

Women and Gender in Short Stories by Rabindranath Tagore An Anthropological Introspection on Kinship and Family

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ABSTRACT

This article examines female protagonists in Rabindranath Tagore's stories and novellas – specifically Charu (*A Broken Nest*, 1901), Mrinal (*The Wife's Letter*, 1914), Kamala (*Musalmani*, 1941), Anila (*House Number 1*, 1917), Chandara (*Punishment*, 1893) and Boshtomi (*Devotee*, 1916) – from a social anthropological viewpoint, focusing on gender and time-based kinship relations. Here, kinship is defined as an extension of familial relationships to the community (common ethnic-social life, locality and religion) in such a way as to achieve progressively higher levels of social integration and extensive social networks through marriage alliances and lines of descent. Studying how the characters placed the universality of family and kinship structures into question, I argue that parameters of kinship organisation need to be redefined, with plurality and difference as the basis of inquiry rather than universality.

KEYWORDS

biological descent, family, gender, kinship, marriage alliance

Tagore's Life

Edward Thompson said of Rabindranath Tagore that '[n]ot a man only but an age has made its way at last into history. . . . He has summed up in himself a whole age, in which India had moved into the modern world' (Thompson, 1926; cited in Fraser 2013: 1; see also Srinivasa Iyengar 1985: 103).

Tagore always pointed out that a tree stood out as a distinctive entity in its universe. He also indicated that the tree cannot subsist on unfriendly atmosphere and mutual exclusion, since it thrived by maintaining a union with the macrocosm, retaining its individualism in its separateness, which, in turn, thrived in perfect harmony with its world of the sun and the soil and the seasons (Fraser 2013). This was the har-



mony that Tagore experienced at Jorasako, his family home in Calcutta, where he was born in 1861 and where he breathed his last in 1941. Tagore himself explained: 'I was born in what was then the metropolis of British India. My ancestors came floating to Calcutta upon the earliest tide of the fluctuating fortune of the East India Company. The conventional code of life for our family thereupon became a confluence of three cultures, the Hindu, the Mohammedan and the British' (cited in Fraser 2013: 4). Very early in life, Tagore learnt the boundaries that could be imposed by unimaginative individuals as an impediment to freedom, which he strove all his life to challenge. Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father, took him on his travels when Rabindranath was eleven years old, and Tagore experienced a sense of release in the Himalayas in a unity of being with the universe, as he walked during the day amongst the tall deodar trees and felt their immensity, which had lived through the centuries.

Tagore's family's attempt to send him to various leading institutions in Calcutta failed as Tagore hated their rigidity and discipline, their unimaginative education methods that relied on rote learning and stifled the creative and analytical mind. He was a school dropout but had intensive lessons at home from competent tutors in the arts and sciences, and continued to read voraciously at the Jorasanko library.

The freedom of women in the West struck Tagore as a strength in Western society. The women in Tagore's writing were innovative and revolutionary, and they were key protagonists in the feminist liberation of Indian women. In his 1911 novel *The Home and the World*, while engaging with the complexity of divisive politics around the Swadeshi Movement advocating self-sufficiency, Tagore shows how imperative it was for a nation to bring women from behind the curtain across the threshold, to confront and engage with the world, breaking the conventions of keeping women confined to the inner recesses of the home (Fraser 2013).

Tagore built Shantiniketan, also known as the University Viswa Bharati. Shantiniketan was unusual in many different ways. There was something remarkable about the ease with which class discussions could move from Indian traditional literature to contemporary as well as classical Western thought, and then to the cultures of China or Japan or elsewhere.

The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Tagore in November 1913 was a historic event, as this was the first time a non-Westerner had been awarded the prize. Tagore was a British subject when he received the prize and remained one until his death in 1941. The

Nobel Prize took Tagore onto the world stage and he grasped this opportunity to speak tirelessly for over two decades, journeying across India and abroad, on the creative principle, nationalism, education, cooperation, rural reconstruction and the environment. For Tagore, this was a conscious choice, to speak beyond India's borders, on the world stage, to both the West and the East, explaining and expounding on his belief and faith in universal man (Fraser 2015).

The outbreak of the First World War strengthened Tagore's belief that extreme individualism had destroyed the innate capacity of love in man. He was transgressive and subversive as he challenged the binaries of East and West, centre and periphery, dismantling the imperial construct of hegemony. Tagore throughout his writings affirmed his position as an Indian 'Renaissance man' and his stature as a leading world writer, philosopher, educationist, environmentalist, rural reconstructionist and activist, embodying India's 'modern consciousness' (Nandy 1994).

