CHAPTER 5
EMERGENCE OF NEW WOMEN

The Victorian era had squeezed the world for the women since it was the time when women were feeling the chains of social bondages even on their souls. This led to the development of a new wave of woman thinkers and writers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Sarah Grand led the brigade of the thinkers and writers who got engaged in pushing the limits set by the andocentric society. In her famous article, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” published in the North American Review in 1894, Sarah Grand coined the term “New Woman”. The term clearly indicates towards a change in the ideology and thought process of contemporary woman thinkers who advocated more rights and liberty for women. While giving the definition of New Woman Winifred Harper Cooley asserts:

The new woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages, has come to say – if civilization is to endure. The sufferings of the past have but strengthening her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her—and she now knows that she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her work. (31)

Suffragette movement in the nineteenth century to secure women’s democratic rights was in the background of the New Woman ideology. Diverse channels of liberalization were claimed by women, some in collaboration with men and some against the conservative spheres crafted by men. The New Woman could survive even after shunning relationships and still maintain social status protected by legal rights. She was intelligent, confident, educated and self-supporting. Sally Ledger writes, “The New Woman was a very fin-de-siècle phenomenon contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism. She was part of cultural novelties which manifested itself in the 1880’s and 1890’s” (12). Henry James’s novels present many new women of Sarah Grand who could lead an independent life crafted
upon their own ideals leaving husband and family behind. However, this
category of New Woman was not completely stable. In fact, the New Woman
writers were themselves not completely in tune with the New Woman concept.
Whereas Sarah Grand advocated sexual purity and celebrated motherhood in
*The Heavenly Twins*, Mona Caird attacked the motherhood in *The Daughters of
Danaus*. Heroines of Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* are champions of free
love, quite contrary to the heroines of Grand’s novels. Sally Ledger highlights
her point saying:

> The elusive quality of the New Woman of the *fin de siècle* clearly marks
> her as a problem, as a challenge to the apparently homogeneous culture
> of Victorianism which could not find a consistent language by which she
> could be categorized and dealt with. All that was certain was that she
> was dangerous, a threat to the *status quo*. (11)

The wave of New Woman ideology was not only limited to the Western world.
It influenced woman around the world and even men who were sensitive to the
issues of women. Rabindranath Tagore was one such personality who frankly
dealt with issues like women’s desire, their rights and freedom in his novels.
He had sensed the changing stream of time much ahead of his contemporaries.
He trenchantly puts in *Rabindra Rachnavali Vol. 13*, “She [woman] is not in
the world of the fairy tale where the fair woman sleeps for ages until she is
touched by the magic wand. . . . At last, the time has arrived when woman must
step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power” (226).

The novels of Tagore throw ample light on his radical thinking,
liberated mind and inclusive spirit. In *Rabindra Rachnavali Vol. 11*, he
reminds, “A woman’s identity is no longer limited to the role of a mother or a
wife. We have arrived at a stage when women are demanding their right as
human beings. They want to be counted unreservedly in their identity as
individuals” (28). Tagore’s personal life shows how difficult it would have
been for him to deviate from the compelling pressures of traditional and social
conditions of the conservative society of his time. His radical attitude gave him
courage to swim against the current. He was the first writer who gave equal or
perhaps more space to women in his writings. This liberal-minded writer had
no objection in women performing on the stage, which was highly controversial issue in the contemporary society. S. Sastri throws light over this:

Women, most probably prostitutes, used to take part in theatrical performances on the public stage in August, 1873. Public opinion was very hostile towards the inclusion of women in such performances. Even Vidyasagar and Sibnath Sastri, two champions of the cause of women, were so angered by it that they never again went to a public theatre. (90)

Women of Tagore family took active part in private theatrical performances and won appreciations for the same. In fact “…in most fields, the women of Jorasanko Tagore family played the lead role. They appeared either individually or jointly, as torch bearers to dispel the darkness” (Deb vii). Along with Tagore, one of the main proponents of modern theater in Bengal, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, also persuaded theatre patrons to introduce actresses to the Bengali theatre. As a result, many actresses like Rajkumari, Haridasi, Jadumani, Kadambini and Binodini appeared on the stage.

The wave of social change was evident in many other spheres also. In November 1866, a number of Bhramo men and women gathered in a meeting thrown in the honour of Miss Carpenter, relative of the Governor. After the reception, men and women were introduced to each other. Everyone was exalted as it was uncommon to find a gathering comprising of both the sexes in those times. While congratulating the women one of the speakers said:

Ladies! Henceforth do act according to the spirit of freedom that you experienced today. From this moment shake off the mean and impure sense of shyness that always gets the better of the women of our country. You are neither inanimate things nor just animals so that you will do whatever your husbands order you to do….You too have the right, as men have, to think and to act freely. Do what you consider good, we men have no right to object. We cannot do everything according to your wish, nor can you do everything as we want you to do. (qtd. in Dasgupta 154)
Women of the contemporary Bengali society were too shy to come to the outside world but gradually they started learning the ways of the world and many women like Jnanada Debi, Brahmomayi Debi, Saudamini Roy, Rajkumari Banerji, Radharani Lahiri, the Bose sisters—Swarnaprabha, Subarnaprabha, Labanyakprabha and Hemaprabha and many other Brahmo ladies turned into “social” women of the late 1870’s. In December 1875, when the Prince of Wales came to visit Calcutta, Jagadanada Mukherji, a Calcutta High Court advocate arranged a reception in his honour. The Prince was warmly received in the *zenana* by quite a few traditional Hindu women belonging to the Mukherji family. On this, Bandyopadhyay comments:

The Brahmo women had started to become unorthodox several years earlier, but this was the first well known example of traditional Hindu women disregarding the custom of female seclusion. Jagadanada and his family were severely criticized by both the traditional Hindus, for having violated *purda* and by educated young men who had recently become imbued with a strong sense of nationalism, for having invited the Prince into the *zenana*. (172-73)

Women of the Tagore family such as Indira Debi, Hiranmayi Debi, Sarala Debi and Pratibha Debi are examples of “emancipated” women. Women of Tagore’s fiction have the reflection of these courageous women. In fact, one can call them the ‘New Women’. Several women of remarkable traits encouraged the novelist to give a new vision and scope to the Bengali women through his social work as well as creative writings. His women stand apart from the contemporary women of the society and slowly and steadily mop out the stereotypical track of the traditions. It is for this very reason his women are considered more modern than the contemporary women of Bengali society. Though, he was against any direct involvement of women in national movement but his heroines like Bimala and Ela are brave enough to participate in the main stream of national movement. The multi-dimensional interests and intellectual engagements of his women characters challenge the shibboleths and stereotypes of the Bengali culture and in this way they become the spokespersons of the writer. Nirad C. Chaudhuri presents an analysis of the
writer’s attitude in a meaningful way when he says, “Tagore challenged the entire political, social, cultural and religious superstitious, and was therefore regarded as an apostate so are the women of Tagore” (609).

Tagore’s fiction and non-fiction idea of gender equality and justice but he also felt that women should first fulfill their roles and responsibilities towards their family. Many of his essays such as “Indian Marriage”, “Women”, “Hindu Marriage”, “Women’s Education” and travel narratives like “Diary of a Traveler to Europe”, “Diary of a Traveler to the West” and “Letters from Europe” interrogate the role of women, their liberation and criticism of patriarchy in a humorous manner. Critics like Partha Chatterjee define the familial and homely responsibilities of women as sacrosanct and home as their limited space which preserves the national and domestic culture and any invasion of the Western cultures will bring negative influence. Chatterjee opines:

But the crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized . . . There would be a marked difference in the degree and manner of Westernization of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation. (126)

This matrix of responsibilities between family, nation and gender becomes the central theme in many of Tagore’s novels. The colonial Bengal under the British rule was the arena of encounter between the East and the West; moreover, the influence of Bhramo Samaj and Christianity was making a rapid way in the social, cultural and familial life of Bengal. The new Bengali men wanted to bring their traditional wives into the non-traditional group of poets, editors and artists. These encouragements led to the emergence of ‘New Bengali Women’ and at the dawn of the twentieth century, Tagore’s narratives registered this paradigm shift. In his fiction and non-fiction, he describes
women as active agents of social change. In *Europe Jatrir Chithi*, he expresses his views about ‘modern’ women. Amartya Mukhopadhyay states that, “... But whatever the motivating factors were, Tagore turns out to be one of the earliest commentators on gender bias and oppression women faced in India” (286). The conversation of Binoy with Gora reflects Tagore’s vision, “If we were able to see our women outside the essential purposes of domesticity, then we would have seen our nation in all its beauty and completeness” (G 79). Tanika Sarkar says that the construction of myth for representing Hindu woman as motherland in the colonial Bengal to free her daughters and sons from the chains of slavery foregrounded her role both within and outside the home:

If the household was the embryonic nation, then the woman was the true patriotic subject. The male body having passed through the grind of Western education, office, routine, and forced urbanization... was supposedly remade in an attenuated, emasculated form of colonialism. The female body on the other hand, was still pure and unmarked, loyal to the rule of the shastras. (43)

Tagore’s essay, “Swadesh” resonants the image of woman as mother India but *Gora* presents the secular image that is free from communal, religious and cultural constraints. Women characters in this novel are modern in its true sense. The divine character of Anandamoyi encourages the staunch patriot Gora to understand real nationalism. He accepts, “You are my mother whom I have been wandering about in search of all the time sitting in my room at home. You have no caste, you make no distinction, and have no hatred—you are the image of our welfare! It is you who are India!” (G 407). The novelist deliberately chooses the name Anandamoyi instead of Annapurna, as Anandamoyi is the symbol of bliss instead of bounties. He wants the image of Anandamoyi to be free from mere care-giving and food-giving mother. *Gora* celebrates Tagore’s pre-Nobel prize creative phase when he was deeply influenced by the liberal reformism and Hindu revivalism. This creative courage and ideology encouraged this Nobel laureate to transform the conservative gendered images into rebellious women. Through his novels like *Gora, Home and the World* and *Four Chapters*, Tagore tries to efface the distinction between ghar/baire and
In his essay “The Nation and its Women”, Partha Chatterjee makes this point clear:

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of day to day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. And so, one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*. (120)

Women of Tagore’s novels and short-stories come from this conservative, unhygienic and claustrophobic space to mark their way in the society. Religious dogmas regard women as second sex and inferior to men but they are in no mood to accept the age long traditions and customs which ruin their life under the burden of society. In fact, they are more spontaneous than men. Tagore has created a series of women characters who have blossoming aspect of education, culture and maturity. They are emotional as well as intelligent. His women can boast of this dual combination rarely to be found in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries of the colonial Bengali fiction. His new women can read, write, compose poems and discuss issues related to politics and philosophy. They can give reasons, interrogate, reject and reconstruct their identities by struggling against stereotypes roles and mindless social practices. Partha Chatterjee observes in “The Nation and its Fragments”:

The new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the “new” woman was quite the reverse of the “common” woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. (127)
Binodini stands first in this category of the most radical and courageous woman of Tagore’s fiction. She by all means is a ‘new woman’. As forerunner of a new genre in Indian fiction, she has received high acclaims from critics. A Grain of Sand is rightly hailed as “the beginning of a new pathway” (Bhattacharya 97). Through the image of Binodini and Asha, Tagore presents a story that is devoted to the study of social problems in India. Humayun Kabir has a point when he regards this novel as “one of the first and finest studies in woman’s psychology in Bengali or indeed any other Indian language” (17). Tagore’s distinction lies in the fact that through this novel, he not only deals with the plights of young widows in Indian and especially in the Bengali society but also asserts that they should be given equal opportunities to live the life to the fullest. They also have desires whether it is emotional or carnal. Binodini does not want to suppress her emotional and physical desires and fights for her rights. Her courage in wooing Mahendra and Bihari in the first half of the novel and rejecting both of them in the second half of the novel is extraordinary and bold. Her decision of not marrying either Bihari or Mahendra seems to suggest writer’s belief that the amelioration of helpless women does not lie merely in their remarriage but in the realisation of their and selfhood. V. S. Naravane has rightly commented on this issue:

It is in this light that Binodini’s extraordinary act of will in rejecting remarriage as a possible solution to her predicament has to be viewed. Rather than consenting to a socially unacceptable marriage, she seeks, through the dynamics of self-affirmation, a more meaningful role for her rich personality, acquiring thus grandeur even in her defeat. (118)

The writer highlights that widows are not husband eaters or evil temptresses and they should be given equal rights in the society. From a mere clone of “a second poison tree”, Binodini becomes a powerful and bold woman who has the potential to efface the male characters in the novel. She enjoys a say in the family matters of Mahendra’s family right from the very beginning which was something very difficult for a helpless widow of that time. First, she ignores Mahendra and then enchants him with her beauty and courteous eyes. She makes him puppet of her hands and when he madly falls in love with her and
dares to cross his limits, she assertively says ‘no’ and rejects him. Her sexual rivalry with Asha also makes her a woman distinct from her contemporary heroines. Niharranjan Ray’s remark completely suits Binodini, “The sense of individuality expresses itself in a desire for an independent existence for the woman as woman quite distinct from her husband in the most recent Bengali society. . . The inevitable result of this sense of individuality is the sense of sexual independence of the woman” (404).

Binodini has the confidence to register her disgust when love ridden Mahendra in order to provoke her, coins the name of Bihari. Highly irritated, she at once insults him, “Whom do you mock? If you were worthy of his friendship I would have endured your mockery of him. You have a small mind; you are not strong enough to be friend and you talk of jest” (GS 133). It is Binodini who brings the egoist Mahendra to her feet, not once but several times in the novel. When he visits her at the late hour and Rajlakshmi happens to see him, Binodini strictly condemns him and immediately swaps all ties with him. The letter that she writes to Mahendra speaks aloud about her fearless character:

In this world, I have no one to love and no one to love me. Hence I play at games of love and satisfy my craving for it. When you had time to spare, you joined in the game. But all games must end some day. You have summons from the house—why do you still peep into the playroom. Shake off the dust and go back home now. I have no home. So, I’ll sit in a corner and play games in my head. I shall not call you. . . At one point in time, you believed you love Asha—that was a lie too. Now, you think you love me, this too is a lie. The only one you love is yourself. . . You don’t have the capacity to quench my thirst—my desire for games has ended. Now, if you call me, I shall not answer. You have called me heartless in your note. That may be true. But I also have a soul and hence today, I take pity on you and renounce you. (GS 163)

The desire of Binodini is far more than mere physical lust. She wants to register her name as a complete woman, who has importance in the society. It is very courageous on Tagore’s part to design a widow the heroine of the novel,
especially when, women were labeled as ‘second sex’ without any debate. She has the courage to give a befitting reply to Rajlakshmi when the latter calls her ‘evil-enchantress’. She thoroughly rejects the idea and accuses Rajlakshmi of using her as a prop to take revenge on her weak daughter-in-law, Asha. She gives her a jolt:

Aunty, you know better than me whether I am a seductress or not and what enchantment I possess. Just so, I know the spell that you tried to cast, though you might deny it. But it must have been there or this would not have happened. Both you and I lay the trap with some willfulness and some ignorance. That’s the way our breed goes—we are enchantresses. (GS 167)

Binodini not only loves Bihari but also has the courage to purpose him. Similar to Sarat Chander’s Paro who doesn’t hesitate in the least while going to Devdas’ room late at night Binodini also goes to Bihari’s house in a stormy night and proposes him for the marriage. Bihari remains shocked seeing such valour in a widow. Tagore writes:

And then, she wove herself around him like a human creeper and raised a pair of lips as fragrant as a flower, up to his own. Bihari closed his eyes and tried with all his might to banish the image from his mind. But he felt powerless to hurt her in any way – an incomplete, fervent kiss hung on his lips, and he was suffused with a strange exhilaration. (GS 181)

Through the image of Binodini, the novelist unfolds the inner layers of a woman’s heart. She is presented as a normal being with all the natural faults and follies. Binodini feels jealousy of a great degree sensing Bihari’s feelings for Asha. She wants to ask him, “Why shall I stop him? . . . And I suppose I have no dreams and desires of my own? I am not so pious that I’d wipe out all my wishes from this life, for the sake of your Asha’s well being, for the sake of Mahendra’s family” (GS 175). All the sufferings and humiliations inculcate a strange courage in Binodini and she not only sends Mahender back to his house, but also turns down Bihari’s proposal of marriage as she does not want
to bring dishonour to him. Her decision to remain celibate and save Bihari from social ostracism makes her a supreme woman in several regards. Would there have been any ordinary woman, she’d definitely not let Bihari slip from her hands but Binodini is not an ordinary woman. She is the pioneer in the literary tradition of Tagore’s new woman. The progression of her character from a heartless coquetry to a humane and from self-centered to a sacrificing woman bestows a different status to her personality. Her sacrifice invests her as “the symbol of the stricken conscience of the contemporary middle class Hindu society” (Ray 185). This sacrifice of Binodini reflects her strong will power and worldly wise attitude. Kh. Kunjo Singh rightly asserts, “Binodini heralds the emergence of a new class of emancipated woman, who are no longer prepared to be downtrodden by the society but fight to assert their rights” (50). Along with Binodini, Asha also enjoys the status of Tagore’s new woman in certain sense. In the beginning of the novel, she is perceived as mere China doll, but with the passage of time, she gains maturity and becomes a strong woman. Like several other girls of the contemporary society, she is also taught to perceive husband as God but on learning Mahendra’s infidelity she rejects to place him on that position. Tagore writes, “How could Asha gift her chaste devotion to this Mahendra, how could she say, ‘Come unto my steadfast heart, come and place your feet upon the spotless lilies of my chaste wifely devotion’? . . . She no longer perceived this Mahendra—disposed of conjugal loyalties—as her god” (GS 212-13).

Contrary to Ibsen’s Nora, Tagore’s Asha does not leave the house, rather decides to perform her duty as the daughter-in-law of the family. In the final chapters of the novel, she acquires the authority and forbids Mahendra from disturbing his ailing mother, “Don’t go in there now . . . The doctor has said that if mother gets a sudden shock, consequences may be grave” (GS 221). Even Mahendra is shocked to see such a transformation in her personality. Whatever Tagore writes in this regard is a salute to the spirit of Asha’s dauntless personality. The novelist declares:

The new face of Asha was a novelty to him. This Asha had no diffidence, no inadequacy; this Asha was confident of what she was
doing and she wasn’t begging for protection from him. Mahendra may have rejected his wife, but he felt a growing respect for the daughter-in-law of the house. (GS 221)

Mahendra’s wounded ego is highlighted when he accuses Asha for having a soft corner for Bihari. She at once shuts his mouth with strict reply. She is deeply hurt by his negligence to his duties and speaks with resolute vigour, “. . . You can surely take lessons on caring for your mother” (GS 224). Now, Mahendra is well aware that the anguish of Asha has turned into disgust and this riposte leaves him gasping for words and the writer puts it, “Mahendra perceived his total defeat. He had never imagined that Asha would . . . ever be capable of reprimanding him thus. He realized that his status had now been dragged down from the throne to the ground” (GS 225). In this way, Asha emerges as a ‘new woman’. Now, she is no longer afraid of facing Bihari and talks to him with ease. From a shy daughter-in-law, she becomes the confident mistress of the house. Bihari can’t stop praising this attitude of Asha and thinks, “This young woman had bathed in the holy water of sorrow and acquired a divine status like the goddesses of ancient times—she was no longer an ordinary mortal; terrible grief seemed to have made her as old as the ascetic women that the Puranas described” (GS 249). At the end of the novel, she not only forgives Mahendra but Binodini also and this is their biggest punishment. Thus, Asha also comes out as a new woman who is not meek and ordinary but important part of the novel.

