Chapter IV

Redefining their Spaces: Tagore’s Women

Women have always been on the periphery of society in conservative patriarchal set-up. Their voices have begun to be heard only in the recent times. Their representation in literature has largely been a reflection of the same conformist traditions. When Tagore appeared on the literary horizon, women were portrayed as acquiescent, traditional, timid and silent entities. Most of his contemporaries depicted women as bound by customs and traditions.

Tagore is quite unconventional in portraying women in the tradition of his contemporaries Bankim Chandra and Sharat Chandra and in fact here he surpasses them. His non-conformism was more radical and consistent. His progressive and feminist outlook is evident in his portrayal of bold, courageous and assertive women. He probed deep into the mind of women and presented myriad forms of their persona very sensitively.

Tagore’s plays acquaint his readers with the social conditions in which women were placed. Almost always the victims, and more interestingly, responding differently yet with the same dignity, he has created unforgettable women characters. The treatment of women and their position in society was of serious concern to Rabindranath Tagore. Being a sensitive person and a great poet, his understanding of women was profound. His portrayal of their joys and sorrows, hopes and despair, their yearnings and their dreams is genuine and perceptive. Among many aspects of Tagore’s humanism, his ‘portraits of women’ stand out as the most impressive feature. These portraits are drawn
in soft earth colours and they look real and last long in our mind. The characters shine like stars and do not blind the eye’ (Moradi 1).

Chitra: Woman as Embodiment of Inner Strength, Love and Beauty

Tagore’s play Chitra is a dramatic sermon on the theme of true love. This lyrical drama, first published by the Indian Society, London, in 1913, the year Tagore received the Nobel Prize, is based on the story of the Mahabharata. It is the English translation of Chitrangada, a Bengali play published in 1892. Chitra is the first clear elucidation of feminism in India by Tagore. This play is a work of superlative art and a vision of ideal beauty. Tagore’s conception of human love finds a striking expression in Chitra.

Krishna Kriplani describes the play as the most fascinating, and the most satisfying examples of Tagore’s genius: “one of Rabindranath’s most beautiful plays, perhaps the only one that is flawless”. Edward Thompson describes the play as “the loveliest drama, a lyrical feast’. Masti Venkatesha Iyengar observes that “even in the English rendering, the play is a thing of beauty” (Iyengar, 45-6).

The play Chitra revolves around Chitrangada. The appeal of the play depends primarily on her characterisation. In the preface to the first edition, Tagore introduces the theme on which this lyrical drama is based: “In the course of his wanderings, in fulfillment of a vow of penance, Arjuna came to Manipur. There he saw Chitrangada, the beautiful daughter of Chitravahana, the king of the country. Smitten with her charms, he asked the king for the hand of his daughter in marriage” (qtd. in Desai 167). The king Chitravahana on learning that Arjuna was Arjuna the Pandava, told him that Lord Shiva gave Prabhanjana, his ancestor this boon, that he and his successors would each have one
child after the childless king performed penance for a long time. It so happened that the promised child had invariably been a son. Chitravahana was the first to have only a daughter Chitrangada to continue the line of descent. He treated her as a son and made her his heir. The king further said that the one son that would be born to her must perpetuate my race: “That son will be the price that I shall demand for this marriage. You can take her if you like, on this condition”. Arjuna promised and took Chitrangada to his wife, and lived in her father’s capital for three years. When a son was born to them, he embraced her with affection, and taking leave of her and her father, set out again on his travels (qtd. in Desai 167).

Chitra, thus, is a dramatisation of the story of love between Arjuna, the Pandava Prince and Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur. S. K. Desai observes: “In Chitra, we have the well-known Mahabharata story of Arjuna and Chitrangada, which Tagore transforms into a symbol of human love and, in a sense of human life itself” (167)

The significance of the Arjuna-Chitra episode in the epic of the Mahabharata episode highlights the daring qualities of Arjuna in his odyssey of love. Tagore’s play, on the other hand, highlights the mysterious nature of a woman’s love and the role she plays in the game of love. Chitra is presented by Tagore as self-assertive princess who admits her desire to seek the love of Arjuna by all means. Arjuna on seeing her in the first instance while in the forest does not respond to her love. However, she is not disappointed. In course of time, she shows her strength after gaining perfect beauty from Madana. Eventually, she succeeds in making him surrender before her borrowed beauty. Tagore has invested Chitra’s character with an inherent strength associated generally with
empowered women: “She proved her equality. She equalled herself with her ancestors who made penance for child” (Pathan 49).

Since Chitra is the only child of her father, she, has been trained to be a warrior right from her childhood. Dedicated to the battlefield, she is always dressed as a soldier in male attire. She acquires perfection in handling bow and arrow and faithfully discharges her duty towards the state like a king and safeguards the interests of her people. She exclaims:

I am Chitra, the daughter of the kingly house of Manipur. With god-like grace, Lord Shiva promised to my royal grandsire an unbroken line of male descent. Nevertheless, the divine word proved powerless to change the spark of life in my mother’s womb- so invincible was my nature, women though I be. (Collected Poems and Plays 153)

Tagore’s Chitra has a spirit that is indomitable. Having been brought up like a male since her childhood, Chitra has no surface charms. She is very well aware of her responsibilities towards her state. She has outstanding physical power but has not cultivated her feminine sensibilities and charm that may impress a man. She admits: “I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow, but I have never learnt Cupid’s archery, the play of eyes” (154). Yet once she sets her sight on something, she will spare no effort to acquire it. This assertiveness makes Chitra quite unlike women, who are conditioned to bury their desires forever.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar aptly describes Chitra as ‘a succinct Tagorean version of Kalidasa’s Sukumala’ (qtd. in Murti 25). Nand Kumar believes that through the Chitra-Arjuna episode has been taken from the Mahabharata:
Tagore seems to be recasting the Lord Shiva-Parvati myth as described by Kalidasa in *Kumara Sambhavam*, an excellent epic in Sanskrit Literature. Like Chitra, Parvati, after seeing Madana brunt to ashes before her eyes, began to hate beauty through which she could not win over Lord Shiva. It must be noted that like Chitra’s Parvati’s beauty and youth were also refreshed by Madana and Vasanta. (37)

Before the gods deck her with captivating grace, Chitra is but a simple, common and unselfconscious girl, wearing a boy’s attire. She has been portrayed by Tagore as an embodiment of simplicity and truth. To realise her ambition she reveals her agony and makes a declaration:

> I am not the woman who nourishes her despair in lonely silence, feeding it with nightly tears and covering it with the daily patient smile, a widow from her birth. The flower of my desire shall never drop into the dust before it has ripened to fruit. (156)

Chitra also lacks the submissiveness associated with women. The villagers call her “terror of all evil-doers” (168). Tagore, however, invests Chitra’s character with essential human traits as well. During his exile, Arjuna, the Pandava prince, meets Chitra. The splendour of his masculine personality stimulates her suppressed feminine sensibility. The very first sight of Arjuna, the great warrior, sows the seeds of love in her heart and she spontaneously falls in love with him. She is bewildered and her latent femininity is awakened. One, who did not know how to win hearts, on meeting her object of love, Arjuna, gets attracted towards him and says:
An amused smile flickered around the corners of his mouth, perhaps at the sight of my boyish countenance. Then for the first time in my life I felt myself a woman, and knew that a man was before me. (154)

Arjuna is the hero of her dreams. She had an ambition to “challenge him in his disguise to single combat, and prove her skill in arms against Arjuna.” (155) In fact, this is the desire of Chitra, the warrior. However she also desires him as woman because she has fallen in love with him. She is aware of the fact that she is no enchantress and that Arjuna would not be smitten by her beauty. She discards her manly attire and comes to Arjuna dressed in alluring clothes. Arjuna remains cold and unaffected by the demonstration of her love. Eventually, he tells her he cannot marry her because he has taken the vow of celibacy: “I am not fit to be thy husband” (155).

Unable to bear rejection, Chitra feels dejected and disillusioned. It is difficult for her to suppress her heart’s desire. Moreover, Princess Chitra would not accept defeat. She feels a vacuum within and craves for physical beauty in order to capture the heart of Arjuna. She performs a severe penance and invokes the God of beauty and love to endow her with perfect beauty that would enchant Arjuna’s heart. Rejection from Arjuna makes her feel as if her strength as a warrior has vanished and all her “man’s training lies crushed under thy [Arjuna’s] feet” (155). Desperately she asks the god of love to grant her wish:

Now teach me thy lessons; give me the power of the weak and the weapon of the unarmed hand....I have come to thy door, thou world-vanquishing Love, and thou, Vasanta, youthful Lord of the Seasons, take from my young body this primal injustice, an unattractive plainness. For a single
day make me superbly beautiful, even as beautiful as well as the sudden
blooming of love in my heart. Give me but one brief day of perfect beauty,
and I will answer for the days that follow. (156)

Thus, Chitra is blessed with a boon of beauty “not for the short span of a day, but for one
whole year” (156).