Tagore's Readership

The fact that he found time to build institutions, write educational texts, lectures and articles on diverse subjects and set an example as he implemented his vision through his multiple pragmatic projects makes Tagore a true Renaissance man, the myriad-minded man.

Scholars like Fraser (2015) have observed that Bengalis read Tagore every day, and that every line of any of Tagore's texts can make the reader forget all their earthly troubles. It is important to note that Tagore entered the world stage, and his journeys (cultural, metaphoric, historic and political) threw light on the reception, rejection and resurgence of Tagore outside India; the multiple dimensions in Tagore's studies offer an interpretation through their interdisciplinary relevance.

Translations of Tagore's work were taken up after the Nobel Prize by his English publisher, Macmillan, and have continued to make his work known beyond the English-speaking world. For example, his German publisher, Kurt Wolff, sold 'more than one million' copies of Tagore's books (Kampchen 2011: 179–89; here 183).

In order to explain Tagore's vision of the world and why his literary creation is still so relevant and important in the modern world, especially in Europe, I would refer to Tagore's connection with W. B. Yeats and Patrick Pearse, representing Ireland, Patrick Geddes, representing Scotland, and some more recent European scholars who celebrate Tagore's literary work more than a century after his birth. Yeats wrote

in his famous introduction to Tagore's *Gitanjali*: 'I have carried the manuscript of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me' (Yeats 1913: xiii). From this quote we can understand that Yeats became especially attached to Tagore's writings. In a very similar way, and at the same time, Yeats became the catalyst for contacts between visionaries like Patrick Pearse of Ireland and Tagore representing India. In the *Dublin Evening Mail* of 2 September 1915, Yeats referred to the school of Tagore in India as the 'Indian St. Enda', a school founded by Patrick Pearse. Both Tagore and Pearse were influenced by their cultural nationalism. Both were inspired by the vision of a precolonial age and observed that historic patriotic models provided for them 'older and truer' conceptions of the purpose of education. Both writers emphasised spiritual reflections, geographically removed from the community and unaffected by English mainstream cultural influences. Tagore debated British influence on Indian education and was a severe critic of British rule in India. Similarly, Pearse's school was kept under strict watch by British intelligence before the Irish uprising (Walsh 2007: 295–9). Walsh further points to *In Defence of Children*, an educational manifesto that espoused characteristic tenets of the radical school credo shared by Tolstoy, Pearse, Tagore and Elmhirst. He argues that because conventional schooling depended upon the authority of the masters, rather than self-government, children could not be exposed to the workings of democracy early on (Walsh 2007: 312).

The important Scottish scholar Patrick Geddes's intellectual similarities with Tagore should also be noted here. Not only were these two similar in their minds, but they also interacted quite often. Professor Murdo Macdonald (cited in Fraser 2005: 11) wrote that 'the most profound link between Tagore and Geddes was their shared sense of the interdependence of the local, the national and the international'. Their interaction and correspondences are well documented (see Fraser 2005). They exchanged and shared their ideas on internationalism, nationalism, education and nonviolence in politics.

A global interest in Tagore has continued. In August 2000, a Bengali studies special issue of the *Journal of African and Asian Studies, Archive Orientalni*, edited by William Radice (2015), illustrated an international body of knowledge centred around Tagore and his circle. Books on India/Asia and the world by leading thinkers have chapters on Tagore (e.g. Sen 2005; Mishra [2012] 2014), showing through an engagement with the visionary and his work (Fraser 2013; Fraser 2015)

how Tagore remains an impetus for deliberation on India's relationship with the world.

Tagore remains a subject of research globally, as Collins's book (2012) shows, documenting that Tagore in his day and in the modern age can be considered a public intellectual, and Western scholars continue to study the significance of Tagore's global impact from a post-colonial perspective (Fraser 2015). Radice (2015) emphasises how Tagore's literature has been taken to international audiences, and through extensive translation work and publishing and documenting his biography and letters, has been established in the academic sphere. Translations of selected poems by Tagore (Radice 1985; Dyson [1991] 2010), Martin Kampchen's work (1991; Kampchen and Baghe 2014) in Germany, Victor van Bijlert's (1996) in the Netherlands and Hannele Pohjanmies's (2009) in Finland opened a huge door for international readers in Europe and other parts of the world.

The Women Characters

The women characters from the short stories considered here distinctly challenged and at the same time reinforced the conventional sense of kinship in Bengali middle- and upper-middle-class society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, a model for kinship was developed as a cultural system in Tagore's stories, drawing attention to important processes: negotiation between these women and their immediate societies, creation of choices and acknowledgement of the voices and vital roles of the studied women. Further, the article explores why Tagore chose such characters and how far his fiction, in combination with his many other contributions towards women's emancipation, was in line with future transformations of Bengali urban society (O'Connell 2010). Perhaps Tagore anticipated future transformations in the organisation of kinship and was able to create a vision of culture from within, as befits a true visionary philosopher (Tallman 2002).

