CHAPTER 2

MATRIX OF MARITAL LIFE

The very psychology of men and women about their mutual relation is changing and becoming the psychology of the primitive fighting elements, rather than of the humanity seeking its completeness through the union based upon the self-surrender. (Tagore 61)

A mutual ground of understanding is required for a perfect marital relationship. However it is an ideal state rarely followed though much preached. Rabindranath Tagore has depicted the gamut of complexities and confusions in the married lives of Indian women in his fiction as well as non-fiction by presenting the matrix in the husband-wife relationship because of the presence of in-laws, extra-marital pulls and omnipresent socio-cultural influences. Tagore highlighted the pitiable condition of chide-brides, sorry full state of married women, miseries of young women begetting children year after year and uncountable humiliations and restrictions imposed on widows. Being the son of Zamindar, Tagore spent a pretty long time in the countryside and here he came in direct contact with common folk of Bengal. He was introduced with the harsh realities of their lives. His heart moved to see the dreadful condition of the Bengali married women.

Tagore was well aware of the orthodox Hindu ideology about the concept of home as well as marriage. ‘Home’ is considered a substitute for the world outside and “just as the King reigns over his dominion, so the head of the household (Karta) rules over his household” (qtd. in Sarkar 38). This ‘Karta’ rules like a King and adjudicates like the chief justice. It is also said that “whoever can run a Hindu family can administer a whole realm” (Basu 99). In a Hindu household who could be this ‘Katra’ other than the man? Indeed, it is ‘man’ who has all the power and say in the family. It is equally important to note that this Karta knows “how to marshal his force to face a rebellious woman within the family” (Basu 81). So, the Karta became a ruler, an administrator, a legislator, a general, a chief justice or everything that he could
not become outside the family in the colonial period of the contemporary Bengali society. The never ending intention of Indian male to govern the whole range of politics was forced to be limited only to the household. This dominance was marked not by any love or respect, but helpless surrender of the woman to the physically and socially powerful man. Thus, “Household relations had to be shown as supra-political ones, relations of power represented as purely emotional states” (T Sarkar 39). However, Tagore denounced the inequality in man-woman relationship. He was uncomfortable with the power that man assumes at home. He asserts in *Rabindra Rachnavali Vol. 01*, “…true power of our society can be unleashed only when we seek woman’s blessings in all forms without any false assumption of power to rule her” (209).

Marriage has always been considered an important phenomenon in Indian society. It is defined by Eva Hunter as a “cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring” (145). But several times marriage does not bring equality and companionship for woman, rather traps her individuality and independence. Kate Millett remarks that this ‘power politics’ in the institution of marriage makes woman merely a ‘utility item’ to be used by man. In the contemporary Bengali society, conjugality was treated as the most vital project in the entire matrix of household relations as it imbibed the absolutism of one and total sub-ordination of the other partner. In fact, the husband-wife relationship became the mirror image of the entire colonial arrangements where men acted as colonizer and women as colonized. The Bengali husbands implicated those torturers on their wives which they were receiving in the outside world. A satirical poem hints at this fact:

The Bengali male goes out
And gets thrashed everywhere he goes
The Bengali male appears terrible
only within his home. (qtd. in T. Sarkar 40)

The act of domestic tyranny by husbands was a mode of easing the effect of colonial tyranny implicated on them by the colonizers. Their attitude towards
their wives was that of exploiters’ reflecting the statement of Karl Marx: “Marriage . . . is incontestably a form of exclusive private property” (qtd. in Mitchell 110). As an expert on the issues of domestic violence, Murray Straus asserts, “With the exception of the police and the military, the family is perhaps the most violent social group, and the home is the most violent social setting” (19). Domestic violence is so widespread and so long tolerated that it has become something obvious and universal. Either it is Indian or Western society, women have been taught to keep family above all. In 1778, Judge Sir Francis Buller said that a husband can beat his wife as long as the thickness of the stick is no more than the circumference of his thumb.

Many folk songs and lullabies trace the panic where girls used to urge their mothers to hide them least some stranger should take them away. In some songs, married child-brides would ask their brothers to come and take them away from ‘this place of tortures’. Mothers would keep on pinning for their young girls who were burdened under the enormous household work of a large family. Mothers-in-law were the source of constant miseries for child-brides and husbands used to believe, “When our white masters kick us, we return home and sooth ourselves by kicking our wives” (qtd. in Goswami 14) and argued that “our women lost their freedom when we lost ours” (Bhattacharya 76). For Hindu women home of the in-laws became a place of continuous tortures. Debi opines, “Conjugal love had disappeared from our country and Hindu women suffered more than anyone else in the world” (62). The position of Hindu wife was no better cattle given as a dowry in marriage. Man treated woman almost as slave and educated wife was not welcomed by husband because it would hurt his ego.

Many Western novelists such as Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens and Sarah Grand also portray domestic violence through their creative writings. In Wuthering Heights, Bronte exposes Heathcliff’s maltreatment of his wife Isabella. Dickens also points out Mr. Gradgrind’s attempt to capture the spirit of his wife in Hard Times. The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon by W. M. Thackeray deals with the story of an upper class woman struggling to free herself from her
husband’s violence. Caroline Norton’s *Stuart of Dunleath* also projects the theme of violence in middle-class society.

Beating of wife, insulting her with abuses and calling bad names are common scenes of marital discord found in most Indian household, yet a woman seldom walks out of marriage and doesn’t take any measure against her husband for the fear of losing support in the patriarchal society. Anita Desai’s *Voices in the City* hints at domestic violence, where Monisha is kept as captive in her own house and abused by in-laws. Saritha of *The Dark Holds No Terror* feels trapped like an animal. In Tagore’s short-story “Punishment”, Chhidam beats Chandara, when she goes to village *ghat* and locks her in room to censure her departure. A significant similarity can be traced in *Rajmohan’s Wife* by Bankimchandra Chatterjee when Rajmohan angrily beats his wife Matangini for fetching water without his permission. At this point, she asserts, “I am your wife . . . I thought there is nothing wrong in it” (12). At this the paroxysm, Rajmohan’s fury finds outlet in his threats and he shouts, “I’ll kill you” (12). Tagore bitterly criticizes this inhuman practice in almost all of his novels and short-stories. Moreover, he was against any false imposition of power under the guise of wrong declarations in the religious documents such as *Manu Samriti*. He trenchantly avers in *Rabindra Rachnavali, Vol. 02*:

I feel both shame and pain to quote those *slokas* from *Manu Samriti* written in utter abuse of women. I [will] refer only to [those] here where Manu explicitly states that women are solely responsible for the cardinal passion of man, viz, sex passion, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity and envy. They have no real identity of their own. (320)

Tagore highlights that illiteracy was imposed on women to mould their desires according to the wish of men so that the married life would be dominated by males only. The mind of women was conditioned in such a way that they took pleasure only in household works and dressing up. Rakhmabai sums up this view, “Reduced to this state of degradation by the dictum of the *Shastras*, looked down upon for ages by men, we have naturally come to look down upon ourselves” (qtd. in Sarkar 442). Unable to pay heavy dowry, parents had to
marry their daughter to much older man who would either be widower or already husband of two to three wives at a time. Child-bride did not enter in her in-laws’ house as a mistress of the house, but as the lowest slave in hierarchy and the ultimate way to get rid of this subjugation “was to bear sons and arrange their marriages as soon as possible in order to reach the exalted status of the mother-in-law” (Ramabai 72). Thus, the position of women in the sphere of domestic life was miserable. This passiveness was not a new thing, in fact, from centuries, women have been perceived in reference to men. Though, some missionaries and men of great insight emerged as their advocates, still the situation was more or less same. However, Tagore cherished a well balanced view about love as well as institution of marriage. He puts in Sadhana:

We do not love because we do not comprehend, or rather we do not comprehend because we do not love. For love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us. It is not a mere sentiment, it is truth, it is the joy that is at the root of all creation . . . It is equality and love which should form the basis of married life and the relationships surrounding this institution. (88)

In most of his novels Tagore has described the problems of married women and especially, their isolated condition in the joint family. Whether it is Binodini of A Grain of Sand, Kamala of The Wreck, Charu of The Broken Nest or Kumudini of Relationships, all heroines are struggling emotionally or socially. Most of Tagore’s heroines are childless even after many years of marriage and it adds to their humiliation and mental tortures. Sometimes, mental incompatibility with husband and intrusion of ‘third person’ shatter their married life. Dasgupta et al. explain the problem:

The tension between the cultures in which a woman is nurtured till marriage in her father’s home and her sense of surprise and shock as she has to face very different value system in her marital home. The refinement of the young bride opposed to the crude culture of her husband’s family and the resultant culture shock as well as her valiant effort to accommodate with the callous environment of marital home
often in silence, in tears and rage is a common theme that has been explored *ad infinitum* in the Bengali fiction. (201)

Tagore’s fiction demonstrates a powerful explosion of faulty emotions that trigger the disturbance of gender relations in the context of married life. His novels expose the complexities in the conjugal life and highlights how their small domestic space is thrashed due to social and psychological factors. First psychological novel in the history of Indian literature, *A Grain of Sand (Chokher Bali)* traces confusions and complexities of married life of Asha and Mahendra. This novel has “subjectivity and the probing of emotional and psychological depth as its hallmark” (Ganguly ix) hence, it is the first modern novel in certain sense. It is also the story of a child widow, Binodini, who is not ready to surrender her wishes and instincts for the age old traditions and customs. Sukumar Sen has a point when he says, “Here, for the first time in Indian literature, the actions and reactions arising out of the impact of the minds of individuals and not so much the external happenings propel the plot. The psychosis of the characters is followed realistically and this is unique for Indian literature (233).” It is a *fin de siècle* novel that captures the conflict in the married life of Indian women of “*se kaal e kaal*” (that time and this time). This novel has a very close resemblance to Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s novel *The Poison Tree (Bishabriksha)* as Swagato Ganguly writes, “There is a mirroring effect here, as *A Grain of Sand* is a rewriting of *The Poison Tree*. This is a novel that is highly alive to textual meditations” (xiii). Both the novels centre on the problematic and pitiable conditions of the upper-class Hindu widows, “whose remarriages were traditionally forbidden and enjoined to mortify the flesh to lead a Spartan existence” (Ganguli ix). However, Tagore is more realistic and vivid than Bankimchandra Chatterjee. Amaresh Das hails, “Tagore flouted the social responsibility of showing moral values which Bankim supported and explored even the deep abysses of the human mind in order to depict the woman characters realistically” (51). The original title of the novel, *Chokher Bali*, is very symbolic as it conveys multiple meanings. Literally, it means ‘sand in the eye’ and symbolically, it means an object of dislike and irritant. Indeed, Binodini becomes an object of irritation in the
married life of Asha and Mahendra and brings tears in their eyes. Commenting on the role of Binodini in the conjugal life of Asha and Mahendra, Sreejata Guha remarks:

‘Chokher Bali’ which literally means a grain of sand that lodges in the eye, an irritant, a source of discomfort in itself an innocuous speck of dust, a grain of sand can bring tears to the eye, and cause a pearl to form inside the oyster’s shell . . . Tagore’s *Chokher Bali*, Binodini performs the function of this grain of sand. She lodges herself within Mahendra and Asha’s household, afflicts their romance and through tears and tribulations, helps their relationship mature into pearl. (iii)

The married life of Asha and Mahendra is under strong influence of Binodini and simultaneously, it “represents the evolving social and moral climate at the turn of the 20th century” (Shirwadkar 17). Binodini implies the radical spirit of the Bengali women, whereas Asha is symbolic of weak daughter-in-law of the Bengali household. While painting the character of Binodini, the novelist shows immeasurable power and strength of woman’s mind. She is not passive and lifeless image of sorrows and sufferings, but aggressive and full of passion. Kripalani opines, “Binodini is the most real, convincing and full blooded of Tagore’s heroines” (187).