The exploitive “hegemony” views which give a lot of freedom and power to men and leave women as mere shadows are negated. Tagore emphasizes to have a balanced perspective to fulfill the interest of the masses. He, undoubtedly, achieves an intended goal to make people believe what he tries to put in words. The identity of a woman in our society is of weak, insignificant and a delicate creature that needs to be protected. However, sometimes woman uses certain tricks to axe her grind. Interestingly, Tagore has no disapproval for the tricks employed by women. In “Swadesh O Samaj” (Rabindra Rachnavali Vol. 06), he writes:
Of course, women do resort to a deception that is also another aspect of women’s strength. The demands of men when they exceed the women’s resources are often met by machinations. It is we men who have dubbed women as enchantress. Indeed, we wanted them to so. If they come short, we give them a bad name, when they are useful, we sing their praise. (21)

The writer believes, “By natural instinct, women are creative and graceful. It is woman who makes the home, which is no way less valuable or easier than running a business. The motivating force that shapes a home is a woman’s love” (GS 546). Though Binodini is the central character in A Grain of Sand, but Asha and her aunt, Annapurna can’t be ignored. It is true that both of them are homemakers, yet they are “new woman” in true sense.

All barriers of caste and creed are transcended by the novelist while projecting a new outlook of openness and flexibility. Through his novels, he has proved that if India wants to progress it must liberate its women. In all his novels, he has depicted the struggle of women from within and without to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. With his longest novel Gora, Tagore brings out the predicament of active consciousness of the women protagonists who are driven to “desperate straits in responding to the stimulus of orthodox revivalism on one hand and liberal reformism on the other” (Raj 41). Anandamoyi, Sucharita and Lolita not only manage to settle down Hindu-Bhramo controversy but also help Gora and Binoy to identify national consciousness in its true sense. All these new women of Tagore act as stimuli for setting ardent nationalism and tradition. Whereas Gora represents the conflict between the reformist and revivalist, Sucharita acts as an active force in handling an “even-handed justice” (Mukherjee 181) to both the ill-conceived forces. Commenting on this, T. R. Sharma says, “Tagore knows that the true path is followed only by those like Anandamoyi, Sucharita and Lolita, who though belonging to the opposite sects, do not allow their religious views to create a gulf between man and man” (67).

Lolita, the frank heroine of Gora, has the capacity to surpass all in courage and daring. Her anger, earthiness and temperament are matters of
concern for the whole family because she does not hesitate in the least to express her views. Even her mother, who is also quite short-tempered, fears from her. Defiantly, she spurns her mother’s demand to recite Longfellow and registers her protest to sing a song in front of Binoy. She replies, “No mother, I really cannot. I don’t remember it very well” (G 45). The quality of character is highlighted by the novelist more than of the body. Lolita’s raw individuality is reflected in the darkness of her complexion, which the text repeatedly draws out. While throwing light on the fearless character of Lolita, Baroda says that she is so brave that she would not cry even if she is hurt. Dasgupta et al. comment on her character, “A creature of complex responses and forthright honesty, Lolita also abandons herself to verbal venting that wreaks havoc without fail, despite the text’s feeble attempts to glorify the fearless honesty” (79). Lolita and her sisters do not hesitate while coming in front of strangers. In fact, they are more confident and at ease in comparison to Binoy and Gora. Their laughter is a matter of surprise for both the boys as it was something rare in the contemporary Hindu society. Binoy observes, “Now and then from a room nearby, the prattle of girls voices, mingled with little bursts of laughter, could be heard . . . never before in his life had he come across the rippling merriment of girls at home” (G 35). Lolita cannot approve of Binoy’s idea of chasing Gora all the time. She openly makes fun of this. No common girl of Hindu family could dare to register her objection so vividly but Lolita is courageous in this regard and quite eligible to be Tagore’s new woman. She openly calls Binoy, Gora’s satellite:

Gora, Gora, Gora day in and day out . . . His friend Gora may be a great man. But isn’t he himself a man also? His friend has overshadowed him so completely . . . It is as though a cockroach had swallowed a midge. I have no patience with the midge for allowing itself to be caught, and it does not heightened my respect for the cockroach. (G 89-90)

When the British officers arrest Gora on false allegation, it is Lolita who stands in his support with Binoy. She openly criticizes Haran Babu for not being supportive to Gora. Tagore makes an important statement, “. . . what Gour Mohan Babu has done is quite right. Is the Magistrate here to bully us that we
should have to be defending ourselves? Have we to pay them fat salaries and then pay pleaders as well to rescue us from their clutches? (G 147)

Lolita abruptly leaves the play that she was going to perform with her mother and sisters in front of the Magistrate. She boldly protests against any kind of tyranny whether it is by Britishers or her by own mother. Neither she cares about the society nor about the sarcastic remarks of Haran Babu. The surprise of Binoy knows no bound when he finds Lolita on the steamer. He gets the shock of his life when he comes to know that she has not disclosed anything to anyone and has only left a note. When he expresses his concern, she says:

Now that the steamer has started what is the use of saying ‘But’? I don’t see why, because I happen to have been born as girl, I should have to put up with everything without protest. For us, also, there are such words have been easier for me to commit suicide than to have taken any part in that play of theirs. (G 151)

Lolita’s escape with Binoy in the steamer reminds the readers of the similar episode in George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*, where Maggie accidently floats down the river with Stephan Guest. Though like Maggie, Lolita also has to face severe criticism, but Tagore infuses more courage in his heroine to face the charge and stand high as compared to Eliot’s heroine who outcasts her own self and can’t muster the courage to face the society. This shows that Tagore was in favour of women empowerment in its true sense and gives full space to the qualities of Lolita. Binoy also realises her superiority and apologizes for misjudging her. She achieves a new level of understanding in the company of Binoy who realises that the vision of womanhood in Lolita is capable enough to make life beautiful. Due to the uproar created by the incident the marriage of the two becomes mandatory but it is not that easy as both of them belong to different casts. Though, Binoy surrenders to become a Bhramo but Lolita forbids him to do so. She shuts the mouth of everyone and makes Binoy remember that their unity is not artificial and their religion is not so trivial that such cheap allegations can disturb them. With confident smile, she commands Binoy, “I could not bear the ignominy of feeling you accepted me by stooping to an act which would lower yourself in your eyes. What I want is that you
should remain where you are now without wavering” (G 306). She tears the agreement of Binoy to be a Bhramo and marries him at her own wish. When the question comes to pacify the family, again it is Lolita not Binoy who comes forward. Her question to Sucharita roots out all the coniderations, “Didi . . . because we have been born girls, are we to wear our hearts out within the four walls of our home? Are we never to be of any use to the world?” (G 226). Commenting on this, Pearson makes a very befitting point, “Lolita takes perceptive, initiative steps to nourish this new relationship and breaks with entrenched previous structures that pose a threat to her future goals” (180). Her final reply to Haran Babu proves that she is a girl quite different from the ordinary Bengali women:

You need not think that I am sorry I spoke! If Panu Babu and his party think that by driving me to the edge of the ocean like a hunted animal they will be able to capture me there, they will soon find out their mistake. He does not know that I am not afraid of jumping into the sea, and that I would sooner do that than fall into the jaws of his pack of yelping hounds. (G 217)

The impact of Brahmo ideology is visible on most of the characters. Similar to Lolita, Sucharita is also an educated Bhramo girl with modern outlook but her temperament is more balanced in comparison to Lolita’s. Due to her calm nature Binoy feels attracted towards her from the very first meeting; even Gora cannot help but drifting towards her. She is adopted, yet favourite child of Paresh Babu, who not only perceives her as his daughter but also finds a mother, a companion and an adviser in her. Mrs. Baroda does not like Sucharita, still she has a say in the family matters. Such kind of authority was not common in the contemporary Bengali families. She does not want to marry Haran Babu, but only for her father’s sake she agrees to do so. She nurses Paresh Babu in his illness and with her sisters’ help wants to open a school to teach poor girls in the neighbourhood. She does not agree to the proposal of Harimohini not to drink milk from the hands of their servant, Ramdin. She protests, “Why, Auntie!” . . . “Isn’t he that very Ramdin who milks his cow for you and brings you your milk every morning?” (G 223). When, Harimohini
permits Satish for taking milk from Ramdin, she says, “Were not the stronger sex privileged to break all rules and evade all discipline, imposed even by orthodoxy?” (G 223). However, her method of registering protest is not as loud as of Lolita’s. The contribution of Sucharita in making Paresh Babu comfortable for Lolita’s inter-caste marriage can never be underestimated. It is only in the company of Sucharita, Paresh Babu understands the fact that it is humanity not rigid religion that is important for the betterment of the society. Praising her, Paresh Babu says, “To-day, mother, I have learnt a lesson from you!” (G 242)

Women characters of Tagore’s novels always play vital role in the development of male characters. Sucharita’s contribution in making Gora realise the true meaning of nationalism and patriotism cannot be overlooked. She drags him from the suffocating and stiff boundaries and transfers to a new vision. With her support, Gora leaves the imaginary burden of staunch notions and says, “Today I am free. I need no longer fear being contaminated or becoming an out-caste—I shall not now have to look on the ground at every step to preserve my purity” (G 405). She is a new woman of Tagore’s literary genuine who is not only beautiful but rational, confident, educated and curious also. At the end of the novel, she gathers the courage to turn down the marriage proposal of Haran Babu and makes her point of view clear to others, “Would not it be better for men and women to have a complete division of duties? If you allow men into the house, their duty to the world outside may suffer likewise!” (G 59). She does not feel comfortable with Gora’s views but never imposes her own ideals on him and at last he realises his follies. A real woman, she enjoys the feeling of loosing ‘self’ for ‘others’. What Gora says to her, is a true tribute to her strong feminine sensibility:

“Sucharita”, said Gora with a smile, “I am no longer your guru. I make know to you this prayer of mine—take my hand and lead me to this guru of yours?” And he held out his right hand towards her. Sucharita got up from her chair and put her hand in his, then Gora turned towards Paresh Babu, and the two together made their obeisance to him. (G 408)
Similar to Sucharita and Lolita, presence of Anandamoyi in Tagore’s fiction adds a new meaning and range to the concept of new woman. From the very beginning, her radical and modern ideas are reflected. Being a Brahmin, it would have been very difficult for her to adopt a Christian child but she has the courage to do so. Though only a home-maker, she possesses a liberal attitude to reject the orthodoxy and dogma. Her transformation from an orthodox Brahmin girl to a generous and open-minded woman is something which would be praised by modern feminists as well. Tagore has highlighted the strong individualistic personality of Anandamoyi, but this individualism has nothing to do with the image of patriarchy. While describing the modern attitude of Anandamoyi, the novelist deliberately highlights her dress sense, she is a ‘new woman’ even the way she dresses:

One thing about her struck all her acquaintances, namely, that with her sari she wore a bodice. At the time of which we are speaking, though certain modern young women had begun to adopt it as part of their dress, ladies of the old school looked askance at the wearing of a bodice as savouring of Christianity. Anandamoyi’s husband, Krishnadayal Babu, had held a post in the Commissariat Department, and Anandamoyi had spent most of her days with him, from childhood, away from Bengal. So she had not the idea that to cover the body properly was a matter to be ashamed of, or to laugh at. (G 11)

Anandamoyi is raised above the conservative social set up. Not only in her lifestyle but also in her thoughts she is quite liberated. She doesn’t entertain Gora’s idea of not taking food from a non-Hindu servant, Lachmi. While registering her protest, she says, “Have you not all along eaten food from her hand, for it was she who nursed you and brought you up? . . . besides, can I ever forget how she saved your life, when you had smallpox, by her devoted nursing?” (G 12). An epitome of motherly affection, she loves Binoy the same way she loves Gora. For her, both are her sons and in her heart of hearts, she is well aware that Binoy loves Lolita and doesn’t want to marry Sushi. It is only for Gora’s sake that he has given his consent. Here also like a woman of modern attitude, she says to him, “Don’t make matters worse, my child . . .
Marriage is for life . . .” (G 96). Like a psychologist, she reads the mind of Binoy and Gora and finds out that both are drifting towards Lolita and Sucharita respectively. Knowing this, she does not lose her temper but tries to know the girls and their family. She does not have any objection for inter-caste marriage of her sons. She does not care what society would think about her; never does she think to regulate her conduct according to the social norms. The day she took Gora in her arms, she cut herself away from traditions and customs. When people accuse her for being a Christian, she clasps Gora to her bosom and says, “God knows it is no accusation to call me a Christian!” (G 175). When Binoy decides to marry Lolita, it is only Anandamoyi who stands by him, even when Gora leaves. She not only gives emotional support to Binoy, but to Paresh Babu also. Gora loses his temper with Anandamoyi for helping Binoy in inter-caste marriage but she replies, “Binoy knows that you will have nothing whatever to do with this marriage of his that is true enough. But he also knows that I can never desert him at so auspicious a moment of his life” (G 341).

She breaks all the ties with the society that never tries to understand her true worth. When Gora learns the real meaning of nationalism, it is Anandamoyi, who becomes his source of inspiration and he calls her mother of the whole nation. Like Mother India, she knows no boundaries, no caste and no discrimination. Gora says to Anandamoyi, “It is you who are India!” (G 407). Similar to Anandamoyi, Nikhil’s grandmother is also a unique example of Tagore’s new woman. In her traditional character, Tagore has filled the colours of modernity. She heartily approves Nikhil’s modern taste and his appointment of an English tutor for Bimala. Initially, a bit reluctant but finally she permits Bimala to move from seclusion to the outside world. Under the influence of Nikhil’s modern taste, she loves to listen the stories from English books. She prefers Bimala for her ‘good stars’ not for her looks. She is not a typical mother-in-law of conservative attitude who bars the happiness of daughters-in-law; rather she participates in all merriments with Bimala and enjoys her company.
Through his heroines, Tagore has given a new meaning to feminism and modernism. He believed that if handled judiciously, the Western education and modernism would immensely assist the progress of the nation. Nikhil encourages Bimala to take lessons from an English tutor; Binodini is also educated by an English lady; Sarojini in Sarat Chander’s *The Dissolute* also has English education but she holds her English education in very high esteem, which the novelist despises. He also criticizes the shallow English customs of Barodasundari in *Gora* and sham ways of Katie, Cessie and Lissi in *Farewell, My Friend*. These women, blind in the imitation of the British culture, forget their real values, while women like Sucharita, Asha and Anandamoyi are not rebellious rather calm and emancipated women. Tagore’s women are not passive characters; they stand for justice and truth and if they commit mistake they realise and try to mend it. The initial hostility of Sucharita towards Gora is explainable but her affection and selfless love towards him is also natural. There are some critics who believe that Tagore was a mere presenter and not a revolutionary. They also negate his strong social and economical tendencies of extending the boundaries of India of the early twentieth century. Bina Biswas remarks in this regard, “Tagore’s heroines and his feminism stance did not bring forth any cultural and social revolution in the society but it successfully stirred the thought process of the elitist society” (188). We have ample examples of new women in his fiction who are torch bearers of a new era advocating the well deserved and dignified place for women. They all are much ahead of their time and society. Tagore did not shout the idea of feminism like the Western militant feminists as crying loud was not his nature, but he clearly and strictly rejected the inequality and cruelty against women.

Like other women of Tagore’s fiction, Kumudini of *Relationships* stands apart from the common Bengali women. Due to her strong will power and firm determination, she emerges as a winner or what we call Tagore’s ‘new woman’. Kumudini also cherishes the image of her future husband as her God similar to Bimala. She imagines him as her Prince and saviour. Tagore writes, “Sometimes Kumudini would get up from her bed at night . . . And asks silently, “Where are you, my Prince? Where is your jewel worth seven
kingdom’s wealth? Save my brothers, and I’ll be your slave forever” (R 42). Madhusudan Ghoshal comes in her life whom she mistakes as the incarnation of her dreams into reality. Her brother, Bipradas understands Madhu’s reality and forbids her to marry him, but destiny has stored something else. After marriage, Kumu gets only rejections and humiliations. Initially, she tries to adjust in the alien atmosphere of Madhu’s house, but soon she realises that he is not the God of her dreams. Unlike Asha, she protests at once. She is not in the mood to bear the tortures implicated by Madhu. She believes that the truth of marriage lies in the honesty and mutual respect. Her views are highly influenced by her brother, Bipradas:

Look at the Puranas; as Sita is, so is Rama; as Sati, so Shiva; as Arundhati, so her husband the sage Vashishtha. The men of our times have no virtues of their own, so they speak one-sidedly of the virtues of chaste women. They can’t supply the oil, but command the lamp- wicks to burn. The parched souls keep on burning and are reduced to ashes. (R 69)

Men who don’t give proper respect and due place to women are strictly criticized by the novelist. Madhusudan shows his hostile side to his wife. He doesn’t allow her to wear the ring given to her by her brother, declaring the stone inauspicious for him. Kumu detaches herself completely from the married life and starts living in seclusion. She starts working in Madhu’s house as a servant because she doesn’t consider herself the mistress of the house and refuses to use his money. She requests Moti’s mother to send a telegram to her brother saying, “You know I have no money with me” (R 116). Moti’s mother replies, “The money I’m given for household expenses is your money after all”. Over this Kumu says, “No, no, no—nothing in this house is mine, not even quarter of a paisa” (R 116). Kumu’s self respect stops her of using the money of her rich but insensitive husband. Such boldness was not an easy thing in the contemporary Hindu society where women had no financial stand of their own. They had to depend on their husbands for everything. That’s why the husbands assumed the role of saviours and handled their life according to their own wishes.
The quality of maintaining balance is infused in the women characters. Kumudini is a woman of even temperament. Like Sucharita, her courage does not have any touch of anger. In order to humiliate her, Madhusudan calls bad names to Bipradas, “You are your brother’s disciple, but let me tell you this, I am his creditor. I can buy him at one market and sell him at another” (R 105). A girl can bear all the humiliations but can’t approve the insult of her family members but here also Kumudini doesn’t lose her temper and says, “Do you want to insult me? You won’t succeed. I shan’t take any insult to heart” (R 104). She further adds, “Look, be cruel if you want to, but don’t be small” (R 105). These expressions of Kumudini show the firmness of her character. In her serenity, the reflection of Anandamoyi’s personality is evident. Madhusudan knows no other means but force to control his wife. He realises that it is quite difficult to tame her self-respect as she has the power of truth with her. Tagore highlights:

At the time, he had thought Kumudini was like ordinary girls, easily tamed by discipline—even, perhaps, liking to be disciplined, he had realised today that there was no telling what Kumudini might or might not do. There was only one means of trying Kumudini’s life securely to his own; by making her the mother of his children. This dream was his consolation. (R 111-12)

