PREFACE

Even in this twenty first century when the world is changing so fast in all conceivable ways, we can hardly refrain from admitting and asserting how hard it is to get over the spell cast upon us by Rabindra Nath Tagore. The language in which we speak, the manner in which we think, act and behave and in fact, all our joys and sorrows, our smiles and tears, nay, our whole being, it seems, begins and ends with him. Indeed, it is in him that all our culture, our life and our living are embedded. This is little short of a miracle and the best way to put it is in the poet's own words - "In truth, wonder grips us when we do behold thee".

Tagore's advent in our life and our literature has been the happiest and the most momentous event we can think of. Not to speak of Bengali life and literature, Tagore's contribution in enriching and ennobling human life through his writings which reflect the feelings, emotions and passions of all men upon the earth has been phenomenal. The more we study him and the more we delve into the fathomless depth of his philosophy of life, the more we feel ourselves getting chastened and elevated to a different plane altogether. Our mental horizon gets broadened and our emotional understanding of things becomes deeper and we can feel the relevance of Tagore in our life in the most palpable way. Needless to say, it is because of this that Tagorean literature has today transcended the barrier of time and space and acquired a universal stature, and it has been shining with a sparkling brightness in the firmament of world literature.

The fact of the matter is that, Tagore has had a fascinating hold on me ever since I started reading his works. Scholars and researchers
have looked into various aspects of Tagore's writings and there has also been lot of discussion, deliberation and analysis of the women characters he has created, but as yet very little research has been done on how the poet himself has looked upon these women and how far they have influenced him or how much they are relevant to the understanding of his vision of life. No doubt, it is almost impossible to understand all that the poet has to say by studying the enormous corpus of his creation and naturally as such one has to focus attention on only one particular aspect and try to measure the worth of it. While looking a bit critically into Tagorean literature with my limited ability, especially at the women characters created by him, it has struck me that such a stupendous task cannot be accomplished within the limitations of space granted in a dissertation of the sort I have been endeavouring to prepare and I have to confine myself to something particular and specific instead of diving foolishly into the vast sea of Tagorean creation. I have been able to realise that it is in poetry where lies concealed the essential truth of a poet's life and philosophy and as such I have decided to confine myself to the study of women who appear only in his poetry and how they influenced him at different stages of his life. So, though the little of my dissertation is "Rabindranath's outlook on Women as reflected in his writings", my field of investigation is limited to his poetry only for reasons already stated.

Poetry, says Tagore, is the manifestation of Truth, Beauty and Goodness and this emerges from the deep recesses of a poet's innermost heart. The beauty that lies hidden within the elemental simplicities of life and in the external reflection of day to day occurrences, is exposed by the poet in a manner that adds
strangeness to it and makes it something mysterious and elusive. And it is for this reason that to Tagore, the woman sometimes appears as a playmate, sometimes as the Deity of Life (Jiban Debata), sometimes as Nature and sometimes as beauty inaccessible. So in Tagore's poetry we find the woman appearing in so many diverse forms and characters and it is this diversity which has been sought to be depicted by me in my discussion on the poet's views on women.

It is a fact known to all that a woman plays multifarious roles in the life of a man and she appears variously as a wife, a guide, a friend, a companion, a mother et al. Tagore too has depicted the woman in different forms and manners in his poetry. But I have refrained from dividing into separate categories these different forms. For instance, in the poems of the poet's first phase of creative career, we find the woman coming out in diverse forms as the beloved, the companion, the mother, the wife etc., but the same is true of the other phases as well including the very last. I have not dealt with them separately for a specific reason. It has to be kept in mind that no man is born instantly with deep thought and understanding. It is through self-understanding and self-analysis that he grows up, attains maturity and gradually acquires knowledge of life and the mystery of things. The same object appears with different meanings and dimensions as a man undertakes the journey of life, grows in body and mind and undergoes changes in outlook and vision through experience. The same happened to Tagore also, no doubt, rather, we can say to a greater extent and degree than ordinary mortals. In the first phase, he looked at the woman in the backdrop of contemporary social milieu, but by and by he entered deeper and deeper into the scheme of things and the mysteries of life and
his vision got mellowed and enlarged. It is from that perspective that the poems of the different phases have been categorized and put under different headings.

In the introductory chapter I have shown the position and status of women in the social backdrop of the ancient times, the middle ages and the modern times and have tried to present the history of changes in outlook of looking at them. It cannot be denied that women were the first to be enslaved in the history of human civilization and from then onwards, along with the evolution of that civilization there has been gradual changes in their position and status, though by very little degrees. In modern times the way of looking at them has changed considerably. Tagore too was not unaware of this historical phenomenon, for we know he was an universalist of the highest order and the root of his literary consciousness was firmly embedded in history. Consequently, in the introduction to my dissertation, discussion on what position the women had been accorded and how they were looked upon during the different periods of human history has inevitably come to occupy a cardinal position.

This has been followed by division of the different phases of the poet's creative output on the basis of subject and outlook of the verses and naming them accordingly.

The first chapter titled 'Pre-Manashi Phase' contains discussion on the poet's outlook on women during adolescence. Naturally, during that period of life, a complete knowledge and understanding of women is beyond the capability of an individual. Tagore's attitude to women and his outlook on them were formed on the basis of his
familiarity and association with the women of the family of which he was a member and those who lived in the immediate neighbourhood.

