages. His book *Dialogues* (1802) was intended to facilitate the learning of the Bengali language. The lessons in the book were set in the form of
imaginary conversations. Carey also published a grammar and an English-Bengali Dictionary. At the same time other prose works *Pratapaditya Charitra* (1802), written by Ram Ram Basu and *Batrts Simhasan* written by Mrtyunjay Bidyalankar appeared in the same year. Journals played an important role in the evolution of Bengali prose. The first journal in Bengali, *Samachar Darpan* appeared in 1818. Very soon enlightened Indian like Raja Rammohan Roy brought out his journal *Sambad Kaumidi* in 1821 in which he launched an attack on orthodox Hinduism. Another important journal *Tattvabodini Patrika* that was the voice of Brahmo Samaj was founded by Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, one of the great social reformers also contributed a number of Bengali prose works like *Vetal Pancavimsati* (1847) *Sakuntala* (1854) and *Sitar Banbas* (1860).

By the middle of the nineteenth century Bengali prose had come to stay because it was much Sanskritised and difficult to understand. The spoken idiom was regarded as unfit for the language of literature. A change however came with the publication of the book *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (1858) by Chand Mitra which is the “first work in Bengali which can be described as a novel” (Clark 33). It was written in a spoken dialect understood by all Bengalis. In spite of
its merits, the portrayal of characters in the book was weak and the denouncement of the plot was unconvincing. It is regarded more as farce than a novel. According to Humayun Kabir neither Mitra nor any of his contemporaries were sensitive to the inner conflicts brought about by the new mode of life. The thought developed under western impact and old traditional outlook handed down through many generations.

Indian society, being traditional and conservative, did not allow the mingling either of the sexes or of people of different castes and communities. There was no scope for adventure. The Indian climate was not favourable for the growth of the Novel since “it needs a self-conscious and sophisticated society where there is recognition of individual dignity and rights” (Kabir 3).

The establishment of the British rule in India during the years 1757-1857 helped to break the old feudal order and created conditions for the development of the middle class. The permanent settlement of land revenue created a new middle class of landowners or “Zamindars” which came into existence because of the British connection. They were naturally influenced by the English language and British culture.
The nineteenth century is regarded by many as a great landmark in the evolution of the culture of the Indian people as “it witnessed their transition from the medieval to the modern age” (Majumdar 1). The transition to the modern age was facilitated by the introduction of English as the medium of instruction in 1835. To this class belonged men like Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Chandu Menon and Kandukuri Veeresalingam. They became the harbingers of western education and culture through literature. They were pioneers of the new genre of literature—the novel—in their respective mother tongues, Bengali, Malayalam and Telugu.

The spread of the English language and the growth of Bengali prose writings created the necessary social climate for the newly emerged middle class to experiment in their language with the new literary forms in vogue in the English language. The immense popularity of the novels of Walter Scott among the Bengali elite of Calcutta naturally favoured the appearance of the historical novel in Bengali.

The first great Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94) began his literary career with an English novel, *Rajmohan’s Wife* published in 1864. Realizing his inadequacy in that language, he switched over to his mother tongue, Bengali, in which he published in 1865, his
historical romance entitled *Durgesh Nandini*. Kabir remarks, “The book literally took Bengal by storm. Tagore was a child when *Durgesh Nandini* appeared, but his adolescence was lit up by Bankim’s genius” (10). Apart from that, He wrote fourteen novels. In the novel *Visavriksha (The Poison Tree)* 1873) an intimate glimpse of the middle class domestic life is presented. Nevertheless, it remarks a setback for Chatterjee as a creative writer as he begins here to assert himself a teacher of morality and does not remain satisfied as an interpreter of life. He held orthodox views on women’s and social problems and did not support widow remarriage. *Raja Simha* (1881) claims its full recognition as a historical fiction. *Anandamath* (1882) is a political novel. In *Krishnakantar Will* (1878), the lesson is that the self-sacrifice of a loyal wife can ultimately save the soul of a man and that purely carnal love can only lead to ruin. His popular novels include *Mrinalini* (1869), *Debi Choudarini* (1884), and *Sitaram* (1886).

Takarnath Ganguly (1845-91) dealt with the life of the lower middle class people. Their jealousies and sufferings were the subject of his domestic novel *Svarnalata* (1873). Ganguli wrote three stories and two more novels where he derived the characters directly from life and his own experience.
Ramesh Chandra Dutt (1848-1909), better known as R.C. Dutt was president of the Indian National Congress. He took to writing historical and domestic romances at the instance of Bankimchandra Chatterjee. His first two novels were semi historical romances. *Bangavijita* (*Conquerer of Bengal* 1874) takes to the days of Akbar and *Madavikankan* (1877) takes to the days of Shahjahan. Dutt’s novel *Bengal Peasant Life* (1874) deals with mild romances of lower middle class life in rural and urban West Bengal. In *Samsar* (*The Family Life* 1886), Dutt staunchly supports widow remarriage. It indicates his stand point contrasted against Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s popularity of his trim novel *The Poison Tree*. Dutt has translated the whole of the *Rig Veda* to Bengali prose in 1887. His *Civilization in India* in two volumes is a good study of the cultural history of the country.

Indranath Banerji (1849-1911) was well known for his satirical writings in his verses, sketches, stories, and novel. Banerji’s satirical novel *Ksudiram* created a vogue of attacking the progressive society. It was known for the orthodox view of the author.