Anthropological texts are very different from fiction in character. Literature is rarely based on rigorous ethnographic observation, but rather on the imagination of fictional social situations. The anthropological study of literary fiction has brought up complex questions about projection and distortion, truth and imagination. Many voices in this conversation have addressed the purposes and shortcomings of the writers of ethnography, their class, gender and cultural biases, their status as outsiders and their ways of structuring their texts (e.g.

Benson 1993; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). However, the distinction between the anthropologist (ethnographer) and the novelist may be somewhat artificial. In many ways they are similar. Both tend to stand apart, consciously marginalised vis-à-vis the cultures they describe, self-alienated, disciplining themselves to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Both attempt to put into words the results of their observations and their ruminations on what they have observed (Tallman 2002). Both draw on conventions and traditions of writers before them, ethnographers usually more explicitly so than novelists.

Like anthropologists, Tagore was curious about the underpinnings of daily life and the taken-for-granted assumptions that order our social world. Tagore had uncovered cultural assumptions by looking within himself as well as by watching others. He had access to cultural knowledge often unavailable to the anthropologist, because he had lived fully in the culture that served as the source of his writings. He even sometimes shared the characters' language, history, values and assumptions as a member of the sociocultural community. On the other hand, anthropologists must construct the understanding of norms and values from external data, by observing ordinary behaviour and by learning to act in the new culture appropriately. In his stories and novellas, Tagore added history, folklore, philosophy, music and other creative and complex expressions of ideas and images, visions and dreams that gave human life meaning (Tallman 2002: 5).

It was quite likely that his women characters were not based on ethnographic observations. However, these characters represented, or rather challenged, contemporary norms of kinship related to gender very distinctively. It is therefore pertinent to ask why Tagore chose such characters and indeed how far his fiction was in line with the future transformation of Bengali middle- and upper-middle-class and rural society. Being the visionary that Tagore was, perhaps he imagined that his fiction would have influence on transformations in the organisation of kinship. He was capable of creating a vision of a culture from within (Tallman 2002).

Kinship and Family Life in Anthropological Theory and Ethnography

It has been argued that anthropology, particularly social anthropology, was founded amidst an 'obsessive' interest in matters of kinship,

procreation and succession (Coward 1983). The mother-child unit is the basic building block of kinship and family life. Hence, Fortes (1971) considered this building block in harmony with natural law. At a later stage Pine (2002) suggested that both industrial and nonindustrial societies had family life with children as their basic building blocks. This is to cover up inequalities between men and women. Pine further says that correlating men with production and women with reproduction in societies is a way of trying to make women's work hidden. Women are placed in a domestic environment perceived as less hostile than men can come back to from their harsh world of rigorous labour. This essence of family life and kinship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been repeatedly challenged by anthropologists – Meyer (1971) and Pine (2002) represent classical views of kinship in the discipline. Indeed, theories of kinship within anthropology highlight several alternative perspectives and debates regarding how kinship ties should be viewed and modelled, particularly in traditional societies.

Distinction between the Domestic and the Jural

Typically, anthropologists study people using the idiom of kinship to frame their activities, including those with political, economic and religious intent. Analytically, the key anthropological insight here is to view kinship as the major institution of 'nonindustrial' societies, where kinship ties encompass all other social relations. Traditional societies studied by anthropologists are kinship-based, and the idiom of kinship takes priority over economics, politics and religion. Thus, kinship is seen as the basis through which these societies maintain order. It is through kinship ties that people create relations of social solidarity. Thus, 'social structure' – that is, the rules that regulate kinship, marriage and residential institutions of a people and endow social roles and identities, and which therefore perpetuate societal relationships – is one of anthropology's main objects of inquiry (Radcliffe-Brown [1940] 1965: 191). Indeed, Radcliffe-Brown ([1940] 1965, 1950) saw kinship primarily in jural terms, as a means of allocating rights and responsibilities and regulating their transmission from one generation to the next.

However, an axiom critical to the anthropological theories of kinship is that the social and cultural attributes of kinship are derivative of the biological relations of reproduction (Schneider 1984: 188). Since reproduction lies primarily in the domain of the domestic, kinship has been

shifted out of society proper into the domestic sphere, where it can be tidily contained and isolated from civil society. An important concern of Lévi-Strauss ([1949] 1969) was to create a minimal model of society in which kinship (descent) groups were integrated through rules of marriage exchange; that is, he showed how classifications of kinship and marriage logically provided a broader level of societal integration than that achieved through rules of descent alone. Thus, Lévi-Strauss equated society itself with male structures of domination and subordination, to be ordered through either descent or alliance relationships.