The moment Arjuna sees the transformed Chitra he is awestruck by her beauty.
Overwhelmed, Arjuna calls her “an apparition of beauty in the perfect form of a woman”
(157). He feels as if “the supreme fulfillment of desire seemed to have been revealed in a
flash” (157). He falls in love with Chitra and calls her the “desire of the whole world!”
(158). Arjuna feels that manly pride would readily bow its head before the beauty of
Chitra, who is perfection personified. He tells Chitra:

You alone are perfect; you are the wealth of the world, the end of all
poverty, the goal of all efforts, the one woman! Others there are who can
be but slowly known. While to see you for a moment is to see perfect
completeness once and for ever. (159-160)

Chitra begins to glow with beauty and youth and desire. In the words of Vishwanath S.
Naravane: ‘The Amazonian Princess was transformed into a maiden of ravishing
loveliness’ (102). Arjuna is mesmerised by her beauty and instantly falls in love with her.
Chitra has become the dearest of all for Arjuna, a new treasure that the almighty has
blessed him with. His heart dances in ecstasy and he desires nothing but Chitra’s love.
Chitra warns him: “woo not falsehood, offer not your great heart to an illusion” (161).
Arjuna however remains unmoved. He is overawed by her beauty and charm. He believes
that no illusion or falsehood can touch him if he possesses the love of Chitra. Finally he
decides to marry her. But Chitra's conscious begins to prick her, not allowing her to fool the one whom she loves the most. She feels ashamed of herself and is unable to face Arjuna with the falsehood of borrowed beauty. “...my body had become my own rival. It is my hateful task to deck her every day, to send her to my beloved and see her caressed by him. O god, take back thy boon” (163). Finally, she decides to reveal her true self to Arjuna, and is prepared for the worst of consequences: “I will reveal my true self to him, a nobler thing than this disguise. If he rejects it, if he spurns me, and breaks my heart, I will bear even that in silence” (163).

In words of Reshu Shukla:

Chitra is a significant fusion of the two kinds of women characters- the emotional and the tranquil type; growing from innocent girlhood to the mellowness of motherhood; which can be traced from drawn of reality and the transition from the fire of flowery spring to the mellow fruitfulness of autumn. She advances from the paradise of sensual rapture to the ecstasy of illumination and the sustaining delight of wisdom. (150)

After a few months, Arjuna is also satiated with the life of idle dalliance. Like Chitra, soon he is discontented too: “I never seem to know you aright. You seem to me like a goddess hidden within a golden image....Thus my love is incomplete” (171).

Meanwhile, Arjuna is impressed when he learns that the warden of the kingdom of Manipur is a woman whose name is Princess Chitra. Other than natural deaths and calamities the villagers fear nothing, because Princess Chitra is their savior. Moreover, they believe her to be their father and mother in one. He yearns to see Princess Chitra, the embodiment of bravery and courage. He imagines what kind of a woman Princess Chitra
would be. When he meets his beloved Chitra he tells her about Princess Chitra who “in valour is a man, and a woman in tenderness” (168).

Chitra is aware of the fact that now Arjuna is admiring her true self. She however tries to dissuade Arjuna from admiring the warrior princess, asks him: “…have you grown so weary of woman’s beauty that you seek in her for a man’s strength?” (168) She tells him that princess Chitra is not beautiful at all but he remains occupied with the thought of Princess Chitra and wants to meet her. Chitra describes herself as:

The unfortunate creature….She is obscured, she is unfulfilled. Her womanly love must content itself dressed in rags; beauty is denied her. She is like the spirit of a cheerless morning, sitting upon the stony mountain peak, all her light blotted out by dark clouds. (169)

Chitra asks Arjuna whether he would still love her if she sheds her beauty with the help of some magic. She makes an attempt to make Arjuna aware of the truth that his beloved Chitra and Princess Chitra are the same. Chitra starts weeping when Arjuna says that “Illusion is the first appearance of Truth” (171). Her conscious is pricked by these words of Arjuna and she finally resolves to reveal Arjuna her actual identity, which she had prior to Arjuna’s desire to see Princess Chitra.

Chitra finally tells Arjuna that she is the Princess Chitra in disguise. She reminds Arjuna of his first meeting with her in the forest when he rejected her, seeing her dressed in male attires. She tells him that she is Princess Chitra, the daughter of the King of Manipur. She also reveals the secret of the boon of borrowed beauty:
I am not beautifully perfect as flower with which I worshipped. I have many flaws and blemishes. I am a traveller in the great world-path, my garments are dirty and my feet are bleeding with thorns....The gift that I proudly bring is the heart of a woman.... Herein lies an imperfection which yet is noble and grand. If the flower service is finished, my master, accept this as your servant for the days to come. (172)

Thus, Chitra embodies the moral courage to be truthful to the one she loves and desires. She knows the danger she faces, of Arjuna’s rejection, yet she is undaunted and honest:

I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference....If your babe, whom I am nourishing in my womb, be born a son, I shall myself teach him to be a second Arjuna, and send him to you when the time comes, and at last you will truly know me. (172)

Thus, Chitra typifies the truth and sincerity embedded in the heart of a woman. No doubt she desires Arjuna but she will not be his wife on any false notion. She shows the capacity of renouncing her desire for Arjuna, in spite of the fact that she carries Arjuna’s baby. In the words of Reshu Shukla, the feminine charm she has acquired after the experience makes her:

the mother, thronged on the fullness of golden Autumn, she who in the harness time brings, straying hearts to the smile sweet as tears, the beauty deep as the sense of silence, brings them to the temple of the unknown, at the holy opulence of life and death. (151)
When the borrowed grace has been shed, Chitra is still beautiful because she has known love, and because she is now the prospective mother. Impressed by her truthfulness Arjuna accepts her in bliss saying: "Beloved, my life is full." (23) Ultimately, she is victorious because Arjuna realizes that love needs to transcend physical beauty in order to have the true depth. He accepts Chitra as his wife attaining fulfillment in love.

Tagore's conception of human love finds a beautiful expression in Chitra. In Chitra's personality we get the first clear exposition of feminism in India. The play promotes the very concept of equality of women even in the field specially reserved for men; Chitra is not the woman who despairs in loneliness. In her own words: "I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like moth with indifference" (173). She has certainly lost one paradise but she has gained another instead, which is the real paradise where woman holds undisputed sovereignty as devoted wife and mother.

Through the character of Chitra, Tagore portrays the picture of the modern Indian woman, promoting the higher spiritual and psychological sensibilities. On the one hand Chitra is a very promising princess and bears all the responsibilities towards kingdom on the other hand she is a devoted beloved of Arjuna and becomes the victim of love and emotions. Arjuna thinks of her as a goddess of victory and says:

....Like a watchful lioness she protects the litter at her dugs with a fierce love. Woman's arms, though adorned with naught but unfettered strength, are beautiful! My heart is restless, fair one, like a serpent reviving from his long winter's sleep. (21)
Through Chitra Tagore reveals the essential paradox of a woman’s persona. She is strong and undaunted in the face of adversity but has a heart tender enough to be swayed by emotion. Chitra is a complete woman, who not only has commendable patience, sacrifice and dedication but is also ready to face any situation at the cost of fulfilling her ambitions and desires. Tagore has beautifully portrayed her as the symbol of strength and determination on one hand, and an emotional being on the other. She willfully transforms herself for the sake of love but keeps her real identity intact.

Though Chitra is successful in winning the heart of Arjuna by her borrowed sublime grace but is unable to adopt this new posture she fails before her own self. She wants to rid herself of that falsehood and tells Arjuna, “If you deign to keep me by your side, in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life then you will know my true self” (173). After winning the love of Arjuna, Chitra is not thrilled with joy, her real persona as a strong woman becomes predominant and she tells Arjuna:

Whom do you seek in these dark eyes, in these milk-white arms, if you are ready to pay for her the price of your probity? Not my true self, I know. Surely this cannot be love; this is not man’s highest homage to woman! Alas, this frail disguise, the holy body, should make one blind to the light of the deathless spirit! Yes indeed, I know, Arjuna, the fame of your heroic manhood is false. (159)

Chitra is fully conscious that her acquired beauty would shortly be a thing of the past. It would vanish never to return. She fears she would be devastated when Arjuna leaves her. In spite of this, it becomes impossible for her to stick to falsehood and stay in disguise.
She prefers to accept the hard truth. The illusion is finally shattered and Chitra appears in her actual persona.

Tagore succeeds in creating women, who are embodiment of strength and tenderness at the same time. Through Chitra, as an epitome of love, truth and beauty, Tagore brings home to us the simple truth of life that beauty and youth, though transient, are yet a part of our experience.

Chitra has been acknowledged as one of the best works of Tagore. In a review of the play which appeared in the Indian Review (August 1914), J. C. Rollo remarked Chitra to be no less masterly than Gitanjali, The Gardener or The Crescent Moon:

There is the same beauty of phrasing, the same flowing, ever-satisfying rhythm, and in its thought there is the same firm hold upon reality, the same truth of feeling and of sympathy, and the same arresting power of symbolism. (qtd. by Iyengar 49)

---

**Malini: Woman as the Metaphor of Creation and Inspiration**

Tagore’s concept of womanhood was inspired from the idea of motivating ‘primal force’ or ‘Shakti’ - the living symbol of divine energy which creates, inspires as well as leads us on the righteous path of love, truth and devotion, rooted at the same time deeply in Indian ethos. A study of his dramatic world reveals his deep and uncanny insight into the strength of a woman’s mind.

Tagore’s Malini, suggests the triumph of the spirit of love over the spirit of hatred. The message the play conveys is - “forgive, whatever the crime! Killing doesn’t mend
anything” (Shukla 131). Malini struggles for the survival of even a fanatic killer so that he has a chance to repent and see things in a new way.