Swarna Kumari Devi (1855-1932), an elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore, was the first all-round accomplished literary woman of Bengal. Her literary activities continued
for half a century, including novels, dramas, short stories, and poetry. Her first novel Dipnirvan (The Burning Out of the Lamp 1876) had for its plot the well-known historical story of Pritiviraj. The next two books Chinnamukul (The Plucked Blossom 1879), a novel and Malati (1879), a long story, have for their theme sisterly love. Among the later novels (Snehalata 1892) is the most significant. Herein appears for the first time some of the problems of the advanced set of the middle class society. She also edited the monthly magazine Bharati which was started by his elder brothers in 1877.

In the mid-nineteenth century, many enlightened individuals equipped with learning that came from the West as well as from the ancient Indian sources were active in Bengal to bring out reform in the existing structure. The literary predecessors of Tagore paved the way for the improvement of society. There was progression as well as oppositions against the social reforms. The zeal of the reformers to change the prevailing social customs and eradicate illiteracy left its mark on Rabindranath Tagore who dealt with the life’s issues at length in novels and short stories. In Bengal a new weekly magazine Hitabadi (1891) started publishing serials of novels in Bengali, contributed by the great Bengali novelist Bakimchandra
Chatterjee, and short stories by Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore wrote his short stories, mostly in Bengali. Tagore himself translated some of his stories into English or got them translated by others. Some of his most popular stories are “The Cabuliwallah”, “Subha”, “The Postmaster”, “The Babus of Nayanjore” and “The Castaway”. It is to the credit of Rabindranath Tagore, being the earliest writer in Indian languages, who took the short story form to great heights in technique. He wrote totally six Short Stories, one story per week, for six issues of the *Hitabadi* magazine (1891).

It is not an easy task to summarize the literary achievements of the prolific writer like Tagore (1861-1941), whose entire career, right from the age of twelve to the age of eighty, when he died, was one continuous ceaseless harvest of literary compositions. Tagore’s aversion for schooling did not get him any academic qualifications. It was compensated by the arrangement for learning Bengali, English and Sanskrit at home itself, which trained his sensibility at a very early age. Asit Bandyopadhyay observes:

In his father he found a grave but pleasing personality. His sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi referred to as ‘Bauthakurani’ fulfilled the emotional needs of Rabindranath who lost his
mother when he was only a child. Bauthakurani’s unreserved affection touched the right chord and drew out the latent poetic talent of the boy. His artistic temperament and the poetic heart began to slowly unfold welling up spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Encouragement from the elders, company of Akshaychandra Chaudhuri, the mystic, multifarious poetry of Biharilal lead to an indomitable urge for poetic expression. (6)

His first published works at the age of twenty were **Rudracanda** (1881), **Valmiki-Pratibha** (1881) and **Kalmrgaya** (1882), all belonged to the lyrical dramas. In the poem **Saisab-Sangit** (1884), we find the poet’s longing for Nature and love of the wide, open countryside. **Sandhyasangit** (**Evening song**, 1882), **Prabhsangit** (**Morning song**, 1883), **Chabi O Gan** (**Picture and Song**, 1884), and **Kadi O Kamal** (**Sharp and Flat**, 1886) showed his attainment of maturity in poetry. The period covering six years, from thirty to thirty-five years of his age is regarded as the best period of Tagore’s poetic career. His poetic sensibility was manifested in **Manasi** (1890), **Sonar Tari** (1894), **Citra** (1896) and **Citali** (1896).

Between 1900 and 1910, ten poetical works came out. **Katha** (1900), **Kahini** (1900), **Ksanika** (1900), **Noibedya**
(1910), *Smaran* (1902-1903), *Sisu* (1906), *Kheya* (1910) with the publication of *Gitanjali* in 1913, he shot to universal fame which won for him the Nobel Prize for Literature. Two other contemporary collections of songs – *Gitimalya* (*Garland of Songs* 1914), and *Gitali* (*Small Songs* 1915) added to his glory.

His poetical period of forty years from *SandhyaSangit* to *Mahua* (1882-1929) was a period of continuous progress, when Tagore moved from success to success, with inexhaustible creativity. His last poetical works of the final period are: *Prantik* (1938), *Sejuti* (1938), *Akaspradip* (1939), *Nabajatak* (1940), *Sanai* (1940), *Rogsayyay* (1940), *Arogya* (1941), *Janmadine* (1941), and *Seslekha* (1941). A remarkable combination of wisdom and realistic outlook make these poems strikingly fresh.

Though Tagore is essentially a genius of lyrics, he has affixed the stamp of genius in every other literary form-drama, lyrical drama, story, novel etc. that he practiced and perfected. The plays *Rudracanda* (1881), *Valmiki - Pratibha* (1881), *Prakrtir Pratisodh* (1884), *Mayar khela* (1888) were written in the youth of Tagore. *Citrangada, Bidayabhisap* (1894) and *Kahini* (1900) are some products of his mature period. His dramas, being the vehicle of ideas, are all symbolic and allegorical.
Among his several dramas, *Citrangada* deserves a special mention. The story revolves around the love between Arjuna and Citrangada, princess of Manipur, taken from Mahabharata. Only the situation is taken, Tagore makes changes in the plot of the story to project his own philosophy of life. Citrangada, the princess of Manipur who looks manly and is not so beautiful gets a celestial beauty for one year by invoking Madana, the god of love and wins Arjuna. She marries Arjuna and bears him a child. The borrowed beauty disappears after a year’s time. Arjuna too is freed from the slavery of the senses. Asit Bandyopadhyay observes, “Rabindranath uses this story to show that a woman is not only an object of sensual pleasure for man; she takes part in his joys and sorrows and is intimately associated with his entire life” (31). Nevertheless *Citrangada* remained the best poetic drama of Tagore. The other classical types of five-act plays written by Tagore are *Raja O Rani* (1889), *Visarjan* (1890), *Malini* (1896), *Mukut* (1908), and *Prayascitta* (1909).