The divergence between the above views reflects in fundamental ways the wide acknowledgement within the literature that we cannot achieve an analytic anthropological construct for kinship that would be both universally adequate and respectful of indigenous understandings and knowledge (Ortner 1974).

Descent versus Marriage

In addition to the above theories, there is a clear distinction between scholars who view kinship as based upon descent links between parents and children, and those who focus instead on alliance relationships created by marriage. Radcliffe-Brown was foremost among scholars who saw kinship primarily in terms of descent, thereby drawing a clear distinction between kin (relatives by descent) and affine (relatives through marriage) (Radcliffe-Brown 1950: 4; see also Fortes 1969, 1971; Goody 1973). However, descent is largely related to male lineage.

By contrast, Lévi-Strauss ([1949] 1969) placed marriage alliance at the heart of kinship, arguing that marriage may be viewed as a structure of exchange resulting from incest prohibition. The prohibition of incest leads to exogamy, which implies marriage with others, and this in turn produces exchange and reciprocity. Dowry and bridewealth emphasise the general opposition between societies that have unilineal kinship systems, emphasizing descent, and societies that have bilateral systems, valuing alliance (Goody 1973).

Kinship and Gender

Although the relation between kinship and gender is quite crucial, kinship studies have paid little attention to issues of gender. Indeed, most kinship research has been chauvinistic – even the term ‘kinship’

itself usually presumes the male viewpoint. To some degree this view is empirically justified by the fact that in many societies, men decide the exchange of women in marriage rather than the other way around (Good 2002: 478).

The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pancultural fact. The actual treatment of women, and the relative power of men over women, vary enormously from culture to culture, and have varied over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both of these points – the universal fact and the cultural variation – constitute problems for explanation. Beauvoir ([1953] 1973) advanced, with great subtlety and cogency and a lot of hard data, the argument that woman's physiology is seen as 'closer to nature' in terms of descent theory in kinship. She reviewed the physiological structure, development and functions of the human female and concluded that 'the female, to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species'.

Further, Beauvoir ([1953] 1973) argued that many major parts and processes of the woman's body serve no apparent function for the health and stability of the individual woman; on the contrary, as they perform their specific organic functions, they are often sources of discomfort, pain and danger. Proportionately more of woman's body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime, and at a greater cost to her personal health, strength and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species: '[M]any of the ovarian secretions function for the benefit of the egg, promoting its maturation and adapting the uterus to its requirements; in respect to the organism as a whole, they make for disequilibrium rather than for regulation – the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements' (Beauvoir [1953] 1973). According to Beauvoir, if 'male' is everywhere (unconsciously) associated with culture, and 'female' seems closer to nature, the rationale for these associations is easy to grasp, merely from considering the implications of the physiological contrast between male and female. Indeed, the fact of woman's full human consciousness, her full involvement in and commitment to culture's project of transcendence over nature, may ironically enough explain another of the great puzzles of 'the woman problem' – woman's nearly universal unquestioning acceptance of her own devaluation. For it would seem that as a conscious human and a member of culture she has followed the logic of culture's arguments, and reached culture's conclusions along with men. In other words, woman's consciousness – her membership, as it

were, in culture – is evidenced in part by the fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture's point of view.

Because of woman's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than men. Yet, in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue, she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus, she appears as something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than men. I refer here to woman's confinement to the domestic family context as a 'natural' extension of the nursing relationship between mother and child that is seen as 'natural'. Mothers and their children, culture seems to feel, belong together. Further, since children as they get beyond infancy are not yet strong enough to engage in major work, yet are mobile and unruly and not yet capable of understanding various dangers, they require supervision and constant care. The mother is the 'obvious' person for this task as an extension of her 'natural' nursing bond with the children. Her own activities are thus circumscribed by the limitations and low levels of her children's strengths and skills. She is confined to the domestic family group: 'a woman's place is in the home'.

In summary, social anthropological theories of kinship related to gender emphasize the universal secondary status of women. Intellectually and analytically, this is a challenging issue. Economy, ecology, history, political and social structure, values and worldview may well explain variations within that universal, but they cannot explain the universal itself (Ortner 1974). Further, the actual treatment of women, and the relative power and contribution of women, vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both of these points – the universal fact and the cultural variation – constitute problems for explanation. In the next section this will be explored in detail while analysing Tagore's female subject characters in the context of kinship and gender.

