Chapter Two

Traditional Women: The Silent Sufferers

At the present stage of history, civilization is almost exclusively masculine, a civilization of power, in which woman has been thrust aside in the shade. (Tagore, Selected Essays 226)

The patriarchal ideology in the form of religious scriptures, epics and myth construct the society, culture and laws. It is a well-known fact that Hindu society divided the people into a hierarchy of castes, each with its separate duties and different ways of life. Brahmins were placed on the supreme level in the hierarchy. The respect shown to them by all the other sections of society ensured in the Brahmin a high self-esteem and a fierce desire to maintain the inegalitarian and the patriarchal caste structure of the society, in which the lower castes were controlled by the higher ones. Women were controlled by men and individuals had little opportunity to take an independent decision on their own other than determined by their castes. If any one dared to behave independently, they were excommunicated.

The obsession with caste purity resulted in the seclusion and the subordination of women. During the Post Rig-Veda period, Manusmriti, the code of conduct came into
effect. This ideology mostly helped in the evolution of Brahminical patriarchy, which provided the rationale for the subjugation of women and the lower caste, the child marriage, sexual initiation at the onset of puberty, and the forbiddance of widow remarriage. The laws of Manu enunciated and ensured women’s total dependence on the males in the family. According to Manu’s law, if a woman becomes a widow in her childhood it is due to her sin committed in the previous birth and she has to live an austere life for the liberation of herself and her husband in the other world. By her good conduct, she could hope to improve her prospects in the next birth. As per the laws of Manu a woman is not allowed freedom. “A father protects a woman during her childhood, the husband during her youth and her son during her old age” (Manu 152). Marriage is made obligatory for a woman. A wife is bound to her husband till eternity, through all the cycles of the birth and death. She should be faithful to him in thought and deed, irrespective of the fact whether he is virtuous or unworthy, dead or alive, and whether marriage is consummated or not. “Though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be worshipped as a God by a faithful wife” (Manu 154). To ensure caste purity, women were jealously
guarded and their freedom was severely restricted. The ideology of “Pativrata” or “Satitva” (chastity and devotion to a husband) was designed to make them control their own sexuality and avoid transgressing patriarchal norms. The practice of “Sati”, and desexualising and disfiguring by removing the hair of widows often were a result of such laws.

The conflation of positive female power with rectitude and obedience to all the society’s traditional rules is epitomized through the women of epics. *The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, The Vedas* and *Manusmiriti*, have been major influences in shaping attitudes to women and of women themselves. The mythical model Sita, the silent sufferer and the archetype of Indian Womanhood; the Earth-Mother, forbearance personified; were cited for women to follow. Patterned on these models, women were passive in accepting the dynamic role of the men in their life. The patriarchal mores made the Indian women to think that the suffering is a righteous experience that every woman of chastity will undergo. A psychoanalytical interpreter, Sudhir Karkar explains the connection between suffering and righteousness as a “... ‘major fantacy’ that protects Indian women from rage against their lot”(10). The subliminal links between passivity and goodness for women
are deeply rooted in Indian culture, equating independence and action with moral or spiritual lack.

A woman is therefore inculcated with the idea of martyrdom, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of Sita and Savitri, who is known as “Pativrata Pathinis” (the ideal of wifehood). A woman is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified as a person, pure and faithful as a wife and a loving mother. Such women sublimed in the tradition bound patriarchal norms are the silent sufferers.

An ardent admirer of Raja Rammohan Roy and a humanist to the core, Tagore was pained to see how the womenfolk, the other half of the human being, was made to suffer in the name of religion, caste, child marriage, young widowhood, “Sati”, denial of education and other forms of “patriarchal oppression.” To quote Neeru Tandon:

A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about women’s life and problem, and feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. That means the feminist apprehends certain features of social reality as intolerable, and to be rejected if one is to transform the society for a better future. (28)
As a man with feminist consciousness, Rabindranath Tagore attacked the social injustices of his day and unveiled the pathetic status of Indian women through the medium of the short story and novel.

The initial period of Tagore’s writing of short stories was between 1881 and 1897. His stories of this phase demonstrate the tragic condition of women in the feudal backwardness of the society, revealing the cruel exploitation, injustice and absurdity. His women characters in these stories adhere to traditional values. They conform to the role of women dictated by the society, and abide by the taboos, superstitions and decrees. They accept all this as their fate with passive resignation. They do not protest, and remain the silent sufferers. They are the prototypes of the traditional ideal women of Hindu orthodoxy. Joyasree Mukherji rightly observes:

Tagore had a very strong feminine side to his nature. . . . Tagore’s feminine intuitive perceptiveness gave him an almost godlike insight into the mind of a woman. . . . As a passing cloud casts its shadow on a sheet of clear, still water, similarly a woman’s every fitting desire, her every yearning, her joy, her sorrow and pain, her hopes and despair, her strength and weakness
were all reflected in the deep clear pool of his understanding. (ix)


“The Ghat’s Story” (1884) is directed to show the devotion of the traditional Hindu wife as portrayed in Hindu mythology. The helplessness and the inner groaning of the tender heart of the child widow is witnessed and narrated by the river stairs. Tagore’s experience of the spirit of the time is woven into the construction of the plot of the story. Kusum, the young girl who lived near the river, loved it and used to sit on the river stairs. At the age of seven, she was married and moved to her husband’s place, where the river Ganges did not flow. Hardly a year passed, Kusum returns home as a child widow. The river stairs continue the narration;

I heard that her husband worked in another part of the country and they were together for no more than a couple of days. Receiving the news of her widowhood by post, at the age of eight, wiping off the vermilion powder from her head and
shedding her ornaments one by one, she had returned home to her Ganges. (SSR 5)

Henceforth, she has to lead a life of ideal widowhood according to the norms of the society. The plight of child widowhood is described by a feminist and widow Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, in *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1894) thus:

> It is the child widow or a childless young widow upon whom in an especial manner falls the abuse and the hatred of the community as the greatest criminal upon whom Heaven’s judgment has been pronounced. . . . A young widow is always looked upon with suspicion. . . for fear that she may at any time bring disgrace upon the family by committing some improper act. The purpose of disfiguring her by shaving her head, by not allowing her to put ornaments or bright garments on her person is to render her attractive to a man’s eye. Not allowing her to eat more than once a day and compelling her to abstain from food altogether on sacred days is a part of the discipline by which to mortify her youthful nature and desire. (43-44)
Kusum is alone without any companion. Ten years roll by; Kusum has become a beautiful young woman and no one seems to notice this. One day, a handsome young ascetic comes and stays in the temple there. He performs prayers and discourses on the holy scriptures on the river steps. Womenfolk, who arrive from the village of Kusum’s husband come across the ascetic and speak among themselves that he resembles Kusum’s dead husband.

On a full moon day, Kusum sits on the river stairs as usual. The ascetic happens to meet his child bride and both seem to recognize each other. Without any conversation, both part ways. Henceforth, Kusum starts doing temple services as per the direction of the ascetic. After some days, Kusum experiences to her dismay, an infatuation for the young ascetic in her dream, and stops visiting the temple. When the holy man and Kusum meet on the river stairs, he asks her the reason for giving up her temple service. The tender heart of the obedient wife replies:

My Lord, I used to revere someone as if he was my God. . . . But, in a dream one night I saw him as my beloved, the master of my heart. . . . Since then, the turmoil inside me refuses to go. All has become dark. (SSR 11)
Kusum breaks down. The ascetic becomes desperate and when he realizes that, it is he who is the man of her dreams, he orders Kusum: “I shall leave today. We are not to meet again. You must forget me” (SSR 12).

Kusum stands up, looks at him calmly and in a steady voice says, “My Lord, so it shall be” (SSR 12). The ascetic leaves. Kusum touches his feet and gathering a little dust from them, places it on her blank head as if it is a vermillion mark, feeling that she is no longer a widow. She murmurs, “He has asked me to forget him” (SSR 12). As a devoted wife, and to keep her promise of forgetting her ascetic husband, she decides to end her life by drowning herself in the river Ganga, on whose lap she has grown.