Tagore’s concern for the realities in life made him go into the social structures, rituals, traditions and conventions. The attention he gave to these aspects drew him closer to contemporary life situations and necessitated the use of prose. Tagore wrote novels, short stories and
novellas as well where he investigated with the eye of a keen observer, the animosity towards social prejudices existing in life. He used the prose form as a vehicle of his ideals concerning humanity. Tagore’s contribution to the evolution of the Bengali novel is very significant. Mulk Raj Anand declares, “Tagore was in the formal sense, the first novelist of India” (63). Nikhil Govind records in The Hindu dated 10 November 2013:

The influence of Tagore’s novels is evident in the oeuvre of writers. . . . The novels are Tagore’s greater legacy. They have too often been sidelined by the immediate beauty of his poems and songs. Premchand was full of admiration for Tagore’s imagination of the feminine voice. (3)

The first successful novel of Tagore is Bou-Takuranir Hat (Market of Daughter-in-law 1883), written when he was only twenty-two. Rajarsi (1887), Choker Bali (Binodini, 1903), Naukadubi (Boat Wreck, 1906), Yogyog (1929), Gora (1910), Ghare Baire (Home and the World, 1916) Char Adhyay (Four Chapters, 1934) are popular, effective novels, which dealt with various social problems and also psychological problems of human minds.

Tagore wrote nearly one hundred short stories during almost all the period of his long career. His most
productive period of short story writing was the 1890s and fifty-nine stories belong to this decade. He wrote forty four short stories between 1891 and 1895. Tagore wrote only three stories before 1890 and eighty stories between 1901 and 1912. Ten short stories were written during the year 1914. His short story collections in English translation are *Glimpses of Bengal Life* (1913), *Hungry Stones and Other Stories* (1916), *Mashi and Other Stories* (1918), *Broken Nest* (1925), *The Parrot’s Training* (1944), and *The Runaway* (1959) published posthumously.

It is seen in Tagore’s short stories, the complexities of human characters, the mysticism of nature, inscrutable fate or the misfortune of man on account of the tyranny of the society, on children, women, and lowest strata of people. Fully conscious of his own sensibility, it seemed that Tagore took the medium of the short story to display his anguish and apathy over the pitiable conditions of the oppressed people of society at large. The problems of modern life, man-woman relationships and the final triumph of humanism provided a pageant of the entire Bengali life.

In general, the theme of Tagore’s short stories is generally very touching, particularly at the end of the stories. To those who criticized the short stories of Tagore as highly poetic in nature, Tagore himself had
replied that they are out of touch with reality. It was the
everyday reality brought close to the mind and heart of the
reader by the genius of a poet. Asit Bandyopadhyay
observes,

> Whatever may be Rabindranath’s position as a
> novelist there is no doubt that he ranks among
> the greatest short story writers of the world.
> . . . Rabindranath’s success as a master short
> story writer was actually ensured by his
> essentially lyrical temperament since; there is a
> close affinity between a short story and a lyric.

(62)

He delved deep into the psychology of man and the riddle of
existence in his short stories which are universal in their
appeal. He was not only true creator of the short stories
in Bengali; he raised it to the status of an independent
literary form.

Tagore as an expert artist wove his theme of social
consciousness, social reality, spiritual and metaphysical
issues through the medium of short stories and novels. In
Francis Bacon’s phrases, Tagore’s short stories and novels
are always to be “chewed and digested” by the readers. His
short stories contain almost all the features of a great
work of art. They have a fine fusion of feeling and form.
Tagore’s contribution to Bengali literature spread over a span of nearly sixty five years. His creativity remained ever green, subsequent writers, especially those of the “Kallol” (The Young Intellectual) group who tried to blame Tagore for his outdated views, were beaten out by his writings in his twilight years which excelled in modernity. Tagore’s writings were never static. As Tagore grew, his writings changed over time from tradition to modernity. His views on women also changed tremendously with the changing times.

For a full century, the House of Jorasanko, where Rabindranath Tagore was born, functioned as the cultural centre of this country. For three successive generations the members of this family led all the important movements of the country in the field of religion, literature, music, education and social reforms.

Dwarakanath Tagore, grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore was a contemporary of Raja Rammohan Roy. The social reforms of Rammohan Roy had the encouragement and financial co-operation of Dwarakanath. Both were of the opinion that English education for both men and women and Western scientific knowledge would improve the condition of the then decadent Indian society. All the evils of the Hindu society like “Sati”, child marriage and child widowhood,
would be done away with and that would be the cause for the betterment of Indian womanhood.

Dwarakanath’s eldest son Debendranath Tagore was a true Brahmo. He was one among the advocates of female education. It is a matter of great credit and pride that the women of the Tagore family were able to ignore the constraints imposed by the society. The women were not only eager to learn, but also had the courage and strength to trend new paths.