Tagorean Female Characters in the Context of Time, Kinship and Gender

The crucial tensions that agitate the relationship between nation, family and gender are repeatedly represented in Tagore's texts. Colonial Bengal under British governance was a period of cultural encounters between the East and the West. The influence of Brahmo Samaj as

well as Christianity insinuated their presence subtly and yet steadily into the lifestyle practices of educated, cultured, urban Bengali households, with the Tagore family leading the way in many instances. The new Bengali men encouraged their female family members to reinvent themselves in nonfictional roles of writers, poets, editors and in-house performing artists, also urging them to engage with the world outside their homes and even participate in nationalist politics. Such tacit or overt encouragement led to the emergence of the new Bengali women, and yet, they never developed the self-assurance of the new Bengali men (Dasgupta et al. 2013).

Inside the educated Bengali family houses was situated the inner home, where the social fabric of the females (the mothers, sisters and wives) of a Bengali household existed. The construction of these houses is always the subject of jealous scrupulousness. There must be as few windows as possible. The women were supposed to avoid the public and neighbours' gaze, thereby keeping out the sunshine and outside breeze.

Tagore, under the influence of Western discourses, tried to change the conditions of such an unhealthy ambience. He even tried to bring out the women folk from this claustrophobic atmosphere. The short stories discussed here are oriented around women characters that break the rules and regulations of the normative orders of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of both marriage alliance and biological kinship.

Tagore's fiction and short stories thus created a series of women who bore in their aspect, their words and in their relationships the first blossoming of the educated, cultured, adult woman who was emotional and intelligent simultaneously. This was unprecedented in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial Bengali fiction. Referring to this transition of women who read, write, compose poems and discuss issues related to politics and philosophy, Dasgupta and colleagues (2013) identify this colonial period as an enabling time that configured a new patriarchy and the emergence of new women who could reason, interrogate, reject and reconstruct their identities by struggling against stereotypical roles and mindless adherence to cultural practices that were exploitative. Tagore's female protagonists here are always opposite in character of ordinary women's coarseness, vulgarity, loudness and quarrelsomeness.

In the essay *Women's Place in the World* (1933; reprinted in Das 1996: 663–4), Tagore stated: 'The future Eve will lure away the future Adam from the wilderness of a masculine dispensation and mingle her talents

with those of her partner in a joint creation of a paradise of their own'. This assertion clearly shows Tagore's recognition of gender equality and gender justice, though simultaneously he also felt that women's role and responsibilities were basically attached to domesticity.

Within the universal fact of secondary status for women, Tagore's fiction showed that the specific cultural conceptions and symbolisations of woman were incredibly diverse and even mutually contradictory, as can be seen in *A Broken Nest* (1901) and *The Wife's Letter* (1914). The universality of female subordination, the fact that it existed within every type of social and economic arrangement, and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicated to Tagore that he was confronting something very profound, very stubborn, something that could not be remedied merely by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, nor even by rearranging the whole economic structure. Indeed, it might be argued that Tagore's stories and novellas suggested the wish to see genuine change come – the emergence of a social and cultural order in which as much of the range of human potential was open to women as to men.

Tagore's women characters cannot be consigned fully to the category of nature, for it is perfectly obvious that they were full-fledged human beings, endowed with human consciousness just as his male characters were; they were half of the human race, without whose cooperation the whole enterprise would collapse. They might seem more in the possession of nature than man, but, possessing consciousness, they thought and spoke; they generated, communicated and manipulated symbols, categories and values. They participated in human dialogues not only with other women, but also with men.

The Negation of Descent

Almost all the female characters' lives rested beyond the descent view of kinship. Charu (*A Broken Nest*), Mrinal and Bindu (*The Wife's Letter*), Anila (*House Number 1*), Kamala (*Musalmani*) and Chandara (*Punishment*) did not bear children, and their lifestyles showed that they were not keen on lineal descent or extension of family by biological reproduction only. Boshtomi (*Devotee*) had a child but, having lost him in an accident, devotes her life entirely to her philosophical and religious pursuits. Ultimately she leaves her home. Hence, she too negates the possibility of any form of biological descent. Indeed, it would appear that Tagore chose to construct these characters as childless and did not consider

their biological constraints, so that these characters cannot be analysed in light of their physiological structure as closer to nature.