Malini is a quite distinct figure and there is no inconsistency in the development of her character. As the play opens one comes across her resolve to dedicate her life to a great ideal as because of her contact with a new religion. It is this ideal which draws her to the outside world where she meets Supriya for the first time. Their acquaintance soon develops into intimacy. When they meet each other in the palace garden, Supriya speaks to her in a spirit of self-surrender: “I have left all arguments and books behind me. Lead me, Princess, and I shall follow you, as the shadow follows the lamp” (493). Supriya’s words awaken love in the heart of Malini. It is for the first time that a young man so noble and dignified has offered himself so completely to her. Her soul is stirred up leaving her dumbfounded: “But, Brahmin, when you question me, I lose all my power and do not know how to answer you” (493). She further reveals her feelings to Supriya in the following words:

There are times when despair comes to choke all the life-currents; when suddenly, amidst crowds of men, my eyes turn upon myself and I am frightened. Will you befriend me in those moments of blan wkeness, and utter me one word of hope that will bring me back to life? (493)

Surely it is the sentiment of love that has been expressed in these words. Her sense of loneliness and her need for a loving companion become manifest when she refuses to see the citizens and, after dismissing the attendant, resumes conversation with Supriya. The king understands the secret of his daughter’s heart and truly expresses it when he says:
I feel I have found back my child once again—not the bright star of
the sky, but the sweet flower that blossoms on earthly soil. She is
my daughter, the darling of my heart. (497)

Malini's love for Supriya is absolute. Tragically, however, it does not attain its fulfillment
on account of the sudden and untimely death of Supriya. The last words of Malini—
"Father, forgive Kemankar!" (500) - are not only consistent with the nobility of her
character that is in conformity with the spirit of Buddhism but are also in harmony with
the spirit of the entire play. The last words of Malini impart a touch of reality to her
character and at the same time emphasise the underlying idea of the play.

According to Mahalanobis: ‘She is torn between two impulses, the life preached
by Gautama and the other life of love and friendship’ (qtd. in Thompson 129). She is the
personification of a religion of love which knows no exclusions. It is this religion, living
and personal, that appeals to him and not the dead dogmas which Supriya learnt in the
scriptures. In the beginning, Supriya also has doubts and but soon afterwards he resolves
all his misgivings by surrendering to Malini. Thereafter, he experiences deep sense of
faith and abiding peace in his mind. He confesses before Malini:

You made me live again in a new land of birth. "Love for all life” was a
mere word, waiting from the old time to be made real, - and I saw that
truth in you in flesh. (494)

Whether she loved Supriya or Kemankar, or was she in love with neither—is the question
that the play poses. The subtle suggestion is that drama is a representation of life and
there are many questions in life which remain unsolved. It is not the function of a work of
art to discuss threadbare the problems of life and offer solutions: “The significant thing
about Malini is that it portrays an unresolved conflict without pointing to any conclusion, and here it resembles life- and Shakespearean tragedy” (Chakravorty 123).

Malini has been portrayed by Tagore as a character endowed with a nobility of soul that is rare—a nobility that reminds us of Joan of Arc. Malini questions Supriya about Kamenkar and later, on seeing him in chains, appreciates his unyielding courage. But she rises far above these mundane considerations when she speaks to Supriya after hearing of Kemankar’s betrayal: “Why did you forget yourself, Supriya? Why did fear overcome you? Have I not room enough in my house for him and his soldiers?” (495). Iyengar’s appropriately refers to Malini’s persona as a symbol of eternal love and compassion: “It is the house of love infinite in dimension, reared on utter fearlessness, walled up by continual understanding and forgiving, canopied by compassion” (Iyengar 130). In Malini, Tagore has presented his ideal concept of womanhood, as “Shakti” the living symbol of divine energy whose inner shrine is in the subconscious depth of human nature and outer manifestations in sweetness of simplicity, of self-dedication and silent heroism of daily sacrifices. She is “the divine soul of this world” (489).

Tagore probes into the inner working of heart which is full of love, forgiveness. Malini knows that she could have won the battle of love openly and affected a change of heart even in Kemankar. That is why she questions the betrayal of Supriya. Therefore her innate divinity and love makes her ask the King to spare Kemankar in the end.

Sacrifice: Resisting Dogmas

In the companion play Sacrifice, Tagore creates Aparna as an emblem of love and duty. Through the play Malini and Sacrifice, Tagore conveys the idea that this world is full of
religious bigotry and blind fanaticism but there are people like Malini and Aparna, who show to the humanity the path of love in the midst of darkness. Both in Malini and Sacrifice we witness the triumph of the spirit of love over the spirit of hatred. Aparna carries the message of love as the true basis of divine worship. King Govinda of Tripura is moved by the tears of Aparna, the beggar girl whose pet goat has been sacrificed before the image of Goddess Kali in the temple.

In Sacrifice Aparna and queen Gunwati represent two aspects of the character of a woman. Aparna is in the background all the time. She acts as the chorus and agent of conversion. The play is also the manifestation of the aggressive character of Queen Gunwati. Queen Gunwati is barren and longs to have a child. Her prayers to the Goddess Kali are supplemented by the sacrifice of a goat belonging to beggar girl, Aparna. Through Aparna's appeal, the king realises the heinousness of the practice of animal sacrifice. Subsequently, and he forbids all blood-sacrifice in his Kingdom. In Aparna's cry of anguish Govinda sees the pain of the Goddess herself at the offerings of blood at her alter.

The play highlights the clash of personal loyalty and professional ethics. Gunwati, being governed by personal interest fails to understand the significance of the decision of her husband. Under the sweep of passions, she neglects her duty both as a queen and as a wife. But here Gunwati puts up an arrogant defiance to the king as she is in favour of perpetuating an inhuman custom, which is detrimental for the whole society. Tagore through her character analysis presents his regret over the perverted assertiveness and insolence of Gunwati. The queen can think only of the anticipated joys of motherhood. She sends "red bunches of hibiscus and beasts of sacrifice" (503), to be offered to the
dread mother, Kali and Raghupati, the orthodox priest assures her that the queen’s sacrifice would please the Goddess. He conspires with the queen to dwarf the liberal king’s plan to abolish the practice of sacrifice until the priest’s own son; Jaising immolates himself on the altar. Raghupati realises at last the vanity of priestly megalomania and the criminal folly of blood sacrifices. Even Gunwati is redeemed, for the old Goddess is no more—“She has burst her cruel prison of stone, and come back to the woman’s heart” (532).

Gunwati is depicted by Tagore as a good woman within limits, but frustration gives her life a wrong turn. She becomes morally blind and is partly instrumental in driving Jaising to suicide. Moral insensitiveness, indifference to other’s pain and assertion of one’s ego—these are in the view of Tagore the root of folly, which is but another word for crime and Tagore has deftly conveyed it through the portrayal of Gunwati. Her first soliloquy at the opening of the play brings out the different facets of character. In her vain gloriousness she asks the goddess:

Thou grandest children to the beggar woman... and to the adulteress... and here am I, the Queen, with all the world lying at my feet, hankering in vain for the baby...(503)

Here she puts an attitude of ‘injured merit’ and it is this feeling of undeserved punishment which drives her from one folly to another, to the extent of planning the murder of little prince Druva. She is infuriated when her beasts of sacrifice are turned back from the temple. She is ready to behead the culprit. In her wounded pride, she asks:
The queen’s sacrifice turned away from the temple gate? Is there a man in this land who carries more than one head on his shoulders that he could dare think of it? Who is that doomed creature? (508)

When she learns that the culprit is the King himself, she moves from anger to tears to supplication in order to soften him, but fails. She exclaims:

I failed. I had hoped that, if I remained hard and cold for some days, he would surrender. Such faith I had in my power, vain woman that I am. I showed my sullen anger, and remained away from him; but it was fruitless. (522)

In her humiliation and frustration she tries to have Druva sacrificed to Goddess. In this way she wants to appease Kali, perhaps to hurt the King who loves Druva, and to protect the rights of her unborn children from Druva. In her distress she exclaims: “...He has robbed my unborn children of their father’s love, usurped their right to the first place in the King’s breast” (522). She conspires with Prince Nakshatra to kill Druva: “That boy must die for the King. His blood is more precious to your brother than his own...” (524). When she fails to get Druva killed her distress is so great that she goes to temple to offer her own blood to the Goddess: “I have brought her my offerings. I have come at last, to appease her anger with my own heart’s blood. Let her know that the queen is true to her promise” (531).

But by now Raghupati has thrown the idol out of the temple after Jaising hasstabbed himself as sacrifice to Goddess Kali “[to] kill the falsehood that sucks the life-blood of man” (532). Now Gunwati has a change of heart and reconciles with the King.
Jaising, the temple servant, is the tragic figure in the play. All the trials and sufferings inherent in the conflict work themselves out on his soul and play havoc with his life. From the very beginning of the play he is torn between his natural instinct of love and concern for others, and the ingrained teachings of Raghupati. He is pained to see Aparna’s tears. Aparna rouses the feeling of love and pity in his heart and while he wonders that the Goddess appears to show no such emotion. He wonders if pity is a sign of weakness, but nevertheless he wants to share Aparna’s sorrow with her. He wants to console Aparna: “Is it worthy of you to shed tears for that which Mother herself has taken?” (504) At this Aparna replies:

Mother! I am his mother. If I return late to hurt, he refuses his grass, and bleats, with his eyes on the road. I take him up in my arms when I come, and share my food with him. He knows no other mother but me. (504)

She further says:

This blood streak running down the steps is it his? Oh, my darling, when you trembled and cried for dear life, why did your call not reach my heart through the whole deaf world? (504)

These touching words of love by Aparna for a goat move and affect Jaising very deeply and in his dilemma asks the Goddess:

I have served thee from my infancy, Mother Kali, yet I understand thee not. Does pity only belong to weak mortals, and not to gods? Come with me, my child, let me do for you what I can. Help must come from man when it is denied from gods. (504)
Aparna asks him to come away from the temple with her. Overwhelmed, Jaising calls her a Goddess: “You are my Goddess....You bring to me your sacrifice every moment, as a mother does to her child. God must be all sacrifice, pouring out his life in all creation” (525).