Tagore portrays Kusum as a faithful, devoted wife as described in the Hindu religious scriptures. She is an ideal woman of the epics. The only satisfaction for her is that she does not die as a widow. In the Hindu religion, every woman wishes to die before her husband dies. The Hindu women want to die as “Sumangali”, that is, with the vermillion mark on their forehead.

The unfortunate consequences of child marriage and the sad fate of women on that score are portrayed through the tragic end of Kusum by Tagore. Kusum upholds the tradition-bound Hindu ideal for being a wife as a “Pativrata
pathini.” It also connotes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to the husband as her ultimate religious duty. Ernest Rhys rightly observes:

Rabindranath Tagore reveals the heart of Kusum by the slight interrogative touches which he often uses to give reality to his spiritual portraits of women. He is one of the very few tales-writers who can interpret women by intuitive art.

(54)

In those days when “Sati” was in practice, widowhood traditionally meant one of three things for a Hindu wife: immediate death, lifelong condemnation to segregation and drudgery and subjugation to sexual exploitation by the males of the family. According to Hindu religion a man turning to ascetic means it is his second birth in this mundane world. Therefore, in this case Kusum’s position is again as that of a widow. Now Kusum is under a situation in which she could neither continue the life of a widow, nor live a conjugal life because her self-centred husband has turned an ascetic and asked her to forget.

Tagore through Kusum puts up a poser to the Hindu conservatives, as to what a woman should do in such a situation. As per Manu’s law, she must obey the commands of her God, the husband. Her heart is unable to forget him.
However, as an obedient wife she has to execute his command. When the patriarchy forces the young widow to live a life of social death, Kusum ends her life by drowning. Death is the ultimate solution for her. Tagore explicates how women are subjected by patriarchy in the name of tradition. Tagore makes clear the meaninglessness of child marriage, when the child couple does not have the maturity to decide their future life. Tagore through this story aims to make the society empathize with the child widows with the tragic end of Kusum.

Tagore, in the early phase of his career, portrays women who passively accept patriarchy as the order of their life and suffer from it. Tagore is well aware of the problems of the women. He wants to remove the evils of child marriage. His feminist consciousness enables him to pity for the cause of women. However, he does not make his characters vehemently oppose or rebel against those evil practices. He simply portrays their sufferings and makes the readers empathize with the women. Only in his later period, he became a vehement critic and depicted his characters to be rebels. Tagore portrays such women and highlights their sufferings in a time when the society was highly patriarchal.
Tagore’s mind was already exercised over one of the major evils of the society; the question of dowry and its tragic consequences. Through his short stories, Tagore draws a lucid picture of the evils of dowry given to the bridegroom. Nirupama in “A Transaction” (1891) is a victim of dowry demanded by her in-laws. Nirupama’s father agrees to pay a dowry of ten thousand rupees to the boy’s father, an eminent “Rai Bahadur”. Nevertheless, he is unable to pay the full amount at the time of wedding. Rai Bahadur, objects to the marriage. However, the bridegroom, the young magistrate overrules his father’s objection and marries Nirupama. It is the beginning of Nirupama’s tragic life. Tagore intimates that the root cause of this dowry menace is the prospective mother-in-law of Nirupama. He points out that the women themselves are primarily responsible for the degradation of women. Here Tagore writes from a feminine perspective.

At the time of leaving to her in-law’s house, Nirupama expresses her doubt, whether she will be allowed by her parents-in-law to visit her father. Ramshunder assures her that he would come and fetch her. However, this does not happen easily as he expected. During his first visit to see his daughter, he is humiliated by Nirupama’s father-in-law as he has not paid the remaining amount of dowry. Nirupama
is also subjected to insults at every turn, and she cries within herself. Her magistrate husband is posted far away, but he is arranging to take his wife with him at the earliest. Her parents-in-law starts torturing her with venomous words. Tagore writes:

Even in her food and clothing she did not receive proper care. If a kind neighbour mentioned it, her mother-in-law would say, ’It is enough for her’—meaning, if the father had paid the full price, the daughter would have received full care. Everyone in that household made her feel as if she had no rights there; she had gained entry by deceit. (SSR 15)

Tagore’s portrayal of the sufferings inflicted upon such brides, whose father is unable to pay the dowry, and the inhuman treatment meted out to women by women themselves is painful to the readers. Nirupama’s father raises the required amount by disposing his ancestral home without the knowledge of his son and goes to the house of his daughter’s in-laws confidently.

Nirupama, understanding that her father has sold their house for her sake, requests her father not to give the money to her father-in-law. With a sense of self-respect, she retorts: “It will shame me more if you pay the money.
Does your daughter have no honour? Is she only a money bag? As long as there is money in it, it is of value? Baba, don’t insult me by giving the money and, besides, my husband does not want the money” (SSR 19). When Nirupama’s mother-in-law comes to know the fact, her hostility towards her daughter-in-law reaches its height.

Nirupama falls seriously ill. Her mental depression leads her to think that she is a dependent, living on the generosity of her parents-in-law. When her health deteriorates, she pleads to her mother-in-law to allow her to see her father and brother just once. Her heartless mother-in-law rejects her appeal on the ground that it is only an excuse to visit her father’s house. It is only at the last moment, that a doctor is called to attend on her, before she has breathed her last.

In Nirupama’s character, one can see the pitiable plight of women who do not have any will power to resist the oppression. They are passive and left it to their fate. Nirupama does show her protest by asking her father not to give the money. After the death of Nirupama, the money-minded mother-in-law writes to her son about his impending second marriage: “Dear son, we have selected another girl for you, so take leave immediately and come here. This time the dowry was 20,000 rupees—cash down” (SSR 21).
Tagore through the story gives a true picture of the pathetic condition of Indian married women, who are ill-treated by their in-laws and subjected to harassment on account of paying a dowry. Nirupama is sacrificed for the sake of better dowry. The supposed educated class is hypocritical and pursues only its narrow interests. Tagore is aware that only education could save such victimized women from being treated as commodities. She dies due to purposeful neglect and inattention. However, her funeral rites are celebrated in a grand manner to show the generosity of the father-in-law’s house. The nameless husband indicates his insignificant role as a husband in the life of Nirupama. Nirmal Kumar Sidhanta writes about Nirupama’s tragic end thus: “It required many of these human sacrifices and the artist’s elaboration of these tortures for society to get rid of, at least to minimize, this evil” (279-80). Selling their ancestral house for the payment of dowry, makes Nirupama realize that she is also treated as a “commodity”, by her in-laws. To allow her to go to her father’s house, her in-laws fix an amount to be paid by way of dowry. They are valued only to the extent of amount of dowry they bring in.

Tagore echoes the opinion expressed by Catherine Macaulay, the eighteenth century French feminist who writes
in her *Letters on Education* (1790), that the women are treated as the “mere property of the men” (Walters 30). The Marxist School of Feminism also points out that women are often “looked at and treated as the property of men. As such, a woman’s position is reduced to that of a commodity meant to be used and disposed” (Tandon 46). Tagore in his short story “A Transaction” tries to awaken the social consciousness of the readers. Even before the birth of feminism, Tagore’s realization of the problem makes him a true Feminist Writer.

Tagore through this story shows the tragic fate of Bengali women whose lives are crushed by the backwardness of feudal society. Tagore has not even named the father-in-law who exploited his daughter-in-law. He is simply referred as “Rai Bahadur”, a title given by the British government to the feudal “Zamindars”. The bridegroom is also not named because he also does not take any action to save his child wife. By this, Tagore is even more contempt for such kind of people. Tagore makes a hint in the story against the younger generation of the intelligentsia, who, although considers the old norms as outdated, but is unable to start a new life. Nirupama’s husband knows very well the cruel feudal attitudes of his parents. Yet he leaves his helpless wife at their mercy. Tagore condemns the wretched
dowry system which is prevailing even in the twenty first century.