The restrictions of the Hindu society had not hardened into chains to shackle the inhabitants of this house. Rather, they had left gaps that enabled the Tagore family to evolve a culture of its own. It was no imitation of others, but something totally new. Women of Tagore family contributed to music, art and literature. Lessons in painting, writing books, participation in the national movement and establishment of various women’s organization became regular activities of them. Chitra Deb observes,

Even today, there is a good deal of curiosity about the women of the Tagore family in people’s minds. While studying the history of women’s emancipation or liberation in Bengal it became obvious that in most fields the women of the Jorasanko Tagore family played the lead role.
They appeared either individually or jointly, as torchbearers to dispel the darkness.

(preface)

The role of Rabindranath Tagore’s sisters and sister-in-laws was not less important than that of his brothers in creating a literary atmosphere for budding poets. Even in his later years, Rabindranath Tagore always turned to women in his family while trying to give shape to his ideas on music, dance and drama.

Rabindranath Tagore’s great grandmother was a literate, having tutored at home by Vaishnava women devotees. Rabindranath Tagore’s mother Sarada was very fond of reading. Vaishnava women used to come by turns to educate women. Maharishi Debendranath, a true Brahmo was a harbinger of female education. His eldest daughter Saudamini was the first female student of Bengal at Bethune School in 1851. Swarnakumari the fourth daughter was a gifted writer, editor, song composer and social worker. His daughter-in-law Janadanandini who was uneducated when she entered as the child bride of his second son was well educated at home. The elder son Sathyendranath, the first Indian Civil Service officer was the pioneer of women’s liberation in Bengal. He encouraged his child bride Janadanandini to become a role model of an emancipated
independent woman. He turned her to become the ideal of Indian women in every way. They were the first to live as a nuclear family. Janadanandini was the first female to cross the sea and travelled to England alone with her young children. In those days, crossing the Bay of Bengal was itself considered as a sin by orthodoxy. She designed the wearing of the sari with undergarments and taught other Bengali women the new trend.

Jyothindranath and Rabindranath were ardent admirers of Janadanandini in the family matters. Jyothindranath the fourth brother was a scholar, artist, music and theatre personality. He influenced Tagore in song composing and singing. His wife Kadambari Devi two years elder to Rabindranath was his playmate. Kadambari was almost uninhibited in the world of poetry when she entered Tagore’s household, but became one of the active participants in the literary sessions, which she used to host in the small roof in front of her room. She was the inspiration to Tagore in becoming a poet. She was the first person to whom Tagore read his poems first. She lived in Tagore’s memory until his last breath. Many poems, drawings, and prose writings were dedicated to his muse Kadambari. The short story “The Broken Nest” was based on their relationship.
The other women of Tagore’s family who inspired include his sister Soudamini, Swarnakumari, his wife Mrinalini, his nieces Indira and Sarala, his daughters Madurilata, Renuka and Meera. The interaction of these women had developed an experienced spaces towards women in Tagore’s mind. Many of these women were great achievers and broke all the conventions.

Although in his twenties Tagore had written eloquently against child marriage, he arranged the marriage of his first two daughters Madurilata aged fourteen and Renuka aged ten in the same year 1901 by paying dowry. The only explanation for this can be the pressure of the elders of the family. Tagore found it difficult to select a suitable match for his daughters since Tagore’s family belonged to the “Pirali” Brahmin community, which was almost an outcast of the Brahmin sect. Unfortunately, all his three daughters had strained marital relationship. The turmoil of the family life, the mental agony he suffered because of his daughters, urged the poet’s tender heart to take up the cause of women’s subjugation by patriarchy in earnest.

Tagore had a very affectionate relationship with Indira and Sarala, his nieces. Indira was a key person in unlocking the secret resources of Tagore’s soul. The women of Tagore’s household made the poet to delve deeply into
the feminine psyche. Their problems created an experienced space in the poet’s mind that lead him to the creation of multifarious women characters in the myriads of Tagore’s compositions, including his novels and short stories. In the changing concept of Indian womanhood in Tagore’s literary creations one could easily feel the inspiration and influence of women of Tagore’s household.

The ideology of “Feminism” is that women are equal to men in every respect and there cannot be superiority-inferiority relations between men and women. Feminism wants a society which does not divide the sexes into different cultural, economic or political spheres, and which value women on a par with men. The word “Feminism” stands for sexual equality combined with a commitment to eradicate male domination and to transform the society. It represents the major changes in social thinking and politics because only feminism radically questions the understanding of men, women, and social structure, which maintain the difference. In that sense, it is a social force. It aimed to end the domination of men, in all spheres of life, in family, society, public, and private activities. They are against sexual discrimination and sexual segregation of women in workplaces and in domestic life. They question the superiority of men and their polygamous nature and sexual
power at the expense of the subordination of women. They want to end the enslavement of women, by men for their selfish interest.

It is a movement of the women, by women, for the women to achieve women’s rights. It is a self-conscious and systematic ideology, which began in the late eighteenth century. The term “Feminism” appeared first in France in the 1880s, in Great Britain in the 1890s and the United States, in 1910. It started in America and in England with what was known as the “Suffrage” movement, seeking electoral rights for women, which was denied to them earlier. The campaign for greater legislative equality such as “Married Women Property Act” was strengthened in the 1940s in Britain and America.

The most important feminist writer of the eighteenth century was Mary Wollstonecraft, often characterized as the first feminist philosopher. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1791), written in response to Gouges’ *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791), was one of the first works that can unambiguously be called feminist. The feminine views of Mary Wollstonecraft most prominently created a furore. Her advocacy of equal rights and opportunities for women and her critical scrutiny of the hypocrisy, misinterpretation
and injustice inherent in the social codes stirred the conscience and the consciousness of the time. Wollstonecraft believed that both sexes contributed to the inequalities and took it for granted that women had considerable power over men, but that both would require education to ensure the necessary changes in social attitudes. Her legacy remains the need for women to speak out and tell their stories. Her own achievements speak to her own determination. (Tandon 3)

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), an English thinker was a notable male advocate of equal rights to women. He perceived the authority of the husband over the wife as one of domestic tyranny comparable with that of the power of an absolute ruler over his subjects or a slave-owner over his slaves.