Jaising loves Aparna and wants to leave with her but:

Leave this temple? Yes, I will leave. Alas, Aparna, I must leave. Yet I cannot leave it, before I have paid my last dues....Come closer to me, my love. Whisper something to my ears which will overflow this life with sweetness, flooding death itself. (525)

Jaising has promised to Raghupati that he would bring the blood of King to quench the thirst of Goddess Kali. The climax is reached when Jaising immolates himself as an offering to the blood-thirsty goddess. Raghupati loves Jaising very dearly and can’t think of losing him: “My boy I have reared you from your childhood and you have grown close to my heart. I can never bear to lose you by any chance.” (518)

Raghupati’s passionate attachment to Jaising and his subsequent loss naturally shatters his world and the very basis of his faith. He picks up the image of Kali and throws it away:

Look how she stands there, the silly stone,-deaf, dumb, blind,-the whole sorrowing world weeping at her door, - the noblest hearts wrecking themselves at her stony feet! Give me back my Jaising! Oh, it is all in vain. Our bitterest cries wander in emptiness,-the emptiness that we vainly try to fill with these stony images of delusion. Away with them! Away with
these our impotent dreams that harden into stones, burdening our world!

(530-531)

As the play closes we hear the gentle voice of Aparna, the beggar girl, leading the priest out of the temple. Earlier Raghupati thinks of Aparna as an "evil omen" now realises his folly and is ready to go away with her. Of Aparna, Sisir Kumar Ghose says, "Again it is a little girl, Aparna, who act as Chorus and the agent of conversion and has the last world" (60). Her request to Raghupati- "Father, come away" (532)-suggests that Aparna has become the spiritual guide to Raghupati, the orthodox priest. Despite the wrong done to her earlier, as her goat is killed and Jaising, whom she loves, sacrificed, she still forgives Raghupati and addresses him as father. Raghupati is moved:

My sweet child! "Father,"- did you say? Do you rebuke me with that name?
My son, whom I have killed, has left that one dear call behind him in your sweet voice....Come, child. Come, Mother. I have found thee. Thou art the last gift of Jaising. (531-532)

In the play Sacrifice, Tagore projects a conflict that goes on within the mind of everybody irrespective of any sect or religion, "between temporal and spiritual authority, between humanity and the inhumanity of animal sacrifice before the goddess Kali...."

Out of these conflicts emerges the conflicting character of a woman full of love and hatred, woman who is selfish and selfless, rational and superstitious at the same time.:

"Queen Gunwati stands for womanly love and eternal motherhood; and Aparna for love and truth" (32-33).

The play redefines the very idea of traditional concept of religion associated with meaningless and cruel practices such as animal sacrifice. Considering the sway these
traditions held on the minds of people during Tagore’s times, the play radically deviates from conventional playwriting. It is an unconditional condemnation of not only the inhuman practice of animal sacrifice but also the institutionalised religion and dogma.

Desire and Renunciation in *Natir Puja* and *Chandalika*

In *Natir Puja* the dramatic interest of the play lies in its deep human appeal and in the subtle and deep psychological analysis of the character of the Queen Mother as well as courageous attempt of martyrdom by a palace dancer named Srimati. Queen mother is torn between two equally strong impulses- the religious impulse and the impulse of womanhood. When King Bimbisara and his son leave the Kingdom and become Buddhist monks, Tagore sensitively portrays Queen Lokeshvari’s pain as woman forsaken. On Vasanta Purnima- Lord Buddha’s birthday, Bimbisara is coming to worship at the altar but Queen Lokeshvari is not very passionate about his coming or about the worship: “Go tell my husband that my worship is finished and done with. Other people may offer their flowers and lamps; I’ve emptied my whole world” (90). Bhikshuni feels surprised by the talk of Queen Lokeshvari and reminds her: “Maharani, it was you who first welcomed the true religion into the palace courts. Why then today…” (90). Lokeshvari replies: My only son, my prince, my Chitra-they’ve lured him away and made a monk of him, and now they ask me for an offering! They cut the root of the creeper and then they ask for flowers. (90)

Separation from husband and the son has made her bitter towards the new religion. The disappointment of Queen Lokeshvari is evident when her son refuses to stay for a night with her in the palace:
I pleaded with him to spend just one night in his mother’s home. He said, ‘My mother’s home has no roof but the sky’. A thunderbolt is a thunderbolt, even in the hands of a god. My breast is a shattered ruin—a hollow emptiness behind my ribs. (108)

It causes intolerable pain for queen to think that her son acknowledges her love no more:

A son comes to his mother—and is no longer her son. There is no sorrow in the world like that. How strangely he looked at me! As if his mother had disappeared and left no trace. I am completely wiped out! I could never have dreamt of such disaster. (107)

Tagore’s treatment of the whole question of desire and renunciation is full of complexity and paradox. When the queen laments having lost the king, her husband, to ascetic way of life, Tagore portrays every aspect of her feelings: “See what I am today—widowed, though my husband lives; barren having borne a son; homeless, in the midst of a palace” (91).

In a subtle way, the play also suggests that society expects a woman to remain confined within the four walls of home. Her desires and ambitions are rejected outright by society. When a man crosses his boundaries, he is never questioned. But a woman is supposed to be accountable for everything in life. A man’s status can never be at par with the status of a woman. The Queen very aptly remarks: “Men grow infatuated sometimes and forget their manhood. But if women allow them to forget it women must bear the brunt, and for them it spells disaster” (110).

These words of the Queen bring to the fore Tagore’s views on the subjugation of women in society. To quote Tagore: [...] the present civilisation is exclusively masculine,
for it is based on power. [...] The time has come when woman should come forward, restore the balance and save humanity from complete ruins (Tagore 166-67).

In the final analysis Natir Puja is a defence of Buddhism. It is true that king Bimbisara is mesmerised with the idea of renouncing the materialistic world. Yet, Tagore would have us believe that it is crass materialism that the king is shunning and not life itself. Tagore’s portrayal of the queen’s pain as woman abandoned is sensitive enough. It is true that she finally realises the power of this philosophy and curses herself. Yet, Tagore does not portray desire as something altogether condonable. His handling of this paradox is marked with a sensitive perception.

He presents the queen’s lamentation as natural fallout of her condition. Even her resentment towards Srimati is portrayed as a plausible response. Tagore emphasises that all human beings feels the pain when their natural desires are left unfulfilled. Whether it is pain of a wife or the frustration of a mother, Tagore treats it with considerable tenderness. Equally remarkable is the queen’s transformation in the end. She realises that the King and the prince have simply transcended the concept of love which is narrow and limited, binding them only to their family. The love they profess now is all embracing, providing succor to mankind.

This transformation in Queen is somehow the outcome of the martyrdom of Srimati, who exemplifies in her life and deeds the majesty of the human spirit which refuses to be cowed down by the tyranny of authority and power. She receives an order to dance in the Ashoka garden before the Lord’s own seat and altar in the evening just at the time of worship. Thus the order implies that she will be forced to insult the Lord whom she wants to worship. This has been a conspiracy of Ratnavali and other princess against
Srimati as she has been chosen by the Order to perform the worship. For them it is their insult and “If the dancing-girl is allowed to make the offerings here, this palace will be desecrated” (113). Queen Lokeshvari also helps Ratnavali to “destroy this worship, root and branch” (113). Her royal pride is wounded in allowing “…for the feet of a dancing girl to tread the royal shrine” (114). She cannot bear the altar to be desecrated by the touch of Srimati—“the altar which my own hands have served!” (113)

Srimati agrees to dance and says fearlessly: “Before everything, I will keep the commandment” (136). But when actually the dance begins with the song of devotion on her lips, Ratnavali, who had manipulated to get the order, feels distressed and cries out:

This is a mere mockery of dancing! See her flow off her dancing robes, one by one! Look, Maharani, the yellow Bhikshuni’s cloth underneath! This is worship surely. Don’t you see her, guards? Don’t you remember what punishment the King has ordered? (138)

The guard reminds her that Srimati has chanted no holy text. Immediately afterwards, Srimati kneels down at the close of the dance worship and chants the holy text. At this Ratnavali shouts “Carry out King’s orders!” (138)

The King’s orders are carried out as the guard unwillingly strikes down Srimati dead on the ground. All the guards cry out, “Forgive us, forgive us” (139). As they speak these words; they bow down and take the dust of Srimati’s feet. Ratnavali herself realises the folly of her action and the enormity of her crime and sinks down on the ground. Lokeshvari, the queen-mother, takes Srimati’s head in her lap and accepts the Bhikshuni’s robe as a parting gift from dancing-girl. She chants the divine text and is followed by others except Ratnavali.
Just at this time Mallika brings the news that King Ajatshatru who had already revoked his previous order but which had been kept a close secret by Ratnavali had come to worship Lord Buddha but went back trembling in fear. Lokeshvari asks in surprise, “Fear? Of whom?” The reply from Mallika is: “Of that dead dancing-girl” (140).