With the advent of youth, the next stage of life, a young man gets overcome by a nameless curiosity and intense fascination, though not without a sense of diffidence, for the opposite sex and now there is the craving for physical intimacy to enjoy the maddening and intoxicating pleasure of love. It was that period of Tagore’s life when his outlook on women was however coloured by a kind of romantic hue more than anything else and this is what we notice in the poems of the ‘Pre-Manashi Phase’ of creation. And that is what I have sought to highlight through an analysis of the poems of that stage.

Chapter II contains discussion and analysis of poems belonging to the period from ‘Manashi’ to ‘Chaitali’. In this phase we find the poet arriving at a point where he could discover the essence of beauty transcending the bounds of the body and becoming something spiritual. He could realize that the woman is not merely an object of physical gratification and that lust for the body is not the only truth. He discovered that the woman is in reality the epitome of pure and stainless beauty. Poems where the poet has looked upon the woman as the deity of life have also been taken up for discussion in this chapter.

In Chapter III, I have sought to find out the poet’s views on women as reflected in the poems from ‘Kalpana’ to Kshanika’. In these poems the woman has emerged as the poet’s beloved of life as well as of life hereafter. In the poems of ‘Kalpana” he has looked for the
source of culture in the midst of tradition and convention while in
‘Katha O Kahini’ he has invested the contemporary woman with
qualities of the heroine of ancient poetry and given her a realistic
identity thereby. In this chapter, I have endeavoured to offer a
comprehensive analysis of Tagore’s realization that the sanctity of
the woman dwells not in body but in the mind. Again, in the poems
belonging to ‘Kshanika’, I have analysed the poet’s conception of
the vastness and depth of the woman’s beauty revealed through
them, where she emerges primarily as the epitome of goodness,
kindness and affection, as one whose sole purpose in life is to do
good to others. It is this image of the woman that I have tried to
project in this chapter.

In Chapter IV, which contains discussion on poems from ‘Smaran
to Geetali’, the woman appears in a form and manner that reflects
the poet’s renewed outlook on her. How the beloved of his personal
life gradually got metamorphosed into the manifestation of universal
love has been shown through an analysis of the poems comprising
‘Smaran’. In ‘Utsarga’ the woman has appeared as a tireless nurse
attending upon all around her and as one who inspires men in all
their works and activities. In ‘Kheya’ we find the reflection of the
poet’s intense eagerness to realize the essence of feminine beauty
and charm and in ‘Geetanjali’, ‘Geetimalya’ and ‘Geetali’ we once
again discover how human love ultimately gets elevated to spiritual
love and how the poet transforms himself into a woman-devotee of
love to get united with the Divine Lover.

Poems belonging to the books of verses titled ‘Balaka to Parishesh’
have been analysed in Chapter V of my dissertation. In ‘Balaka’ we
find the poet coming back to his earlier world of beauty and joy contained in Man and Nature. The woman who had always been the force of inspiration in his life does not exist in physical form before the poet now, but she continues to inspire him by dwelling in the temple of his mind. In ‘Palataka’, the woman appears in multiple forms and manners – sometimes as a soft-hearted being, sometimes as the lady-love, sometimes as one craving for liberty, sometimes as a rebel and sometimes as a magnanimous lady. It is as such the woman in her different entities that seem to appear here. In ‘Purabi’, the playmate of the poet’s imagination has emerged as the symbol of the secret desire of his mind and in ‘Mahua’ the poet has found the source of love in the woman’s awareness of self-right and her sportive witticism. In this book of verses, even ugly women have come out as beautiful individuals by virtue of the inherent beauty of their mind.

In the poems incorporated in the collection ‘From Punascha to Shesh Lekha’ that have been taken up for discussion in Chapter VI, we find Tagore has glorified the various aspects of women in general, such as their sweetness of character, their pains and agonies, their goodness and affection, their love and happiness as they conduct their activities in real life. Again, in ‘Bichitrita’ he has depicted with sincere feeling the apprehension and bashfulness of the virgin bride-to-be on the one hand and on the other, there is the woman looking after the comfort and happiness of the family to which she belongs. The poet has also drawn the picture of the woman ruminating on her joys and delight of a housewife’s life and in the evening of his life, the poet has found in her the attributes of the eternal woman manifesting herself as the epitome of selfless
service and boundless love and affection for all mankind.

Chapter VII contains an analysis of how the poet has discovered the presence of feminine beauty in Nature. He finds Nature appearing variously sometimes as a beautiful and bubbling youthful woman, sometimes as an affectionate and kind mother, sometimes as a playful damsel in the first bloom of youth and sometimes simply as the child of Nature.

In Chapter VIII which is the concluding one, I have tried to summarise Tagore's views on women starting from 'Banaphool', his first book of verses to 'Shesh Lekha', his last book, in order to find out the central strain of his attitude to women and the way he has looked at them.

It was Dr. Dipak Sen, my guide, who drew my attention to the subject which I have taken for investigation, analysis and study in this dissertation. That there is enough room for looking at Tagore's women, as they appear in his verses, from different perspectives was first pointed out to me by him. Needless to say, it is his well-considered opinions and well-thought-out suggestions and guidance that have enabled me to prepare this dissertation. My indebtedness to him cannot be expressed in words. I am eternally grateful to him. I offer my heartfelt regards and respectful 'Pranam' to him.

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