Madhusudan is presented as an utterly base character who debars all forms of communication between Kumu and her brother. He steals the telegrams and letters sent to her by her brother. When she comes to know this, she questions, “Do I have to read my own letters by stealth?” (R 133). However, she controls her emotions, “If someone wants to steal my letter he may. I shan’t become a thief to pay him out for his theft” (R 133). Her reaction reflects her saint like qualities. Through the character of Kumu, the readers get an insight into Tagore’s mind which is free from all worldly meanness and narrowness. Kumu does not let herself suffer endlessly in Madhusudan’s house. The time she feels that he can’t be mended, she leaves his house. When she comes to know about the extra-marital affair of Shyamasundari and Madhusudan, she decides not to return home. Madhusudan also starts drifting towards her and wants to confess, “I have accepted defeat at your hands” (R 146) but his male ego forbids him to
do so. When he comes to know about her pregnancy, he rushes to fetch her with great pomp and show. A child belongs to the father, so under the burden of patriarchy Kumu has to go to Madhusudan’s house but only for delivery. What she says to Bipradas in the concluding chapter shows that she is indeed Tagore’s new woman:

... When the day comes. Dada, make me free as well. By then I’ll have handed over their child to them. There are some thing one can’t lose even for the sake of one’s child... Do you remember our mother? She died of her own free will. She could not find her place in her own household, so she could easily leave her children behind and go. When a person wants to be free, nothing can stop her. I am your sister, Dada, I want freedom. One day the bond snaps. I can assure you of that. (R 252)

Tagore has been accused for using the pregnancy as a cheap devise for solving the problem in the novel. Kumudini’s return to Madhusudan is the defeat of feminine respect. Bipradas is also criticised for causing debacle for Kumudini. Siraj-ul Islam Chaudhuri comments:

Where is now the rebellion of Bipradas? The third eye of Madhusudan? His clear social understanding? Stand in favour of feminine emancipation? Everything has disapproved. He is practically punching Kumu away. As a drowning man revives anything that might weigh him down, so Bipradas decides to get rid of Kumu. (205)

The art of balance which lies in sacrifice and not in confrontation is highlighted in the novel. Bipradas may be ineffective and ailing but he is a noble soul. He tries to stop Kumudini from going back to Madhusudan for the delivery of the child but being a brother, he has certain limitations. Perhaps, Tagore doesn’t want to create upheaval in the social setup. Kumudini is the mixture of soft and strong, weak and powerful. She represents both strength as well as limitations of female, bound in a society conditioned by patriarchal values. But, her subtleness lends a different charm to her personality. Her firm determination not to bear cruelty even after the birth of child makes her new woman of Tagore’s literary genre. Ashapurna Devi opines, “Rabindranath was at the same
time both, a poet and a thinker, a revolutionary and an organizer, a follower and an activist” (88) and he does prove so in the portrayal of the character of Kumudini.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, whole Bengal was burning in the fire of violent freedom movement. The participation of women in the freedom struggle was a matter of discussion in the contemporary Bengali society. Commenting on the importance of women not only in nationalist iconography, but also in nationalistic literature, Tanika Sarkar highlights:

Patriotic themes came to constitute a significant domain in Bengali literature from about the 1880s and the corpus went through many developments. A constant preoccupation was with the figure of the woman. She dominates Bengali works through the conceptualism of the country itself in her image; by investing the ideal patriot with womanly qualities; and by the reconstruction of feminine roles and duties—and consequently, of the familial universe by the nationalist enterprise. (250)

Tagore has not tried to romanticize the concept of women’s involvement in the nationalistic movement. His novels mark the importance of women and their psychological intensification against the stormy background of revolutionary struggles. The significance of the character of Ela is not only in the form of love interest of Atin but also as a catalyst who initiates the reaction in him to join freedom movement. Traits of a human being cannot be judged only in individualistic terms, as he is the result of the interaction of self and circumstances. The novelist develops and moulds the character of Ela to show the impact of exterior circumstances on individual. Analysing the character of Ela from this angle, one can identify the new woman in her. She is not painted as Deshmata or Motherland; still she is the symbol of feminine virtues that inspire the youth to join the freedom venture. Women like Ela are used to ignite the fire of passion as well as to cool the overheated heads of rigid jackanapes. While praising the strong character of Ela, Indranath says, “If you were a man, it wouldn’t have been impossible for you to get the title of Rai Bahadur” (FC 05). Ela by no means is inferior to men. She can handle those vagabonds who are difficult to be handled. She says, “I know from my own
experience how easy it is to get on with the boys, if only the girl doesn’t turn huntress, consciously or unconsciously” (FC 06). Courage and boldness elevates her from the ordinary Bengali women. Tagore highlights these characteristics of Ela several times in the novel. At the outset of the novel, she says to Indranath, “I can’t help telling you that you have done a grievous wrong!” (FC 08). Commenting on this, the novelist says, “Only Ela could venture to say such a thing straight to Indranath” (FC 09). Such a daring is not easy even for a powerful leader like Indranath. Ela straight forwardly rejects the marriage proposal of Bantu calling him ‘Monster’. The first promise that Indranath secures from her in order to allow her join his nationalistic group is not to marry or love in life. Enthusiastic Ela affirms Indranath, but a great amount of firmness is needed on one’s part to stick to the decision. She vows not to marry but can’t stop loving Atin. She never hides her love for Atin from Indranath. In fact, she openly declares, “I’ll not keep anything from you. This love of mine is day by day overshadowing my love for all else” (FC 16).

Through the image of Ela, the novelist highlights that Love, tenderness and caring attitude are the most beautiful qualities that differentiate woman from man. The rigidity of her personality does not overpower the softness of her heart. In order to test her fidelity towards the party, Indranath asks her to shoot a kid, which she simply rejects. However, he tries to tempt her by citing the examples from Mahabharata, but she is firm on her decision. Her love for a poor orphan boy Akhil reflects her caring nature. Indranath also feels that he has made no mistake in selecting her for the freedom movement. He knows that “This boy, Atin, has joined us for his love for Ela. He holds within him dynamite that may at any time explode disastrously” (FC 25). Ela is as beautiful as Binodini, but her expressions have a grave maturity. She is a mature lady of twenty eight years, still looks quite young in her simple cotton dress. Praising the beauty of Ela, Atin says, “It is not your own power, but the enchantment of Maya, Mother Nature. So magical is the melody of your voice, it flings burning whirls of music through the firmament of my mind. And this hand… making every trifle seem priceless” (FC 90).
In the declaration of love, Tagore’s heroines surpass his heroes. We witness this courage in the character of Binodini and Saudamini also. Ela also joins the same tradition when she declares her love for Atin quite freely and boldly:

I had been from my childhood spell-bound within conventional barriers, but at the very first sight of you my heart said, “Let all barriers be broken”. I could never have imagined such a revolution within myself. I used to be proud of my success in controlling my feelings. That pride I have lost. Look within me and you’ll see my surrender. You are the hero, I your captive. . . Such desires women do not acknowledge except to themselves, you have made me acknowledge them to you. (FC 38)

In a conservative society, where women were forced to live in four walls of the house, such expression from a woman was something extra-ordinary. Even without marriage, Ela kisses Atin as his birthday gift and has no regret for this. When eventually, she comes to know that men of Indranath’s party are coming to destroy her, she at once becomes passionate and seizes Atin’s feet and cries, “Kill me with your own hands. I couldn’t wish for a happier end” (FC 104). She gets up from the floor and throwing her arms around him, kisses him again and again and repeats, ‘Kill me, Atin, kill me now!’ She tore open the front of her blouse” (FC 104). She wants true and final union with Atin. Tagore leaves the story open-ended, but he is very successful in showing the daring side of Ela. There is no gainsaying in the fact that Ela is very different from the women of the contemporary Bengali society. Women of Tagore’s fiction become victims of the circumstances and suffer a lot but once they realize their mistake, they take no time in mending it. We see such traits in Binodini and Bimala. Ela also realizes the naked truth of Indranath’s fake nationalism and she confesses to Atin, “Every man and woman is called upon to fight the great fight in the field of righteousness, where to die is to earn the highest heaven. But for us, the way to that battle field is closed. We must now reap to the end the fruits of our Karma, our past deeds” (FC 76).

The centre stage of the novel has been handed over to a woman who is much ahead of her time in thoughts as well as actions. The novelist spurns the
outrageous efforts of disturbing the balance and it is for this reason that he uses his power and pulls the cord at the right moment. Ela is a new woman who has enough metal to lead a life marked out by her own efforts still Tagore makes it quite clear that society is the ultimate place to live in and a woman is more susceptible than man if she tries to mark a place for herself. Through Atin, the novelist makes a very beautiful statement not only about Ela but also about all other women, “I am saying that the realm of sweetness and light which has woman for its centre may appear small on an outward view, but, within, its depth is immeasurable” (FC 45). Tagore has taken up the women’s cause for emancipation with the portrayal of Ela’s character. He breaks the traditional set of image of the Indian woman. Ela is an integrated Indian woman’s voice against the age-old practices of patriarchy. She breaks as well as challenges the laws of patriarchy again and again. She, in many ways, can be compared with Shanti of Anandamath who doesn’t dissuade her husband from her duties towards the motherland. In fact, she encourages him to forget his familial responsibilities in order to fulfill his patriotic duties. She is an active member of political organization and participates in terrorist activities. She finds pleasure to be called wife of a freedom fighter. She says, “My greatest happiness on earth is that I am wife of a hero” (Chatterjee 689). She further says to Satyanand, “My Lord! If while obeying your orders my husband dies, let him die, I will not forbid him” (715-16). Simon de Beauvoir remarks, “…for women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full scale human being” (qtd. in Walters 99) and Tagore has championed this in his Home and the World. The unique imaginative power of Tagore’s new woman is a kind of touch stone for the humanity. Women invented sometimes appear ruined but have recoverable perfection which makes them not only the protagonists of the novels but also models for all ages. Dasgupta et al. make an apt statement on Tagore’s women, “‘the fair woman [who] sleeps for ages till she is touched by the magic wand’ and the needs of the ‘age of mutilation of individuals’ which called for newer, bolder strategies of positiveness” (86). A passage from Personality projects his idea of new woman:
—woman can bring her fresh mind and all her power of sympathy to this task of building up a spiritual civilization, if she will be conscious of her responsibilities—and [then] these human beings who have been boastful of their power and aggressive in their exploitation, who have lost faith in the real meaning of the teaching of their Master that the meek shall inherit the earth, will be defeated in the next generation of life. (183)

Products of Indian heritage as well as of liberal spirit of colonial ideology, Tagore’s woman protagonists function as stimuli for exploring new dimensions of universal psychology. Being a radical, he allows his heroines to root out routine, torturous roads to achieve their Bildungs. It is because of the magical and out-worldly idealism, Tagore has incorporated the power in his heroines to build a better future. They fulfill the criteria of new women drawn by Ruth Bordin, a historian, when he states that new women “exercise control over their own lives, be it personal, social or economical” (Bordin 20).