Srimati’s triumph becomes complete when at the end of the play Ratnavali takes the dust of Srimati’s feet and kneeling down in reverence chants the divine text: “My refuge is in the Buddha! My refuge is the Dhamma! My refuge is in Sangha!” (140). Srimati in "Natir Puja" makes supreme sacrifice which dazzles everyone. She has equalled herself with the males who sacrificed for the noble cause of religion.

Yet another tale of a woman abdicating her desire is that of Prakriti in the play Chandalika. It has some affinity with Chitra. In the latter, heroine attempts to win the heart of her beloved by borrowed charms, but is successful only when she has discarded her borrowed plumes and has nothing to offer but her love. On the other hand, Chandalika is the story of Prakriti, who falls in love with a Buddhist monk, Ananda, whom she offers water after her hesitation, melts away on hearing these beautiful words of the monk: “If the black clouds of Sravana are dubbed chandals, what of it? It doesn’t change their nature, or destroy the virtue of their water” (148).

These words of Prakriti describe her moment of revelation: ‘...who is suddenly awakened to a consciousness of her full rights as a woman by the humanity of a follower of Buddha, who accepts water from her hand and teaches her to judge herself, not by the artificial values that society attaches to the accidents of birth, but by her capacity for love and service’ (Kriplani 370).
The play is particularly important because it dismantles not only the conventional constructs of gender but also of caste and class. It deals with the story of an untouchable girl in a most sensitive manner. ‘Among the dance dramas of Tagore, Chandalika has a special place as it foregrounds the theme of female desire in an untouchable girl, a tabooed subject in his times, indeed even now in Bengali writings’ (Chaudhuri 1).

Prakriti finds herself to be lucky because the “monk came to give” her “the honour of quenching Man’s thirst” (149). Literally, ‘thirst’ here means the thirst of the monk for water. But symbolically it signifies the desire of Prakriti who falls in love with the monk and subsequently pines for him. There blossoms a deep love in the heart of Prakriti for the monk, as she believes that “He who has recognised me will reveal me. And so I wait and watch” (149).

Her suppressed self respect is released. She becomes aware of her dignity as a human being, and particularly as a woman. She wonders if she had anything worth offering, and if there was anyone worthy of receiving it. In a flash comes the answer:” she had nothing to offer except herself, and the only recipient of the gift was the monk who had awakened her sleeping self” (Naravane 111).

Unfortunately, the monk pays no second visit to the well. Prakriti’s desire for the monk, however, is enhanced all the more. She says: “Though he spoke no word, his word was given-why does he not keep his word? For my heart has become like a waterless waste, where the heat-haze quivers all day long and the hot wind fans like flame” (150).

She desires to serve the monk, as she believes that by serving the monk she would serve God: “I want him. All unlooked for-he came and taught me this marvelous truth that even ‘my’ service will count with the God who guides the world” (150). Tagore’s
drama presents a paradox of desire and spirituality when Prakriti likens serving monk with serving God. She says:

I want him. All unlooked for he came, and taught me this marvelous truth, that even my service will count with the God who guides the world. O words of great wonder! That I may serve, I, a flower sprung from a poison-plant! Let him raise that truth, that flower from the dust, and take it to his bosom. (150)

Prakriti’s mother warns Prakriti many times: “Be warned, Prakriti, these men’s words are meant only to be heard and not to be practised” (150). The mother also reminds Prakriti that she is a “born slave” (152). Kriplani calls Chandalika a ‘tragedy of self-consciousness overreaching its limit’ (153). Being an untouchable it is a far off dream for her to love or being loved and her mother also keeps reminding her of this painful truth. But the monk has already brought about transformation in her. She does not consider herself a slave any longer, nor does she see herself as low-born any longer, nor does she see herself as a ‘Chandal’: “Plenty of slaves are born of royal blood, but ‘I’ am no slave; plenty of chandals are born of Brahmin families, but I am no chandal” (152). This, awakening kindles in Prakriti’s heart an irresistible longing for the monk coupled with an urge to surrender: “I want him, Mother, I want beyond all measure. I want to take this life of mine and lay it like a basket of flowers at his feet” (151). Her intense emotion and longing for the monk’s love is clear from these words:

I am longing to give myself; it is like a pain at my heart...Will he join with me in give-and-take? Will he not mingle his longings with mine, as the Ganges mingles with the black waters of the Jamuna? (152)
Her mother, who has been conditioned by the attitude of society, warns her: “You are unclean; beware of tainting the outside world with your unclean presence” (150). But these discouraging words of mother have no effect upon Prakriti’s newly gained self-realisation and she sings:

Blessed am I, says the flower, who belong to the earth.
For I serve you, my God, in this my lowly home.
Make me forget that I am born of dust,
For my spirit is free from it.
When you bend your eyes upon me my petals tremble in joy;
Give me a touch of your feet and make me heavenly,
For the earth must offer its worship through me. (150-151)

Mother reminds Prakriti that King’s son had also wanted to marry her and that he had been mesmerised by her beauty. So she had a good chance to become a queen. She does not understand why Prakriti had refused to go to the King’s house. To this Prakriti responds by saying: “Yes, he had forgotten everything-forgotten that I was a human being. He had gone out hunting beasts; he saw nothing but the beast whom he wanted to bind in chains of gold” (151).

Tagore has introduced this different aspect to the character of Prakriti to affirm the sensitivity of a low caste girl who is not greedy for gold and is attracted towards the monk because of his humanity. She asks her mother to exercise occult powers to bring back the monk to her because her self-realisation has made her daring enough to achieve what she desires: “I won’t simply sit and watch. You know how to work spells; let those spells be the clasp of my arms, let them drag him here” (153). The more the mother
presses hard upon Prakriti to forget the monk, the stronger gets Prakriti’s desire for the monk: “If my longing can draw him here, and if that is a crime, then I will commit the crime. I care nothing for a code which holds only punishment, and no comfort” (155).

Prakriti’s love is true and her desire is wild, therefore no obstacle can restrain her. The spell of the mother drags Ananda, the monk to the doorstep of Prakriti. It is revealed that the seat of meditation has been shaken at last. Ironically, as Prakriti see him coming near, her “heart is rocked by an earthquake” (160). But to her utter disappointment, she is shocked to see the monk at her door: “The light was gone- only torment, unfathomable torment, was in his face” (161).

The monk has lost the radiant light of God. His face is ashen with shame and remorse. Prakriti realises the blunder she has committed by dragging the monk to herself. She confesses: “It seemed that the tortured form I saw was not his only, but mine too; it belonged to us both. In those awful fires the gold and the copper had been melted and fused” (161).

It is true that Prakriti’s desire is portrayed by Tagore as completely irresistible. But he also portrays her courage and indomitable will to renounce her desire for the well being of a man, stricken with the guilt and shame. On seeing the ashen face of monk she feels remorse on her doing:

Where is the light and radiance, the shining purity, the heavenly glow? How worn, how faded, has he come to my door! Bearing his self’s defeat as a heavy burden, he comes with drooping head...Away with all this, away with it! (165)
She asks her mother to undo the magical spell, being aware of the fact that it will lead to her mother’s death. Kicking the trappings of magic to pieces, she bows down at the feet of the monk to ask forgiveness:

O Lord, you have come to give me deliverance, therefore, have you known this torment. Forgive me, forgive me. Let your feet spurn afar the endless reproach of my birth. I have dragged you down to earth, how else could you raise me to your heaven...The veil of my illusion shall fall upon them [Ananda’s feet] and wipe away the dust. Victory, victory to thee, O Lord! (165)

The agony of unrequited love is been laid bare before the readers. The climax comes in the end with the death of mother, Ananda’s release from spell and Prakriti’s spiritual rebirth. The conflict between desire and renunciation is resolved as desire is metamorphosed into spirituality. Tagore has portrayed in Prakriti’s character the courage of a woman, who can love and desire someone deeply and at the same time has the power to overcome her desire. Ananda’s asking her for water reveals to her a new identity, a new birth, and washes her clean of self-degradation and humiliation. Ananda has taught her ‘to judge herself, not by the artificial standards of society, but by her capacity for love.’ (Mukerji 69)

Tagore’s drama powerfully portrays the duality of human existence. If there were no desires, there would be no renunciation. He seems to convey the idea that it is natural to nurture desires. His ingenuity, however, lies in the way he invests his women characters as capable of acknowledging their desires. Even if renunciation comes, it comes as an experience, which reawakens them into an awareness of love that transcends
desire. Tagore, therefore, strongly advocates the middle path, where desire is transformed into something higher and spiritual and leads man to a final awakening.

**Rakta Karabi (Red Oleanders): Woman as Symbol of Cosmic Harmony of Nature**

Tagore's play *Rakta karabi (Red Oleander)* was written towards the end of 1923 under the title *Yakshapuri (The City of Yaksha).* On further revising it, Tagore renamed it *Nandini,* after the name of the female protagonist of the story. [But in 1924, it was further revised to *Rakta karabi.* In his preface to the play, “Tagore adds a new perspective to the play by referring to the Ravana of Tretayug with enormous ambition and greed, and the appearance of a woman ‘Sita’ and the demolition of his Swarnlanka” (Tandon 132).