Jural and Marriage Alliances

In classic kinship research emphasizing jural rules, conformity to such rules was usually seen as normal and explanations were sought only when they were broken. Yet since obedience and disobedience were both matters of choice, it is important to explain why some individuals adhere to the rules, as well as why others ignore them. In this respect, I examine whether these Tagorean characters were obedient: did they choose their life activities, or break the rules and regulations of kinship? I classify some of their behavioural patterns, like intellectual activities, pursuits of imagination, participation in political, religious and sociopublic domain (writing in journals) and even leaving their domestic realms in the quest for truth and knowledge, as their own conscious choice. Can these choices be classified as breaking rules and rebellion?

Charu (*A Broken Nest*), Mrinal (*The Wife's Letter*) and Anila (*House Number 1*) were married to men who were compatible, at least intellectually, even if their husbands were not very sensitive to their wives' needs and largely neglected them. In reaction to this neglect, these characters eventually broke free of their kinship ties through marriage alliance. While these three characters were intellectually sharp, intelligent and highly sensitive, none of them were economically independent. Charu was the most unfortunate. She tried to establish her own identity primarily through her friendship with Amol and her writing skills, but ultimately retreated to the rules and regulations of kinship after Amol's retreat. Mrinal and Anila were more courageous and left their marital home when they discovered irreconcilable ideological and ethical failures in their family life. Their acts surpassed the happy dyad of a complete and conventional model of kinship.

Bindu (*The Wife's Letter*) and Kamala (*Musalmant*) were unlucky to find poor matches in their marriage. Bindu was married to a mentally challenged person, and Kamala was kidnapped before she reached her marital home. They chose different fates. Bindu chose death as her escape route, which also broke the model of kinship in the anthropological literature. Kamala chose the life of a Robin Hood-style *dacoit*. Thus, neither descent nor the jural marriage models prove adequate to characterise kinship for these Tagorean characters.

Nature or Culture?

Where, then, do the subject characters position themselves on the hierarchical scale between nature and culture? Tagorean subject characters break the classic model of ‘female to male as nature is to culture’ (Ortner 1974) and open up a number of important insights. Through my discussion, I consider how, without any apparent contradiction with Beauvoir’s framework, Tagore constructed the dialectic of the transcendental (social, cultural) nature of his female characters as opposed to the naturalness of the process of birth (nature).

A good example of this dichotomy between the relative positions of man and woman is illustrated in *A Broken Nest*. The male characters, Bhupati and Amol, were creative, but Charu was no less. Thus, Tagore demonstrated that women’s bodies (for example, Charu’s and Mrinal’s) did not doom them to mere reproduction of life. It is assumed that the male, on the other hand, lacking natural creative functions, should (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, or artificially, through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables – that is, human beings.

While staying consistent with the Beauvoir framework, Tagore’s characters emphasize that it was not the mere adventure in the external sphere that was the relevant and valued aspect of the human life cycle; rather, it was the transcendental (social, cultural) nature of his female characters as opposed to the naturalness of the process of birth that should be valued. These characters cannot, therefore, be consigned fully to the category of nature as opposed to culture.

The Role of the Domestic

Tagore’s fiction and short stories thus create a series of women who bore in their aspect, their words and in their relationships the first blossoming of the educated, cultured, adult women who were emotional and intelligent simultaneously. This was unprecedented in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial Bengali fiction. Referring to this transition to women who read, write, compose poems and discuss issues in politics and philosophy, Chatterjee ([1931] 2012) identifies this colonial period as an enabling time that configured a new patriarchy and the emergence of new women who could reason, interrogate, reject and reconstruct their identities by struggling against

stereotypical roles and mindless adherence to cultural practices that were exploitative. Tagore's female protagonists here are always opposite in character to ordinary women's coarseness, vulgarity, loudness and quarrelsomeness.

The role of women in a joint family was rather complex and ambiguous, with many contenders for the position of the *grihini* (mistress of the house). She was supposed to distribute food among the family members, guests and dependents. This role model was a very difficult and strenuous task to follow for women. Over and above being ideal torchbearers of domestic labour, women had the vitally important task of childbearing and rearing, which was most often almost unregulated.

Further, all of the characters studied here tried to transcend kinship values and transgress the fixed dyad of parenting and nurturing, which were only connected with the biological reproduction system. Instead, their lives emphasized mutual caring, emotions of affection and protection that went beyond the minimal possibilities of material sense and were endowed with a more pluralistic idiom of kinship. Through his female characters, Tagore introduced the concept of 'home-nest' which bridged the positions of nature and culture. Thus, under this broad concept, 'home' can cover both the jural marriage and the descent models. Tagore examined how far this 'home-nest' concept supported his female protagonists to break and reinstate the kinship values in their own lives.