Virginia Woolf’s book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) could be taken as the first forceful modern tract on feminism. Her contribution to feminism was her argument that gender identity was socially constructed and could be challenged and changed. The gender inequality began very early in the patriarchal family, which in turn led to and underpinned fascism. Woolf’s resonant fact is that women are regarded as the “Other” by men and reflected back to men as how men
wanted to see themselves. Woolf in her work *Three Guineas* (1938) had a good deal to say about women’s qualities of “division” and “poverty”, which women acquired precisely because they are excluded from public life. *Three Guineas* argued that militarism, fascism and legal injustices were all derived from patriarchal formations in parts as early sexual divisions in the family. Virginia Woolf puts forth a new feminist demand for mother’s allowances, divorce law reform, women’s equal rights to education, and to the professions. She argued for changes in disciplines such as science, she proposed a women’s newspaper, a women’s college, the outsider society, a women’s party, and the introduction of a minimum wage and pension for women.

The feminists identified three phases in the growth of their ideology—the First Wave, Second Wave and Third Wave. The first wave feminism started from the latter part of the eighteenth century and ended with Simon De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949). The First Wave Feminism was principally concerned with equalities of sex. The Second Wave Feminism refers to the period of activity in the early 1960s and lasting through the late 1980s. The Second Wave feminism opposed the “legalities” of patriarchal world. The core of the Second Wave feminism was “reproductive rights”. The fight for reproductive rights entailed a fight against
sexual and domestic violence and had profound repercussions for gender identity. Feminist theory questioned sexual stereotypes and the orthodoxies of socio-psychological theories. The Third Wave Feminism began in the early 1990s, arising as a response to perceived failures of the Second Wave. Third Wave Feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the Second Wave’s essentialist definition of femininity, which, according to them over emphasizes the experience of the upper middle class white women.

There were many offshoots of feminist thinking from different writers. This indicated the diversity of feminist views. These different schools of feminist thoughts were “Liberal Feminist Theory”, “Radical Feminist Theory”, “Marxist (Socialist) Feminism”, “Psychoanalytic Feminist Theory”, “Existentialist Feminist Thought”, “Cultural Feminism”, “Lesbian Feminism”, “Eco-Feminism”, and “Post Feminism”.

Liberal or Moderate feminism aimed at bringing equality between men and women in the framework of the existing social system. It did not question the underlying basis of women’s subordination. It wished to bring women equally into all public institutions and to extend the creation of knowledge so that the women’s sufferings could no longer be ignored. Liberal feminism has a long and
familiar history dating back from Mary Wollstonecraft’s book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1791). John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Harriet Taylor’s *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851), and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and *The Second Stage* (1981) belong to this school. “These feminists are visionary architects of liberal feminism who combined feminist ideals with humanist tenets, i.e. gender justice based on humanism. It sees sexism as dysfunctional because it deprives society of one-half of its creative workforce” (Tandon 41). Mary Wollstonecraft’s argument was that “women remain enslaved because of a corrupt process of socialization, which stunts their intellect and teaches them that their proper purpose in life is to serve men” (Tandon 42).

Wollstonecraft opined that women should have education on par with men to enable them to kindle their knowledge for critical thinking. This knowledge would make themselves aware of their status and make them live for their sake also. As human beings, women should also be given the opportunity to become enlightened souls. Wollstonecraft repudiated Rousseau’s idea that men and women think differently, by pointing out that, men and women belonged to the same ‘human’ species, and that their creative
thinking could not differ. If women seemed to be less intelligent, and unreasoning in thought and action, it was only because of lack of proper training and education. Another Wollstonecraft’s contribution was her emphasis on women’s health promoting exercise of body and mind. She argued that would make women be more active physically and more knowledgable about health, anatomy and medicine. Her book was also a precursor to the discussion of violence against women. In this aspect, she was almost three centuries ahead of her times. “The being, who patiently endures injustice, and silently bears insults, will soon become unjust, or unable to discern right from wrong. . . . Nature never dictated such insincerity and though prudence of this sort be termed virtue, morality becomes vague when part is supposed to rest on falsehood” (Chatterjee, *Feminism and Women’s Human Rights* 19)

Sarah Grimke’s *Letter on Equality* (1838) presented the elegant arguments against women’s subordination developed in the liberal tradition. The liberal feminist theory was not acceptable to some radical feminists. They criticized the theory on the basis that women’s subjugation to patriarchal set up continued to exist.

Radical Feminist theory wanted complete liberation from the sexual oppression in the patriarchal set up. They
wanted “to create an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, auto-eroticism, or lesbianism” (Tandon 44). They were against heterosexuality and traditional roles of women as faithful homemakers and childbearing machines. Kate Millet insisted that the roots of women’s oppression were deeply buried in gender system of patriarchy. In her book *Sexual Politics*, she said that women would be liberated only when gender discrimination was eliminated as it was constructed and fostered by patriarchy. The reason is that the patriarchal society is a male dominated society. The norms and values do not permit sexual equality.