Binodini is young, charming, fascinating, yet unfortunate girl married to a man much older to her age, who dies soon after the marriage leaving her behind to suffer in the harsh world. The only child of her parents, she is tutored by an English governess and has all the refine characteristics, but rejected by Mahendra and Bihari both. However, Rajlakshmi says to Mahendra, “She’ll appeal to your modern tastes” (GS 01), but he doesn’t listen. This rejection unconsciously hurts her feelings. Tagore’s male characters always appear weak in comparison to his lively heroines. Likewise, Mahendra is shown as submissive young Bengali boy under the influence of his mother. The novelist describes him as a kangaroo cub, comfortable only in his mother’s pouch. Rajlakshmi’s younger sister-in-law, Annapurna wishes to get Bihari married to her orphan niece, Asha but impressed by the simplicity of the girl, Mahendra becomes adamant to marry her. Though deeply hurt but Bihari has to surrender
to the wish of his friend and says, “I understand, Aunty. I’ll do as you say. But never, ever again will you request me to marry anyone” (GS 14). In this way, fate conspires to get Asha married to Mahendra. His love for Asha breaks all the rules and regulations of antapura. After marriage mamma’s boy Mahendra clings to his child-bride and forgets the whole world which bothers everyone including Annapurna and she leaves for Kashi in resentment. Nobody can digest the open closeness of Mahendra and Asha. Bihari points out this thing saying, “Since you hold your happiness in your own hands, consume it in a way that doesn’t make others jealous” (GS 23). Mahendra is adamant on teaching his illiterate wife and doesn’t let her perform any domestic duty. He says, “Look, I have bought a slate, books and pen-and-paper for her. I am going to teach her to read, even if the world points fingers at me or all of you get angry” (GS 20). This upsets Rajlakshmi and she decides to move to her native village, Barasat in order to give Mahendra a jolt however “She had not expected that her proposal of going away to Barasat would be accepted so easily” (GS 27). Tagore highlights how the contemporary Bengali society was transforming from tradition to modernity, so the confusion would naturally bring turmoil in the family sphere.

The plight of Binodini is a telling comment on the widows of the contemporary society who were considered worthless and all luxuries of the world were forbidden for them. Tagore writes, “There were only a few very old widows living in Rajlakshmi’s ancestral home. Thick forest of bamboo and foliage ran wild all around, the water in the pond was a deep mossy green and jackals howled nearby. Rajlakshmi was quite distressed” (GS 28). In Barasat, she meets Binodini, “Who is spending her days in cheerless household, like a lone flowering plant in the barren wilderness” (GS 28). Seeing Rajlakshmi, Binodini showers all love and care over her. Rajlakshmi is deeply impressed by her perfection in domestic chores and gracious conversation. Binodini shows the least concern for her own health and says, “Unfortunate souls like us don’t fall ill” (GS 29). Tagore hints at her caring nature in her concern for Bihari also. Despite her efforts to control, she feels inclined towards Bihari and does all that a beloved wishes to do for her lover:
Binodini did her best to lighten the burden on this city-bred youth who was unfortunate enough to have landed in this godforsaken place. Every time Bihari came back from his rounds, he found his room cleaned up, a bunch of flowers placed by his bed in a brass tumbler and Bankim and Dinabandhu’ works neatly placed on his bedside table. On inside covers of the books Binodini’s name was inscribed in a feminine but firm hand” (GS 30)

A contrast of perception and reality related to Binodini and Asha is presented in front of Bihari and Rajlakshmi who are impressed by her skills and regret for turning down the girl that makes her undergo so many miseries whereas in Calcutta, incompetent bride, Asha is unable to maintain the household. The height of her negligence reaches when the bird in the cage dies due to lack of food and water. While returning from Barasat, Rajlakshmi brings Binodini with her and at that time, none is aware that she has bought a storm that would ruin the entire family. Binodini, who is thirsty for the bliss of life, is thrilled on seeing the extreme love between Asha and Mahendra. She wants to drink “every detail of the new bride’s new-found romance like a drunkard swigging a bottle” (GS 41). She starts perceiving herself in the image of Asha. She does Asha’s hair, gets her ready for Mahendra and imagines that she herself is going to meet him but somewhere in her heart she is burning in the fire of jealousy to see the incompetent plain girl, Asha ruling the family. Asha is the queen of Mahendra’s heart and bed which might have belonged to Binodini. She grumbles, “Such a happy household, such a loving husband – I could have made it a home fit for royalty and turned him into my devoted slave. This home then wouldn’t be in this sorry state, and this man would have turned heads. But in my place rules this child of a girl, this infantile doll! (GS 43)”

Binodini tries to hide her anger but a worldly wise man Bihari senses the concealed aggression and “he was also wary of the fact that the flame that burned beautifully in an oil-lamp could as well set a house on fire” (GS 45). However, influenced by the charm of Binodini, Mahendra starts noticing faults in Asha and his fascination towards her grows weary. Tagore writes:
The foibles and oddities in Asha that had seemed amusing to him first now irked him no end. He was piqued every moment by Asha’s incompetence around the house, but he never spoke his mind. Even so, Asha could sense that familiarity had taken the sparkle out of the romance. Mahendra’s lovemaking struck the wrong chords – some of it seemed excessive and some self-deceptive. (GS 46)

The range and effect of beauty are highlighted by projecting Mahendra spell bound under Binodini’s charm when he starts drifting towards her, still trying in vain to remain at length and concealing his over-curiosity. A reason of this indifference can be traced in Mahendra’s lack of confidence in his own character as he keeps on reminding himself that he is a devoted husband and none can replace the position of Asha in his life. This increases Binodini’s frustration, “Why all the indifference? I am not a piece of furniture, I am a person, I’m a woman! If he ever got to know me well, he’d know the difference between me and his cherished Chuni!” (GS 50). Smart and educated, Binodini has a good understanding of the psychology of people as in the very beginning, she judges the innocent and childlike nature of Asha and also understands the egoist Mahendra and doesn’t give him undue importance. This negligence fires up his instincts and this is what she wanted. The spell of Binodini does not go waste and Mahendra goes possessive for her and leaves his family and friend. What Binodini wishes is not just physical bliss but she wants revenge from Mahendra for rejecting a wonderful girl like her. As soon as, she realizes her mistake, she places Bihari on the throne of her heart and this becomes the stage of evolution in her character. Banani Mukhia makes it clear:

Binodini also successfully undermined male domination and male ego by making Mahendra grovel before her and then quietly transferring her loyalty to Bihari . . . she subverted the social norm as well as the individual norms of behaviour . . . She had the fortitude to take her own decision and stick by it which is the ultimate testimony to the realization of one’s self identity. (69)

Binodini thrashes Asha in every sphere of life, either in looks, maintenance of antapura or taking care of Rajlakshmi. Asha’s constant comparison with
Binodini makes the former look even smaller and worthless. It leads to disaster in the love life of husband and wife. Mahendra grows disenchanted with Asha’s incompetency and childishness. His intense love for her soon fades away and urge driven by sexuality for Binodini becomes prominent. She becomes the object of his desire, a desire that flourishes because of repression by social practices. Moreover, “The irresistibility of the pull of love in life and man’s inevitable biological attraction to woman for psychological satisfaction” (Chakrabarti 65) also act in the gamut of Binodini-Mahendra-Asha-Bihari relationships. Commenting on her sexuality the novelist writes, “Binodini looked around the room and at the bed with a painful frustrated longing” (GS 56). Bihari addresses her as “a beautiful riddle” and “the planet Saturn”, but also notices a different side of her personality when they go for a picnic, “The tender heart that was at the centre of her flashing radiance was still full of gentle affection . . . burning embers of unquenched desires and all her sharp banter had not yet succeeded in withering the woman in her” (GS 71).

Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s The Poison Tree is referred throughout the novel and Binodini is constantly compared with widow Kunda, who tempts another man and marries him. She, like Rohini of Krishnakantar’s Will seduces a married man and at the end of the novel is destroyed by her own wanton conduct. Through the novel Chatterjee tries to pronounce moral teachings on widows like her. In A Grain of Sand also Binodini is shown reading The Poison Tree and Mahendra happens to discover her secretly reading the text in Asha’s absence. Bihari warns Mahendra against the poison tree in the form of Binodini and offers a solution for the problem, “What another poison tree . . . Even if you throw her out, it will not take her long to return. There is only one remedy; get the widow remarried. That will remove the poison fang forever” (GS 142) but Mahendra replies, “Kunda too had been married off” (GS 142). Tagore presents the same story with a different point of view. He never lets Binodini fall as a sub-standard woman. Her love for Mahendra is a mere play game and that’s why she never allows him to touch her. In fact when Bihari proposes to marry her, she at once rejects the idea saying, “Oh, for shame, even the thought is shameful. I am a widow, I am tarnished – I shall bring dishonour to your
name in the eyes of society—no, no, this cannot happen. For pity’s sake, never say these words again” (GS 269). Binodini, who is thirst for Bihari’s sacred love rejects his proposal. However initially, she wanted to enjoy the freedom and sexual liberty that marriage brings but it is also true that if sexual urge or greed for power would have been her wish, she should have grabbed Bihari’s proposal but she is afraid lest his association with a fallen woman should ruin his reputation which she definitely can’t bear. There is no denying in the fact that Binodini has no deliberate plan to wreck the conjugal relation of Asha and Mahendra but she herself is unaware of the real nature of her feelings for Mahendra:

Did she hate him for it and sought to avenge her wrong, or did she love him and wanted to offer herself in self-surrender? All she knew was that she was being consumed by a passionate flame inside her, whether of hate or love or both she could not say . . . Do I wish to die or destroy? Am I the hunter or the hunted? I wish I know. (GS 74)