To Tagore, home is an essentially private and individual routine, fantasy, memory, longing or presence. Indeed, its construct as a social institution was an attempt to publicly and collectively impose home as a social fact, and a cultural norm to which some should belong and from which others must be excluded. Hence, characters like Mrinal (*The Wife's Letter*), Anila (*House Number 1*) and Kamala (*Musalmanni*) became exiles and refugees, as well as Boshtomi (*Devotee*), who chose to be excluded by the society as she fell short of combining nature and home. Mrinal chose her exile when she could not adjust any longer to the unethical situation in her household. Bindu's suicide led Mrinal to take refuge in the outer world. Beyond a point, Anila could not accept her utterly insensitive husband and chose her own exile, even refusing an invitation by another charismatic outsider for bonding and relationship. Kamala took a very positive path of rescuing women who met with a fate similar to hers (kidnapping by *dacoits*) and chose her own partner.

While each of these characters declined kinship through reproduction, Tagore showed that they left their marriage alliances as well in

very different ways. The essence was, however, the same. In becoming free individuals contributing towards society, they broke out of the domestic sphere.

Outside the Domestic: The Public Domain

The fact of woman's full human consciousness, her complete involvement in and commitment to culture's project of transcendence over nature, might ironically enough explain another of the great puzzles of 'the woman problem' (Beauvoir [1953] 1973). Here, Tagore's subject character too was prominent – she felt the urge to surpass, and her project was not mere repetition but transcendence towards a different future. She joined the men in festivals that celebrated the successes and victories of the human species – for example, Charu, who transcended from the role of audience to that of author and cherished her glory in the process.

Likewise, Mrinal, Anila and Kamala were free from the lingering descent-based dyad (mother-child) and became further independent when they joined the public sphere in quest of their true identity and knowledge. They left their homes when faced with ethical problems in their family life. This act of leaving their homes was in direct conflict with the concept of kinship pattern as defined in anthropology. The characters highlighted resistance and challenged not only kinship values but also gender-related issues of late nineteenth-century Bengal. These women characters could therefore be modelled as enlightened women.

For Tagore, the concept of home encompassed cultural norms and individual fantasies represented by individuals like Charu and Amol. Home should therefore be sensitive to numerous modalities: memory and longing, the conventional and the creative, the affective and the physical, the spatial and the temporal, the local and the global (Wright 1991: 214; Rapport and Overing 2000: 157–8). This 'home-nest' model broke between Charu and her husband, hence the title of the novella, *A Broken Nest*.

Through the process of accepting the public domain, Charu used her intellectual talent and earned literary recognition in the process. Her husband was quite negligent towards her. When his business failed he crumbled into a miserable condition. At that juncture, he tried to retreat and claim consolation from the world created by Charu. But she was then unable to provide that shelter to her husband.

This situation was consistent with her attitude towards change: she understood setbacks in life needed to be faced as challenges, not as prompts for despair. She faced these threats and learnt to create despite the stress and danger.

In Boshtomi (*Devotee*), Tagore essentially described his concept of a free woman: one who did not feel the obligation to maintain the norms of kinship and gender relations. Further, the 'homeless mind', like that of Boshtomi, was hard to bear, and hence there was widespread nostalgia for a condition of being 'at home' in society, with oneself and with the universe. For her, the home of the past was socially homogeneous, communal, peaceful, safe and secure, but it could not give her true freedom.

Thus, Charu, Mrinal, Anila, Kamala, Chandara and Boshtomi succeeded in defining themselves as active agents rather than passive victims of their gender; empowered themselves through personal and collective organization; and transformed the dependent and subservient relationship of family and domestic life into self-definition and exploration of their personhood. They achieved this by stepping beyond the domestic to embrace the public domain.

Anticipating a New Social and Cultural Order

Tagore indulged in certain structural changes within the domestic sphere in his fiction and gave rise to the upper-middle-class women who were educated and had sophisticated cultural tastes. These women resemble their Western counterparts – the new woman. They took on the role of supervisor to ensure a smooth functioning of their homes. Tagore even made radical deviations to this role of supervisor.

Mrinal and Charu were the housewives in affluent/landlord households. They could have been perfectly happy, except for their childlessness. Intelligent, creative and questioning Mrinal and Charu felt claustrophobic within the traditional, familial atmosphere. Their writing and creative spirits were turned mute and became their secret solace. All six characters discussed here emerged as mature and stable heroines. They were undoubtedly from orthodox backgrounds (except Chandara), but they all were situated in the crosscurrents of tradition and modernity. Here readers encountered six major refined and wiser women characters educated by institutions and life experiences (Dasgupta et al. 2013).