In the early phase of Tagore’s writings, he handed over traditional roles of mother and lover to his women but in the later phase, he painted some of the most rebellious characters. In short-stories like “Punishment”, “Letter from a Wife”, “The Laboratory”, “Women Unknown” and “The Story of a Mussalmani”, Tagore attributes special roles to women which he had discovered in the course of his life. These new women challenge the conventions and take their own decisions. Commenting on the new-women of Tagore’s short-stories, Dasgupta et al. state, “Tagore’s women-centric short-stories represented the New Woman as a significant transformed identity in a more assertive format than in his novels and therefore undoubtedly the short-stories read from the gender viewpoint can be classified as resistance literature” (101).

Tagore projects a very bold image of woman through the character of Mrinal in “Letter from a Wife”. Dasgupta declares this story a fine feminist text and opines, “Can ‘Mejo Bou theke Mrinal’, (From second daughter-in-law to Mrinal) be a possible sub-title of Rabindranath’s path-breaking short-story “Streer Patra”? (59). Tagore himself declares this story as his first attempt in writing a pro-woman text. Tanika Sarkar quotes Tagore from a letter where he
said, “It’s in my short story “Streer Patra” that I supported the women’s cause for the first time . . .” (qtd. in Sarkar 200). The protagonist of this short-story, Mrinal is neither a seductress nor an enchantress. She has been living with her husband for last fifteen years as it is considered the ultimate destination for woman, but she forces the readers to rethink the notion. Explaining the real meaning of home and its importance, Kripalani says:

    One would imagine that nothing much ever happen in a home like that with its numerous inhibition and restricted social contacts, and in fact nothing happens that may not happen in any Indian home. And yet passions, savage and violent, are unleashed within hearts seemingly placid, and battles rage until the home is nearly burnt down without flame or smoke being visible to the outside eye. (104)

Every woman needs respect in her personal space, i.e. home as she finds her expression here only. However, the home of her husband becomes a jail for Mrinal and she expresses her true feelings to him through a letter, the first and the last. This epistolary story narrates the hardships of several women like Mrinal who do not have any claim over anything. Mrinal commences the letter, “My submission at your gracious lotus-like feet” (SHE 189). An obedient daughter-in-law of the family, she affirmed all the wishes of the family but now she has shunned all. Mrinal writes, “I am the Mejobou of your family. After fifteen years, standing on the edge of the sea, I have learnt that I have another connection as well, with my universe and the God who rules over it. That has given me the courage to write this letter. It is not a letter from Mejobou” (SHE 189).

    Mrinal has gone through many hardships in her life as woman of Bengali bhadralok. She survived typhoid in her childhood while her brother died. Neighbours said the God of death only takes valuable things. Mrinal was married at the age of twelve without dowry because her mother-in-law wanted to compensate the average-looks of her first daughter-in-law with the beauty of Mrinal. She can never realize the worth of her beauty as “in spite of all their looks and accomplishments, women never shed their diffidence” (SHE 190). Soon after marriage, everyone forgets her good looks because female beauty is
just like God’s play, no use for her in-laws. Besides being beautiful, Mrinal is intelligent, quality over which her own mother always feels concerned as she believes knowledge can bring misfortune for girls. She writes, “My Maker has inadvertently granted me more brains then are required to become a daughter-in-law of your family; whom shall I return it to you all have abused me by calling me brash. Abusiveness is the consolation of the weak. I forgive you” (SHE 191).

Helen Cixous, the French Feminist in *The Newly Born Women* (1987) advises women, “She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing, which, when the moment of liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history” (18). Mrinal also has the talent of writing poetry like Haimanti that she hides from her husband for fifteen years. Strange enough, he never comes to know about it even after living together for such a long time. This incident highlights the gap in the relationship of husband and wife in a joint Bengali family. Mrinal’s daughter dies just after birth. Tagore highlights how Mrinal bears the pain of motherhood but does not get the freedom that comes with it. The English doctor is shocked to see the pitiable condition of *zenana* and thinks that this inhuman living condition would have been very painful for them but Mrinal says, “When self-esteem is low, no amount of neglect seems unjustified. That’s why it has no pain” (SHE 193). In the confinement of her room, death comes and stands by her side but, she has no fear of death. “Bengali women” writes Mrinal, “can die at the drop of a hat. But what glory is there in such dying? Dying is so simple, it is almost embarrassing” (SHE 193).

Apart from Mrinal, two other women in the text are Boro Bou and her sister Bindu who also bear the pains of patriarchal burden. Boro Bou is constantly humiliated because of her lack of beauty. She is highly ashamed of her younger sister, Bindu, who takes refuge in her sister’s marital home. In order to prove Bindu profitable at a minimum investment, Boro Bou makes her perform all strenuous household work. Mrinal’s longing for a child finds expression in Bindu. However, the mutual feminine love that brings a happy change in Mrinal’s monotonous life is hinted with sexual attractiveness also.
Martha Shelley, a Lesbian feminist opines, “We must learn to love ourselves and each other; we must grow strong and independent of men so that we can deal with them from a position of strength” (qtd. in Tandon 56). Some critics smell lesbian traits in the relationship of Mrinal and Bindu who share a strong bond. Bindu’s care for Mrinal helps her to rediscover her individuality and she starts asserting her identity and independence. In her company, Mrinal once again feels beautiful and important. She confesses, “Bindu began loving me to such an extent that I left scared. I had never known love like this before. . . She couldn’t take her eyes off my face” (SHE 196).

Bindu is considered an additional burden on the family and Mrinal knows how humiliating it is to take shelter in someone’s house without their consent. The family members arrange Bindu’s marriage in haste but just after the marriage, Bindu comes to know that her husband is mad and has fits of anger. She manages to run away from their somehow. When Mrinal comes to know the truth, she is filled with hatred and anger against her husband and forbids Bindu to go back. When her own in-laws and Bindu’s in-laws threaten her, she declares, “I don’t know from where I get my strength. I could not accept that the cow that has run to me for shelter after escaping from the butcher must be sent back to the butcher. I dared to say, “Let them go to the police station’’” (SHE 202). Finding no way out, Bindu goes to her in-laws only to get herself burnt by setting fire to her sari. Her death raises uproar in the society, but people condemn her act saying, “It has become a fashion with women to die by setting their saris on fire . . . Nothing, but theatrics” (SHE 205). Here, Mrinal comments, “May be it is necessary to ponder why are such dramas played with Bengali women’s saris and not with the dhotis of the loins of Bengal” (SHE 205). This blunt and bold attitude of Mrinal raises her position as a new woman of Tagore’s literary genre. Disheartened, she at once decides to leave the house of her husband after fifteen years of marriage. She writes a final letter to him declaring:

I will not return to your 27 Makhan Boral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have known the value women are given in your world. I have had enough. I have also seen that though she was a woman, God did not
desert her. Whatever be your authority over her, there was a limit to it. She was larger than her unfortunate life . . . [you] keep her always under your feet, for that your feet were not big enough. (SHE 206)

All three women in the story have loveless marriage but Mrinal leaves in order to live. She gains confidence to shed the burden of unwanted patriarchal laws. She also makes it quite clear to her husband that she will not commit suicide like Bindu, she need not to die in order to end her sufferings. Mrinal ends her letter by saying:

This holding on, is living, really.
I too shall live. I am living.
Breaking free from the shelter beneath your feet.

. . . Mrinal. (SHE 209)

Mrinal prefers to write her real name instead of the nomenclature of ‘Mejo Bou’ which is assertion of her individuality and independence separate from her husband. It can be marked as her second birth. It is a journey from a mere daughter-in-law to an individual. Foucault once said that ‘power-relation’, “where one or the other is completely at the disposition of the other and becomes his thing, an object on which he can exercise an infinite and unlimited violence” (qtd. in McNay 173) has certain possibility of resistance. That’s why Mrinal leaves her husband’s home to live, whereas Bindu commits suicide. The similar episode is repeated after fifty years when Satyabati of The First Promise by Ashapura Devi, leaves her husband’s house after leading 30 years of secure married life. Like Mrinal, she says to her husband, “For 30 years, I have been relying on you for everything, now at the fag end of my life, I want to rely on myself” (Devi 433). Both these heroines have strong resemblance with Nora of A Doll’s House who also speaks in the same tone. Ibsen writes:

Helmer: But, this is disgraceful. Is this the way you neglect your most sacred duties?
Nora: What do you consider is my most sacred duty?
Helmer: Do I have to tell you that? Isn’t it your duty to your husband and children?
Nora: I have another duty, just as sacred.
Helmer: You can’t have. What duty do you mean?
Nora: My duty to myself. (3.310-3.315)

All these women shed the heavy chains of responsibilities and move out. Maitreyi Charretjee points out that the young Tagore does not seem comfortable with Nora’s decision, but at the age of 53, he reinterpreted Nora as Mrinal. M. Chatterjee critically observes:

Ibsen’s play received hostile notices because it encourages women to question the society about home and family. Even Tagore was annoyed with the ending of *A Doll’s House*. He felt Nora’s rejection were in excess of her husband’s condemnation of her. He has even gone on record saying that in the Indian family structure, woman brought up on the ideals of patience and self-sacrifice were more appreciated and respected, and that Nora’s situation was unthinkable in India. But, that was Tagore in his young days. When he was wiser, more thoughtful and less biased at the age of 53, he made his heroine, Mrinal in “Stree Patra” (1914), reject home and family in search of a new meaning in her life as a human being. Nora was re-interpreted in the context of a daughter-in-law in an urban joint family residing at No. 27, Makhan Boral Lane.