The central place has been rendered to Binodini but none can ignore Asha who wins the appreciations at the end. She is the representative of all women of Indian household who have been conditioned right from the beginning to take care of husband along with his family. She is average looking, not competent as Binodini but she loves her husband despite of his infidelity. She regrets for not fulfilling Mahendra’s requirements and thinks, “Is he still angry? Is he moving away because he is upset with me? Am I so useless that I am pushing my husband out of his home? Death would have been a better fate” (GS 78). Mahendra leaves her for Binodini but she can’t leave him for Bihari or anyone else. She has the courage to forgive the seductress of her husband. Tagore writes, “But today, when it was time to take leave, when her aunt was departing from the household a second time, Asha’s heart swelled with tears, and she found herself pitying Binodini too” (GS 286). From a meek and submissive wife, she becomes the mistress of the house. Now she easily forbids Mahendra disturbing his ill mother, freely talks to Bihari and takes the charge of the household. Unlike Nora of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* or Mrinal of “Letter from a Wife”, she doesn’t leave the home but stays in the family. It also brings to the
fore the development of Tagore as a writer who in beginning of his literary journey focused on maintaining the balance in the familial sphere even at the cost of the self-esteem of his women characters but in later literary phase he was radical enough to allow his women to take separate path to secure their own identity. Asha’s tragedy transforms her from a naive, innocent child-bride to a self-assured, commanding mistress. She is no longer a puppet in the hands of her husband or Binodini. Even Mahendra is amazed at her transformation. As a phoenix, she emerges from the ruins of her broken conjugal relationship and controls the family. B. Majumdar aptly remarks:

The transformation of Asha from a simple, artless and incompetent girl to an efficient mistress of the household commanding respect from everyone concerned is one of the chief attractions of the novel . . . Asha had every claim on the affection of Mahendra and yet she could not retain it for long because of the strong counter-attraction from Binodini. (216)

The dual pulls of infatuation and love unsettle Mahendra and the ‘mother-control’ factor play havoc in his personal life. In Sarat Chandra’s Devdas, Harimati Devi is a stern and vigilant mother who forbids her son to marry his childhood love, Paro. Her class-conscious behaviour becomes a major cause of the rift in their relationship. In order to take revenge, Paro’s mother also forces her to marry a rich widower much older to her age. Though, at a crucial point of the novel both of them realize their mistake. In Tolstoy’s Anna Kerenina, Kitty’s mother also conditions her daughter that country life and country people are clumsy. She encourages her to turn-down the marriage proposal of simple landlord Levin. Kitty’s father accuses his wife for turning the girl’s mind and cries, “It makes me sick to look at it. I tell you it makes me sick! And you have got what you wanted, you have turned the poor girl’s head. Levin is a thousand times the better man” (Tolstoy 68). Later on, the infidelity of urban-cultured, Vronsky breaks Kitty’s heart and she reaches on the verge of breakdown. Paul Morel of Sons and Lovers also finds his love-life disturbed because of the excessive influence of his mother, Mrs. Morel. Similar to
Rajlakshmi, she also believes that Miriam will snatch Paul from her. At one place in the novel, she shouts, “Miriam is not an ordinary woman, who can leave me my share in him. She wants to absorb him till there is nothing left of him, even for himself. He will never be a man on his own two feet—she will suck him up” (Lawrence 193). One can find the same agitation in Rajlakshmi also in fact some critics smell something of Oedipus complex in their relationship. Through Binodini, she wants to prove to Mahendra that there are more able girls than Asha. In hatching the conspiracy, she ignorantly destroys the married life of her own son. Later on, when she finds Binodini as a transgressor of guest’s code, she calls her “temptress”, over which Binodini’s shuts her mouth, “That’s true aunty. One doesn’t even know oneself. Wasn’t it you who once wanted to tempt your son with this temptress, simply to avenge yourself on your daughter-in-law? Think about that and then answer me” (GS 167). M. Sarada remarks, “In the character of Rajlakshmi, Tagore points out how mother like her, due to lack of education, wisdom and being ignorant of the ways of the world, spoils their children by pampering them and thus bring misery to everyone around them (33).”

Through the characters of Binodini, Asha, Rajlakshmi and Annapurna, Tagore has depicted the consequences of dispassion and dehumanization which Indian wives were forced to undergo. The novelist also highlights that women always carry a great influence over men, both in terms of construction as well as destruction. Through the matrix of the relationships of Mahendra-Asha-Bihari, Mahendra-Binodini-Bihari and Mahendra-Asha-Binodini, Tagore has reflected different shades of women’s nature. She can be a caring mother, a loving wife or a merciless destructor. Thus, he has proved that “the relationship between man and woman should be rooted in mutual freedom” (D. Biswas 75).

The explosive system of “hegemonic” views, which bestow a lot of freedom and power to men and leave women as mere shadows, has been the root cause of all exploitation in the marital relationship. Tagore tries to view, and evaluate the society and its people from a balanced perspective that would fulfill the interest of the masses in general. He achieves the intended goal to
make people believe what he tries to put in *Rabindra Rachnavali, Vol. 02*, “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” (546). The balance is achieved in this novel with the growth of Asha as a home-maker and Binodini’s realization of the truth.

The anti-partition movement in Bengal involved people of all ranks and it was the time when Bengali society was passing through a transitional phase; simultaneously, with this was changing the nature of conjugal life. Slowly and steadily, the Bengali husbands started giving freedom to their wives and women were encouraged to move out from the inner space to the outer world. In *Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*), Tagore marks a connection between the micro and macro, i.e. between the ‘home’ and the ‘world’ and proves that one affects the other. This novel deals with the question of the participation of women in the affairs of world and its impact on their marital life. The present novel revolves around the marital life of Bimala, Nikhilesh (Nikhil) and stimulating angle of Sandip. A beautiful use of the first person narrative technique has been made by the novelist that gives a direct insight into the speaker’s mind. Bimala speaks to the readers directly, “I was married into a Rajah’s house” (HW 208) and it reminds of the first person narrative of Jane Eyre when she addresses the readers directly, “Readers, I married him” (Bronte 252).

The depiction of ideal versus reality gives a see-saw ride to the readers which life actually takes. A traditionally cultured Indian woman, Bimala feels proud of her vermillion mark at the parting of hair, red-bordered sari, eyes full of depth and serenity. Married in a royal family, she wants to prove herself a devoted wife as her mother was. Tagore writes that Bimala’s sole aim is to “…become an ideal wife” (HW 208). Her dark complexion is a matter of concern for her and she says, “My husband’s face was not of a kind that one’s imagination would place in fairyland. It was dark, even as mine was” (HW 208) but they enjoy a balanced marital relationship. Similar to other traditional
wives of the contemporary Bengal, she takes the dust of her husband’s feet
daily in the morning but Nikhil is not comfortable with the idea:

At that time the Prince of the fairy tale had faded, like the moon in the
morning light. I had the Prince of my real world enthroned in my heart. I
was his queen. I had my seat by his side. But, my real joy was, that my
true place was at his feet . . . But, my husband would not give me any
opportunity for worship. That was his greatness. They are coward who
claim absolute devotion from their wives as their right; that is a
humiliation for both. (HW 210)

Nikhil doesn’t entertain the idea of worshiping husband as God. He is the only
boy in the family to secure an M. A. degree, who does not have the habit of
drinking and smoking, while his father and elder brother died because of
dissipation. Bimala is fortunate enough as Nikhil hires an English tutor, Miss
Gilby to teach her modern ways ignoring the taunts of family members and
outsiders. Modern and educated Nikhil is not in the favour of *purdah* and wants
to bring Bimala out of it. He believes that if in the outside world she would
show true devotion to him, then only their love would be complete. He says, “If
we meet and recognize each other, in the real world, then only will our love be
true” (HW 215).

The marital paradise of Nikhil and Bimala also experiences a jolt with
the arrival of Sandip in their life. Sandip, a revolutionary activist and friend of
Nikhil, has militant patriotism in his blood. He not only extracts financial help
from Nikhil but also makes his house the centre for carrying on his political
activities. The revolutionary and passionate talks of Sandip penetrate deep into
Bimala’s heart and her hopes and desires turn red with a strange passion. The
four walls of the house which have been the ultimate world for her break with
the call of Sandip and she steps outside. Unable to understand his flattering,
she starts idealizing herself as the symbol of “*Shakti*” and “Mother India”. For
the first time, Bimala questions the nature of her marriage and the role of
Nikhil in it:
I was utterly unconscious of myself. I was no longer the lady of the Rajah’s house, but the sole representative of Bengal’s womanhood. And he (Sandip) was the champion of Bengal. As the sky had shed its light over him, so he must receive the consecration of woman’s benediction . . . (HW 223)

The novelist highlights the change in Bimala’s attitude which comes with the arrival of Sandip and with this arrives the complexity her married life. The transformation of Bimala from a docile housewife to a confident woman ready to participate in freedom movement gives birth to several problems. While commenting on the whirlpool in the marital relationship of Bimala, Dasgupta et al. assert:

The Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century produced a string of luminaries and also a strong movement for social reform, particularly concerning the status of women. We shall see reflections of this in *Home and the World (Ghare Baire)*, where the heroine Bimala appears as a post-reform, modern woman, the ideal of the Bengal Renaissance, and yet tied to the old world in many ways. (141)

Bimala finds herself in a struggle to choose either home or world but at last asks Nikhil to invite Sandip for dinner and it is for the first time she steps out of her *zenana* to feed him. Sandip flirts with Bimala openly and calls her, “Goddess of Plenty” and “*Shakti* of Womanhood”. His eloquence forces her to doubt the merits of her husband. In this way, one step of a shy woman in the outside world changes her completely. Sandip calls her the source of inspiration and adds that it is only she who can get India free from the chains of slavery. His extravagant praise for Bimala in front of her husband is something unusual in a conservative society but even-minded Nikhil is calm. Sandip retorts:

See, Nikhil, how in the heart of a woman Truth takes flesh and blood. Woman knows how to be cruel: her virulence is like a blind storm. It is beautifully fearful. In man it is ugly, because it harbours in its centre the gnawing worms of reason and thought. I tell you, Nikhil, it is our
women who will save the country. This is not the time for nice scruples. We must be unswervingly, unreasoningly brutal. We must sin. We must give our women red sandal paste with which to anoint and enthrone our sin. (HW 232)

Sandip has a deep understanding of the psychology of people around him and similar to Binodini, he plays with people’s sentiments and affects their lives to a great deal. He tries to exploit Bimala discussing everything, even man-woman sexual problems. His flattering makes her feel exalted. She senses Sandip’s eyes are burning with the passion of lust for her and they make her feel the wonder of beauty and power. His spoken and unspoken words make her feel all the splendor of Bengal at her feet. The meek and docile Bimala sheds all shame and keeps Sandip’s photo in her jewel case and accepts, “This portrait has no flower of worship to offer, but it remains hidden away under my gems. It has all the greater fascination because kept secret” (HW 278). The advent of Swadeshi movement synchronizes with Bimala’s modern education and widens her outlook of society and life. Mesmerized under the spell of Sandip, she thinks, “All the country was in need of me” (HW 240). She believes that his worship of the country is interwoven with his worship for her. That’s why E. M. Forster describes the novel as “boarding-house of flirtation that masks itself in mystic or patriotic talk” (qtd in Sarada 83).

