

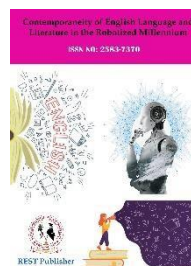
## Contemporaneity of English Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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# Feminist Voices in Tagore's Views on Essentialism: A Study

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**Abstract.** *A prodigy of the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century, Rabindranath Tagore was a multifaceted talent who distinguished himself as a prolific fiction writer in addition to being a poet, playwright, essayist, musician, and painter. His books, including novels and short tales, frequently address many societal issues, particularly those that affect women, such as illiteracy, child marriage, dowries, unsuitable marriage, etc. The suffering and situation of women under patriarchy, which makes them vulnerable to many forms of oppression, seems to be of great concern to Tagore. Thus, he has made a major point of emphasising the necessity of women's liberation, self-identity, and independence in his storylines. In light of the foregoing, the following essay examines the diverse feminist ideas held by Tagore based on several of his fictional works.*

**Keywords:** *Bengal Renaissance, Colonial, Patriarchy, Emancipation, Feminist perspective.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tagore is a multifaceted genius who, in addition to being a social, political, religious, and aesthetic thinker, distinguishes himself as a humanist, educator, poet, dramatist, essayist, painter, lyricist, and fiction writer, though he prefers to be called a poet and holds the distinction of having won the prestigious Nobel Prize Award in 1913 for his collection of songs, Gitanjali. But, he is also praised as a fantastic fiction writer and is credited with capturing in his short stories and novels a variety of aspects of Indian social life and psychology, most notably the difficulties experienced by women in patriarchal societies. He appears to be endowed with a special ability to discern women's physical and mental characteristics, allowing him to appreciate their beauty and virtues such as love and selflessness, service and empathy, obedience and devotion, goodness and piety, etc. Nonetheless, he appears to be aware that these traits run against the fundamental precepts of feminism, which demand that women be strong and combative in order to assert their proper place in society. It may be the reason why Tagore regularly depicts women as strong, dashing, fearless, and brazen in his stories. These women are capable of withstanding the great odds of life thanks to their grit and resolve, patience and self-sacrifice, sense of perception, and decisionmaking. Nonetheless, he takes a pretty balanced attitude to women, showing both their strength and frailty equally.

## 2. BENGAL RENAISSANCE

One of the most renowned literary figures of colonial India, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), was a by-product of the Bengal Renaissance, which was primarily sparked by the colonial government's introduction of English education and culture to Bengal in the middle of the nineteenth century. The spread of English among the locals of Bengal, which at the time served as the epicentre of British authority in India, sparked an astonishing surge in intellectual activity despite being done with the selfish goal of producing cheap and submissive employees for the East India Company. Dubbed as the Bengal Renaissance, it resulted in the construction of new institutions and colleges to further scientific study and education, which helped Bengali writing, including novels and blank poetry, to develop. The Bengal Renaissance questioned the validity of the conventional socio-cultural conceptions that were in place at the time, particularly those that dealt with women and marriage, such as dowries, unsuitable marriages, child marriages, early widowhood, etc. Many notable figures, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore, spearheaded the Bengal Renaissance movement that brought about these developments in