Twenty-four years after writing “A Transaction” (1891), Tagore writes “Haimanti” (1915), in which the central theme is again the same dowry menace, but the setting is different. The story is narrated by the husband of the dowry victim, Haimanti. In this story, Tagore has attempted to present the plight of women oppressed in the name of dowry, from the male’s perception. The girl is the only child of her father who holds a high post under a king. Naturally, his wealth and prestigious job are also likely to be inherited by the prospective bridegroom. The bridegroom is nineteen years old, doing his final year of graduation.

Tagore, the social critic, makes a scathing remark on the attitude of men towards women by saying that, it is similar to that “... of a tiger’s towards man after having got the taste of human flesh” (SSR 172). Regardless of his age and worldly circumstances, a man does not hesitate to fill the loss of his wife immediately by marrying another. Tagore becomes an advocate for women’s liberation from the patriarchal oppression like John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), an English thinker and women’s rights advocate. After marriage, the bridegroom’s parents assure
Haimanti’s father that, henceforth his motherless child would have both a father and a mother in them.

Haimanti’s father tells his son-in-law that she is fond of reading and loves to feed people for which he pays a hundred rupee note to him. He understands that Haimanti’s father has given her all the freedom of self-expression and encourages the development of her personality as a human being. He wants to treat his wife as his equal. Considering one’s wife as a companion of heart and soul is Rabindranath Tagore’s new effort in the short story in Bengali literature. The Sanskrit mantras recited during the marriage ceremony of the Hindu religion insists that the groom should treat the wife as a friend. However, most of the couples perform the rituals, without understanding the mantras. Tagore’s social consciousness of equality of women is expressed through the bridegroom’s thinking. “I suspect most men only marry their wives, do not get them, and don’t even know they have not got them” (SSR 178).

Haimanti’s pain and suffering starts from the day her in-laws learn that Haimanti’s father does not have that much wealth or hold a high position that they have taken for granted. The husband feels that as there is no open discussion about all these things before the marriage, he finds no reason to be disappointed. Nevertheless, the
parents feel that they have been cheated by Haimanti’s father. Consequently the ill treatment of the daughter-in-law begins in the customary way. How Tagore works on the mother-in-law menace is quite impressive.

The first problem begins when the relatives gather to celebrate a festival. The mother-in-law, to keep her family reputation, says that Haimanti is only twelve years of age. Haimanti disputes that to the provocation of her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law reports this to her husband, and consequently he scolds Haimanti. The husband of Haimanti feels sorry for the plight of his young wife and gives her the book of English Poetry by way of consoling her.

Haimanti’s husband is impressed by the friendly relationship existing between Haimanti and her father. In her letters to her father, she does not make any complaint against her in-laws. The husband says that Haimanti’s love makes him cheerful and he could also share his session of reading with her. He says, “To me she was God’s gift to my ardent prayer; She was my fortune, not my property” (SSR 178).

One sunday afternoon, while studying, he observes in Haimanti, a “. . . silent expression of profound grief in her face” (SSR 185). Suddenly he realizes that a girl, enjoys complete inner freedom before her marriage, but the
moment she gets married, her freedom is lost. He begins to think about how he can help to ease her out of her grief. He goes to his father and tells him that Haimanti is not well and she should go to her father’s house for a while. But his father calls Haimanti and directly asks her, what is ailing her, for which she answers in the negative, which displeases him.

Informed by a friend, Haimanti’s father without prior intimation comes to see her. On seeing her, he receives some relief, and wants to take her home. But Haimanti’s father-in-law rejects that proposal. When he brings the physician to check Haimanti, the doctor also advises a change of atmosphere. The father-in-law’s ridicule about the doctor shocks her father. The proposal of the husband to take Haimanti away to some place is also ruled out by his father.

As a weakling husband, he cannot overrule his father’s orders. He feels helpless and unable to rescue his wife, he also feels guilty over his lack of courage. His self-reproach is worth pondering over:

Some of my friends have asked me, why I didn’t do what I had said I would. I could have taken my wife away. Why didn’t I? Why! If I had not put social duty before moral duty, if I had not been
able to sacrifice the person closest to me at the altar of the family, then what was the use of carrying the age-old doctrines in my blood? . . . Only the other day, I wrote an article in a monthly magazine on the nobility of giving up one’s wife to satisfy public sentiment. Who knew then that I would have to write the saga of a second sacrifice of Sita with my own blood? (SSR 188)

Here Tagore sarcastically remarks about the Hindu Revivalists who speak and write volumes about old doctrines, which dictates various rules to the society, but fail to treat women at home with a human concern. The husband’s inability to shield his wife from harassment and neglect results in her death. Tagore makes men realize that it is their duty to protect their wives from the sufferings meted out by in-laws. Tagore gives a solution to end the problems that women have to face as a wife due to an ineffectual husband through the story of Haimanti. Tagore suggests if he has come out of the joint family and has set up independently a home of their own, that might have saved her. Here Tagore indicates that the patriarchy subjugates the younger male also, which blocks his individual growth, and makes him inactive.
Tagore depicts Haimanti as a sensitive woman. The meanness and dishonesty of the in-laws make Haimanti, self-nurtured to feel depressed, but she does not complain about anyone either to her husband or to her father. Gradually, the unexpressed grief takes her life. She dies for want of proper medical treatment from her in-law’s side. Her husband, though realizes her mental agony could not help her out of the situation. Here Tagore has vehemently criticized the indifferent inhuman treatment meted out to the new bride by her in-laws. He is very sympathetic to these young brides. Tagore’s description of this kind of patriarchal persecution of young innocent brides is heart rending. Tagore through the portrayal of the character Haimanti makes the reader empathize with her. She is unable to fight against the patriarchal oppression and so passively subjects herself to it. This categorizes her as a traditional woman.

Haimanti reflects some personal experience of Tagore. Though he vehemently attacked the dowry menace and the child marriage, he had to get his elder daughter Madurilata married at the age of fourteen in 1901 paying a dowry of rupees ten thousand to the bridegroom. This was because as Tagore’s family was known as "Pirali" Brahmins who were considered as untouchable by the orthodox Brahmins because
of their ancestor’s association with Muslims and being Brahmos. Therefore, it was difficult to get a suitable match. Moreover, under the joint family system Tagore was financially dependent on his father. Maharishi equally shared the dowry amount. Madhurilatha’s mother-in-law insisted on the dowry, thinking that Tagore was rich enough. The description about Haimanti’s father Gowrishankar that has some resemblance with Tagore will confirm this. Even after marriage, Madhurilata had a strained relationship with her in-law’s house. This might have made Tagore to deal with the dowry menace again in this story.

The turn of the nineteenth century saw the success of women’s struggle for voting rights in England and France. Then it blossomed into women’s liberation from all sorts of patriarchal oppressions, including the denial of education to women. The “New Woman” concept, literature on women written by women became significant. Feminist writings like Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1791), and *The Thoughts on Education of Daughters* (1787) all came to light and seriously had its impact on the education and emancipation of women.

At that time, the status of the female in Indian culture was very different from that of the Western women.
The four divisions of caste system in the hierarchical order divided the people into separate watertight compartments without any contact between them. Naturally, women were also separated along with men. The upper caste women could not recite the Vedas like “Sudras”, and they were denied education. They had no chance for salvation other than serving their husbands.

As a Brahmo, Rabindranath Tagore also considered that women’s education and emancipation were beneficial not only to women themselves but for the entire human race. However, the orthodox Hindus were trying to defend those outworn theories of child marriage, denial of reading and writing of girl children, and thereby depriving their rights to education by rationalizing their unreasonable religious rituals by inventing scientific reasons. Tagore’s “The Exercise Book” (1891) is a short story of a young child bride of nine years who is fond of writing.