In this novel divergent streams of patriotism are discussed by the novelist that directly affects the married life of the central characters. Bimala does not like the ‘watery-milky’ patriotism of Nikhil, while Sandip’s patriotism is aggressive and loaded with every type of extremity and this extremity fires her passion. Nikhil is well aware of the conspiracy of Sandip and Bimala’s urge for him but prefers to wait for her return, “I have been noticing for some time that there is a gross cupidity about Sandip. Bimala’s hero-worship of Sandip makes me hesitate all the more to talk to her about him, lest some touch of jealousy may lead me unwittingly into exaggeration” (HW 237-38). Bimala believes what Sandip says, “No, don’t be ashamed, you are far above of all modesty and difference. You are the Queen bee of our hive, and we the workers shall rally around you. You shall be our centre, our inspiration” (HW 239).
Nikhil notices, “Bimala loves to find in men the turbulent, the angry, the unjust” (HW 244). Thus, the strong devotion of Bimala for her husband dooms to dust with the slightest blow of flirtation. Even Nikhil’s master Chandranath Babu forbids Bimala to fall under the disastrous effect of Sandip. Nikhil’s faith does not allow him to use force to make her realize the truth, “Use force? But for what? Can force prevail against Truth?” (HW 250). Tagore presents a very bold and radical face of his heroine when she dresses up with great care to tempt her husband to help her lover. This act of Bimala leaves Nikhil heart-broken. He accepts:

It was palpable that she had specially dresses herself up to coax that order out of me. Till that moment, I have never viewed Bimala’s adornment as a thing apart from herself. But to-day the elaborate manner in which she had done up her hair, in the English fashion, made it appear a mere decoration. That which before had the mystery of her personality about it, and was priceless to me, was now out to sell itself cheap. (HW 317)

Sandip like a gambler plays with Bimala’s sentiments and she like a child drifts towards him. Here Sandip becomes tempter similar to Binodini while Bimala is tempted like Mahendra. Sandip is a charmer and Bimala lets herself be charmed. Both Bimala and Mahendra are educated but love and lust know no bound. Though, never overtly expressed but Bimala’s attraction for Sandip is imbibed with sexual passion and this passion forces her to go against her husband’s ideal nationalistic attitude. She like Kiranmayi of Sarat Chandara’s *The Dissolute* has affection for her kind-hearted husband but also cherishes love for another person. She can’t suppress the natural instinct of sexuality and indulges with Sandip. Though he pretends to worship Bimala, but in reality he has a conservative and dominant patriarchal attitude which is again and again reflected in the novel. He is found declaring, “We are men, we are kings, we must have our tributes. Ever since we have come upon the earth we have been plundering her; and the more we claimed, the more she submitted” (HW 326). Sandip catalyses in Bimala the dormant seed of womanly praise and she counts
herself the owner of all feminine virtues. She starts believing that it is all because of magic of the air around her that a tremendous man like Sandip has fallen helpless at her feet. She has not called him, yet it is summon of her spell that has brought him to her threshold. Mesmerized Bimala exclaims:

O my King, my god! What you have seen in me I know not, but I have seen the immensity of your grandeur in my heart. Who am I, what am I, in its presence? . . . Ah. The awful power of Devastation! Never shall I truly live till it kills me utterly! I can bear it no longer my heart is breaking! (HW 335)

The turn of events makes Bimala realize that the ghare (home) cannot be different from the baire (world). To rob in the house is to rob in the country. She feels that for this sin, neither the country nor the home can forgive her. As a result, the relationship which thrives on “the duel sense of glory and triumph as well as of guilt and shame” (Mukhia 48-49) breaks. Guilt ridden Bimala apologizes to her husband and bows her head to his feet. When Nikhil tries to draw her to his breast and takes his feet back, she says, “No, no, no, you must not take away your feet. Let me do my worship!” (HW 420). Her return to Nikhil is the return of a river to the sea. She has passed the agnipariksha and now nothing can frighten her. K.V. Surendran opines, “What is inflammable had been burnt to ashes and what is left is deathless. Bimala surrenders herself to the person who accepts her sins into the depths of his pain” (56). Thus, Tagore presents the gamut of relationships not only of husband and wife but also of an outsider.

The problems in the married life of Bimala and Nikhil are not only because of Sandip but also because of the affection of Nikhil’s widow sister-in-law for him. Owner of stunning beauty, she is a constant source of irritation for Bimala. She flirts with Nikhil which Bimala does not like. Her presence is a matter of conflict between husband and wife still Nikhil as well as Bimala feel pity over her unfortunate condition. Bimala is indeed one of the most important heroines of Tagore who is unfortunately trapped in the extra-marital affair with Sandip. She is not an ordinary woman and represents the transition of woman
from secluded domesticity to the politics of the outer world. Still, she is unable to mark a balance between the private and public life. S. K. Das defines the novel as:

It is a story of husband-wife relationship challenging the notions of chastity and norms of domesticity as distinct from public life. . . It is also a drama of a psychological challenge for a woman lashed by the winds of change shattering the distinction between the private and the public world. (73)

Extra-marital affair is a prominent angle in Tagore’s novels and short-stories that brings turmoil in the married life of many of his women. The Wreck is different in this regard where the matrix in married life is not because of sexual attraction towards ‘The Third One’ but because of strange games of destiny. In his prelude to the novel, published a few years after the publication of A Grain of Sand the novelist himself throws light on the role of fate in shaping the conjugal life of the characters especially of the heroine, Kamala. This novel not only presents the psychological development of Kamala from a child-bride to a mature woman but also shows the importance of female education and questions the custom of arrange marriage in the contemporary Bengali society where man and woman were forced to marry without any former introduction. For the first time in The Wreck, the novelist focuses on the turmoil of the Bhramo and Hindu Samaj, when a Bhramo girl wants to marry a Hindu boy. Later he repeats this theme in Gora also. This novel presents an adventurous love story of Kamala, Ramesh, Hemnalini and Nalinaksha. Ramesh is deeply in love with Hemnalini and wants to marry her but his Hindu background doesn’t allow him to do so. His orthodox father forces him to marry the daughter of his old friend. Afraid of his father, Ramesh can’t protest and hopes that “some accident might still prevent the marriage” (TW 05). He averts his eyes at the time of the ritual of shubhodrishti and this childish protest gives an absurd turn to his life:

The wedding duly took place, but Ramesh refused to recite the sacred formula correctly, closed his eyes when the time arrived for the “auspicious look” . . . wore a hang-dog expression, and kept his mouth
shut during the jesting in the bridal chamber, lay throughout the night with his back turned to the girl, and left the room as early as possible in the morning. (TW 06)

The specter of fate is used again when shy child-bride Kamala also avoids her ritual of *shubhodrishti* with Nalinaksha. Whereas Ramesh’s reaction is the result of his anger, Kamala does so because of her hesitation. A child-bride, she doesn’t have the confidence of looking in the eyes of her future husband. Through this the novelist reveals the submissive attitude of the girls of the contemporary Bengal. The whole confusion starts when after the shipwreck Ramesh finds Kamala alive on the river side and mistakes her as his wife Susheela, who has already died in the boat-wreck. Kamala takes Ramesh her husband and starts treating him as a devoted wife. The novelist describes her sincere feelings when he writes, “In the dense darkness she found comfort on the heaving chest of Ramesh” (TW 10). Ramesh also sees her as “his future helpmate . . . as his girl-bride, his adored mistress, and chaste mother of his children . . . bringer of joy and prosperity to his home” (TW 13). One day Ramesh discovers that Kamala is not his wife and this discovery leaves him stunned. He begins to sleep separately and keeps Kamala at a safe distance. She in her ignorance lies down next to him, clinging to his chest. Confused and afraid, Ramesh admits her in a boarding school. Kamala can’t understand the nature of Ramesh’s negligence. She wants to be in the company of her husband and as from childhood she is taught that husband is God, that’s why she doesn’t protest his wish of sending her to boarding school. When she meets Sailaja, who is very fond of her husband and keeps on talking about him all the time, she naturally feels the contrast between their married life as she knows nothing significant about Ramesh and this intensifies her sufferings:

> She realized that she had hitherto never had an opportunity for a heart-to-heart talk with Ramesh about his affair and that she knew almost nothing about the man who was her husband. For the first time, she felt how peculiar her positing was, and a sense of her own unworthiness overwhelmed her with confusion. (TW 151)
Tortures implicated by mothers-in-laws add to the miseries of young girls. In this novel also, the aggressive attitude of mothers-in-law and their sharp sarcasms are highlighted by the writer, “Such phrases as ‘Hold your tongue!’, ‘Do what I tell you!’, ‘Young girls shouldn’t say ‘No’ so often,’ had never been dinned in her ears. Consequently, she faced the world with body erect and head high, a graceful plant with a tough stem” (TW 152). After marriage Kamala receives bad reception by her in-laws. The novelist points out that when Kamala enters in Ramesh’s house as a bride, she has to bear a lot of criticism because of shipwreck tragedy, “no one offers to entertain her; in fact people shunned the very sight of her” (TW 12). Without committing any mistake she has to bear all the humiliations as she is considered responsible for the shipwreck.

Problem starts when gradually Ramesh starts feeling a soft corner for Kamala and decides to bid farewell to Hemnalini’s love. He accepts the decision of the fate and makes up his mind to accept Kamala as the queen of his heart. Here again fate plays its role and Kamala happens to find the letter of confession that Ramesh has written to Hemnalini. After reading the letter, she realizes the real face of the problem and guilt-ridden for living with a stranger leaves the house in search of her real husband, Nalinaksha. Like a devoted Indian wife, she thinks, “If I would be a true wife to him I must live to prostrate myself at his feet. Nothing will rob me of this guerdon. While life endures he is not lost to me. The Lord has preserved me from death that I may serve him!” (TW 268). In one way or other, Tagore makes Kamala join the tradition of Sita and Savitri who win their husbands back after many miseries. The search of her real husband becomes Kamala’s sole mission and it reflects her sense of individuality and optimism. In the course of her search she has to work as servant in Nabinkali’s house. Here she gets the first sight or shubhodrishti of Nalinaksha. Kamala’s love and devotion for her husband falls in the category of bhakti as she feels that her sufferings have reached its climax and God has granted her relief. Kamala wonders how such a man of great worth can be the husband of a wretch like her. There is godly calm on his face, “She prostrated herself before Nalinaksha’s chair, touched the ground with her
forehead, and kissed the dust. Alas! That she was debarred from serving him! Her heart was sick with the consciousness of devotion thwarted” (TW 282).