Bengal. Derozio, a poet and philosopher, Michael Madhusudan Datta, a poet, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a scholar and social reformer who worked for the cause of Hindu widows and women's education, were some of the other notable figures that contributed to the birth of the new spirit in India. In addition to the aforementioned individuals, the creation of the New India also benefited greatly from the work of author and government servant Bankimchandra, scientists Jagadish Chandra Bose and Prafulla Chandra Ray, and Vivekananda. Also, there were two notable women. Toru Dutt, a young poetess who produced poetry and novels in English and French at a period when most women were uneducated, and Rassundari Devi, the first Indian woman to publish her autobiography. Rabindranath Tagore and Raja Ram Mohan Roy are two individuals who frequently took the lead in the Bengal Renaissance, which brought about major socio-cultural reforms in Bengal. If the former may be credited as the movement's founder, the latter is his finest representation. (Sengupta 211-12) He is also saddened to observe how the prejudiced culture tends to underutilize women's potential, which results in a massive loss of human resources. He criticises the practise of forcing societal norms on women in the guise of tradition by claiming that "society takes the weight of thinking so totally and completely on itself that I am not even conscious that it is thinking. . . False behaviour has a place in society, while good behaviour has no place at all." (Sen228). While expressing his opinions on women, Tagore distinguishes between two types of women: mothers and lovers or wives, of whom he regards mothers "like the rainy season giving water and fruits, soothing in heat and giving herself to others like Gandhari in Gandhari's Prayer or Prakriti's Mother in Chandalika." (Suryawanshi 288) Thus, in *Gora* Binoy realizes early in life that Anandamoyi is his 'Ma' and is the face . . . of his motherland" (Tagore19). He reveres Anandmoyi, a woman who devotes her entire life to serving men at home, as a representation of maternity. He feels considerably differently about Sucharita, Paresh Babu's foster daughter, whom he refers as "a girl he has affection for has respect and admiration." (Rani40) Thus, Sucharita fills the slot of the lover or wife type of woman, who he feels "like the spring, illusively charming, influencing passions and touching the heart" (Suryawanshi289). As a result, it appears that Tagore valued women for their various contributions both within and outside of the house. This is evident from his admiration of women in their dual roles as mother and wife. In his novella *Two Sisters* in which Sarmila and Urmimala, respectively, play these twin roles of women, Tagore brilliantly exhibits them. Tagore believes that an ideal wife must possess both attributes concurrently in order to avoid problems. The two sisters play the roles of mother and lover respectively, in the novel are Sarmila and Urmimala (Urmi). Sasanka's wife, Sarmila, cares for her husband with maternal devotion as they enjoy a happy life together. Yet with time, Sasanka grows weary of his wife's maternal affection and starts to hunger for a lover's devotion. He is so drawn to Urmi, his wife's younger sister, who joins the family to take care of her dying older sister's home. Sasanka is drawn to Urmi right away because of her intelligence, vivacity, beauty, and childlike innocence. The two sisters clearly depict the two different sides of women one is domestic and reassuring like a mother, while the other is frivolous, beautiful, and alluring like a lover.

### 3. PATRIARCHY

Sasanka thus becomes very emotionally devoted to Urmi, putting his wife and company above anything else. Sarmila detects this, and she chooses to make the ultimate sacrifice by taking Urmi as her co-wife. To prevent her sister's nest from being destroyed, Urmi finally withdraws from the situation and travels to Europe, displaying her maturity. The lesson in the aforementioned narrative is that it is challenging to discover both motherly and adoring traits in one person, and that trying to do so is likely to fail. It also teaches that "If we are not satisfied / pleased with what we have and carry on looking, we have to love the whole world" (Tagore 111). The protagonist of *Gora*, Proclaims that it is the finest to 'worship woman' when 'they are placed as Mother.' In contrast, Tagore makes it abundantly obvious that of the two forms, the place of woman as a mother is superior. The Mother is the highest position a woman is given in such a structure. (Rani39) Moreover, Tagore is a big admirer of feminine beauty, and all of his main female characters whether they be a mother, sister, wife, or lover are frequently lovely. In his short story *Punishment*, he prominently demonstrates how a woman's physical attractiveness affects her relationship with her husband. For example, Chidam deeply adores his wife Chandara because she is 'wellrounded, compact, and sturdy,' whereas his brother Dukhram constantly fights with his wife Rekha because she is unattractive and argumentative. Sucharita in *Gora* is also a woman of abounding beauty, observing whose face in mirror. In the same way, in *Two Sisters* Sarmila is Sasanka's wife. Her sister Urmimala is also beautiful but on a different parameter, as she is enthusiastic and very active girl and is "always at the receiving end like a child, who is although not an expert in house hold management, yet by the virtue of her work, by the charm of her personalit . . . filled a great and longstanding void in this house." (133). Thus, in the above story Sarmila and Urmimala, who incidentally personify the mother and lover images of women respectively also represent them in both traditional and modern forms and Tagore seems to celebrate them in all their manifestations. Also, in *Samapti (The Conclusion)*, Mrinmoyi is a beautiful woman with 'huge black eyes. In his story *Laboratory*, Tagore describes Sohini as a woman with 'sharp, bright eyes and a smile that lingers on her lips like a sharpened knife.' She has a magnetic personality and wears a sari with a hidden knife at her waist. So, it's clear that Tagore puts enough emphasis on a woman's physical