In this play Tagore expresses grief over the exploitative materialistic societies' insatiable accumulative instinct and ruthless exploitation of Nature.

Here, too, it is a woman ‘Nandini’ who makes us aware about man’s suicidal violence and hostility against nature. She represents the innocence and opulence of Nature. The call of harvesting season is a call of Nature in her pristine purity and limitless bounty. In the harvesting song which may be regarded as the theme song of the play, Nandini refers to the cosmic harmony of Nature. (Tondon 132)

In the play, Tagore repeatedly tells us that Nandini is the embodiment of Nature. She epitomises the beauty and splendour of earth. In midst of the soulless, heartless, mechanised city there is Nandini, a beautiful girl, who symbolises what is best in human nature- love, faith, trust and fearlessness. She makes the people of Yakshapuri aware of
their bondage, and creates in them a desire to be free. Professor gives an apt description of her:

You awaken a cry in our hearts....In this Yaksha Town all our treasure is of gold, the secret treasure of the dust. But the gold which is you, beautiful one, is not of the dust, but of the light which never owns any bond....We poor drudges are insects in a hole in this solid toil, you are the evening star in the rich sky of leisure. When we see you, our wings grow restless. Come to my room. For a moment allow me to be reckless in my waste of time. (Ray 214-215)

A powerful and moving play, *Red Oleanders* epitomises protest against social taboos and futile materialistic pursuits. Nandini, the protagonist is an unusually courageous woman—one of those rare human beings, who can bring about a change in society. Seeing gullible people of the town being exploited, she makes people aware of their bondage and teaches them the lessons of freedom. As she sacrifices her life, she is instrumental in giving a new life to gold diggers symbolising the essence of freedom and love; she infuses strength in everyone who comes in contact with her. In the words of Nirmal Mukerji:

She is a symbol, to begin with, but she grows on you, as she does on everyone with whom she comes in contact in Yaksha Town. She is warm; she understands the meaning of love. Possessions do not mean anything to her; she has learnt how to be generous with love. Her red oleanders, the flowers with which she is identified, become her red badge of courage. (Mukerji 70)
Everyone is charmed by her choice of the colour red. In fact red comes to stand for the uniqueness she embodies. The Professor wonders why she should chose this particular flower. He feels that there is a suggestion of something ominous in her choice of flower ornaments:

I don’t know what event you have come to write with that crimson tint. There was the gardenia and the tuberose, there was white jasmine,-why did you leave them all and choose this flower? Do you know, we often choose our own fate thus, without knowing it!

(217)

For Nandini, the red-oleander is a symbol of love, passion, vitality, courage, beauty and nature. Nandini explains to professor: “Ranjan sometimes calls me Red Oleander. I feel the colour of his love red, - that red I wear on my neck, on my breast, on my arms.” (217). A miner named Gokul also calls her “an ominous torch” (218). The King of Yakshapuri though an oppressor, is envious of Nandini because he sees in her:

The dance rhythm of the All....The rhythm that lightens the enormous weight of matter. To that rhythm the bands of stars and planets go about dancing from sky to sky, like so many minstrel boys. It is that rhythm, Nandini that makes you so simple, so perfect. How small you are compared to me, yet I envy you. (221)

Nandini is sorrowed to see men who have become mere lifeless shadows, without flesh and soul. They are continuously dragging themselves through gold mines and have no escape from it. Nandini says: “Dear me, what an awful place! You are not men, and those you drive are not men, either.” (250) Nandini condemns such existence: “If this is the
way of man’s being, I refuse to be, I want to depart with those shadows” (246). Her fearlessness affects the governor too, of whom everyone is afraid. He says: “The girl has somehow managed to ensconce herself in a niche, safe from the laws of this land, and we can’t lay hands on her. Our King himself.” (250)

Woman should not be under-valued. She is like a Nature’s lightening that contains inherent thunder. She warns Governor: “Because I am a woman, you are not afraid of me? God sends His thunderbolt through His messenger, the lightening spark-that bolt I have borne with me; it will shatter the golden spire of you mastery” (250).

She is an expression of Tagore’s belief that a woman reflects divinity; hence she is an emblem of eternal truth and eternal goodness. Nandini not only denies the authority of the Governor but also expresses indignation towards the divine existence. Tagore’s radical attitude echoes through the words of Nandini: “The Gods have all eternity for their worship, they are not pressed for time. But the sorrows of man cannot wait to reach other men, they have so very little time” (261).

Nandini represents the spirit of joy, love and beauty to the world of male. The Professor is overwhelmed by the contrast between Nandini and Yaksha Town:

She has for her mantle the green joy of the earth. That is our Nandini. In this Yaksha Town there are governors, foremen, headmen, tunnel-diggers, scholars like myself; there are policemen, executioners and undertakers-altogether a beautiful assortment! Only she is out of element. Midst the clamour of the market-place she is a tuned-up lyre. There are days when the mesh of my studies is torn by the sudden breeze of her passing by, and through that rent my attention flies away swish, like a bird. (243-244)
Among all the female characters in Tagore’s plays, the figure of Nandini stands apart—beautiful and heroic. She is so out of place in the atmosphere of Yakshapuri that she seems almost unreal. But Nandini is not an abstraction. The poet himself, who regarded Nandini as one of his finest creations, describes her as ‘a real woman who knows that wealth and power are \textit{maya} and that the highest expression of life is in love’ (Naravane, “An Introduction” 110). Her love for Ranjan is frustrated by the ambition of the King, who cannot understand love except in terms of possession like the professor. To him it is simply an object of psychological curiosity. Tagore goes on to discuss \textit{Rakta-karabi} as a play in which he had tried to convey his idea of personality:

Personality, the divine essence of the Infinite in the vessel of the finite, has its last treasure-house in a woman’s heart....The joy of this faith has inspired me to pour all my heart into painting against the background of black shadows...the portrait of Nandini as the savior of the message of reality, the savior through death. (qtd. in Naravane, 110)

In the course of a private conversation, Tagore gave another interpretation of \textit{Rakta-Karabi} from a slightly different angle.

Nandini is the touch of life, the spirit of joy in life who, matched with Ranjan, the spirit of joy in work, together embody in themselves the spirit of love; love in union, union in love, a harmony before which the discord of greed is scattered as under a spell. (qtd. in Naravane 110)

Undaunted in the face of the king’s tyranny, Nandini walks in with her touch of vibrant life joy and love symbolising the lofty ideal of truth—a truth for which many great men
and women across regions and across time have made supreme sacrifices—that behind this spirit in man is God.

Ranjan’s death is agonising for her. Now she is ready to fight with the King against his tyrannical rule despite the fact that he is very powerful. She tells the King: “Death of mine will go on killing you every single moment” (262). Eventually the King realises his folly. So much so that he is ready to be Nandini’s comrade. She finally succeeds in destroying the tyrannical regime in Yaksha town, which has reduced its citizens to gold-digging slaves, though she herself dies in the process.

Reinterpreting Tradition: Images of Women from Indian Classics

Tagore’s women are essence of love and humanity, of Nature’s strength. They also manifest inherent nobility as mothers and companions. There are many aspects of man-woman as well as mother-son relationship that his plays deal with.

In Karna and Kunti Sambad (Karna and Kunti Dialogue) he dramatises the intrinsic nature of mother-son relationship. This dramatic poem based on an episode in the Mahabharata is from Tagore’s collection Kahini (1900):

Reworking old stories from the Mahabharata or from Buddhist lore, reinterpreting them so that they resonate in modern times, so that the new interpretations act as bridges between tradition and modernity: these were artistic tasks that Tagore took very seriously in his poetry and drama.

(Dyson, “Translator’s Note”)

In Karna and Kunti, Tagore refers to two adjoining sections of the ‘Udyogaparva’ of the Mahabharata, a dialogue between Krishna and Karna, and a dialogue between Karna
and Kunti, to create a new complex tale of an encounter between a foster son and a long-lost natural mother, set against the backdrop of the impending great war of the *Mahabharata* between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. ‘Karna is Kunti’s eldest child, born before her marriage, whom she had carefully packed and consigned to the mercy of a river, just as Moses had been consigned in the Jewish story’ (Dyson, “Translator’s Note”).

Kunti gave birth to a child before marriage being blessed by Sun God. Suppressing her powerful maternal instincts, she abandons the child to avoid societal stigma. Kama was found and reared by low caste foster-parents. His foster father was a charioteer. Kama eventually became a great warrior and an ally of the Kauravas, led by Duryodhana. A man noted for his generosity and steadfastness, he refused to change sides, when, on the eve of the war of Kurukshetra there was an attempt to woo him over to the side of the Pandavas, first by Krishna, who is an ally of the Pandavas, then by Kunti.

In the poetic play, Tagore dramatises the moments of intense emotional crises, when Kunti goes to Kama to demand the lease of Arjuna’s life. She asserts her lost motherhood and reveals hesitantly her identity to Karna. She admits that because of her weakness, Kama suffered the humiliation in society. But the power of her love fails to affect him.