Kamala is simple hearted like Asha and has no tinge of jealousy towards Hemnalini. For Kamala, her husband’s happiness is her own happiness and if it comes with his marriage with Hemnalini, she is comfortable with it also. Like a devotee, she places flowers on the footwear of Nalinaksha which reminds of Bimala’s devotion for Nikhil in *Home and the World* but in her case no outside force can shake her love for her husband. The tragedy of the life comes to its conclusion with the re-union of Kamala and Nalinaksha. He also realizes the true worth of his wife and accepts her without any question. Here, uncle Chakarbarti comments, “Not many men in the world would make themselves entirely responsible for a woman’s happiness. If Heaven has endowed Nalinaksha Babu with that kind of true manliness, then I want to convey to him . . . he should accept her and regard her without constraint . . .” (TW 339).

One can wonder why Kamala shows no psychological conflict in leaving Ramesh. Though, the marriage is never consummated but she has lived with him for a long period. Sisirkumar Ghose remarks, “As soon as she learns of the wreck she is eager to return to Nalinaksha. Ramesh is totally forgotten, as something foreign” (72). This must be Kamala’s love for her real husband, Nalinaksha. The writer points out the love of Indian woman for her husband that develops soon after the seven circles of the holy fire. Kamala represents ideal Indian woman who is simple, traditional, pure-hearted, yet confident and determined. She is the symbol of love and devotion. Kh. Kunjo Singh rightly states, “Kamala excels all the traditional heroines of Tagore like Asha, Sharmila and Niraja, by her qualities of humility, self-restraint and self-effacement. Tagore seems to believe that such women can bring the much needed stability to the restless domestic world dominated by men” (60).

It is for the first time that Tagore talks about the problems in inter-caste love marriage in detail. Marriage of a Bhramo girl and a Hindu boy was a difficult task in the contemporary Bengali society, as Bhramo used to be considered as *Pirali* Brahmins. Hemnalini, daughter of a broad minded Brahmo, Ananda Babu, is the first heroine of Tagore who loves an inter-caste
boy, Ramesh, and wants to marry him. Through the character of Hem, the novelist shows that the girls of the twentieth century Brahmo Samaj were well-educated and had freedom. Ananda Babu also gives his consent to this marriage without any objection to Ramesh’s religion. Even after Ramesh’s decision of postponing the marriage, she has deep faith in his character, as Tagore says in *Greetings of Sunrise* (Verse 60), “Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark” (06), likewise, Hem also asserts, “I will never believe it till I hear it from his own lips” (TW 102). She never blames Ramesh for any tragedy in her life and believes that circumstances have forced him to do so. Kh. Kunjo Singh highlights:

She exhibits a rare constancy of love and loyalty towards Ramesh, but the latter’s indecisiveness, lack of grit and inability to release himself from the grip of circumstances overtakes him render their love unfruitful... She wore an air of supreme melancholy and resignation that was like a permanent twilight on her features. (59-60)

However, Hemnalini doesn’t marry Ramesh but her love for him is unshakeable. Her self-less love encourages Sisir Kumar Ghose to say, “She is the first of a type that recurs in Rabindranath, the prototype of Sucharita, Kumudini and Lavanya, Tagore’s dream daughters” (72). The matrix of marital lives of Kamala and Nalinaksha as well as Hem and Ramesh has a number of turmoils but Nalin’s mother brings a sigh of relief. Contrary to the cruel mothers-in-law, she is very considerate and understanding. She has motherly affection towards all. She tries to resolve the complications in the married life of not only her own son and daughter-in-law but of Hem and Ramesh also. It was surely the result of the transformation in the Bengali society, which changed the attitude of mothers-in-law and now they were more cordial with the daughters-in-law. Santosh Chakravarti observes, “Tagore’s socio-familial concept took a new turn as he began to probe the husband-wife relationship within the joint family set up. Gone is the tyrannical in-law and submissive son syndrome in which subservience to the patriarchal norm is the rigour” (94). Terror-stricken Kamala fears from her mother-in-law’s views but Nalinaksha consoles her saying, “In the course of her life mother has forgiven many sins.
Surely, she can forgive you for what was not a sin at all” (TW 358). Here, Dasgupta et al. highlight:

In one sentence, Tagore sets Kamala free from the ruthless Hindu stricture of subjecting women to go through the ritual of agnipariksha, a trial by fire to validate her purity, as in the classic case of the suffering Sita in the Hindu epic Ramayana. Also, the typical role of the oppressive and fundamental mother-in-law in a patriarchal family is reversed as Nalinaksha says the concluding line of the novel. (200)

These three women of the novel undergo several sufferings in life but remain optimistic. In fact, they can be called complete women. Both men of the novel are not stereotypes as they respect the women and understand them. What Ramesh writes in his last letter to Hemnalini before leaving reflects the viewpoint of the novelist towards women, “I found that I could not forget Kamala altogether. But whether I forget or not, no one in the world expect myself will suffer for it... I can never forget the two women who have ever found a place in my heart, and to cherish their memory all my life will be an inestimable boon to me” (TW 334).

The lives of Kamala, Nalin, Hem and Ramesh are full of complexities and confusions but with their intellectual abilities and strength of character, they solve all problems. The matrix of Kamala and Nalin’s married life entangles not because of some outsider but because of unfortunate incidents and to the relief of the readers they solve it. While portraying the character of Nalin and Ramesh, Tagore shows how modern and far sighted was he from his age. In this novel he not only presents different shades of women’s personality but also of men who are kind and benevolent to women. Nalinaksha’s love for Kamala and Ramesh’s love for Hemnalini are on platonic level. Kamala manages to escape from the complexities of her life and guides other characters also.

Tagore has established the individuality of woman more than man and it is this individuality which ensures her dignity, self-respect and sexual-independence in the society. However he cannot be hailed as a “feminist” in an
ardent sense of the word, still his writings reflect a considerable understanding of woman’s psyche, her status in social structure, strong urge to gain freedom and power for decision making in the family as well as in the society. Krishna Kripalani observes, “Tagore has inexhaustible sympathy and admiration for Bengali woman but little for the male of his race” (156). N. Ray holds the view that “Because of his interest, sympathy, concern and love for them Tagore’s women come off . . . much better, much more clearly and colourfully than his male characters . . .” (281).

Most of Tagore’s heroines of bhadralok are childless or do not have any work of substance to fill their time and “The trauma and loneliness at home push the women to the brink of hysterical madness when they discover their unknown sexual intensities; on the other hand, the same women may imprison themselves in stereotypes of domesticity” (Sinha vii). These kind of themes are absent in the early works of Tagore where the setting is mostly of the rural Bengali society but his later fiction focuses on the urban life, its psychological complexities and lack of freshness, tenderness and spontaneity. The Broken Nest (Nastaneer) presents the complexities of married life of the elite class. His Dui Bon (Two Sisters) and Malancha (The Garden) also deal with the same theme of love outside marriage. This story is supposed to be the story of Tagore’s own relationship with his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi. He dedicated his six books to Kadambari Devi and modeled the character of Charulata on her. This novel was written after A Grain of Sand. Whereas A Grain of Sand deals with the problem of free-mixing of a young beautiful widow and a married young man in the search of nourishment from lust, The Broken Nest highlights the problem related to emotional love relationship between an unmarried young brother-in-law and a married young woman for finding succor from the negligence of a sex-cold husband. Santosh Chakrabarti has a point when he says, “Emotive, extra-marital and unconventional sex-problems that convulsed Tagore’s mind in the early years of the fourteenth century (B. S.) evolved in concrete shapes with their myriad ramifications in Nastaneer (The Broken Nest)” (14). Entry of the Victorian values in the middle-class Hindu household leads to problems of financial planning and
calculations, male members always busy in business, sudden breakup of the
finance as well as heart, treachery, turmoil, financial fraud and “poeticization
of women” (Sinha viii). Sinha also adds:

Women discovered that the humdrum domesticity of the immediate past
was being supplanted by a poeticized and mystified version, public
opinion now responded to change by moulding that which was as easy as
breathing into a poetic art. The imaginatively inclined men of today are
raising their pitch constantly as they hold forth on the unparallel poetry
of the wifely devotion of married women and the abstinence of widows.
It is evident from this how in this domain of life there has been a breach
between truth and beauty. (474)

Tagore’s time was the time of great upheaval in the conservative Bengali
society. In many of his novels, he has presented the emotional conflict of the
upper class Bengali families and in these urban fictions mothers-in-law, sisters-
in-law and relatives are absent from the scene and it seems he wants to
concentrate only on man-woman relationship which was under turmoil in the
wake of transition from tradition to modernity. Charulata, the protagonist of the
story, feels both emotional and sexual denial from her husband, Bhupati, who is
always busy in his publishing house. This successful businessman and news-
paper editor doesn’t have the idea “while he remained thus engrossed with his
newspaper, his child-bride Charulata matured into young womanhood. The
newspaper editor missed this important news entirely” (BN 04). Alone and idle
Charu is frustrated in her isolation. Her frustration has strong resemblance with
the frustration of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, when the latter questions her
husband in a forceful voice, “I ask you, Mr. Astronomer, you are gazing at the
sky, but why is your wife not by your side?” (30). Mistress of a wealthy
household, Charu doesn’t have much work to do. Shut in the interior billet of
the four walls, she spends her leisure time reading literature. Neither Charu nor
Bhupati notice “The period in which husband and wife rediscover each other in
the exquisite first light of love – that gold-tinged dawn of conjugal life – had
slipped silently into the past. Even before savouring the new, they had become
old, familiar and accustomed to each other” (BN 04).
The husband-wife relationship takes a new turn with the entry of Amal, Bhupati’s cousin and a third year college student. Initially Charu moves to take his help to get the reading material in order to kill her time but later on she finds in him a close companion for her leisure hours. Tagore gives strong emphasis on the literary taste of his heroines and their habit of reading novels. In literary taste Charu resembles Bimala and her encounter with the Western world through ‘modern fiction’ gives wings to her imagination. In *Home and the World* also Bimala hides her ‘modern’ book beneath the copy of Longfellow. It is her attempt to hide her ‘dangerous desires’ under the cover of ‘safe literature’. It reminds of Emma Bovary and the influence of Walter Scott’s novels on her which gives her license to follow her dreams. Thus, it is their literary taste that brings Charu and Amal close to each other.