Tagore was apprehensive of the Hindu Revivalist theory which he thought might be a stumbling block in the education and emancipation of women for which they were struggling. Through the short story “The Exercise Book”, Tagore makes a scathing attack at the Hindu Revivalists who tried to bring back the age-old superstitious belief and customs, thereby making a reverse trend in the minds of
people who had just started thinking about women’s literacy.

Tagore’s opening lines of the story itself denotes the plot of the story that revolves around the denial of writing of the nine years old child-bride, Uma. Uma becomes a great menace to her family as well as her in-laws later on as soon as she learns to write. In Tagore’s words:

On every wall in the house, she would draw unsteady lines and write with a piece of a coal in big unformed letter—Rain drops on tree tops, she hunted out the copy of Haridasi’s Secrets under her sister-in-law’s pillow and wrote in pencil on every page – Blackwater, red flower.

(SSS 45)

She has such a fascination for writing that she writes anywhere she finds space. Even in the almanac of the house, she writes her school rhymes. Tagore describes that she has not even spared her father’s account book. She has written across the credit column “He who writes and studies hard will one day ride horse and cart” (45).

Through the writings of Uma, Tagore reflects the aspiration of the middle-class that only a boy child should be educated and he will only look after the parents in the evening of their life. It is the middle class mentality,
even now prevailing in the Indian society. A boy-child is considered as an asset, a credit in the account. The girl child after marriage will be going to the in-law’s house. The expenditure incurred in the marriage of the girl children will always remain in the debit account. Tagore points out the thinking of parents in loud and clear terms through the rewritings of Uma across the account book, that the need for education is only for boys not for girls which Tagore feels is discriminatory.

Uma is now seven years old. She has an elder brother Gobindlal who is a staunch believer in the Hindu Revivalist theory, and uses to write about this to newspapers. One day, taking her brother’s manuscript copy of his essay on the subject to be sent to the newspaper, Uma writes across the paper in bold letters: “Gopal is a very good boy; he eats whatever is given him” (45). On finding his letter spoiled, Gobindlal becomes angry, beats her and confiscates her writing materials. Tagore lays a sarcastic remark on the Hindu Revivalist theory by drawing a simile between the cow and the readers of Gobindalal’s writings: “I do not think that by her use of the name ‘Gopal’ Uma had intended any special reflection on the readers of her brothers’ essay” (SSS 45). Uma’s impression of her writings over the Revivalist essay of Gobindalal is Tagore’s symbolic
significance of his vision of the forthcoming age where women will progress towards a high pedestal in gynocriticism.

Though initially angry with his sister, Gobindlal pities her later and presents her a new bound exercise book with writing materials exclusively for her. Uma feels happy and she starts writing everything she feels in her exercise book. It becomes a constant companion of her until her marriage at the age of nine. Tagore makes the exercise book as a symbol of Women’s Writing and education. Women’s writing was a revolution in those days. She takes the exercise book with her when she goes to the girls’ school, which arouses envy in other children. In Tagore’s words:

In the first year she wrote carefully in her exercise book—The birds sing the night is past. . . . In the second year, a few independent compositions began to make their appearance. . . . The line ran as follows—‘I love Jashi very much’. . . . Throughout Uma’s compositions, one might note this fault of Self-contradiction. (SSS 46)

Through the writings of Uma, Tagore makes Uma’s character a representative of all the womenfolk whom he wants to indulge in pouring their voices in writing. Tagore reflects
the opinion of the feminist writer Helen Cixous, who in her book *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975) says,

A woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away violently as from their bodies——for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put herself into the text—as into the world and into the history by her own movement. (29)

Tagore champions the cause of Women’s Writing in “The Exercise Book”. According to the rulings contained in *Manusmiriti*, Uma’s marriage is fixed at the age of nine. The groom, Pyarimohan, is a literary associate of Uma’s brother. He is also an ideologue of the Hindu Revivalism, favouring no change in the age-old customs like child marriage; women should be kept inside the house unlettered.

Tagore reflects the mind of patriarchy through Pyarimohan’s words: “If woman began to read and write novels and plays would soon make their way into the home and it would be hard to uphold the household virtues” (SSS 48). In those days, it was thought in the Hindu religion that a woman’s career in writing was a prelude to becoming a widow very soon. It is expressed through Pyarimohan’s
subtle theory who says, “If the power of the female was vanquished through education and study . . . the conjugal bond would be completely destroyed, and so the woman would become a widow” (ibid).

Before Uma’s departure to her in-law’s house, she is advised by her mother: “Listen to your mother-in-law darling; attend to the household, don’t spend all your time reading and writing” (SSS 47). Gobindlal tells his sister, “Remember not to scratch letters on the walls; it’s not that kind of house. And for heaven’s sake, don’t scribble on any of Pyarimohan’s writings” (ibid). On hearing the advice, the little heart of Uma is worried about how she is going to learn which is wrong, what is offence according to the norms stipulated in her in-laws family. Uma’s affectionate elderly woman Jashoda, who accompanies Uma to her in-law’s house, takes her exercise book along with her. For Uma, the exercise book is a loving reminder of her brief stay in her parent’s care. She has written in her exercise book an “abridged history” (47) of her parents’ love.

Similarly, while recording a folk song in her exercise book, she is caught red-handed in her closed room, by her three sisters-in-law who laughed at her writing. She pleads to them not to tell this to her husband and assures that
she will never write again. Despite her request, they summon their brother. Uma’s husband Pyarimohan ridicules her and takes away the notebook from her. Uma is devastated and collapses on the ground. In Tagore’s words, “It seemed to her that if the earth opened, she might disappear into its depths to hide her shame” (SSS 49). Uma has to be apologetic for her writing in the exercise book. In this short story, Tagore mirrors the real status of women’s writing in his times. Nearly nine decades later, Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her book, *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women’s Writing* (1972) observes: “Women always begin apologizing for women’s writing” (9). The story ends with an ironic remark that Pyarimohan also owns an exercise book to propound his Hindu Revivalist theory, but there is no one to seize that book from him.

Tagore’s “The Exercise Book” apparently seems to be a simple short story about a girl child’s passion for writing. However, the strong message he wishes to convey through the story is that women’s writing should be encouraged. Nearly nine decades after the writing of this short story by Tagore, the “Woman’s Writing” was articulated fiercely and propounded as a theory “*Ecriture Féminine*”, in 1976, by Helen Cixous, a staunch French
feminist writer. Woman’s Writing by this time took a center stage in the feminist movement and transformed itself as a feminist literary criticism. “Helen Cixous the French feminist asserts that women often write in male discourse and men can write in a feminine way” (Chakrabarti 60). This statement is aptly applicable to Tagore as much as he has taken the subject of Woman’s Writing in his short story “The Exercise Book”.

Tagore through this story suggests that for the betterment of the society women should also be educated on par with men. Child marriage is a hindrance to the education of female child and hence should be avoided. Women should write in order to express themselves so that they will not be subjugated by patriarchy in the name of tradition. He vehemently attacked the Hindu Revivalists who stood as an obstacle in educating the girl children under the name of Hindu scriptures.

Women’s writing has always played a key role in giving voice to the sufferings of the suppressed women by patriarchy. In Tagore’s family all women, right from his grandmother were literate and tutored at home by Vaishnava women folk tellers. Tagore’s mother Saradha was very fond of reading. “It has been said that if she did not find any other book she would read dictionary” (Deb 17). Besides
Saradha, other women of the family could also read and write. According to Chitra Deb “At the Jarasanko residence of Tagore’s, every girl had to devote time for reading or being read to . . . . Thus the reading habit was inculcated early. They were not scared of the popular belief that literacy would lead to widowhood” (17). Tagore beautifully portrays Uma’s fascination for writing and makes her reveal her feelings in the exercise book. Suppressed by the patriarchy and devoid of true companions women can express themselves only through their writings in the diary, letter, and autobiography. Most of the women ventilate their grievances in writing autobiographies. “Often autobiography assumes a significant role as the text of the oppressed” (Anderson 14).