As in the epic itself, in this play, Kunti comes to Karna to accept him as her eldest son, saying: “Your place is before all my other sons” (562). Karna does not recognise her and asks who she is. She says, “I am the woman who first made you acquainted with that light you are worshipping” (561). Kunti apparently approaches Karna at this stage out of
sheer love for him. However, the greater possibility is that she offers him his rightful place in order to make him spare Arjuna, whom he has taken a vow to kill. At the same time, Tagore emphasises her agony as a mother, who cannot claim him her son publicly for fear of social humiliation and disgrace, at social level. Her love and pain is evident from the lines:

...do not hate me. I still remember the day of the trial of arms in Hastina when you, an unknown boy, boldly stepped into the arena, like the first ray of dawn among the stars of night. Ah! Who was that unhappy woman whose eyes kissed your bare, slim body through tears that blessed you...There was one woman of the Pandava house whose heart glowed with joy at the heroic pride....(562)

Now she has come to take him to her “breast thirsting for love.” (562) But Karna asks her why she left him when he was an infant and “what made you rob your son of his mother’s love!” Kunti is full of remorse and says:

I am dogged by a curse more deadly than your reproaches: for, though surrounded by five sons, my heart shrivels like that of a woman deprived of her children. Through the great rent that yawned for my deserted first-born, all my life’s pleasures have run to waste. On that accursed day when I belied my motherhood you could not utter a word; to-day your recreant mother implores you for generous words. Let your forgiveness burn her heart like fire and consume its sin. (564)

Her desperation is evident in her frantic appeal to Karna. More than her desperation, it is probably the pressure being exerted on her by the manipulative powers to secure Karna’s
consent to change sides. When she fails to persuade Karna by her sentimental appeal, she tempts him of the mighty kingdom:

I did not come with the hope of winning you back to my arms, but with that of restoring your rights to you. Come and receive, as a king’s son, your due among your brothers.... Come and win back the kingdom which is your’s by right! (564)

But, Karna is above all temptation. Neither her emotional appeals nor the glitter of power moves Karna to betray his foster mother. Tagore conveys the idea that the bond determined by birth is much less powerful than the bond of love. Karna tells Kunti that the roots of affection of his birth have withered and they cannot be revived by the sudden disclosure of “forgotten motherhood” (563). He says: “The quick bond of kindred which you served at its root is dead, and can never grow again…” (564).

Through a moving scene, Tagore presents a conflict between social taboos and longing to love and be loved of a throbbing of heart. He projects Kunti as a distressed mother and Karna as an abandoned son yearning for mother’s love and blessings. Kunti stands for the predicament of an unmarried mother, who loses her right to motherhood to the prescribed norms of morality and affection for her son. Karna, on the other hand, represents those who are victimised again owing to societal norms. According to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar: “Kunti is great because she has suffered as few have suffered, and Karna is great because fate has played with him and cast him for a cruelly difficult role” (Iyengar, “Indian Writings” 139).

Even as he assures her of Pandava’s victory, Karna’s bitterness for what was done to him as an infant is evident:
Mother, have no fear! I know for certain that victory awaits the
Pandavas.... On the night, of my birth you left me naked and unnamed to
disgrace; leave me once again without pity to the calm expectation of
defeat and death (565).

In *Karna and Kunti*, Tagore’s underscores the vulnerability of Kunti and Karna both. He
puts the age old myth of Kunti’s innocence on trial in order to highlight the pain of Karna
as well as Kunti which was the result of social taboos. Mahabharata’s Kunti is beyond
blame because she gave birth to Surya’s son (the child of Sun god). The scripture does
not take into account Kunti’s pain. Tagore’s rendering of the story, however, highlights
the insensitivity with which the agony of an unwed mother as well as her son, who was
adopted by low caste parents has been largely peripheral in the cultural tradition. *Karna
and Kunti*, therefore, is a text that redefines tradition.

**Women as Defiant and Assertive Beings**

*The King and the Queen*, (*Raja O Rani*, 1889), the first of his series of tragedies is
notable for its success in delineating woman as beautiful and gentle yet strong beings.
Queen Sumitra has been portrayed by Tagore as a wise and inherently strong person.
King Vikram, on the other hand, infatuated by her love neglects the state and all his
obligations towards it. Consequently people suffer at the hands of corrupt functionaries.
Devdatta, the King’s Brahmin friend, apprises him of the situation. There is bitter
sarcasm in many of his statements: “The King’s poor subjects have been practicing long
to live upon half a meal a day, but they have not yet become experts in complete
starvation” (537). In Sumitra, Tagore presents a conscientious and sagacious queen
responsive towards the call of love and demands of her duty as a queen. She presents Tagore’s ideal of modern and dynamic woman. She protests against King Vikram’s excessive preoccupation with her as a desirable woman to the exclusion of affairs of state. She requests the King:

Hate me, King, hate me. Forget me. I shall bear it bravely,- but do not wreck your manhood against a woman’s charms....I feel shamed to share alone your heart which is for all men. (541)

Exasperated, she leaves him at last to seek her brother’s help to save the state from impending doom. King Vikram, in his recklessness, sees her action as both betrayal of their love and insult to his manhood. “Woman you mock me....you dare not leave me.” (542) Possessiveness and infatuation now changes to blind hatred, and the thirst for revenge: “Revenge is stronger than the thin wine of love. Revenge is freedom,-freedom from the coils of cloying sweetness” (547). ‘Revenge is a pyrrhic victory too, and King Vikram’s ‘enemies’ (Sumitra and her brother) elude his grasp, and he gloomily notes that love and death are not too careful in their choice of victims. They are impartial’ (Iyengar 46).

The King thinks that the queen Sumitra has betrayed him and says that this “cruel pain pierces my heart.” But his friend Devdatta tells him “you shall have no time for pain, or for love, now,-your life will become one stream of purpose, and carry your kingly heart to its great conquest” (547). But the King is still not able to understand his duty as a King and takes it as an insult when informed that queen Sumitra has gone to her brother in Kashmir for the help quell the rebellion in his Kingdom.
The King sets out to bring her back, crushing all opposition. The Queen begs him to stop devastating the country, but the King is in no mood to listen to her and says:

"...When once a war is started, rightly or wrongly, it is our man's pride that must carry it on to the end" (549). He makes clear his purpose of battle: "To rob was not my purpose, but to restore my honour. The head that bears the crown cannot bear insult" (550). The Queen's brother, instead of surrendering, sends his severed head through his own sister to ensure peace in the kingdom. It is only when the King meets Ila, who is engaged to be married to Kumarsen, the queen's brother that he gives a slight inkling of being a human being, made of flesh and blood, and not a maniac. But this change of heart comes very late, and in the meantime the precious life of Kumarsen is lost.

Queen Sumitra sympathising with her people offers to bear the responsibilities of the kingdom. She considers herself responsible for the pitiable plight of her subjects. She requests Vikram, "Sire, I beg of you, attend to your work" (536). She, being the guardian of the realm, is the mother of all her subjects. Therefore, it is impossible for her to see them in pain and suffering without feeling. She says, "What shame is this! I must remove this refuse from my father's land and save my people. I am the mother of my people. I cannot bear their cry. Save them, King" (538). King neglecting the general good and ignoring the Queen's entreaties has no effect on King and he says to her: "No more vain words, Queen. The birds' nests are silent with love. Let lips keep guard upon lips, and allow not words to clamour" (536).

Tagore invests the character of the queen with a rare moral courage. The play reverses the traditional idea of womanhood that is associated with an inherent meekness
and submissiveness. Tagore’s queen is not of a dumb woman, who would never question
the status quo.

*The King and the Queen* and *Sanyasi* are similar in many ways. In *Sanyasi*,
Sanyasi renounces the world to achieve the infinite, his goal and ultimately is
encountered with the reality that the Finite is the only medium to obtain the Infinite. In
the same way, King Vikram renounces his kingly responsibilities to receive love from his
wife Queen Sumitra. To him, “Respite from duty is a part of duty” (536). King Vikram
neglects his duties and responsibilities to satisfy his own love and lust for physical beauty
of the Queen. Comparing the character of the King of this play with the Queen of
*Sacrifice*, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes:

*The King and the Queen* and *Sacrifice* are reverse, and observe the same
model. The ‘King’ is spiritually and morally blind in the former play, the
‘Queen’ in the latter; and the blindness in either case is the result of their
self-centeredness, their inability to make love a wholesome force instead
of contracting to mere self-love... Vikram given to self-indulgence and
sloth, he has made himself the monarch of a sensual heaven. (125)

In *Sanyasi* (*Prakritir Pratishodh*) Tagore belittles the life of renunciation and upholds the
dignity of everyday life. He himself says about this play:

It may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary
work, or rather this has been the subject on which all my writing have
dwelt the joy of attaining the infinite within the finite. (Tagore, “My
Reminiscences” 235)
In the play the hermit is 'a seeker after truth and reality, who tries to approach his goal via negative, or the way of negation.' (Tagore, "Sanyasi and Sacrifice" 21) In his solitary state of meditation he develops an attitude of detachment and disregard for everything else. In his withdrawal from all that is human and worldly it may be said that he has regressed into a state of irresponsible comfort and egotistical carelessness. He thinks that he has conquered the world of illusions, has freed himself from desires and affections, and celebrates his loneliness. "I sit chanting the incantation of nothingness" (Tagore 463). He is untouched and unmoved by the sorrows of humanity. In the opening monologue he denounces the temptations of life and makes egoistical declaration of his freedom. He takes an oath that he would take revenge upon "interminable appearances, mistress of endless disguises... I am free, I am the great solitary One" (464). The dark eternity is contrasted with the confined earth. Sen Gupta has interpreted this play as: "Representing a stage in the poet’s own development, because like the Sanyasi he was absorbed in his self and like the Sanyasi he emerges into the open-air life of nature, beauty, human love, joy and sorrow" (145).

