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印度两大史诗和 泰戈尔作品中的 女性人物研究

Women Characters in the Works of Tagore
— a Study in the Perspective of the *Mahabharata*
and the *Ramayana*



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Dedications

**To my dear sister Wei
for her love, affection, prayer...**

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Introduction

This is a comparative study of the women characters in the two great epics of India, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* with those in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's women characters are in focus while those in the epics are the background and the framework.

Women characters in the epics and in Tagore fall into five types:

1. wives;
2. widows;
3. women in love;
4. educated women characters;
5. tragic women characters.

As a heuristic principle, in view of the large number of characters in the Epics and in Tagore, I shall take closer look only about the representative characters from each type.

"Only by comparison can similarities and differences be clearly seen", this is a popular saying in China, the country of my origin. From a comparison between the female characters in the two epics and those in the works of Tagore, we can see how Tagore was influenced by the epics, how he followed and developed the tradition of the epics and how he re-contextualised the epic characters in general and women in particular. Also, the similarities and differences of the state of women in these two eras can be understood.

Why do we choose women characters as a window to make comparative study between these monuments of Indian literature? Women are the mirror of a society, their condition and treatment reflect the concerns and constraints of a society. In the *Mahabharata* and the

Ramayana it was for the sake of heroines (Draupadi in the former and Sita in the latter) that great wars broke out and soul-stirring events happened. Such heroines as Draupadi, Sita, Damayanti, Sakuntala, Savitri, Gandhari, Kunti, Devayani become traditional models for Indian women and perpetual heroines in the history of Indian literature. With the exception of *Gora*, the central theme of all the novels of Tagore revolves around a woman. Other women in his works also play significant roles. Of over 100 short stories written by Tagore, about 70 are stories of women; of 5 novelettes, the main characters are all women; of 8 novels, main characters are women in 5 novels, and female characters are equal in number in the other three (*Gora*, *The Wreck*, and *The Royal Sage*); of about 40 dramas, 34 have heroines as their main characters. So we can say without hesitation that most of the works of Tagore are about women characters. If women characters are excluded, little remains of his works.

There are inherent and inevitable connections between Tagore's works and the epics. Through a comparative study we can see and articulate those inherent and inevitable connections. That is, how Tagore was influenced by the two great epics, how Tagore inherited the literature tradition of the two epics and, more importantly, how he widened and extended that tradition. Only in this way we can appreciate Tagore's place in the realm of literature.

In ancient India in all patriarchal societies the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event. Daughters were regarded ill eligible for offering oblations to the manes. Child marriage came into vogue from about the beginning of the Christian era, and soon thereafter both *niyoga*, or levirate, namely, to have children with brothers or relatives of only their childless late husbands, and widow remarriage were prohibited. Inter-caste marriage began to be disapproved by society. Remarriage was no longer possible. The growing prevalence of the Sati

custom from about the 5th century A.D. added to the poignancy of the grief. But when the temporary feeling of disappointment was over, the family took as keen an interest in the daughter as it did in the son. Some of them like Devayani were too much fondled and became spoilt children. Unmarried girls were, therefore, among the persons, selected to receive Rama on his return to Ayodhya from his long exile and to offer him the coronation ablution. It is interesting to note that Rama was offered this important religious ablution at the hands of unmarried girls first and then of his trusted generals and ministers.

Education was imparted to girls before they got married. Ceremonial initiation into Vedic studies was as common in the case of girls as it was in the case of boys. The initiation ceremony was followed by a period of discipline and education, which was regarded as very essential to secure a very suitable match. A maiden could succeed in her marriage only if she had been properly trained. Women students were divided into two classes, *Brahmavadinis* and *Sadyodv*. The former were long life students of theology and philosophy; the latter used to pursue their studies till their marriage. During the eight or nine years that were thus available to them for study, they used to learn by heart the Vedic hymns prescribed for the daily and periodical prayers and for those rituals and sacraments in which they had to take an active part after their marriage. The cultivation of fine arts like music, dancing and painting was encouraged in the case of girls. Musical recitation of the Sama^① hymns was originally special function of ladies. Girls in ruling families used to receive some military and administrative training also.

Marriage was regarded as a social and religious duty and necessity. It was regarded as obligatory for girls. Prepuberty marriage

① *Sama-Veda*, the third *Veda*, its *samhita*, or principal part is wholly metrical, consisting of 1549 verses, of which only 75 are not traceable to the *Rig-Veda*.