Radical feminists therefore envisaged a revolution, which would restructure the society anew by destroying gender differentiation based on the wrong notions of maleness and femaleness. Feminists felt that oppression of women was based on the belief of gender differences for women. Women should first free themselves from this sexist notion, which was internalized in them. Women must fight the male dominated institutions and values. Matriarchy was not the alternative. The new society should be more rational and humanistic. Destruction of gender difference would benefit men also. By destroying the patriarchy there would be a better society, where there would be good human
relations. Men and women would work and live in a non-sexist and non-oppressive society.

Marxist (socialist) School of Feminism improved intellectual understanding of relation between class and sex. Marxist feminism analyzed women’s oppression exclusively from the economic point of view. Women’s struggle was seen as part of a large class struggle against an exploitative capitalist system. Friedrich Engel’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) pointed out that, “women were often looked at and treated as property of men. As such, women’s position was reduced to that of a commodity meant to be used and disposed” (Tandon 46). It advocated the economic independence of women. Women’s oppression was situated in context of class oppression, which superseded all other forms of oppression. Marxist feminism was less concerned with getting women into the positions of power than liberal feminism.

Psychoanalytic Feminism was perhaps the most prominent of other feminist thoughts, originated from Karen Horney’s *Essay on Femininity*, who challenged Freud with her positive view of the feminism. Contemporary psychoanalytic feminism began with Kate Millet’s attack on Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex. Dorothy Dinner, Stein Jean Baker Miller,
Nancy Chodorow were some of the other leading feminists of this school. These feminists created their own brand of psychoanalytic theory with reference to heterosexual relations.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* was the key theoretical text of twentieth century feminism, which was explained based on existentialist theory of Sartre. It was acknowledged by other feminists as one of the outstanding contributions to feminism.

Cultural Feminism theoretically admitted that there were fundamental differences in personality of men and women and that women’s differences were special and should be. Cultural feminists believed that women would be liberated through an alternative women’s culture. It advocated for a special matriarchal vision—the idea of a society of strong women guided by essentially female concerns and values.

Lesbian Feminist theory came into being in the early 1970s. It argued that the root of women’s oppression was the institution of ‘heterosexism’. Therefore, a woman-to-woman relationship was encouraged. “The central thesis of Lesbian feminist theory was the positive image of the lesbian as a woman of strength and independence” (Tandon
55). Tandon quotes Elsa Gidlow, an elderly Lesbian poet in her *Lesbianism as a Liberating Force*,

The Lesbian personality manifests itself in independence of spirit, in willingness to take responsibility for one self, to think for oneself, not to take ‘authorities’ and their diction on trust. It usually includes erotic attraction to women, although we know there have been many women of Lesbian personality who never had sexual relations with one another. What is strongly a part of the Lesbian personality is loyalty and love of other women. (55)

In *Loving Another Woman*, Anne Koedt presented Lesbianism as a very human experience. Martha Shelley looked at Lesbianism as a model of the independent woman. She urged that “Lesbianism was really ‘the heart of the women’s liberation movement’. In order to throw off the oppression of the male caste, women must unite”. She said “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).

Eco-Feminism is a theory based on the principle that patriarchal ways were harmful to women, children and other living things. They found a similarity between the man’s
destruction of the natural environment or resources and oppression of women. Eco-Feminists also resisted destroying the Earth as well as the subjugation of women. They thought that patriarchal society was a later development during a period of two thousand years, or so and that the matriarchal society was the first society. They suggested that an end to the oppression of women was bound up with ecological values, and that women should be concerned with ending the exploitation of the eco-system. Eco-Feminism recognized the interrelationships among all living beings and the right of all including inanimate objects to exist.

Post-Feminism advises women to liberate themselves by joining together and overcoming the male oppression by speaking out bravely and writing boldly.

The status of the female in Indian culture was totally different from that of the western women. The status of women in India started from the early Vedic age. During the Rig-Veda period, women were given equal status as men, in every lifestyle. That was in the matter of production, education, religious rights and freedom of movement. "Sati" and Purdah did not exist. The women could move freely to celebrate festivals. No caste system prevailed. This was the formative period of the Indian social system. In the later Vedic period "Varna Ashrama Dharma" and Caste system
became predominant in society and women were pushed back, resulting in a setback to their status and position in the society.

The four divisions of caste system, in the hierarchical order were “Brahmin”, “Kshatriya”, “Vysia” and “Sudras.” “Brahmana” was the highest and “Sudra”, the lowest. Women were treated like “Sudras”. *Manusmriti*, an authority on caste system, came to be implemented. The caste system shut the people into separate water-tight compartments without any contact between the systems. Naturally, women were also separated along with men and they were the most suffered lots due to the caste system. The upper caste men could go to lower caste women, but the upper caste women could not marry lower caste men. The upper caste women could not recite the Vedas like the “Sudras”. They had no chance for salvation other than serving their husbands. The child marriage system prevailed among the upper caste, especially “Brahmins”. “Sati” dying alive with the husband’s funeral pyre was the pitiable custom followed for the young child widow. While the rigidity of the caste system and the consequent restriction of the freedom of women were there, the Islamic invasion deteriorated the position of Hindu women to the worst level.
After the arrival of the British, the intellectuals like Rajarammohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, felt the need of English education to transform the society. They felt that modern education could only improve the status of women. It is to be noted here that it was the male section of society that raised its voice against the masculine tyranny of the female. As a result of their effort, the barbaric “Sati” system was abolished by an act of law in 1829.