There is a striking affinity between Uma’s writing in her exercise book and the remarkable real life childhood autobiography Copy Book of the French psychoanalyst and writer Marie Bonaparte. Princess Bonaparte a descendant of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte filled her Copy Book with her emotional longing for maternal love by writing in English at the age of seven. (English was used as a second language to maintain secrecy. The reason for the mis-spelt words was also the same). Miss Marie Bonaparte who had lost her mother at the age of two writes in her Copy Book; “My most
sad moments is: it is that when the papel scol me and when I muss work after and study my lessons in this sad moment I would go to lose myself in the street. When I am riting in this book, and that they will not. I would go and loose myself” (Spacks 281).

The child Marie Bonaparte is despair and she protests when she is prevented from writing her copybooks. The only consolation to relieve her from the pain of want of love is free intellectual work, deprived of that, she feels suicidal. This is the voice of Miss Bonaparte the real life character in the later nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that her Copy Book was written in the year 1890 and Tagore wrote the story about Uma’s exercise book in the year 1891.

The successor to these two girl children comes in the name of Celia, the protagonist of the novel The Color Purple (1983) written by Alice Walker, the popular Black feminist writer. Here Celia is a married illiterate woman who expresses her sufferings from patriarchy by writing letters to God. The three common factors that can be found in the writings of these three women are

1. They are writing secretly to themselves to ventilate their feelings and to find their identity and to get relieved of their worries.
2. The mode of expression is writing letter, diary, and autobiography.

3. Their language is incoherent, incomprehensive and mis-spelt.

In real life, Tagore’s elder brother Sathyendranath Tagore’s mother-in-law also had to read and write in secret. The social taboos forced women to enclose their writings in secrecy. This was the condition of women that prevailed until the first half of the nineteenth century, not only in India but also in Europe and Great Britain. Satyendranath’s wife Jnanadanandini went to England alone. It is said by Chitra Deb, “We are surprised to learn she undertook the voyage only to acquaint herself with women’s liberation. On her returning home, she was able to use her experience to usher in a golden dawn with numerous possibilities for women” (37). Tagore’s first visit to London to stay with Sathyendranath’s family also made him aware of the subjugation of women including the denial of education and the other basic human rights in England. No wonder that Tagore has expressed his anguish and apathy over the forbiddance of female writing and education, by his pictorial portrayal of how Uma’s practice of writing is forcibly snatched away by her husband in “The Exercise Book”.

Every minute detail he has described in this short story about female writing is remarkable. That his writing has several striking similarities in the real and the fictional women characters portrayed by the later day staunch feminist writers nearly nine decades after, reveals his consciousness as a Feminist Writer.

According to the Feminist ideology, there is an existence of literary and cultural binary opposition where woman, mother, and nature is equated with “uncultured”, “powerless”, “passive”, “sensitivity”, “pathos”, and “negative”, and occupy the marginalized position in the society. Whereas, man and father are equated with “god”, “cultured”, “powerful” “active”, “reasonable”, “positive” and is at the centre of the society. Therefore, man takes over the right to civilize, dominate, and dictate the rules over woman and nature equally. “Eco-Feminism” or “Ecological Feminism” is a term coined by Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. Neeru Tandon briefs the ideology:

Eco-Feminism is a social and political movement which believes that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature. There is an interconnection between women’s oppression and destruction of natural environment by patriarchy. (161)
Tagore, a born poet in a literate family and fascinated by the natural beauty of Bengal was alive and awake to the world of man and nature around him. This temperament of Tagore is reflected in his short stories. Tagore, as an expert artist, wove his theme of social realities, pathetic condition of women, their moods and silent sufferings through the imagery and symbolism of Nature in its different manifestations of Mother Earth, River, Rain, Sea, Birds, Animals, Plants and Flowers. As a man with Feminist Consciousness, Tagore attacked the oppression of women and nature by the patriarchal society. This is the ideology of Eco-Feminism too.

In the story “Subha” (1893), Tagore’s ironical connotational device itself brings in the pathos of the protagonist. Subha, the youngest of the three daughters to her father is named “Subhashini”, meaning, “sweet talking”. However, she turns out to be dumb and becomes a “useless burden”. Subha’s parents, just like all the other people, think that, because she could not speak, she has no human feelings. Everybody expresses his/her sympathy for Subha openly in her own presence as if she has no human mind and belongs to the non-human being like nature and animals. Her own mother regards her as “deformity in herself” (MOS 146). Her mother is displeased with her, thinking Subha as “a
stain on her womb” (MOS 146). Devoid of her mother’s love and care, Subha withdraws herself from ordinary people and turns to Mother Nature for her companion.

According to Tagore, Nature’s infinite sounds and movements like the “babble of the river”, “the clamour of people’s voices”, “the boatmen’s songs”, “the bird’s calls”, “the rustle of leaves” all blend together and become the voice of the voiceless Subha. Her lack of speech is compensated by her large dark eyes shaded with long lashes which expresses everything in her mind. “Her lips trembled like a leaf in response to any thought that arouse in her mind” (MOS 147). Tagore describes Subha as Nature’s own. The character of Subha is part of the very rhythm of Nature. He delineates:

They who from birth have had no other speech than the trembling of their lips learn a language of the eyes, endless in expression, deep as the sea, clear as the heaven, wherein play dawn and sunset, light and shadow. The dumb has a lonely grandeur like Nature’s own. (MOS 147)

Tagore uses Nature to illustrate the feeling of Subha’s loneliness. He is at his best in selecting the appropriate season and day to the mood of the characters. He selects the midday for the dumb girl Subha to converse with Nature.
During that time, all activities of normal people stop for lunch and there is absolute silence in the atmosphere. Tagore pictures “... beneath the vast impressive heaven there were only dumb Nature and a dumb girl, sitting very silent one under the spreading sunlight, the other where a small tree cast its shadow” (MOS 147). Tagore excels in portraying the companionship between Nature and the dumb girl whose language of silence is unintelligible to human beings. Tagore personifies the River of Bengal, one of the non-human friends of Subha, as a daughter of the middle class, which keeps to its narrow bounds, by doing its duty of endless benediction with swift flow through the village. Tagore aptly blends the feminine metaphors for nature and the natural similes for woman to bring forth the subjugation of both woman and nature under the androcentric society. This stylistic technique of Tagore identifies Carol Adam’s premise of Eco-Feminism which Warren quotes,

Language which feminizes nature and naturalizes women describes, reflects and perpetuates oppression of the twin dominations of women and nature. . . are in fact culturally analogous and not metaphorically analogous. (19)

Apart from Nature, Sarbashi and Panguli, the two cows are also the friends of Subha. Though they have never heard
their names from the lips of Subha, they know her footfall. Though she has no words, she murmurs lovingly and the two cows understand her, and respond to her feelings of joy and sorrow. Tagore introduces Pratap, an idle lad of the village, as the companion of Subha, among the higher species of animals, the human. Since he has speech, Pratap and Subha could not share a common language. He finds the silent girl as the suitable companion who will not divert his attention while fishing. Gradually Subha grows up. She begins to find herself. In Tagore’s words:

Once upon a time, late on a night of full moon, she slowly opened her door, and peeped out timidly. Nature, herself at full moon, like the lonely Subha, was looking down on the sleeping earth. Her strong young life beat within her; joy and sadness filled her being to its brim; she reached the limits even of her own illimitable loneliness, nay, passed beyond them. (MOS 151-152)

Tagore’s portrayal of the feelings of the teenage dumb girl, by comparing her with the lonely Nature, is heart-touching. Subha is a personification of lonely Nature. Tagore describes man’s unmindful neglect of nature through
the character of Subha, and thereby he echoes the idea of Eco-Feminism.

