



THE 'WORLD' OF WOMEN, IN THE LIGHT OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *THE HOME AND THE WORLD*

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ABSTRACT



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Rabindranath Tagore's novel *The Home and the World* offers a multidimensional portrayal of the society of the Nineteenth century Bengal, and women's condition in it at that time. Tagore aligned his affections with the intellectual group 'Brahmo Samaj', which concerned itself with the advancement of the society, and which was in support of those revolutionary changes in the society which aimed at casting away superstitions, ill-practices, and obsolete customs. Tagore, similarly, was supportive of social and cultural changes which could make people more enlightened and free. He, as well as other followers of this intellectual motto supported emancipation of women, who had been the objects of oppression since ages. This paper is concerned with exploring the pattern of society, its culture and women's role and importance in it, at the same time Tagore's portrayal of women's condition of his own time-period and his ideas regarding women's freedom. The point is to show how Tagore proposes to break the prevailing cultural mould of the time by introducing progressive thinking into his novel *The Home and the World*.

Keywords: *Nineteenth century Bengal, Obsolete customs, Cultural changes, Emancipation of women.*

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Long established social relations of power between men and women are largely responsible in maintaining pre-conceived images regarding both men and women; at the same time gender biases for women and gender privileges for men. Patriarchal society exercises unreasonable subordination of

women on the basis of their physicality and efficiency, considering that women are weaker so cannot perform those works which are considered to be masculine and which actually are necessary works for the survival of human beings. Since the beginning of human civilization, such essential works were



hunting, fighting the enemies away, plowing the fields etc. At that time women, who possess a delicate constitution in comparison to men, remained at the equal side of men. Now the human civilization has progressed so well, and human beings have acquired the status of being the best creation of God.

It is now commonly regarded that human beings are more than animals who are not only concerned with fulfilling their biological needs. It means that human beings have so many higher goals to achieve than merely hunting and killing. Power principle as a necessary doctrine of living was a conception of Stone-age, which provided domination of male over female, but in today's world where we consider human mind to be origin of all sort of powers, human physicality has become secondary.

If in today's world we consider women subordinate because they are weaker than men, does it anyway show that human mind has ever evolved, or that, are we really greater than all the other species found in nature, for we possess power in our minds. The question mark becomes bigger and bigger as much as we brood on the points like this. Patriarchy has always had the law of forcing women one step behind men. Lack of resistance against traditions force them to be used and sold in the hands of men. They have almost no choice in their lives, instead of being good wives to their husbands and to pile up children upon children because in the sacred texts of every religion it has been considered to be their prime duty.

In the 21st century, the scenario has been little beautified by feminist movement which claims to have understood the problems and challenges of women, and to have worked for women's welfare but women's situation in today's world suggest that the changes which we see, in context of liberation of women, equality and many more, are in fact ineffectual changes to be seen only from outside, a change only of the external image. Strikingly, reality remains the same as it was ever before. Consequently, in most of the countries, women have got rights equal to those of men, but the question is, are they really free to exercise their freedom? The answer is a big "no". Women are being harassed sexually, being raped everywhere, which is nothing

but exercise of power against their sexuality. Women are doomed to suffer because it is a woman who is impregnated and bears the marks of violence on her body. In general perception, woman still has not evolved out of her image of a body which is only meant to play with. The primitive man inside the suited-booted men of today's world still has not died.

By the mid-Twentieth century came Suffragette movement which opened up the discussion about what we exactly do with our women who constitute half of this world. Feminism started as a criticism of gender roles in the society. Feminists argued that the gender roles were created by men for their own benefit. Since the 1950's, feminists were broadly critical of family patterns, which were considered to be faulty at that time. The dominant family type at that time was joint family system, especially in Indian society. Joint family system had created a polarized atmosphere within the family where women were on one side, performing their ritual like duties of household; while men were on the other side of the scene, controllers and masters. Essentially, feminists viewed the organizations of the family system as a breeding ground where patriarchal values were learned by an individual. The society, on the other hand, a macrocosm of family system itself exercises same authority over women, who are generally regarded as inferior constituents of the society. Social constructs about gender roles and specific patterns of perception define woman's duty to stick to household works and demand least participation outside the home. Ambai (original name C.S. Laxmi), a Tamil authoress has brilliantly raised the issue of female drudgery inside the household. She writes in her short story "A kitchen":

From that dimly lit, narrow windowed kitchen, there were hands reaching out to control, like the eight tentacles of the octopus which lives in the sea. They reached out to bind them, tightly, tightly; and the women accepted their bonds with joy...the women entered a world that was enclosed by wire on all four sides and reigned there proudly. (Holmstrom. trans. P. 239)

The earlier Twentieth century was typical of these sort of beliefs in India. Rabindranath Tagore



who is considered to be a visionary author, realized the ill-practices which were done against women. Rabindranath Tagore in his novel *The Home and the World* (1919) tried to explore these problems inherent in Indian society, in the backdrop of Indian national freedom movement. Tagore's purpose is to bring into light, state of women in earlier twentieth century in the suitable background of freedom struggle, which constitutes a general atmosphere of social unrest and enthusiasm, thus dragging attention of every class, creed and age group of society.