They also took action to abolish the practice of the custom of child marriage, the custom of disfiguring widows, the ban on the remarriage of upper caste Hindu widows, and a host of other evil practices that affected women. Women-education, obtaining legal rights to property for women, and rights to child adoption were other creditable achievements of these social reformers.

In any case while the term “Feminism” may be foreign, the concept stands for a transformational process, a process which started in Bengal in the nineteenth century as an organized and articulated stands against women’s subordination. Feminism was not artificially imposed here nor was it a foreign ideology.
The Brahmo Samaj, started by Rajarammohan Roy, Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, was also a cause for the enlightenment of the Bengali Hindu society. In fact, feminist consciousness arose in Bengal during the Renaissance period especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century during struggle against foreign rule and against the local despotism of feudal monarchs. The voices against women’s subordination during this period took the form of a demand for the possibility of widow remarriage, for abandon on polygamy, the practice of “Sati” and of purdah and demand for the elevation and legal emancipation of women.

Slowly women started participating in freedom movement in Bengal immediately after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. At this crucial juncture, the feminist consciousness also emerged among the women of educated families in Bengal. Tagore’s elder sister Swarnakumari Devi’s daughter Sarala Devi was a notable person who actively participated in the freedom struggle and in the feminist movements. Panditha Ramabai of Maharashtra, the first and foremost feminist of India founded “The Arya Mahila Samaj” (1858-1922) in Poona in 1882 to impart education of young widows. She gave evidence for the education of women before the commission appointed by the then British Indian Govt. in 1882. In the
April 1889, she started a home-cum-school in Bombay which she named “Sarada Sadan”. This was the first home for widows in Maharashtra— the only other home was in Bengal, started by Swarna Kumari Debi (1856-1932) elder sister of Tagore. She also organised “Sakhi Samithi” which aimed at the education of young widows. Anni Besant (1847-1933) came to India in 1893 also fought for equality of rights of men and women along with her participation in the Indian freedom struggle. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Sarojini Naidu, were all fought for the freedom of India as well as women. Freedom struggle and fights for women’s rights were intertwined. Sarala Devi Chaudharini, who may be regarded as the first feminist activist of modern Bengal, initiated the pioneering women’s organization at the all India Level, “The Barat Stri Mahamandal” (All India Women’s Organization) in 1910. Sarala Devi was the niece of Tagore. In Tagore’s creation of the protagonist Kalyani in the short story “Woman Unknown” Sarala Devi was the role model. Kumudini Bose another popular feminist writer asserted in her journal Bharatamahila as “education is the basis for women’s advancement, so is the emancipation of women its soul” (13). As Gandhi emerged as the political leader, he advocated women’s equality. He persuaded the women to step out of their homes and join the freedom struggle with moral
strength. After India got Independence, the constitution granted women the political status equal to that of men.

In short, during the phase prior to independence, an awareness of the need to remove social disabilities of women was created. The doors of education were opened for them. Women writers also emerged on the scene. However, the awareness and enthusiasm of women disappeared immediately after Independence. Then, by 1970s only, many women’s organizations came up. A study on women as a special subject was given importance in universities. Women writers like Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukerjee, Shashi Deshpande, Shoba De and others appeared in the literary field. Revival of Feminism started. In a seminar held in Bangkok in 1979, the Third World Feminists “have used a definition of feminism to mean an awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family and conscious action by women and men to change this situation” (Tandon 27).

Many critical appreciations have been done on Tagore as a poet. Tagore has been studied as a novelist and the issues of, culture, the narrative technique, nationalism, and humanism have been focused. In most of his fictional works the female protagonists seem to be placed on a higher pedestal than men. One of the essential traits of Tagore’s
writings is the exposition of women’s emancipation. Only a few articles have been published after 2010, the year before his One-hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary. It seems an in-depth study focusing the female protagonists from feministic perspective has not been attempted yet.

In Nirmal Kumar Sidhantha’s write up “Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories” published in A Centenary Volume: Rabindranath Tagore 1861-1961. (1961) Sidhantha offers a brief account of Tagore’s short stories. The critic appraises that Tagore began writing short stories when their vogue had not been fully established in the Indian languages. But there was something in the form, in its conciseness and compression that appealed to Tagore. Sidhantha observes from Tagore’s confessional letter to his friend, that Tagore was repelled by the involutions in a long novel. The brevity of the short story subjected the writer to a discipline and for a period Tagore welcomed the discipline for his objective writing. Yet perhaps it is not quite correct to describe these stories as wholly objective. They have been compared to lyric poems. Sidhantha gives a broader thematic classification of the stories. The critic categorizes short stories under the problems of the joint family system, social criticism in a wider sense, love or placid love with its waywardness and
eccentricities. Sidhantha recapitulates Tagore’s method of narration. Sidhantha concludes Tagore’s short stories as a standard medium of imaginative prose, especially that of prose fiction.

The book *Tagore: The Novelist* (1983) is written by G.V. Raj. It is a study of Tagore’s novels which provides a more comprehensive and authentic account of his literary genius. The critic’s appreciation initiates the vitality of Tagore’s vision of human predicament. The critic has traced the variety of Indian experiences embodied in his novels and its manipulation is evaluated. The nine novels are allotted a separate chapter each in order to spotlight its distinct theme and technique. He emphasizes Tagore as a creator of the modern novel in India.