When Subha comes to know about her marriage, through her friend Pratap, she is heart-broken. With a great fear, gathering for days, she “dogged her father and mother like a dumb animal” (MOS 167). Tagore compares the silent agony of Subha to a “stricken doe” looking into the “hunter’s face” (MOS 167). Subha goes to the cowshed and bids farewell to her childhood comrades. She feeds them with her hands. She looks into their faces and tears fall fast from the eyes which speak for her. As a sign of comfort, they rub their horns softly against her arms. Subha finds consolation in the laps of her Mother Earth and in the compassion of dumb cows, as the human beings become deaf to her silent cry. That night, Subha goes to the riverside and tries to say: “Do not let me leave you Mother, put your arms about me as I have put mine about you and hold me fast” (MOS 167). This vividly expresses the unexpressed feelings of the dumb girl Subha, symbolic of Nature. Tagore aptly uses ‘mother’ as a metaphor to Nature, which is another important facet in Eco-Feminism. It reveals the powerful symbol of care, nurture, and represents the ability to regenerate, and sustenance of life. Inspite of
their benevolence to human beings, women and nature are ruled over, dominated, made use of, and neglected by men.

Subha’s father arranges marriage for her with a gentleman in Calcutta. She is taken to Calcutta to be examined by the prospective groom. Subha’s bridal make up done by her mother has killed her own natural beauty. Her mother scolds her for the tears rolling down from her eyes, which tries to convey the crying of her soul. The bridegroom with his friend comes to see the bride. Tagore delineates the scene as “a god arriving to select the beast for his sacrifice” (MOS 167). Like a land is being examined and evaluated for its worth before possessing, Subha is also “scanned and inspected” by the city-bred groom, and she is certified as “not so bad” (MOS 167). Here Tagore indicts the patriarchal oppression of not caring for the consent of the girl for the marriage and her status as mere puppets in the hands of her father and husband who decide her destiny. The bridegroom sees the tears in the eyes of Subha and thinks it is a crying of the tender hearted girl for the separation from her parents. Tagore brings in the simile of “pearl in the oyster” for Subha’s tears. Oyster produces a liquid as a defensive action to protect itself from the danger caused by any foreign particles lodged inside the shell. This liquid turns to be the pearl, which
is profited by man for its rare purity and preciousness. Likewise, Subha’s disapproval for marriage conveyed through the tears is not understood by the groom or her parents, rather it increases her value as a girl with soft nature, and makes the groom to finalize the deal as she will prove to be a useful possession. Tagore reflects the manifestation of Eco-Feminism that patriarchy “exploits nature and animals by associating them with women’s lesser status and conversely dominate women by associating them with nature’s and animal’s inferior status” (Warren 19). Men’s tendency for the indiscriminate use of women and nature without caring for its consequence is well depicted by Tagore.

Subha is plucked away from her Mother Nature when she is married and taken to Calcutta by her husband. The parents are relieved of their worries, once they deliver the “silent weight” into another hand. No one can understand the facial expression of Subha that articulates the endless and voiceless weeping of her heart. Once the husband comes to know that Subha is dumb, he simply abandons her. Tagore comments on the rational mind of the groom as, “Using both eyes and ears this time her lord made another careful examination and married a second wife who could speak” (MOS 168).
Subha cries silently. Her husband fails to understand her as a human being with all her inner feelings and spiritual mind. The description of the feelings of loneliness of the dumb girl Subha can be identified with that of the lonely Nature whose inner spiritual beauty human beings fail to appreciate. The sadness of Subha is the sadness of nature itself. Man’s indifference to nature is very similar to the patriarchal oppression of women. Subha’s parents, in the name of tradition, think that their duty is over once they have given their daughter in marriage. Subha’s husband discards her when he feels that she is of no use to him. Subha has to remain as a darling of Nature. Tagore equates the status of Subha with the silent Nature. Man destroys nature whose “Virgin timber is felled, cut down: fertile soil is tilled and land that lies fallow is ‘barren’, useless” (Warren 19).

Like Subha, Nature is also exploited by men in different ways without any reason. In the portrayal of Subha’s tragedy, Tagore the poet of nature sends the message that Nature and Women are possessed, dominated, exploited, and isolated by the patriarchy. In “Subha” the spiritual loneliness of Nature and Women is explicated. The external beauty of Nature and Women charms the mankind only for a short time and is left alone without any appreciation
and concern by man, when it does not satisfy his materialistic demand. It also endorses the basic principle of Eco-Feminism that patriarchy always abuses women, as it abuses nature. In his portrait of Subha, Tagore equates her to Nature that is personified with its inner spiritual beauty and external beauty. Eco-Feminism became a popular theory nearly seven decades after this short story was written. In Tagore, one can find the heralds of Eco-Feminism. Even before Eco-Feminism emerged as a theory in the West, Tagore practiced it in India. In a sense, he is a precursor of the theory.

Tagore’s portrayal of his women characters and their sufferings are manifold. “The Judge” (1905) is a story about a young girl widow who is subjected to sexual exploitation. Mohitmohan, a handsome youth, a college student, is a neighbour of the young girl-widow Hemshashi. He aroused her passion by writing frequent letters to her in the fictitious name of Vinod Chandra. The young love-starved lonely widow develops a true love for him. He presents a gold ring etching the fictitious name of him on it. One day she became a prey to the lust of Mohitmohan. Just as any other girl left in the lurch, Hemshashi is also pushed into prostitution, as she cannot return home out of shame. She takes the name Khiroda for the profession.
Years pass by and Khiroda is in her mid-thirties. One day she wakes up to find that her then new lover has looted all her gold ornaments and money. She finds it difficult to search for a person who would give her shelter, food, and protection. “She had never dreamt that, he too would forsake her like one discards old, worn out clothes” (MM 131). Due to sheer poverty, Khiroda tries to commit suicide by jumping into a well along with her three years old son. Her attempt fails, and she is charged with infanticide and suicide attempt. The social and legal law fails to notice the reason which leads her to choose death. Even a woman is deprived of choosing either the life or death for herself. Her fate is determined by the patriarchy both inside the family as well as in the society.

She is sentenced to death by the judge Mohitmohan, who is the root cause of her pitiable condition. Both of them do not recognize each other at that time. Mohitmohan has now become a respectable judge. Mohitmohan is symbolic of the cruel patriarchal hegemony which exploits the innocent women and makes use of their pitiable status of dependence. His “iron judgment” (MM 133) for this hapless woman is ordered by him as he thought that she does not deserve any mercy. He is of the opinion that if such women are given any leniency, they will spoil the society. He justifies
“. . . if at any time rules and restrictions were given a free rein, there would not be a single good lady left in the cages of this social structure” (MM 134). This thought is the outcome of his own behaviour during the prime of his youth.

In the end, “judge” Mohitmohan happens to meet Khiroda in the prison, where he finds his gold ring in her possession. The poor devoted girl has still been nurturing a true love for this man for the past twenty-four years. For Mohitmohan, Khiroda is one among the many young women whom he has seduced. Nevertheless, for Khiroda, he is the master of her heart and she has devoted her mind only to him.

Tagore, through the character of Mohitmohan, wants to drive home the point that a woman is not merely an object of sensual pleasure. Tagore’s portrayal of Khiroda’s hapless situation comes closer to the observations on women’s sexual exploitation made by Marlowe Dixon, a Radical feminist and Sociology professor that “. . . women must function as sexual objects, being defined in purely sexual rather than human terms, and being forced to package and sell themselves as commodities on the sex market” (Deborah 88). In Tagore’s times, women were passive to patriarchal oppression and subjected to sexual exploitation
for the sake of survival. This situation is in tune with the later day Marxist Feminist discovery that economic dependency on men is the cause for women’s subjugation. Tagore’s feminist consciousness is revealed in his creation of Khiroda’s story which is conforming to the conceptualization of the Marxist Feminism. Tagore’s picture of Khiroda is fully in agreement with the assertion made in the Red Stockings Manifesto:

Women are an oppressed class. . . . We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women; a few men dominate the rest. All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. Men have controlled all political, economic and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. All men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. (Marxism, Feminism & Women’s Liberation 3)
In describing the feelings of the women suppressed by patriarchy, Tagore’s feminist consciousness as evident in these short stories is more illuminating and thought provoking than that of the hardcore feminists who came out with their feminist ideologies decades after his time. This makes him a visionary of Feminism in Indian background.