Indian culture continued to remain ancient in its beliefs regarding social constructs. Women, the weaker sex was not allowed to come outside the territory of house and take part in the functioning of outer world. The main reason behind were that, firstly, women were considered to be inferior in mental as well as physical abilities. Secondly, women were considered nothing but companions and subordinates to men. In every relationship women constitute the other and inferior part, whether in the relationship of husband - wife, son - daughter, brother - sister or father - daughter. The male counterpart, in every relationship, remains the controller and master.

Bimla, the protagonist of the novel, too gets married in a house long rooted in the old aristocratic tradition where women were only the show and pride of the house. They were never to cross the threshold of the house and bring defame to the family. Bimla, who is brought up in the environment conforming to traditional values, believes that husband is the deity of women so he should be worshipped. She comes to touch the feet of Nikhil when he is asleep, believing that women who worship their husbands like gods, are sent to heaven after death. She considers herself so fortunate that Nikhil married her in spite of her dusky complexion. She is, in a way relieved to see that Nikhil too possesses a dusky complexion. Nikhil, her husband is a learned man, who believes in the liberation and education of women. Bimla was taught to live like a wife, she was overjoyed when she is envied by other women of household for her husband's dedication for her, but to Nikhil a woman is more than an object

of husband's interest. At one place in the novel they converse;

I remember I once told him: 'women's minds are so petty, so crooked!' 'like the feet of Chinese women', he replied. 'Has not the pressure of society cramped them into pettiness and crookedness? They are but pawns of the fate which gambles with them. (P.7)

Nikhil is a representative of Tagore's ideals about social reforms. He encourages Bimla to come in the *diwankhana* of the house and introduces her to Sandeep, his friend and a nationalist. It was a time when women were prohibited to enter into *diwankhana*, i.e. the drawing room which was considered to be a place specially made for men. It was a place where important discussions took place. Women, as usual had no right to interfere. But even at that time, Nikhilesh, husband of Bimla, helps her to come out in the drawing room and join political discussions with his friend Sandeep.

Here Tagore brings two spheres in order to merge - national and domestic. It is, however not the motive to pose female protagonist in between two choices, rather the woman herself becomes a site of contending ideologies of freedom, both for women as well as for nation. Bimla is perceived by sandeep, the revolutionary, as *shakti*, the goddess of power, the symbolic mother India of the radical swadeshi movement. Nikhil, her liberal *zamindar* husband also treats her as a companion in social cause, believing the western model of freedom. Nikhilesh also employs a white governess to teach Bimla. *The Home and the World* tips the scales in favour of recognition of women's roles within the private sphere. Initially, as Bimla emerges out of the *zenana* (living area of women), she realizes her worth and her role as a friend, a fellow to her husband and an educated woman in the outer world. Bimla has been enclosed within the boundary walls of her *haveli* (the palace) for nine long years in *purdah* complying with the societal norms which did not give a woman right to be conscious of herself. Her husband is enthusiastic enough to bring her out in the open world, outside the confinement of home. He says:



I would have you come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality. Merely going on with your household duties, living all your life in the world of household conventions and the drudgery of household tasks,- you were not made for that! If we meet and recognize each other in the real world, then only our love will be true. (P.8)

The freedom of having experience of the outer world was something like a dream of distant world for women at that time, but Bimla was lucky enough to have got a husband of radical ideas. Of all the debates and agitation about the social reforms of the nineteenth century, majority of them centered on those that dealt with women's utter helplessness and position in society. *Sati pratha*, prohibition of widow marriage, child marriage, polygamy and lack of education were chief evils of the society. Issues of female education and emancipation remained in the agenda of nationalists at that time but never quite achieved.