All six women characters discussed here more or less are in quest for intellectual and cerebral knowledge from books as well from their solitary, emotional self-examination. They went through enormous struggles for self-definition in a hostile environment, where the forces of bourgeois society and family loyalties demand conformity.

In these six stories Tagore explored the concept of alienation among the women protagonists through their restlessness, contempt for convention and violation of social law. They suffered from their emotional storms. They tore apart from extreme intrusiveness of the community and its culture of social tyranny. They became very assertive (Dasgupta et al. 2013).

All such evidence of English-educated and cultured Bengali women highlight that urban Bengal was changing rapidly. In that respect, Tagore's heroines represented the changing times and the evolution of women's role and identity in the new social environment. All these stories addressed issues of the gendered bodies, body images, body politics and sexuality through their childlessness, nonconformity of sociofamilial norms and the phenomenon of leaving behind their homes. Protagonists like Charu, Mrinal, Boshtomi and Anila of *House Number 1* can be observed as representatives of radical literature (Dasgupta et al. 2013).

Tagore's philosophy about the free woman was embodied most prominently in the character Boshtomi (*Devotee*), who surpassed even the stereotypical concept of gender in late nineteenth-century Bengal. In this Tagorean model, the free woman carried spiritualism in her heart and broke gender roles. In this context of exile from home, Tagore described Boshtomi in the story *Devotee* (Tagore 1916) thus:

One day, in a small village in Bengal, an ascetic woman from the neighbourhood came to see me. She had the name 'Sarva-khepi' (the mad woman) given to her by the village people, the meaning of which is 'the woman who does not care about earthly matters.' Evidently she pitied me who lived (according to her) prisoned behind walls, banished away from the great meeting-place of the All, where she had her dwelling. I felt that this woman, in her direct vision of the infinite personality in the heart of all things, truly represented the spirit of India.

Through all his women characters, Tagore focused on the theme of change – especially change in family relationships as aristocratic and traditional values crumbled. These changes created dichotomies and tension, which required creativity to resolve. His stories and novellas described rituals and the negotiations developed by the characters, as

well as their friends and relatives, to cope with life's challenges and to build a bridge between human consciousness and nature.

Thus, the societies of these characters should also generate a sense of ultimate moral unity for all members above and beyond social categories. In other words, even if this psychic mode, from one point of view, appeared typical of women and infracultural, tending to disregard categories and seeking communion directly and personally with others, it was at the same time associated with the highest levels of the cultural process. This progressive view of society and institutions like marriage, and the role of women within this framework, is at the same time consistent with other contributions of Rabindranath Tagore – particularly his writings on educational and social philosophy (see e.g. Sen Gupta 2005) and his paintings.

Clearly, we find that the modern women in Tagore's short stories showed remarkable determination through their performances, enabling them to reject social and cultural norms in terms of marriage and biological kinship. Tagore in these stories traversed and transgressed into deterritorialised space and the liberation of the mind, spirit and body (Dasgupta et al. 2013).

Conclusion

Tagore's role as a writer was not to put forth a detailed programme of social and cultural renovation; he clearly wanted society's acceptance and indeed encouragement of women's participation in, and active appropriation of, the fullest range of social roles and activities available within the relevant cultural environment. Through the characters of Charu, Mrinal, Anila, Kamala, Chandara and Boshtomi, Tagore stated that men and women could, and should, be equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence. Only then would women easily be seen as aligned with culture in culture's ongoing dialectic with nature (Ortner 1974).

Critics such as Thompson (1926) voiced the view that Tagore's cultural liberation from traditional representation happened because the Tagore family were members of Brahmo Samaj, known for its liberated humanist and resident cosmopolitanism. Tagore followed this mission of deviating from rigid caste regulations and ritualistic performances of the patriarchal Hindu religion.

Dasgupta and colleagues (2013) observed that in Tagore's earlier stories his women protagonists were based on patience and self-

sacrifice. As he matured he took up a more progressive stance regarding his women heroines. Mrinal from *The Wife's Letter* rejected home and family in search of a new meaning in her life as a human being. Tagore in these six short stories interrogated the system of arranged marriages, and the entrapment and enslavement of these women as wives. They all have loveless and childless marriages, although apparently their husbands provided them with shelter, security and sustenance. Usually wives were taught to adjust and accept the patriarchal stereotype. Equal partnerships in marriages were impossible. However, Tagore broke this stereotype and showed the different levels and scales of resistance to this appropriation of power possible. The female protagonists either had education or experiences that empowered them to deny and defy the norms of domestic space and could argue about topics that were considered outside the domain of femininity in conservative colonial Bengal.

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