Charu wishes to construct a beautiful garden with Amal at the back of her house where nobody can disturb them. This ambition of Charu implies her wish to make a home with someone she loves. Here home is not the structure of four walls and a roof but the temple of emotions. When Amal asks her to take the help of Bhupati to realize her dream, she rejects the proposal saying, “You and I will make the garden together. There is no fun if I tell him. He might just order an Eden garden from some English gardener – where will our plan be then?” (BN 08). The world of Charu and Amal is so secret and compact that none is allowed to enter not even Bhupati. She always has prejudice against her sister-in-law, Manda, wife of Umapati, as she is a constant source of Amal’s digression from her. She is never welcomed in the committee of these two dreamers. Charu is not aware that she is constantly trapping herself “in her own language which no one around her really understands” (Sinha xii).

The psychological impact of women’s motivation on men’s mind is analyzed by the novelist thoroughly. Charu encourages Amal to write. This incident has a strong reflection to the real-life incident of Tagore and Kadamberi Devi, as she also used to inspire young Rabindranath to write poetry. Similar to Kadambari Devi, Charu becomes Amal’s Literary Muse. She becomes possessive for Amal and when he says, “Ninety percent people in the world had no appreciation of beauty” (BN 10), she simply replies, “Our two-
member committee doesn’t belong to that ninety percent” (BN 10). For the first time, an outsider enters in their two-member committee when Amal gets his article published. Tagore writes:

She felt so betrayed, but was unable to find any reason. Amal’s writings belonged to her as much as to him. Amal was the writer and Charu, the reader. The secrecy of their venture was its primary attraction for her. She could not clearly comprehend why she feel so upset at the thought of other people reading those pieces and praising them. (BN 14)

Gradually Amal gains recognition as a writer and has a little time for Charu. Charu feels hurt and neglected, similar to Kadambari Devi and accuses Amal for negligence, “Even as my husband you have no time” (BN 16). Manda brings third angle in the story of Amal and Charu when she starts giving importance to the budding writer. Commenting on this Tagore says, “The man who wears his status confidently, who has acquired a certain power, can attract women easily” (BN 21). Charu can’t digest the idea of Amal’s reading any piece of writing to Manda as it is she who has made him a writer. Charu doubts that Manda is weaving a web to trap the poor, innocent Amal and it is her duty to save the boy from the impending danger but does not understand that it is she not Manda who is getting trapped in her own web. She fails to interpret that her jealousy is swapping her intelligence away.

A vivid picture of women’s jealousy is visible when in order to prove her superiority to Manda, Charu also starts writing and exploring her imaginative power which is something unusual for the ordinary Bengali women. Amal wants to show it to Bhupati but now the matrix of Charu and Bhupati’s conjugal life has ruptured beyond repair as she cries, “I don’t need his delight” (BN 28). Once a child-bride, she has now become a possessive lover and wants to read her writings only to Amal. When Bhupati shows Charu the article of her praise in the newspaper that is published by Amal, she feels as if someone has let her bird out from her secret cage. The development of Charu as a successful writer is a deliberate effort by Tagore because he wants to show that India is a nation that has produced not only men, but also women of
substance. If given a chance, they can prove themselves superior to man. Chakarbarty also hints at this tendency of Tagore when he opines:

. . . Rabindranath accords an apotheosizing welcome to youth in the Balaka sequence of the poems – he veers away from the traditional socio-familial image of the Indian woman – the mother image, the daughter image, the suffering daughter-in-law image – and set a new value judgment for the woman. The ageing poet’s welcome to Youth has its corollary in the concept of the rebel woman who does not accept her husband’s neglect lying down, but revolts, not in a violent but silent manner. (95)

In a conservative society men find it hard to digest the appreciation of women as the latter are considered inferior. Appreciation of Charu as a writer makes Amal feel neglected and in order to balm his wounded ego he goes to Manda to read his writings. This effort proves oil in the flame. Everything looks yellow to the jaundice eye, so Charu also smells the smoke of love affair between Amal and Manda, “What if Amal were in love with her! Was it because Manda had left that Amal was . . . how horrible! Could Amal behave this way? So low? So unchaste? Could he really attract to a married woman? Impossible! She tried to dispel the suspicion with all her might, but it gnawed at her” (BN 51).

In order to uproot the biggest thorn of her path Charu asks Bhupati to get Manda out of her house lest her brazen behaviour should spoil its piousness. Deeply in love with his wife, Bhupati feels amused by this baseless suspicion of Charu to consider it an act of a dutiful wife who wants to ensure complete chastity of her house. Suffering from financial crisis Bhupati consoles himself, “No matter what, Charu at least will not deceive me” (BN 43). But he is not aware that now it is too late to mend his broken nest. Emotional bankrupt, Bhupati wishes that only a love enquiry of Charu, her concern would eradicate all the pain of his aching wound, but “bounty deserted the bountiful” (BN 43). Herself grief-stricken she can’t find the way to unlock the heart of her husband, who is no more than an ordinary member of the family for her. The departure of Manda from Charu’s house makes a never ending rift in Amal-
Charu and Charu-Bhupati relationships. Their lives get entangled in the love triangle of Charu-Amal and Bhupati.

Realizing the mistake of neglecting his wife for such a long time, Bhupati senses that now it is time to go home. He settles marriage of Amal to the daughter of a wealthy man and Amal goes to England. The last grip of Charu over Amal also loosens and with this she loses her sensibility. Guilt ridden Bhupati tries to please his wife whom he has neglected for twelve years, but miserably fails. Sometimes both of them don’t know what to talk. He realizes that it is easy to deliver a lecture than talk to his wife. Tagore writes in Sadhna, “…this is the greatest tragedy in the relation of husband and wife, when both fail to untangle the tussle of their married life … especially, when ambitions are more important than relationships” (16). Bhupati is not competent and sensitive, whereas, Charu does not want to come out from her whirlpool of emotions. Amal’s memories dominate her body and soul to the extent that she finds no escape. She is herself surprised at the never ending depth of her misery. Her condition has a strong resemblance with the condition of Mahendra who falls madly in love with Binodini. Tagore writes:

Eventually, Charu gave up completely, desisting from battling herself, acknowledging defeat; she accepted her condition and lovingly enshrined Amal’s memory in her heart. Gradually, it came to pass that meditating on Amal with all her attention, with all her being, become a source of pride for her – as though the memory of her love were the greatest glory of her life. She fixed a certain time of day for this. Shutting her lonely bedroom door, she would relive every event of her life with Amal. Burying her face in her pillow, she would say over and over, ‘Amal, Amal, Amal!’ A response seemed to emerge from across the seas, ‘What is it, bouthan, what is it? (BN 59)

The attachment of Charu with Amal is far beyond the physical charm. It is more on platonic side. She sets him on the altar of her heart and worships him as God. The chamber becomes Charu’s temple where she constructs a memorial for her sorrow and adores it with the garland of tears. None is allowed to enter
in this temple not even Amal, only she can enter in it unveiled and uncovered. Charu’s passion reaches its extreme when she pawns her jewellery in order to send telegram to Amal and Bhupati happens to see it. Noticing that his wife has given her heart and soul to his own younger brother, in anger he decides to move to Mysore leaving her behind. In reality this journey is an attempt to flee from the infidelity of his wife. Journey always carries a spiritual significance in Tagore’s novels. It is an important step towards ultimate deliverance quite contrary to the general perspective of the English narratives where Caleb Williams, Jane Eyre, David Copperfield and Tom Jones are thrust into exile against their will. Tagore’s interpretation of exile is an affirmative experience that has mark difference from his British counterparts. His protagonists travel to eradicate darkness, confusion and sterility of life. Asha goes to Kashi to sooth her heart. Mahendra also makes a journey with Binodini to a secluded Villa on the banks of the Yamuna away from the moral world of Calcutta. Ramesh also travels with Kamala from one space to another in order to find the solace from his disturbed life. The journey of Kamala to search Nalinaksha can be called the journey to find the meaning of life. Gora also chooses to travel whole India to understand the real meaning and significance of nation and nationalism. Likewise Bhupati’s journey to Mysore is his attempt to start a new life. Charu is willing to go with him but he simply says, “No, I can’t do that” (BN 72). However his heart melts and he offers to take her with him, but now she rejects, “Never mind” (BN 72). Tagore makes a very important point in this novel which Sinha puts in words:

The characters do not understand each other and indeed themselves fully. Bhupati and Charu, for instance, move in virtually two parallel conversational corridors without a meeting point. Amal, as a budding writer, proficient in a florid style of Bengali is unable to grasp the force of Charu’s literary style praised by the critics. Above all, Amal can’t quite follow the deeper meaning of Charu’s teasing, playful talk, her attitude to Manda and reaction to Amal’s public recognition as an author. . . Charu reconciles herself to a double life in which she fulfills
her duties as wife while constructing a subterranean existence around sorrow at separation from Amal. But, that most secret interior, cherished space where she is herself sans disguise and mask has no place for anyone else—even Amal’s presence is in the form of cherished memory, an absence. (xii)

Charu and Bhupati fail to understand each other and their relation reaches to a deadlock. The absence of Amal makes this relationship even more barren. Tagore analysis the loneliness, stress and pain of his women and give them proper space in his writings. His heroines try to conceal their emotions to maintain the social decorum but many a times it is impossible for them to suppress their natural instincts completely. Whether it is Bimala, Binodini, Charu, Urmi or Kamala, they are not ready to recognize the faulty lines of the settled domesticity and at once revolt against the lack of emotional intensity and immaturity of their husbands or men around them. That’s why Charu denies the proposal of her husband to go to Mysore. Though, there is no sign of physical closeness between Charu and Amal, but she is not a rubber doll devoid of emotions. Shirshendhu Chakrabarti has a point when he says, “The lonely, traumatized women of Tagore are nevertheless given a space of their own, where they can reflect upon and come to terms with their situation in life. In this sense, Tagore remains a feminist before his time” (qtd. in Sinha xiv).

Beyond all terms and slogans, Tagore open heartedly accepts the psychology of women and affirms it again and again in his fiction as well as non-fiction.