Tagore in the novel is presenting the idea with the help of Nikhilesh. Nikhilesh is the mouth piece of Tagore's liberal ideas. His understanding and support also extend to even those people whom he does not politically agree with. Nikhil befriends and funds a popular activist of swadeshi, Sandeep. Thousands of people are attracted with his charismatic personality, whom he easily sways with himself. Sandeep gradually becomes a frequent visitor at the drawing room of Nikhilesh, and gets chance to converse with Bimla as well. Bimla, too is attracted towards him. She finds views of Sandeep to be very energetic and forceful. Sandeep, being fully aware of her devotion, makes opportunist use of her. In spite of all congenial support provided by Nikhilesh, Sandeep persuades Bimla against her own husband. He even persuades Bimla to steal gold from Nikhil's case. Sandeep suffers from excessive hubris and narcissist attitude to make use of other people for his own cause. Even Bimla becomes a victim of his self interest. He says at a place that Bimla is a ripe fruit, whom he must pluck. His lustful desires do not spare a bosom-friend's wife. The contrasting views of two men - Nikhil and Sandeep, provide two different attitudes for woman, for one she is an individual who

recognizes her potential and promotes, and for the other she is an object of pleasure. Bimla's character undergoes development in which she gradually moves towards realization. Her wavering consciousness, awakened by her husband Nikhil, now allows her to think in more liberated terms. Bimla, thus gradually starts thinking about herself, that she is actually the *shakti*, the she-power. Bimla starts to think that even her husband is not quite worthy as a swadeshi activist for he did not prohibited importation of foreign goods in his estates. At the beginning she is angry that God did not make her beautiful, for beauty is considered to be one of the most precious possessions of a woman. When Bimla was a traditional woman with little contact to the outside world, she misunderstood that a woman's physicality is her power, that her sexual charm is most important. Early in the novel she relates how Nikhil's grandmother had chosen Bimla for mostly as she did not fit the archetype of a beautiful young woman. Bimla has a dark complexion and she gladdens when she meets Nikhil, on finding him similar in appearance. Bimla's logic understood that whilst all other wives were beautiful, their physical superiority prevented their husbands from falling prey to vices of the world. She failed to understand that if a husband is moved towards other things it is not simply the lack of beauty in a wife rather it is more a lack of companionship and understanding. Nikhil too, is more attracted towards goodness of her character, and loves her as much as a beautiful woman would be loved.

Bimla's misconception leads her towards misunderstanding Sandeep, whose forceful personality she finds bewitching. She gets attracted towards him more for the appeal his physicality had. Her blind faith in swadeshi movement, leads her to take bold moves, ignoring her husband and diverting her energies in towards Sandeep. Tagore would have us believe that Bimla is actually being made an object in the hands of Sandeep, but the reality is that she gradually comes to know that Sandeep is totally different from her conception about him. She, in course of time comes to know that her inclination towards Sandeep is wrong:



I have been noticing for some time that there is a gross cupidity about Sandeep. His fleshly feelings make him harbor delusions about his religion and impel him into tyrannical attitude in his patriotism. (31)

Bimla gets a lesson regarding what is actually right and what is wrong through a process of self realization. It is a matter to muse about, whether Tagore has a message to be conveyed with the help of Bimla's character development that she gradually comes back to her previous identity of a wife, and her flights of advancement were just for a short span. Her coming back to the identity of a Bimla who adored her husband is not the regression of a woman from progress and liberation, but a woman's real education in a real world, where she is now able to differentiate between right and wrong. It is like the way an infant learns to stay away from fire once he burns his hand by touching it. Bimla is representative in the novel, of a generation which was learning to come out of home, unaware of vices of outside world. How she comes across practicality of the *baire*, or the world does only increase her knowledge about it.

Tagore has, however presented the majoritarian point of view that rigorous practices which were being employed for the liberation of the country, come at a cost. Feminism, secondly, may be instrumental in bringing reforms, but the actual picture lies behind the diwankhana where lives go through changes. At a glance it seems that Tagore has made Bimla indirectly a passive respondent in hands of two men who direct her life. He seems mostly like a preacher when he chooses to prove that Sandeep is a villain and her husband is an angel, therefore she must return to him. But the important point is that Bimla becomes stronger in the process of struggle with her inner world, her household who were against her freedom, and the outside world. The inside as well as the outside world, however has not been ready to accept a woman modern in her notions, because of the fear that it would lead to the disintegration of family. An article published in *Bamabodhini Patrika* stated that:

They (the educated Bengali women) instead of respecting their husbands often express

sharp, impertinent and cruel statements. They try and control the mother in law and other elders with great discourtesy. They waste their time in purposeless amusements such as playing cards instead of paying attention to the housework. (qtd. in Sengupta and Purkayastha P. 46)

Primary job of a woman has always been considered to be managing household, and neglect of it a big offence. Even in today's world the family mechanism operates around the female, not the male. The obligations of family life, household and society has been both managed by women, still they are unable to get their due respect, as attending to household is considered to be a job of trivial value. The irony is that even the triviality of this job has been so confining to the women that their identity has been overshadowed by it. Rabindranath Tagore has focused his attention on this confinement which has turned into social custom, consequently emerging from this situation has remained highly offensive in society and challenging to women.

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