beauty in his stories and vividly describes the beauty of each of her limbs. Also, girls at the time didn't get to go to school because of these kinds of superstitions, and people thought that marriage was a better option for them than school. Since girls were uneducated and young when they got married, it was natural that they didn't have a say in who they married. Instead, their parents gave them to a stranger like a piece of property or a pawn, while boys got to choose their brides. Perhaps the best example of this is Apurbo's marriage to Mrinmoyi instead of his mother's choice, who was a very strict person. In fact, this part of the story makes it clear that girls' education was not a top priority at the time and that getting married was more important. But in the case of Mrinmoyi, things seem to be a little different. She couldn't have been a child when Apurbo saw her on his way back from Kolkata and fell in love with her right away. He wants to marry her, but his mother isn't sure about making a tomboy her daughter-in-law. In the end, she gives in to her educated son's desire, and Mrinmoyi and Apurbo get married. The physical profile of Mrinmoyi as depicted in the story suggests that she is not innocent like Ratan in *The Post Master*, as there is no trace of shame, fear or guile in her large dark eyes. No one thought to ask her age because she was strong, well-built, and healthy. This shows that Mrinmoyi is much too old to get married and that her lack of femininity has already made her a bother: She was quite infamous in the village. The men affectionately referred to her as crazy, but the women were worried and petrified of her. She played only with the boys of the village, shunning and treating girls of her own age with contempt. In the children's world this girl was a veritable marauder, a borgi (Tagore 164). Tagore's story *The Postmaster* shows, however, that not everyone has the choice to get married. Only lucky girls whose parents have enough money to pay for their dowry can get married. So, Ratan, the main character of the story, who is an orphan and has no one to take care of her dowry, has to work as a maid for Postmaster Dadababu when she is 13 years old. So, Tagore had to marry a girl who was only about ten years old when he was twenty-two. In his writings, he not only shows his time, but also gives it a new shape and direction. Based on the foregoing discussions, it can be surmised that the attitude of Tagore towards women undergoes a process of evolution, as per which, in the beginning he seems to be obsessed with romanticism that holds women as a means to serve, entertain and inspire the man. However, with *Nashtoneer* (1903) he begins to touch upon the feminist issues eagerly, raising voice against women's subjectivity. So, he shows the main character of the book, Charulata, as a brave woman who decides to leave her husband and move in with his cousin, with whom she is having an affair. Between 1903 and 1940, Tagore's writings keep coming back to these kinds of bold ideas. For example, in *Gora* (1910), he gives two strong female characters, Sucharita and Lolita, their own ideas about marriage and family. In *GhareBaire*, which was written in 1916, Nikhil, a wealthy zamindar, gives his wife Bimala freedom so that she can find her true love. However, Bimala's true love doesn't respect her freedom and falls in love with Sandip, a fiery political activist. Tagore shows the problems that come from a forced marriage and stresses the need for a marriage based on consent. The above bold type of women of Tagore's perception also find place in many of his stories, such as *Steer Patra*, *Aparichita*, *Badnaam*, *Laboratory*, etc. In *Steer Patra*, Mrinal leaves her husband and his family to protest the unfair treatment of Bindu, a maid she may be in a relationship with. In *Aparichita*, Kalyani decides not to get married because of the way people treat her because of her race. But Sohini in *Laboratory* might be the most like the woman Tagore imagined. People think that the character of Sohini was based on the educated, brave, and beautiful women in Tagore's own family. Tagore probably takes a pro-woman stance in his stories because of this and because of the many ways women contribute to society, both inside and outside the home, as mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, lovers, etc. Tagore comes up with the idea of a 'complete woman' because of this. A 'complete woman' is a woman who is good at everything she does, is smart, has a goal, is brave and assertive, and is always ready to fight against injustice and being a victim under the patriarchy. As a social reformer, Tagore also writes about a wide range of women's issues in order to teach people about them and change the way society feels about them, as well as to come up with solutions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

At the same time, he tries to make women aware of how inferior they are in society and urges them to demand equality with men, which is by far the most important thing about feminism. However, while supporting the women's cause Tagore adopts a middle path, which is why at times he is even accused of being an anti-feminist, but in view of the examples of free thinking and even rebellious women like Sucharita, Lolita, Mrinmoyi, Mrinal, Sohini, etc. as portrayed by Tagore in his fiction the blame does not hold much water. Tagore prefers to adopt a middle path between social strictures and individual aspirations, thereby giving a tangible shape to his feminist perspectives. So, in the end, Tagore comes across as a feminist who, while praising women in their traditional role as homemakers, gives them enough room to express their own ideas and experiences, even on sensitive topics like gender discrimination and the relationship between men and women inside and outside of marriage.

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