Not only as a novelist, but as a short-story writer also, Rabindranath Tagore holds his head high among the greatest short-story writers of the world. His stories have rare qualities of dramatic traits, lyricism, variety of themes, surprise elements and always a lesson. In his short-stories, one can find joys and sorrows of the common people of Bengal. Although, short-story is fairly a new genre in literature, still it carries special charm as Bandhyopadhyay defines, “Within a well defined limited frame-work, a short-story must throw a flood of light on one central incident” (57). Tagore loved the same God which is the essence of the whole Universe and this is reflected in his love for the entire humanity. He opines in Sadhana, “It might sound like boasting, but I
would say that very few writers in Bengal have looked at their country with as much feeling as I have” (15). His passion for writing short-stories began at Shilaidah days where he was leading a secluded, but privileged life in his ancestral home. Here, he got the opportunity to come in direct contact with the ordinary people of rural side who triggered his imagination with their innocent and simple ways of life. He talks about his passion of writing short-stories:

I am really unable to decide which is my true calling. At times, I feel I can write an endless number of short-stories and write them well. One can get a lot of joy in writing them too. Just as a lusty woman is unwilling to let go any of her lovers, a similar tendency has taken hold of me. I do not want to disappoint any of the muses – but it increases my workload enormously. (qtd. in Mukerji viii)

Short-stories are not like photographs; they need a very fine blending of perception and understanding. In Tagore’s short-stories, he has painted the naked realities of the society, sexuality in man-woman relationship, complexities of married life, pathos of widows and socially out-casted women, and psychology of common folks. Nature and its impact on human mind always emerge as important factors in his stories. Manmohan Basu holds the idea that “The author ponders over the fate of those who live in the midst of this rich nature. Tagore could feel subtle nuances of the beauty of nature and link it with human life” (105). Along with Nature, pathos and especially, of women, is also important aspect of his short stories. If in his poems Tagore, the poet, is mystic; then in his stories, Tagore, the writer is realistic. Iyenger comments on the themes of his short-stories:

The recurring theme of the stories is the ‘tears in things’, the heartaches at the core of life; . . . the truth that defines the lie, or the sheer mad thrill of pain. The old ‘stale’ tales of Mother Earth and Mother Humanity, the pity and poetry of it all, the poetry being the pity – no painstaking ‘modernity’ at all . . . The women in his short-stories, of course, are splendidly womanly, frail and fair, yet wise and strong; always – or almost always – more sinned against than sinning. Tagore
plumbs the depths of womanly heart, and behind the seeming wiles and the helpless gestures he sees reserves of devotion and sacrifice. (76-7)

Short-stories of Tagore reflect his idea of transforming the opinion of the public, their personal beliefs and social perceptive. His upbringing was not much influenced by the patriarchal views of the society; so in comparison to the spineless male characters, his heroines are more powerful and have lasting impact. The revealing spiritual richness of the Bengali women makes his stories more intense and vibrating. On one side, they are fighting against the feudal customs of Bengal and on the other side; they are engaged in understanding their true place in the society. The following comments of Nirmal Kumar Sidhanta are enough to highlight the problems of women of the contemporary Bengal:

In a few stories, we have seen the problem of the wife in a joint family, the conflict of loyalties between what is due to her husband and what she must do for her parent’s family. But, the conflict becomes more acute when her husband is perhaps a subordinate person, where she may see jealousy or ill will on all sides. Numerous new relationships grow up and she has to adjust herself to these without forgetting her old ties: the relations between the wife and her husband’s younger brother (who is an object of affection while the elder brother has to be treated with respect); those between the husband’s and the wife’s sisters, between the wives of two brothers, between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. If she is unfortunate she may have a co-wife; if she loses her husband she may become a little better than a maid servant tolerated by her ‘in-laws’. If she has some responsibility to a brother she may find it difficult to reconcile that with what she owns to her husband’s family. (287)

Tagore’s short-stories that present the matrix of married life are, “The Ghat’s Story”, “Punishment”, “The Gift of Sight” and “House Number One”. “The Ghat’s Story” (Ghater Katha), is one of Tagore’s finest short-stories dealing with the pathetic life of a young widow, Kusum. Here the writer personifies an old ghat that has seen many tragedies. The present story displays writer’s anger
and disgust for child-marriage and the ill effects of widowhood on the psychology of young girls. Among those child widows one is Kusum, a lively girl who gets married at a very tender age and becomes widow when she was just eight years old. After ten year, she develops into a beautiful girl neglected by the society and her own self. Meanwhile, a monk arrives in her village and takes shelter in Shiva temple in front of the ghat. News of his arrival spreads all over and people come to seek his blessings. Suddenly the news of strong resemblance in the appearance of Kusum’s dead husband and the monk spread like a wild-fire. She grows mentally restless at his appearance and starts seeking joy in his daily service. One day, the cover of Kusum’s face slips and the monk happens to see her moon lit face. Tagore writes, “They seemed to recognize each other, as if they had known one another in some former birth” (SHE 09). He asks Kusum her name and walks away, that night the monk sits on the ghat’s step for a long time thinking something. The writer very beautifully paints the upheavals in the inner chambers of his heart. Tagore seems to delve deep into the sub-conscious spheres of mind of the Freudian psychology when he presents how gradually Kusum’s religious worship taints with carnal desires when one night she has a dream and in that she perceives the monk as her lover. Guilt ridden, she stops frequenting the temple and ghat. On being asked, she says:

My Lord, I used to revere someone as if he were my God. I worshipped him and the pure joy of is filled my heart. But, in a dream one night, I saw him as my beloved, the master of my heart. Somewhere, in a grove of bakul trees, he took my right hand in his left, and talked to me about love. This incident appeared neither impossible nor strange to me. The dream ended but its seduction remained. When I saw him the next day, I did not see him as I once used to... But, the picture remained. Since then, the turmoil inside me refuses to go. All has become dark. (SHE 11)

The writer bestows full courage and candidness to the character of Kusum when she discloses the secret to the monk, “Lord, it was you” (SHE 12). The moment she opens her heart, the monk says that he has renounced the world and now both of them can’t meet again. Kusum bows to him and touches the
dust of his feet and places it on her head. Disheartened by his decision she ends her life by drowning herself in the river. The ghat says, “The girl who used to play on my lap, ending her play slipped away, I do not know where” (SHE 12). Tagore gives several hints that the monk may be Kusum’s husband who after marriage have renounced the world. The story raises several questions. Though Kusum’s love is platonic, but she cannot suppress her carnal desires for her husband. Through her, the writer has successfully depicted the plight of widows due to social restrictions on widow remarriage. Commenting on the story, K. S. Ramaswami Sastri says, “In this story, Rabindranath Tagore reveals the heart of Kusum by the slight interrogative touches which he often uses to give reality to his spiritual portraits of women” (392).

The renunciation from the man who may be her husband is heavy on Kusum’s conscience. Like her, many innocent women live in utter dejection and have to face numerous humiliations in order to pamper the fake ego of their husbands. Tagore has scrutinized two such conjugal relations in “Punishment” (Shasti), where Chandra is the representative of poor village women who are treated as dust by their husbands. Chhidam’s love for Chandra is of vegetative type. One day his short-tempered elder brother, Dukhiram loses his mind and strikes hatchet on his wife’s head. Profusely bleeding Radha dies at once in Chandra’s arms. In order to save his brother, Chhidam asks Chandra to take all the blame on her head and says, “If I lose my wife I can get another. But, if my brother is hanged, where will I find another brother?” (SHE 51) These words of Chhidam are sufficient to expose his shallow love for Chandra. Substitute of wife was easy to find as one could marry one after another woman without much worry.

There are also hints about the physical tortures that Chhidam implicate over Chandra when she goes to ghat alone. He “gripped her hair, dragged her into the room, and locked the door from outside” (SHE 55). When he asks Chandra to confess the crime, she stares at him in shock and her eyes burn like coal. Her body and mind want to get rid of the “monstrous husband”. Chandrakant Basu writes, “Chandra who loved her husband is taken aback by her husband’s cruel suggestion and is convinced that her husband had never
given any value to her feelings‖ (SHE 59). At last, she decides to take all the blame as a protest of her humiliation. Her silence tells her husband, “I am leaving you to embrace the gallows with my blossoming youth. My last ties in this world will be with them” (SHE 56). It is extremely humiliating for Chandra to walk handcuffed in the streets of the village where she had moved with grace and confidence. She cannot live there with the stigma of a murderer. When the magistrate gives death sentence to Chandra, she heartily accepts. Tagore writes:

On that auspicious night, when a dusky, round-faced, puny little child of no age at all had left her dolls behind and came away from her father’s house for her in-laws’, who could have imagined the final turn of events? Her father had died in peace with the thought that at least he had been able to give his daughter a secure future. (SHE 60)

The anger of Chandra in accepting the crime that she hasn’t even committed is very much visible in her final hours of life. When she is asked about her last wish, she expresses the desire of seeing her mother, not her husband. When the civil surgeon asks, “Shall I call your husband? He wants to see you” (SHE 60). She simply says, “Incorrigible (maran)!” (SHE 60). Interpreting the word ‘maran’ ‘which in Bengali means “death”, Sankar Basu says:

These simple words convey the depth of the offence and grief in the mind of a simple but strong-willed and stable woman, who found that she has been deceived in his love towards her husband. Such laconic, natural and highly impressive endings of Tagore’s stories in many ways remind us of the endings of Chekhov’s stories. (115)

Chandra’s story is a comment on feudal oppression that had degraded women’s position in the contemporary Bengal. Tagore highlights the point that it is very difficult to cure the wound of heart. Through her passive resentment Chandra wants to take revenge from her husband. She finds no other way to stand against the injustice done to her. Though it is Chandara who dies but, eventually it is Chhidam who is punished and it is he who will burn in the fire of guilt and remorse for the rest of his life.
Ample light is thrown on the mentality of Indian women who are trained to consider their husbands as god or *parmeshwar*. The wishes and whims of husbands, however absurd they may be are considered important by wives. This also happens with Kumudani of “The Gift of Sight”. While commenting on the story, Bina Biswas says, “This is a story with extraordinary subtlety with which a blind woman’s emotions and her penetrating insight are portrayed. There is an atmosphere of feminine delicacy and softness” (121). Kumudani says, “I have heard that these days many Bengali girls have to find their husbands through their own effort. I have also had to find mine, but God helped me – may be because I had observed many religious vows and offered *puja* to Shiva from a very young age” (SHE 77).

Like many of Tagore’s heroines Kumudini is also childless. While giving birth to a dead child at the age of fourteen, she was nearly dead herself. But, fate has reserved many sufferings for her. Her husband, Abinash, who is studying medicine, takes her health for granted and starts testing his professional skills on her eyes. Connecting it to the real life of Tagore, A. K. Mishra points out, “There is a connection between Kumudini’s eventual loss of sight in “The Gift of Sight” due to her husband’s insistent faith in his own capability as a physician, and the gradual deterioration of Mrinalini Devi’s health owing to Tagore’s own method of diagnosis” (53).

In Indian society girls are considered other’s asset (*parayadhan*) by their parents as a result; they also start watering this notion. Kumudini is also suffering from this *parayadhan* syndrome and feels, “since my family had given me away in marriage, why try to share the responsibility of my welfare. My happiness and sorrow, my health and my sickness, were now all are in the hands of my husband” (SHE 78). As a good wife she does all that is necessary to make her husband happy, “If one is born a woman, what lies she has to say! . . . As a mother she has to soothe the child, as a wife she has to soothe the child’s father – women need to have such a bag of tricks” (SHE 81).