In the book *Rabindranath Tagore: A Study of Women Characters in his Novels* (1988), M.Sarada had done a study of nine novels only which were available in English translation at that time. The critic has excluded the first three novels of Tagore *Karna, Bau Thakuranir Hat,* and *Rajarishi* that were his maiden attempt under the influence of his predecessor Bankimchandra Chatterjee, which were not available in the English translation then. The novel *Yogyog* which has feminism agenda as the plot is also excluded by her since its English translation was made available only
after 2010. The critic gives a general analysis of all the women characters based on the transformational changes in
the society. The critic classifies the character under three categories, as heroines, mothers and aunts. She
concludes that all heroines and other major characters have many common qualities. The critic places Tagore as the
father of the realistic and psychological novel in Indian literature.

R.N Roy’s critical work in the book form is

*Rabindranath Tagore: The Novelist* (1994). Roy seeks to examine the Novels of Tagore, chronologically. The critic
traces the development of Tagore’s mind and art. Roy has dealt with the milieu, story, plot, characters, dialogue,
style, and commented on their merits and demerits. Based on the theories of fiction advanced by Percy Lubbock,
E.M.Forster and Edwin Muir, Roy has detached view in assessing the literary value of all the thirteen novels of
Tagore.

The book *Humanism and Nationalism in Tagore’s Novels* (2002) by Kunjo Singh is a critical study of Tagore’s nine
novels in English based on the Humanism and Nationalism of Tagore. He comes to the conclusion that it is Tagore who
ushered in the spirit of social realism and liberal humanism into the Indian novel and it is to him that the
modern Indo-Anglian novel owes its moral and human concern in its projection of contemporary reality. The critic comments that whatever Tagore might have been, he was everything else a great Humanist and Universalist, and a true citizen of the world.

Indira Chatterjee a renowned critic in *A Thematic Study of Tagore’s Novels* (2007) has done a detailed study of his novels. She has confined herself strictly to the field of his fictional works and have tried to grapple with the themes that are spread out in his novels. Her study covers different themes like political, social, religious, and psychological. She concludes with an assessment of Tagore as a novelist who had a world view of his own.

Nandini Sen Roy in her article “Women Characters in Tagore’s Short Stories: An Anthropological Introspection on Family and kinship”, contributed to the book *Women and Tagore* (2012), published by the Women’s Study Centre of Rabindra Bharati University, interrogates how the fictional characters of Tagore fit in the traditional views of kinship related to gender or indeed challenge these views. The author shows how the characters like Charu, Mrinal, Bindu, Karuna, Chandara, Anila and Bosthami transcend the notion of caring and nurturing associated with biological parent and have tried to build up mutual caring, emotions
of affection and protection. The author analyses the characters in the background of kinship and locates the space these women have invented for themselves.

The one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary celebration (2011) of Rabindranath Tagore gives an opportunity to reread his writings and to rethink about his immortal creations, particularly in view of two facts: one, that Tagore has vast influence over the present generation and thus is so very relevant in the new millennium and two, that the contemporary world is unable to find the light to the problems with respect to women. The still existing patriarchal society is withholding the space that the women should legitimately have. The domestic and social violence on women are still persisting. In this light, an analysis of Tagore’s women characters has become all the more necessary.

This thesis “From Exploitation to Emancipation: The Metamorphosis of Womanhood in Rabindranath Tagore’s Fiction” endeavours to trace the transition of the heroines of Tagore from traditionally exploited to the stage of emancipated women. Tagore is revisited and his female protagonists in his select fiction are rediscovered in the light of feminist ideologies evolved before his life time and after. The study also scrutinizes how Tagore’s
perception of womanhood undergoes a sea change from tradition to modernity over a span of nearly six decades of his writing career. The women of Tagore’s early works are mere victims and silent sufferers of patriarchy. During the middle phase of his career, Tagore created women who are conscious of their subjugation. The women of Tagore’s twilight years become emancipated and begin to challenge patriarchy. Thus, Tagore is a pioneer of women-liberation. The concepts of Lesbian Feminism, Eco Feminism, and Radical Feminism are found embedded in Tagore’s fictional writings. He anticipated most of the later day theories of feminism too. Tagore is a “Feminist” even before the term and the ideology it signifies came into existence in Indian scenario.

The thesis has been divided into five chapters. Chapter one “Introduction” sheds light on the social, cultural and political background prevailed in Bengal at the time of the birth of Tagore. A development of prose fiction of Bengali literature is briefed, followed by the literary achievements of Tagore. An account of women of Tagore’s household who were the perennial source of inspiration to Tagore for championing the cause of women’s subjugation is discussed. Growth of Feminism as an ideology developed in the West, along with the emergence of Women’s
Liberation Movements in the Indian scenario is presented. At the end of the chapter, a review of literature available on this topic is done. The postulate of this thesis is introduced.

In chapter two, “Traditional Women: The Silent Sufferers”, Tagore’s portrayal of women protagonists, in select fiction, who have been victimized by social outrages in the name of tradition and religion enforced by patriarchy is analysed. The third chapter, “Transitional Women: Towards Self Assertion”, evaluates how in the changing social scenario the subjugated women attempt to break the patriarchal hegemony and how far they succeed. Tagore’s portrayal of the transitional women is scrutinized through his portrayal of heroines in his two novels

*Binodini* (1903) and *Yogyog* (1929). In chapter four, “Emancipated Women: The New Women of Tagore”, it is analysed that how Tagore envisioned the image of emancipated New Women of the new age through the heroines of the later day fiction who completely emerged as empowered women. The fifth chapter sums up the ideas highlighted in the previous chapters and exemplifies Tagore as a Feminist Writer and a harbinger of Feminism in India.