Sitting by the side of the road he feels superior to the fighting and struggling crowd and looks at them with pity and scorn. In his quest for perfection he is cut off all earthly bonds and feels proud of his achievement. The ascetic exclaims, "What sights of man I have seen! Can I ever again shrink back into the smallness of these creatures, and become one of them? No, I am free. I have not this obstacle, this world round me. I live in a pure desolation." (467)

The Sanyasi mistakenly believes that he can find truth in the emptiness of self. In the first half of the play the Sanyasi stands for the hatred of the world and insatiable thirst
for the Infinite. He renounces the world, searches for the infinite in the darkness of the
cave, and feels that he has achieved it. Philosophically, he gives up this world and mocks
at its nothingness. His rumination is interrupted by a little girl called Vasanti, the
daughter of Raghu, an outcaste cobbler. Her meeting with the Sanyasi is a coming
together of kindled souls in the sense that one has been deserted by the world which the
other has willfully left. ‘The action of this one-act play highlights the role of Vasanti, an
untouchable girl, in awakening the disdainful Sanyasi to the ineffable joys of folk-ways
of living’ (Padma 52).

Tagore skillfully introduces the Sanyasi’s fateful encounter with Vasanti at this
juncture, for pride has already enmeshed the Sanyasi in the world of men. In his pride
that he is immune to the common emotions of the heart, he allows Vasanti to sit near him.
Vasanti, emboldened by the fact that the Sanyasi has not shunned her, seeks his
protection and shelter. The Sanyasi promises to be her companion, but on his terms:

I am away in the endless. You can sit here, if you wish” (468). He adds to the
dismay of little girl, that he has no father, no mother, and no friends. Vasanti wonders
how such a man could offer her shelter. This forces the Sanyasi to assert his freedom
from the transient life of earthlings. In a passionate outburst he denounces all human ties:

Shelter? Don’t you know this world is a bottomless chasm? The swarm of
creatures, coming out from the hole of nothingness, seeks for shelter, and
enters into the gaping mouth of this emptiness, and is lost. These are
ghosts of lies around you, who hold their market of illusions (469).
The Sanyasi tries to explain his theory of non-attachment to the naive girl and she cannot
understand the talk of Sanyasi. She coolly replies: “But, father, they seem so happy in
“The world” (469). “The Sanyasi’s tone of contemptuous mundi and his habitual language of abstractions leave Vasanti bewildered and not a little frightened” (Padma 53).

Vasanti places her hand in the Sanyasi’s big palm, and expresses her desire to nestle like a bird in the hills and valleys of his palm. Her touch, for him is “soft…like the touch of sleep” and “has something of the great darkness, which touches one’s soul with the wand of the eternal”. Vasanti’s innocent gesture and simple expression of love communicate themselves directly to the Sanyasi’s emotions, even to his spirit. ‘However he succeeds only in formulating his idiom of abstractions of darkness’ (Padma 53).

Gradually Vasanti makes her way into the Sanyasi’s heart and talks about the beautiful things she has seen. For her “things that are beautiful are the keys to all that I have not seen and not known” (472). “No, no, the beautiful is mere phantasy”, says the ascetic, “they are all illusions. To him who knows, the dust and flower are the same” (472). But, he begins to feel the stirrings of pity and concern for Vasanti and is alarmed at the return of these feelings which he thought he had conquered. Through Vasanti he gets the realisation that he is not truly free and a world of wonder opens up before his eyes. He admits to Vasanti:

You seem to me like a cry of lost world, like the song of a wandering star.
You bring to my mind something which is infinitely more than this
Nature- more than the sun and stars. It is as great as the darkness. I understand it not. I have never known it, therefore I fear it. I must leave you…the messenger of the unknown….I must go. I thought that I had known, but I do not know. I leave you to know who you are. (473)
His despair is so great that he runs away from Vasanti so as to preserve his non-attached state. Yet the thoughts of Vasanti pursue him. He is time and again reminded of Vasanti who had put her child like faith and trust in him. He realises the futility of being a Sanyasi and finds that reality lies in relationships, in sharing, in one's commitment to one's fellow beings. He begins to understand that man as a solitary unit is an abstraction, unnatural, and ineffectual. It is through his plurality with others, through love and compassion, that man completes and finds fulfillment. The scenes which he now sees no longer arouse his contempt. He is fascinated by shepherd boys and girls singing about the joy of love and the pain of parting. A mother talking to her two children about some domestic problems awakens his interest in the simple life of human beings whom he had hitherto shunned. His heart is full of gratitude. He feels that Vasanti had opened his eyes to the worth of the actual world. Eager to seek her out, he retraces his steps and goes back to the village. He spends many a day's searching for the child he has forsaken. Sanyasi realises a new meaning in " Darkness" and a new value in Vasanti:

The night grows dark and desolate. It sits like a woman forsaken, - these stars are her tear turned into fire. O my child, the sorrow of your little heart has filled, forever all the nights of my life with its sadness...My darling, your sobs that pursued me, when I fled away, have clung to my heart. I shall carry them to my death. (477)

He breaks his staff and alms bowl and says:

Let my vows of Sanyasi go. I break my staff and my alms-bowl. This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time, - let it take me up again, let me join once more the pilgrims. Oh the fool, who wanted to
seek safety in swimming alone, and gave up the light of the sun and stars, to pick his way with his glow-worm's lamp! (478)

The ascetic failed in his attempt to conquer himself because he sought perfection while ignoring love. His pride was humbled when he saw that a little girl, in spite of all the hardships that fell to her lot, had grasped the substance of life while he had been chasing shadows. Her death roused him to a realisation of the extent of his own loss. But the lesson has been learnt. The great lesson that nature teaches him is on the pathway of the heart: "The bird flies in the sky not to fly away into the emptiness, but to come back again to this great earth....The finite is the true infinite and love knows its truth" (478). It is through love which is finite, the infinite can be attained. Earlier he called Vasanti "the moth of the daylight" (472). He didn't understand why she is clinging to him and what can she find in him. She had replied: "I do not want anything else. Your love is enough for me" (472). At that time love for him meant only an "illusion", but now he knows the meaning of her words and says: "My girl, you are the spirit of all that is, -I can never leave you" (478). The tragic irony is that before Sanyasi could reach her, she is dead. He has come too late. His illusions come to an end and he realises that his earlier vows are meaningless.

Vasanti the female protagonist of the play makes the Sanyasi realise that the true freedom lies in the love and not in emptiness of the soul and hatred of worldly things. It is through the love of the little girl that the contempt of the ascetic is transformed into love. Tagore has portrayed Vasanti as a symbol of humanity. Her little trusting hand seems to touch his soul "with the wand of the eternal" (472). Her death enables Sanyasi to awaken from the nightmare of egotistic possessiveness and go through the baptism of
regeneration as a human being. She symbolises that true love far from binding, can emancipate and enlarge. She is the vehicle of Tagore’s basic tenet of life that love liberates, purifies and intensifies human understanding and reveals infinity in a grain of sand and heaven in flower.

In his lecture on “Woman’s Place in the World”, Tagore speaks of woman’s capability to “impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power” in today’s world. He says, “Her exuberance of vital interest is spontaneously expressive; it makes her speech, her laughter, her movement, graceful and picturesque…” (Shukla 130). The nature and role of Vasanti furnish the clues vital to an understanding of Tagore’s conception of Woman. In a sense, ‘Vasanti, the little vibrant orphan, may be regarded as the quintessential feminine psyche’ (Padma 55). It is Vasanti’s simple joy in her and in the men and women around her, and her naive and trusting love for the Sanyasi that forces him to reckon with a new vision of the finite as an emanation of an infinite that is pure joy. His seeking after an impossible reunion with Vasanti makes the ascetic a totally different man, true to Nature. Vasanti, in spite of her symbolic function, is the only character with a name among the multitude introduced in the play. In words of Padma:

It is Vasanti’s spontaneous expression of joy and love and her impact on the warped souls of the naysayers to life that was to be richly varied and explored in Tagore’s major plays. (56)

Tagore’s oeuvre focuses on social injustice in all its dimensions. He was vehemently opposed to discrimination on the basis of gender. Besides this, he placed before the whole world the ideal to self reliant in Indian woman fighting not for their own rights and desires but also for those of subjugated nationality and downtrodden humanity. Through
his plays he has presented very sensible and revolutionary picture of a common woman. Feminism in Rabindranath Tagore challenges the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex. 'His female protagonists are subversive as they defy the accepted norms of the then society and instead present women confident in their choices of life that they themselves make' (Chaudhuri 3).

His women characters - 'Chitra', 'Srimati', 'Prakriti', 'Malini', 'Sumitra', 'Aparna' and Nandini—all of them have significant status of their own. They are shown self-sufficient and self-reliant. They remain victorious by proving their faith, assertiveness and strength to achieve their purpose, but still are full of love, compassion and motherly care for humanity. All these women can be role models for the modern women. Tagore is highly successful in redefining tradition through the portrayal of his women characters, who certainly present an antithesis of the conventional model of women. They defy hegemonic structures and dismantle the constructs of patriarchy. Having minds of their own, their portrayal bears out that Tagore was far ahead of his age in his attitude towards women.