The miseries of two women, Bindu and Mrinal, are two different stages of womanhood. Bindu was weak and ended her life; Mrinal is brave and intelligent enough to face the challenges and survives. A new woman of Tagore, she can’t bear the injustice done by anyone not even her husband. K. V. Dominic opines, “Mrinal is an embodiment of an ideal woman, not just surrendering to the male domination. Through Mrinal, Tagore exhorts the women of his country to resist discrimination, injustice and cruelty shown against them” (72). Tagore uplifts his woman protagonist above the dull and drab gender compulsions and sets her as a model for the suppressed women of the contemporary Bengali society. He asserts the idea that women can no longer be silenced by the andro-centric culture. Kalyani of “Woman Unknown” also shares the stage with Mrinal in accepting the role of new woman. She not only rejects the marriage proposal, but also decides to remain unmarried for the rest of her life to work for the betterment of the society:
Celibacy was important to the feminists because it attempted to set up an alternative role for women apart from the traditional female sphere of marriage and motherhood: an alternative, indeed, that was followed from choice by many of the pioneers. It enabled them to avoid the sexual and economic subordination of marriage, while at the same time pursuing for them an interesting and challenging career. (Banus 97)

Tagore exposes the lack of decision making power in Bengali *bhadralok* boys through Anupam’s character, which added to the miseries of young girls. More than Kalyani’s victory, it is the story of Anupam’s defeat, a twenty seven years old boy, who confesses his failure to the readers. Anupam never has a say in his personal as well as familial matters. After the death of his father, he is pampered by his mother and controlled by his uncle. He himself says, “I am an obedient son because I lack the ability to disobey. Any woman choosing her own husband would do well to remember that I have been trained to follow orders from the women’s quarters” (SST 219). He neither has inclination nor ability to decide the course of his life as he has his “mother inside the house and uncle for the world outside” (SST 220). When a girl is chosen for him, it is taken into consideration that she should not be from a rich family, as a rich family would not bow their head but it is also necessary that this not so rich girl should bring a lot of dowry. Being the only girl child of her father, it is expected that “he would not hesitate to scrape the bottom of the family barrel for her sake” (SST 220).

The writer hints at the money-oriented approach of the society where parents of the boys count it their birth right to grab maximum dowry. Though, the age of the girl is fifteen that was little too much in the contemporary Bengali society but the rich dowry would surely efface this blot. On the day of wedding, Anupam is decked in gold braid, jewels, rings and necklaces. He says, “I was going to confront my future father-in-law with my price-tag clearly displayed on my person” (SST 220). His uncle wants to check the jewels given by girl’s father so that they cannot be cheated. Man of self-respect, he can’t bear the insult and breaks the marriage of his daughter at once saying, “I cannot give my daughter in marriage to a family that considers me capable of stealing
her gold” (SST 224). As expected, Anupam does not say even a word of protest. Before departure, the groom’s party makes a mess of the place by breaking all the furniture and chandeliers. Still Anupam’s family expects the bride’s side to fall at their feet and ask for apologies, although, nothing such happens. Kalyani is not an ordinary girl, who would weep her eyes out for marriage; she vows not to marry again in her life.

After many years, Anupam happens to meet Kalyani in a train and can’t take his eyes off her beautiful face. Here, he gets the real glimpse of her dauntless personality when a policeman compels them to leave the berth for an Englishman, but she simply says, “No, we are not moving from here” (SST 229). She even forbids Anupam to leave his seat. Very confidently, she makes the English officers realize his mistake in his own language. Mesmerized Anupam and his mother look at her. Knowing her real identity, Anupam realizes his mistake and apologizes to the girl and his father. Though, the father forgives but she straight forwardly denies for marriage as now, she has given herself for the service of Mother India. After all the fiasco of marriage, she devotes her life for girls’ education. Anupam was twenty three at that time and now he is twenty seven, still unmarried waiting for the ‘yes’ of Kalyani. She is the new woman of Tagore who does not need a man to lead her life. Similar to Gora, Anupam also gains maturity in the company of Kalyani. He leaves his uncle and develops his own decision making power since Kalyani cannot approve the man who does not have any power to take his own way in life. Anupam says that he has not yet given up the hope of marriage with Kalyani:

Do you think I have hopes of marrying her? None whatsoever. I live in the faith which an unknown melodious voice instilled in me on a dark night: ‘there is room here’. There is room for me. There must be; where else could I go? The years pass, but I stay on. I meet her; I hear her voice; I make myself useful to her when I can, and my heart tells me I have found room. I have found a place for myself. O my unknown woman, I have not got to know you fully; I never will. But I am fortunate. I have found room here. (SST 230)
New women are confident enough to plan their life and Kalyani’s decision to participate in nationalist movement is a step ahead in the direction of self-expression through something which was more or less dominated by men. Her abjectness in exploring the transgression of women empowerment makes her stand apart from the common Bengali girls. She can speak three languages, relishes munching snacks publicly, travels alone with young girls; therefore, attracts the attention of Anupam. Her assurance ‘there is room here’ becomes Anupam’s metaphor of life and he becomes her follower for eternity. “Woman Unknown” is indeed an exceptional work of Tagore that can be hailed his benchmark in the portrayal of new woman much ahead of the time. Like Kalyani, Sohini of “The Laboratory” is also an unconventional woman. In fact, she is the boldest of Tagore’s heroines. The role of Sohini is quite subversive and deconstructs the popular stereotypical representation of good Bengali woman. In fact, the writer has made a self-confident Punjabi woman the heroine of his story because women from North-Western part of Indian are generally considered strong-willed. According to Pramatha Nath Bishi:

Tagore’s writings in the last phase of his life increasingly gave calls for liberation of the individual. He has repeatedly sent forth summons to free individuals from bondages overcoming hurdles. At one end of this invocation for women is the poem “Mukti” and at the other end are stories like “Haldar Goshthi” (The Haldar Clan), “Streer Patra,” “Poila Number” (Number One), etc. The last such invocation is in the story “Laboratory.” (236)

Tagore has drawn an altogether different image of new woman in Sohini’s character. She is not only beautiful but intelligent and brave also. She always remains armed and wears a knife around her waist. She knows how to tempt men and use them according to her own wish. She takes initiative to propose Nandakishor and makes him pay off the debt of her grandmother. Even a brilliant scientist like him is startled by her courage. From the outset, she is very confident and aggressive as she says to Nandakishor, “I have charmed a lot of men, but this is for first time I have met a man who can beat me at my own game. Don’t let go of me Babu, or you will be loser” (SST 262).
Nandakishor does not believe in *oshoborno vivah*, so he decides to educate her so that they could be a befitting couple. He comments, “for the husband to be an engineer and the wife to peel vegetables is not permissible by human law. I see such unequal marriages all the time, but I am trying to match our castes” (SST 264). In the company of her husband, Sohini learns all those things which are confined to men only. She has her own views and ways of life. It is not easy to bend her and make her fit in any definite set up. She responds both to the requirements of soul as well as body. She reveals her multiple love affairs in front of Manmatha Choudhary, “How else have women survived through the ages? Feminine wiles need clever planning, just like the rules of battles; but of course one needs to top it up with some honey as well. That’s a woman’s natural fighting style” (SST 268).

In pre-independence times, widows were not allowed to participate in worldly affairs but Sohini rejects living like widows praying gods and their brokers to ensure a seat in Heaven. She wants to live a colourful life with confidence. Like Binodini and Saudamini, she does not want to suppress her carnal desires. She had relations with her husband’s scholars and has no hesitation in declaring it:

> I am an impure woman. . . The heart is greedy. It hides the fire under flesh and blood, but it flares up with a little prodding . . . I have no qualms about talking frankly. We women are not lifelong ascetics. We have a tough time trying to keep up pretence. Draupadis and Kuntis have to pretend to be Sitas and Savitris. (SST 271-72)

While defining her Punjabi ideology, Sohini asserts, “I don’t have sentiments in my arid Punjabi heart. I can flout all the strictures of society for my physical pleasure, but not on my life will I betray my faith. They could not draw a paisa away from my laboratory” (SST 272). She is described by Tagore as a woman ready to use all strategies including sexuality as an axe to counter the resistance. She uses her body as a planned weapon to meet her goals. She kisses and hugs Manmatha Choudhary in order to execute her plans. Not only this, she also uses the charm of her daughter Nila to realize her dreams.
The writer highlights the serenity of Sohini’s heart that has always been secured for her husband. Despite having extra-marital affairs, she still loves her husband and wants to manage his laboratory after his death. She can read scientific encyclopedia and repeat botanical names. The writer deliberately de-genders the stereotypical readings, like romantic novels, poetry and story materials, women are known to pursue. By all means, Sohini wants to restart her husband’s laboratory and for this, she employs Rebati Bhattacharya, a promising Brahmin scientist who can manage the work of lab quite systematically. Initially, she wants him to marry Nila but since Nila is a ruinous girl, who breaks whatever she touches, she drops the idea. Nila is keen to marry Rebti, as a simple boy like him can be managed easily after marriage. Sohini not only forbids her but also sets four guards outside the laboratory so that Nila can’t enter there. Although, Sohini is Nila’s mother but she never effaces her conduct and frankly declares, “The princess will be sold dirt cheap, I know but as long as I am alive, the kingdom won’t be so easy to get” (SST 286). She can’t allow anyone including Nila to spoil the laboratory and boldly declares:

If anyone touches my laboratory, I’ll defy your fate; I’ll defy your doctrine of immutable cause and effect. I am a Panjabi woman: I can wield a knife quite readily. I can kill anyone, even my own daughter or any aspiring son-in-law . . . I am not a Bengali woman, to do nothing but weep her eyes out for love. Between my heart and laboratory, I place this knife. (SST 287)

Sohini has a motive in her life and she is committed to it. Nandakishor has left a lot of money with which she wishes to open a hospital for stray dogs, cats and rabbits. Sohini is full of affection and loves her aged grandmother, who has raised her. When the grandmother falls ill, she runs to Ambala to look after her, leaving behind her precious laboratory. Without such tenderness of heart, Sohini would have been an incomplete character. After returning from Ambala, She gets to know that Nila is about to marry Rebati. She publically declares that Nila is not Nandakishor’s daughter and she has no shame in accepting that. She rebukes her saying, “Who is your father? In whose property are you
claiming a share? Are not you ashamed to say you are the daughter of such a man? He was aware of that too. So he put it down very carefully in a registered document” (SST 297). Thus, Sohini does not have any problem while confessing her infidelity either in open or in close. She has no mood to suppress the desire or to hide the result. Her character is unique in Tagore’s writings as well as in contemporary literature. None of his contemporary writers could portray such a daring character. Even today, a child out of wedlock is a disgrace for the mother and in Indian context, it is considered a ‘sin’ but Tagore establishes Sohini as an epitome of boldness. His women characters challenge social norms and patriarchy at every step and it is never easy to suppress them. The writer has been successful in infusing a modernist spirit for bringing a change for them as well as for the other women of the times to come. Tagore gives due space to the factors which are beyond the control of women and their fate is crafted according to the unprecedented turn of events, and communal issues are one of them. His last piece of writing, “The Story of a Mussalmani”, testifies his life long struggle against ills of contemporary society towards women. P. K. Pal comments:

In this draft too, he (Tagore) lashes out at the cowardice and prejudice of a society that cannot protect its women but is inhumanly insistent on their purity. The story also bears a relevance to the destructive communal political of its period of composition. Its message takes on a special resonance on the lips of a Hindu woman converted to Islam. (299)

The short-story tracks the abduction and rescue of a beautiful bride, Kamala from the clutches of highwaymen. Kamala suffers a lot because of being an orphan. A good for nothing but powerful man wants to marry her and she has to surrender against her wish. On its way, the palanquin is looted by bandits when a middle-aged Muslim, Habir Khan, rescues her and gives her shelter in his house. A Brahmin girl, Kamala can’t digest the idea of living in a Muslim house so she requests him to send her back to her uncle’s house but her aunt rejects her, “Show her the door! Show the door to this ill-omened creature! You ruinous girl, aren’t you ashamed to come here after staying with infidels?” her
uncle also adds, “I am helpless, my child. This is Hindu home, nobody can take you back. If we do, we’ll lose caste ourselves” (SST 301).

Women should be allowed to safeguard their personal arena in all odes but Kamala is not allowed to enter in her own house as now she is impure and unfit to be accepted according to the social norms. She cries and questions her guardians for punishing her. Her despair reminds the pain of Rajlakshmi of Srikant, when she laments in front of the hero, “Why is it that a man, however degenerate, is allowed to change his ways and come back to his family and society in which he was born while a woman, should she commit the tiniest error, finds all doors locked against her . . . Our society is too unequal-too cruel to its women” (Chatterjee 115-16).

The predicament of these women has strong resemblance with Lajjo of Amrita Pritam’s Pinjar, where she is rejected by her real parents for being abducted by a Muslim man. The innocent but unfortunate girls are not allowed to re-enter in the main-stream of the society. They all are punished for the crime which they have not even committed. Finding no way out, Kamala returns to the house of Habir Khan and he gives all assurance of safety and security to her. She is allowed to worship her God according to Hindu rituals. She leads a pious life of a Hindu woman like Jodha Bai who married a Muslim ruler Akbar, yet never gave up her religion. Eventually, Kamala falls in love with the son of her rescuer. She tells her saviour that she wants to be a Muslim and marry his son:

Father, I have no religion. My only religion rests in the fortunate person whom I love. I have never found the providence of God in the religion which has deprived me of all kinds of love all through my life and finally fling me upon the garbage heap of ignominy. To this day I can’t forget that the gods of that religion have insulted me every single day. Dear father, I have tasted love and affection for the first time at your home. Only now have I understood that life is precious even for a wretched woman like me. The God is god, neither Hindu nor Muslim . . . Make me a Muslim: I won’t object. Maybe I can preserve both religions. (SST 303)
Love is the universal religion and it is highlighted by the writer again and again. Although in a different pretext but Kamala also understands the real meaning of religion like Gora. Thus, she becomes Meherjan. History repeats itself, this time bandits abject Kamala’s cousin, Sarala, when she is on her way to her husband’s home. Fearless Kamala rescues her and returns her to the family, “Don’t be afraid, sister. I have brought you the assurance of shelter from someone who shelters everyone. Someone who is not concerned with caste and religion” (SST 303). She assures her aunt and uncle that she would not pollute them by touching their feet but they are requested to take Sarala back because she is not contaminated by any touch. She is happy that she has paid off all the debts of her aunt’s food and shelter. Kamala while giving red sari to Sarala says, “If ever she is in distress, remember she has a Mussalman sister to protect her” (SST 303). This ‘unfinished text’ becomes the symbol of the social change the post-colonial social context. Through the image of Bimala and Sarala the growing communal violence between Hindus and Muslims is brought to the fore. In “Trespass” also Tagore shows how a pig is saved by a pious Hindu widow, by giving it shelter in her temple. Kamala elevates herself from narrow walls of religious discrimination. This unfinished text becomes the saga of Tagore’s vision of Kamala as a new woman of a new age. His women reject social and cultural restraints and give full encouragement to their femininity and sexuality. By negating all social prides and prejudices, Tagore’s stories traverse and transgress the liberation of mind, spirit and body. One can find this vision in his dance drama Chitrangada, where Chitrangada, the female protagonist, declares:

I am Chitrangada
I am not Devi,
Nor am I an ordinary woman
You will worship me and hold me aloft, I am not that either,
You will neglect me
And hold me as a pet behind you, I am not that too.
If you hold me beside you
In times of stress, if you share with me complex thoughts, if you permit me To dedicate myself to your committed causes If you make me a partner in your grief and happiness Then will you know who I am. (1.9.37-48)

This spirit of Chitrangada is reflected in all the novels and short-stories of Tagore. Each of his creation illustrates his commitment to raise feminine issues. Tagore’s adolescent heroines of his early novels follow the course of bildungs such as in novels like Tom Jones, Jane Eyre, David Copperfield and Great Expectations. He employs, “‘embedding’, a literary technique “by which the significant figure is cast as the matrix of the work and draws other to itself for constructive confrontation” (Irving 64). His women break their shell and develop their skills. What makes the growth and identity formation of these heroines different from the Western literature is their pliability. Their pliancy is different from the pliancy of Wilhelm Meister of Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship by Goethe. Even passive women characters of Tagore exhibit signs of ‘determined participation’. A telling example can be traced in Asha’s attempt to win Mahendra’s heart again through a few adjustments and small initiations like arranging flowers, perfume ready cloths, preparing food of his choice, managing household etc. However, development in her personality proves a positive surprise. Tagore writes, “The image of Asha that he noticed today was truly a remarkable transformation. Asha he saw was neither shy nor abject; this Asha was able to stand her own ground. She did not have to beg Mahendra for that” (GS 344). These girls practice pliability in their own way and finally rewarded, “Like Little Dorrit in Dickens who wins her Arthur in the end, they enter a new life with their men, ‘inseparable and blessed’”. (qtd. in Dasgupta et al. 58)

Women of Tagore’s fiction believe in ‘ekla chalo’ philosophy. It is not that they are aloof from the contemporary stream of the society but they are capable enough to manage their life even when nobody is there to help them. It is said that any piece of creation is the mirror of creator’s personality. In this way, all creative works of Tagore are the reflection of his radical mind. His
mind was free from all skepticism as he said, “My mind was brought up in an atmosphere of freedom- freedom from the dominance of any creed that had its sanction in the definite authority of some scripture, or in the teaching of some organised body of worshippers” (qtd. in Das 120). In song XXXV of Gitanjali, Tagore’s defines his ideas about freedom and this quest for freedom is reflected in the image of his women also:

Where the mind is without fear and the head
Is held high, where knowledge is free,
Where the world has not been broken up in
Fragments by narrow domestic walls,
Where words come out from the depth of Truth,
Where tireless Striving stretches
its arms towards perfection,
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost
Its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my father,
Let my country awake. (01-13)

Women of Tagore’s fiction are not ready to acknowledge any fear or bondage. They are courageous like Sucharita and Lolita, educated like Charu and Binodini, truthful like Kamala and Mrinal, innocent like Kalyani and Haimanti, rebellious like Kumudini and Ela, benevolent like Bimala, smart like Sohini and lovable like Annapurna and Anandamoyi. They all are intellectuals and know the difference between right and wrong. His female characters have reasoning mind and want to keep their head high in dignity. There is a whole range of images of woman developed by Tagore and his success lies in igniting the mind of the common folk regarding the problems on personal, social and national levels.
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