Kumudini loses her eyesight all thanks to quackery of Abinash but consoles herself saying that as God Rama offered his own eye to Lord Shiva when he ran short of flowers, in the same way, she has given her eyes to her
God i.e. Abinash. Although critics are not comfortable with this blind devotion of Kumudini for her husband as Bina Biswas says, “Kumudini prefers to become blind by letting her amateur doctor husband treat her for her blindness. Her blind love for her husband makes her actually blind” (122). The sight-loss episode is presented by the writer as a test for the married life of the couple. He also hints at the evil practice of polygamy in Bengali society through this story. Though, guilt-ridden Abinash vows never to leave Kumudini in any condition but his vow breaks in a stretch seeing Hemangini as his future wife. She also believes that a blind wife is a burden on her husband and feels, “Whatever he may say, he breathed a sigh of relief when I set him free. No man is able to dedicate his whole life to serving a blind wife” (SHE 85). His aunt turns down his idea of not marrying again and argues, “Let me tell you one thing, Bouma, the more wives her husband acquires, the prouder the Kulin girl should be of him. . . But, a Kulin wife is fated not to die, and as long as she lives, the husband profits” (SHE 92). One day, Abinash loses his patience and declares:

I am telling you the truth – I fear you. Your blindness has wrapped you in an eternal shroud which I am unable to penetrate. To me, you are like god and like god you are awesome. I cannot conduct my trivial, day-to-day living with you. I want an ordinary woman whom I can scold, whom I can be angry with, whom I can pet and pamper with trinkets. (SHE 100)

The outburst of Abinash reminds the outburst of Shashanka in “Two Sisters”, when he says to Urmila about his wife Sharmila, “I am sure you know that I am in love with you. And as for your sister, she is a goddess. I have never revered anyone as much as I revere her. She is not a mere mortal; she is on a far higher plane” (Tagore 129). Tagore hints at the importance of true and pure relation between husband and wife. Extra-marital affair can’t be approved, but the marital relation should be normal and lively. Spiritual and platonic love can’t replace the importance of carnal emotions in marriage. In anger, Kumudini says that if she has been a true wife, Abinash would never be able to marry again, either she would become widow or Hemangini would die. When Abinash goes to marry again, a high tide obstructs his way and he reaches on the verge of
death. Constant prayers and chastity of devoted wife save the life of her husband from the clutches of death. She becomes Savitri, who fought with Yamraj to bring the life of her husband back. Later on, when she comes to know that it is not Abinash but her brother who has married Hemangini her joy knows no bound. Abinash accepts his mistake and addresses Kumudini as his goddess. To this she replies, “No. I have no desire to be a goddess. I am only a housewife – an ordinary woman” (SHE 103).

Through this story, the writer reveals the common practice of the society to place woman either on the pedestal of goddess or degrade her accusing witch but he is against the idea as he believes that women are also human beings made up of flesh and blood. It is the conspiracy of the patriarchal society to snatch their common rights either by elevating or degrading women from normal plain. In Personality, Tagore talks about the difference of the concept of love between a man and woman and gives high regard to the unconditional love of woman for everyone:

A man’s interest in his fellow-being becomes real when he finds in them some special gift of power of usefulness, but a woman feels interest in her fellow-beings because they are living creatures, because they are human, not because of some particular purpose which they can serve, or some power which they possess and for which she has a special admiration. (77)

Patriarchy is not just a social configuration but an attitude deeply embedded in the psychology of the male members who take women for granted and any objection to their own superiority would be counted as a revolt. The male ego gets hurt when they find women superior to them. Tagore’s “House Number One” (Poila Number) truly and completely qualifies this classification. The matrix in Anila’s married life is the result of her superiority to her husband. Whereas in “The Gift of Sight”, Tagore narrates the story from a woman’s point of view but in “House Number One”, he makes a man confess his follies in his own words. The husband (Adwaitacharan) in the story is an ordinary fellow who is proud of his intelligence and superiority that he fails to see the true worth of the woman married to him. He holds late night literary
discussions with other lovers of literature. In all this facade, his wife participates silently and never shows any resentment which he himself confesses:

I have never noticed how the arch of my wife’s eyebrow quivered when she had to arrange a feast at an odd hour. Gradually, she came to accept that the system in my house was a lack of system, and indiscipline its order of rules. . . . My wife knew better than I how our needs were sustained on the money left over my hobby, like a stray cur licking and sniffing at the left-over of a pedigreed dog of foreign breed. (SST 233)

The wounded ego of the husband finds it hard to digest the intelligence of his wife and this reveals the social conditioning which does not let the man realize the true worth of a woman. An epitome of patience, Anila silently endures all mismanagements of her husband. Though her saris are cheap and ornaments are not of pure gold but for her the theories and logics of her husband are not of second grade. Sometimes she is even deprived of the literary discussions, but she never complains. Even after many years of marriage the narrator is unaware of the meaning of his wife’s name. After the death of her father, she becomes the ultimate guardian for her brother and has to entrust his education. Emotionally hurt Adwaitacharan reaches to the crux that a man of great knowledge and intelligence should give up all the hopes for proving his worth to woman. He thinks, “Anila did not respect me. I did not have a college degree: maybe that was why she thought I had neither the right nor the ability to advise her on education” (SST 234).

The character of Anila shows how women strike a balance between their domestic and emotional trails without mixing one with other but things are not easy for men. Adwaitacharan is a man who cannot understand the fact that his wife is performing her duty of wife and elder sister simultaneously. For the narrator preparation of meals for him and his friends is the only important work of Anila but he never tries to know what is going on in her heart. The upheaval in their married life starts with the arrival of a man of great worth in their neighbourhood. Even Adwaitacharan’s friends are influenced by his greatness, but Anila says, “The people next door are becoming a nuisance. Let’s move to
some other house‖ (SST 237). The narrator is happy to know that “Anila has not taken in by it” (SST 238). Though never displays, but he has a great jealousy from Sitangshumouli who can handle music, men and animals with same ease. Highly envious, he asks his wife to shift the house, but she wishes to stay for a night as her brother, Saroj has committed suicide and she has to manage his last rites. The strangest fact is that it is not the narrator but his friend who get this news from House number One, whose owner helped Anila in managing police and cremation. When the narrator goes inside the house, he finds Anila making dinner for her husband’s party. The narrator concludes: “Anila had not been affected too badly by her bereavement. I thought she had developed a certain detachment of mind because of the lofty doctrines I once used to tell her about. Though she lacked the training and ability to understand it all, there was such a thing as personal magnetism” (SST 240).

By now Anila, like Chandra of “Punishment” has understood that the love of her husband is superficial and it is time to move. Tagore makes a very sharp satire that a worldly wise man like Adwaitacharan cannot understand the simple feelings of his innocent wife. For him the show-off of his intellectuality is more important. His ego shatters when he finds a hand written note from his wife, “I am leaving. Don’t try to find me. You won’t even if you try” (SST 241). Bewildered Adwaitacharan tries to search her everywhere but fails. Here Tagore makes him speak and his speech is the reflection of writer’s own idea:

After the initial shock, I tried to take the whole thing lightly, like a veteran philosopher . . . how many years had I spent without the least anxiety, my eyes shut in the secure conviction that there was a living object called a wife. All of a sudden, I had opened my eyes to find that the bubble had burst. But everything in the world was not like a bubble. (SST 241)

It is evident that the heart cannot be satisfied with mere touch of philosophy. Very soon, Adwaitacharan realizes the importance of his wife, when suddenly he gets twenty five love letters for his wife from house number one. Though, never responded, but each word of the letter is expressing the platonic love of the writer. The narrator feels “how very strange it was. After eight years of
intimacy, I saw my wife for the first time through the letters of a stranger who had had only a moment’s glimpse of her. How thick had been the curtain of sleep over my eyes?” (SST 242). Tagore emphasizes that though Adwaitacharan gets Anila after marriage but he never cares for her and has always taken her for granted. His dry knowledge has remained more important than Anila. Still, he wants to face the man who loves his wife but when he goes to Sitangshu, he is surprised not to find Anila with him also. He is also carrying a hand written note of Anila with the same statement. It means that she has renounced both the men and left the hollow domestic world prescribed for women. Tagore has left the story open ended and he does not make it clear what Anila decides to do with her life. Yet one thing is sure that from now onwards, she has made-up her mind not to satisfy the sham ego of her husband. Like Charu and Bhupati, they can’t have their final reunion. Bina Biswas makes an apt remark:

Anila breaks away from the confines of home into the uncharted and unknown future. Adwaitacharan’s continued difference to her psycho-physical needs leads to the tragedy of husband-wife rupture. The final order of assistance, which is platonic in its essence, by Sitangshumouli, is slightest because the offer is hardly recuperative of the waste of whole span of a conjugal bliss. (42)

An unprejudiced analysis of Rabindranath Tagore’s novels and short-stories brings home the idea that his liberalism was not the liberalism of the West. For him, unbridled freedom and militant feminism were distasteful and suffocating. He rejected the freedom that could be destructive and knows no control. He had a strong belief that if we are not reformed within, the society can’t be reformed. His characters are his spokespersons and he has criticized the evils of society through their mouth. He has counted the undeniable and unavoidable importance as well as presence of women in society. He does not preach anything, as he himself says, “Expressing is part of my nature, but preaching is not” (qtd. in Ghosh 156). Through his fictional narratives, he has graphed the need for women empowerment and also proved that with their own efforts and resistance women have paved an altogether new way for themselves and now,
they are important factor in nation building. There is no denying in the fact that in the portrayal of women characters, he has even surpassed great Bankimchandra, who was the pioneer of the Bengali novel. A very famous quote by Tagore presents the crux of the discussion. In an address delivered at the All India Women’s Conference, Tagore stated, “But women cannot be pushed back for good into the superficial region of the merely decorative by man’s aggressive athleticism. For she is no less necessary in civilization than man, but possibly more so” (qtd. in S. Das 678).

Tagore’s women like Binodini, Asha, Bimala, Charulata, Kumuduni, Chandra, Anila and Kusum present different aspects of life and undoubtedly, they are more lively and convincing than their male counterparts. All characters are entangled in the matrix of married life and related complexities but somehow manage to recover from the situation with the strength of their personality. Women of Tagore’s fiction are more intellectual and confident in solving the issues. Nikhil becomes writer’s mouthpiece when he says that ‘She’ (woman) is not destined to fulfill man’s desires. She is not an entity, rather a human being and should be treated like that only. Tagore stands high as a humanist more than anything else whose major concern seems to celebrate the element of God which is in all human beings but above all restrictions.
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