As a young “Zamindar” of his family estate, Tagore happened to see the exploitation of poor people especially women by the feudal society. “Punishment” (1893) is about the tragic life story of Radha and Chandara who has been dehumanized and undervalued by their husbands Dukhiram and Chidam. Belonging to rural Bengal, they are simple, illiterate peasants living at the mercy of the landlords. After a day’s hard labour, without being paid the day’s wages, and abused by feudal masters, the brothers return home with resentment. The hungry Dukhiram asks his wife Radha to serve food. As there is nothing in the house to prepare any food, she ridicules him. Unable to bear the harsh words, Dukhiram loses his temper and kills her with a chopper. Then he is upset and repents for his mistake. Tagore has rightly reflected the assertion of the Marxist Feminism which says that,

Capitalist class relationships are the root cause of female oppression, exploitation and
discrimination. Men are socialized into exploitative relationships in relation to work and they carry this socialization over into the home and their relationships to women.

(*Marxism, Feminism & Women’s Liberation*)

The capitalist exploitation oppresses the low caste men, and they, in turn, ventilate their suppression in showing the same towards their women at home. The women of low castes are doubly suppressed from both the men of colonizers as well as the men of their household.

The younger brother Chidam’s first reaction is to protect his brother. For that, he puts the blame on his wife Chandara, who uses to quarrel with Radha every day. Chidam declares, “If I lose my wife I’ll get another, but if my brother is hanged I’ll never get another” (MM 113).

By this logic, he himself becomes the exploiter and Chandara, as a woman, becomes the exploited. By hearing this Chandara is thunder-struck. She is wounded by this outrageous suggestion that she could only stare at him in stun. Tagore mirrors man’s inhuman treatment of woman as a mere object that could be replaced by another. Here Tagore has echoed the opinion expressed by Catherine Macaulay, the eighteenth century feminist writer of France who writes in
her *Letter on Education* in 1790 that the women were treated as “mere property of men” (Walters 30).

Chandara, though illiterate, has a mind of her own and she is not a submissive wife. Her sense of pride is hurt by her own husband. She could fight and save her life simply by telling the truth. But she could not bear such a situation and she decides that her life is not worth living when she is betrayed by her own husband. Silently, Chandara seems to be telling her husband: “I have abandoned you and chosen instead, in the full bloom of my youth to wed this scaffold – the last tie in my life will be with it” (MM 118).

As a woman, she wants to protest against this patriarchal oppression. So, she calmly admits to the crime which she does not commit, fully knowing that she will be hanged. She denies all attempts to save herself from going to the gallows. She also refuses to implicate her elder sister-in-law, even though she used to quarrel with her every day before her murder. Perhaps, as a woman, she wants to save her prestige.

In the jail, before hanging, when the kind civil surgeon asks her, whether she wants to see anyone, she replies that she would like to see her mother. Tagore describes, “The doctor said, ‘Your husband wants to see
you. Shall I call him?' Chandara said, "Death!'" (MM 120).
The betrayal of her husband has hurt her feeling.
Resentment and anger runs so deep in her mind that she
takes revenge on her husband by refusing to see him just
before hanging.

The way in which Tagore has portrayed the intense,
depressed feeling of Chandara is remarkable. As a woman, she
has established her feminine individuality and accepts
death in dignity. She is a victim of patriarchal
oppression. That she wishes to see her mother, before going
to the gallows might be due to woman bonding. Tagore’s
depiction of Chandara as a victim of patriarchy has
undoubtedly made him a precursor of feminism. To quote The
Second Wave feminist’s observation,

The nature of women, like that of slaves, is
depicted as dependent, incapable of reasoned
thought, childlike in its simplicity and warmth,
martyred in the role of mother, and mystical in
the role of sexual partner. In its benevolent
form, the inferior position of women results in
paternalism; in its malevolent form, a domestic
tyrranny which can be unbelievably brutal.

(Marxism, Feminism & Women’s Liberation 2)
The Marxist School of Feminism also views that women are often “looked at and treated as the property of men. As such, a woman’s position is reduced to that of a commodity meant to be used and disposed” (Tandon 46). In as much as Tagore’s portrayal of Chandara’s unfortunate end closely resembles the above Marxist Feminist observation on patriarchy, Tagore can be undoubtedly called a writer with a Feminist Consciousness.

Even though The Abolition of Sati Act (1829) and Widow Remarriage Act (1856) were enacted as law in the mid-nineteenth century, conservative society was disinclined to put it into practice. These were only open for discussion for and against. This was only because the gender relations had not changed much in the society.

The plot of the story “Mahamaya” (1893) is “Sati” the gruesome practice of widows accompanying the bodies of their husbands. They are to be burnt simultaneously on the funeral pyres. Mahamaya and Rajib grew from childhood as neighbours. They love each other even though Rajib belongs to a lower caste. Mahamaya has a brother named Bhabanicharan Chatterjee. Both the brother and sister are made from the same mould. They talk less, but their eyes glow like the “midday sunlight” (POW 64), which frighten all the people with whom they speak.
One midday, Rajib asks Mahamaya to meet him urgently in a dilapidated temple by the riverside. Rajib tells her that they could get married and go to a far off place in Sonapur estate where his British employer wants him to continue his service. Even though Mahamaya loves Rajib, she rejects this idea of eloping with him, for fear of being condemned by her high caste Brahmin community. She is already twenty-four years old and she is afraid of her brother Bhabanicharan. At that time, Bhabanichan sees them together. Rajib is startled. But Mahamaya defying the command of his brother to go home tells Rajib that she will meet him at his house. “Mahamaya, unruffled, looks at Rajib and says, ‘I will come to your house, please wait for me’ ” (POW 66). That very night Mahamaya’s brother arranges her marriage with an old Brahmin who is about to die. Mahamaya passively accepts the marriage in obedience to her brother and becomes a widow the next day. In Tagore’s words:

Mahamaya’s marriage ceremony was completed in the semi-dark room, lighted by the glow of two cremation pyres nearby and the sound of the cries of the dying and mixed with the unintelligible incantations of the priest. Mahamaya became a widow the day after her marriage. (POW 67)
Rajib is agitated to hear the news that Mahamaya is going to be cremated along with her dead husband. He wants to prevent this “Sati”, but keeps quiet as he does not want to do anything against the wish of Mahamaya. She is thrown into the funeral pyre with her hands tied. At that time nature in the form of a fierce storm and rain saves Mahamaya from death.

Rising from the funeral pyre, she wears a sari covering her head and goes to Rajib’s house. She comes to Rajib as a changed woman physically with her burnt face and emotionally as a strong woman, conscious of her dignity. She accepts to go with Rajib to Sonapur with a condition that Rajib will never open the covering of her face. Rajib agrees to that and they live together only as friends. After some months have passed, Rajib happens to see her uncovered burnt face, while she is sleeping in her room. As he has broken the promise, she leaves him for good, disappearing into the darkness never to return.

Mahamaya, though a strong willed woman does not want Rajib to live with her out of pity. She also fears that Rajib could not love her as before after seeing her burnt face. Mahamaya does want neither to inflict pain on him nor to suffer it herself. She survives the fire of the funeral pyre but her life, as a human being does not. In this story
Tagore condemns the social system, which in the name of sanctity of caste, allows the marriage of young women to very old men, and the consequence of becoming young widows and thus being burnt according to gruesome “Sati”.

Mahamaya is also a victim of her own false pride in tradition and the filial oppression of her brother. In not accepting Rajib’s request to forgive him for the mistake of seeing her uncovered face, Mahamaya has her own fears of social taboos. She is the passive victim who submits herself to the social norms imposed by the patriarchy.

Even though “Sati” is officially banned by the then British government in 1829, six decades earlier, Tagore writes this short story “Mahamaya” when it is prevailing among the high caste Hindu women. Tagore through the character Mahamaya depicts the mindset of the Hindu orthodoxy, which does not accept the widow remarriage even if it is approved by law.

According to the situation that existed in the Hindu orthodoxy, the argument for practicing “Sati” is explained by the then social reformer and a widow Pandita Ramabai Saraswati of 19th Century in her book The High Caste Hindu Women (1894),

A few years ago, a high-caste man in Cutch (North Western India) ventured to marry a widow, but to
endure the persecution which ensued was beyond his power, and the wretched fellow was soon after found dead, having committed suicide. Remarriage, therefore, is not available nor would it be at all times desirable, as a mitigation of the sufferer’s lot. So, the poor, helpless high caste widow with the one chance of ending her miseries in the Sati rite taken away from her, remains as in ages past with none to help her. (47)

The love of Mahamaya and Rajib cannot withstand against the social sanctions. Mahamaya’s elder brother, the upholder of orthodoxy, shatters their passionate impulsiveness. His inhumane treatment by forcefully marrying her to a dying man is contemptible and villainous. The daring act of her brother is the result of maintaining his family dignity by stacking the life of his sister. This inhuman act evidences the passive status of women of those days, who remained a passive property in the family by allowing the patrilineal force to determine their fate.

In the light of the observation of Pandita Ramabai, Mahamaya is afraid of the social laws which prevent her from marrying him. She is entangled by the social customs which makes her to reject Rajib even though he prostrates before her to forgive him and wants to marry her. Tagore’s
opinion that women themselves should try to rise up against the cruel practice of “Sati” is emphasized through this story.

Tagore depicts Mahamaya as a woman of enormous will and conviction. Tagore reveals the high caste pride of both the brother and sister. Tagore’s intention of taking this subject may be to show the shallowness of high caste pride which is not beneficial to both the partners. Mahamaya’s high caste pride is revealed when she rejects her lover Rajib’s proposal to elope with him. Her ruthless brother Bhabanichan’s inhuman treatment of forcibly marrying his sister to a dying old man is also born out of the caste pride. Mahamaya’s sudden leaving of Rajib is also for the reason that Rajib may not accept her with a scared face.

Through “Mahamaya” Tagore tells the world that man–woman relationship cannot continue without passion. Tagore shows the pathetic condition of women by such “honest killing” of lovers, which affect both the families. Tagore’s focus on such kind of brutal killings in the name of “family honour” is still happening even in the twenty first century goes to prove that Tagore has envisioned the eternal problems of women.

Tagore’s portrayal of his women characters is manifold. There are different facets of women characters.
They are of the traditional type, submissive, and subjected to all types of humiliation by the patriarchal, social, and religious set up prevailed at that time. Even if they try to raise their voice against the injustice, their voices are not heard. They are conventional women whose sufferings are sanctified by the patriarchy.

Tagore had the unique natural genius to get into the female psyche and to analyse their strange structure, through his fictions. Even in cruel actions and base thoughts, Tagore brings out the noble feelings. He tells the world that Indian women are highly sacrificing, loving, obedient, meek, religious and kind. They adore their husbands, and love their children deeply.

In most of the initial writings of Tagore, he brings out the pathos of women caused by various situations in the house. The problems women had to face were vividly portrayed by Tagore in most of short stories written in his first phase of writings upto 1897, while he was in his thirties. By focusing the pitiable plight of women, Tagore wants to make known the problems of the degraded status of women in the dominating male society at large and women themselves in particular. Tagore deals with the problems of the wife in the joint family system. A woman is torn between the loyalty to the family of her husband and the
parents. She has to bear the ill treatment meted out to her by her in-laws due to non-payment of dowry, and also the jealousy. These are recurrent themes of Tagore in his fictions written in his initial phase of writings during 1881-1897, upto the period of his stay in Shieldaha, where he managed his estates.

Tagore was brought up in Jorasanko Mansion of Calcutta. Tagore from his childhood days felt lonely under the strict vigil of Servocracy as reported by himself in his *Reminiscences*. Tagore came into contact with rural people only when he started living in boat house of river Padma. Naturally the women characters of this period are traditional bound, without even aware of their subservient status. Tagore, created the examples of tradition bound Indian womanhood and projected their problems in his writings. It is interesting to note that even though Tagore’s stand on reformist attitude revealed in his writings *Yurop Probosir Patra* (*Letters from one Emigrated to Europe*) when he was in London at the threshold of youth during 1878-1880, it did not reflect in the first phase of literary writings. Tagore’s articles appreciating the free mixing culture of women with men of British society were published in his elder brother’s journal *Bharati*, which created an uproar among the Hindu Revivalists. Even the
editor Dwejendranath Tagore twenty-one years elder to Tagore who himself a Revivalist, wrote in his editorial note denouncing the views of Tagore. Alarmed at Tagore’s radical questioning of Hindu Bengali family and social values comparing with the European culture, Debendranath called him back discontinuing his law studies. After his return in 1880, he found the clash between the reformist trend and Revivalist forces had reached its peak. It seems the young Tagore felt that he could not overrule the Hindu Revivalists and seems favourable to the conservative group.

Hence, in the first phase of writings he simply focused on the silent sufferings of women by patriarchy. However, he did not remain static in his thoughts on women’s emancipation for long. Debendranath Tagore although a social reformer “he sincerely observed many dictates of the Hindu society in spite of being a humanist, widow remarriage, intercaste marriage, unlimited freedom of women were never condoned by him” (Deb 25). He was a conservative of the age-old customs and norms of behaviour observed by women. He was tolerant so long as his children did not stray into a wrong path. He conducted the “Upanayana” ceremony (wearing the sacred thread) for Rabindranath at the age of ten, deviating from the rules of Brahmo Samaj. Tagore got his two daughters married at the age of fourteen
and ten in the same year even though he was against child marriage on the advice of his father. During this period, it seems Tagore was favourable to the Hindu conservative camp. It is established in his letter written to Panditha Ramabai, an erudite Maharashtrian scholar and a true feminist denouncing her belief in equal rights for men and women. However, he did not remain confined within the narrow parameter for long. As an obedient son, perhaps Tagore did not want to earn the displeasure of his father and the conservative Hindu society.

From Rabindranath Tagore’s portrayal of traditional women characters in the selected short stories discussed in this chapter, it is clear that he has dealt with almost all the outrages inflicted upon women by the patriarchy and androcentric tradition. They are all the heroines victimized in the name of tradition (The Ghat’s Story) dowry menace (Transaction) and (Haimanti), sexual exploitation (The Judge), denial of education for women which make them easily vulnerable to patriarchal oppression in (The Exercise Book), child marriage and its consequent child widowhood (The Ghat’s Story), “Sati”—the burning alive of young widows along with the funeral pyre of their husbands (Mahamaya), the inhuman treatment of women as a mere object (Punishment), and neglect of women just like
the nature uncared (Subha) are poignantly portrayed. Tagore seems to reflect the Liberal Feminist theory of Mary Wollstonecraft as propounded in her _The Vindication of The Rights of Women_ (1791) that, “...women remain enslaved because of a corrupt process of socialization which stunts their intellect and teaches that their proper purpose in life is to serve men” (Tandon 42). The central theme in all the short stories discussed in this chapter is Rabindranath Tagore’s Feminist Consciousness of victimization of women under patriarchal oppression. That, men have not even understood to treat the women as a human being which his predecessor and the first feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out have been reflected in Tagore’s short stories, goes to prove that Tagore is a writer with Feminist Consciousness.