became the order of the day. The bride must be a virgin at the time of her wedding. Absolute chastity was to be most desired. Divorce was not possible because the marriage sacrament united the parties in an indissolubility, and the husband and wife each prayed that their love and friendship be lasting, genuine and indissoluble. In actual practice, down to about the beginning of the Christian era, divorces and remarriages took place now and then in all sections of society even after the consummation of the first marriage. And divorce was permitted to Sudras and other lower castes. The dowry system did not stand as an impediment in daughter's marriage. In rich and royal families some gifts used to be given to the son-in-law at the time of marriage. Draupadi, Subhadra and Uttara brought with them rich presents of horses, elephants and jewels at the time when they left their parents' homes after their marriage. These presents could hardly be called dowries, for they were voluntarily made after the marriage out of pure affection. Wealth, beauty, health, intelligence and good family were the main considerations in the selection of the bride and the bridegroom. The caste did not raise any insurmountable barrier in the way of marriage for a long time. While a husband was permitted to remarry during the life-time of the first wife, he was not allowed to divorce the wife even when she was completely forsaken. It is interesting to note that even Manu himself observed that a wife was not to blame if she abandoned a husband who was impotent, insane, or suffering an incurable or contagious disease. This abandonment of the husband practically amounted to a divorcee, for Manu permitted such a wife to remarry if her previous marriage was not consummated. Sati of a widow was widely prevalent in epic time. There were three courses open for them: they could either pass their remaining life in widowhood, have children by levirate (*niyoga*) or remarry regularly. For remarriage of a widow, we have only one instance in the *Mahabharata*: Ulupi was a widow, and she

practically compelled Arjuna to marry her. Child widow remarriage was also allowed. But such remarriages were very rare.

A good wife was supposed to be one, who was obedient to her husband. Her real happiness was centred around her husband. The home management, however, was under her direct charge. She was to frame a proper annual budget and regulate the daily expenditure according to it.

In Tagore's time, the birth of a girl was not as much an unwelcome event as that in the epic age. The rising of the marriageable age helped the cause of female education in a remarkable degree. Many schools including colleges and universities were established. Marriage was not an impediment to female education. Much more girls from different castes were educated. A group of female intellectuals came into society. Child marriage was no less than in the epic age. Divorce could be had only by an Act of Parliament. But very few persons divorced. Married life, and wife's duties did not change much. There was still Sati custom. Widows were regarded as inauspicious, but all the widows could remarry. But a lot of them dedicated themselves to religious and spiritual pursuits. The custom of levirate (*niyoga*) was not existing any more. Purdah system was still popular. But some educated women came to public life. They could even join men in their debates.

Some female intellectuals called for emancipation of women. They began to figure in the political movements. They had more freedom in religion and had more economic and proprietary rights.

In Bengal, traditionally, women had more rights, especially in inheritance and partition.

The epics provide both theory and models in respect of women. In any case they enable us to judge many issues. Vyasa and Valmiki depicted many women characters in which the state of women in the societies of their ages is reflected. The *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*

are almost like encyclopedias on women's rights, duties and status, thereby confronting practically all women issues. The two epics give a vivid and objective picture of life of women in ancient India.

From the epic age to Tagore's age, it is a long span of time. Certainly such a long span of time has witnessed great changes. But cultural traditions pass with relatively little change from generation to generation. Some of Tagore's women characters like Chitrangada in drama *Chitrangada*, Devayani in *Curse at Farewell*, Gandhari in *Gandhari's Prayer* and Kunti in *Karna and Kunti Dialogue* are drawn directly from the two epics.

Why did Tagore portray so many women characters in his works? The great influence of the epics is of course the first reason. Here we have other five points to answer this: the open and free cultural atmosphere of his family, the influence that Mahatma Gandhi's revolutionary thought on women issues exerted on Tagore, matriarchal influences persisting in Bengal, his unique ideas on Indian Dharmasatras and his own ideas on Indian women.

Tagore's open and free cultured family exerted great influence on Tagore in his ideas on Indian women. His birthplace, Jorasanko in Calcutta functioned as a pivot for all progressive movements that led to far-reaching changes and exercised considerable influence in shaping the social, economic and cultural life of India. What was beneficial in the new culture was borrowed freely. The members of the family built up through their activities the atmosphere that helped the genius of Tagore to full-blown blossom to perfection. His grandfather Dwarkanath was a pioneer in many fields, in trade, banking and industry. Debendranath, his father, distinguished himself as the leader of the new religious movement engendered by the impact of the Western culture. As a follower of Ram Mohan Roy, he became one of the leaders of Brahmo Samaj. He was a reformer. His compassion towards women was a

potential force in his life and he was in quest of an adequate formulation of a moral code to parallel the religious principles of his Brahmo Dharma. The outcome was sincere statement of ethical duties that recognized the need for changes in Hindu social life particularly in matters relating to the treatment of women. Abanindranath, the grandson of his brother, Girindranath, was a famous painter. Tagore's first elder brother Dwijendranath was a writer, translator and musician. The son of Dwijendranath, Sudhindranath, was a writer, initiator of the journal *Sadhana* and founder of Tagore Research Institute. Tagore's second elder brother, Satyendranath was the first official in the Indian Civil Service. Satyendranath was concerned about the welfare of Indian women. His wife Jnanadanadini Devi joined him by boldly defying and breaking the *Purdah* system and encouraging women to discard the *purdah* and participate in public life and fight for the rights of free movement of women in Indian homes. Their son Surendranath was a writer and translator of Tagore's works. Tagore's fifth elder brother, Jyotirindranath was a musician, poet, dramatist, translator and painter. His wife Kadambari Devi also extended a helping hand. She bore extreme affection for Tagore. Swarnakumari, Tagore's elder sister was recognized as the first woman writer of note in Bengali literature. Her daughter Sarala Devi was a musician and a fighter for Indian freedom. ①

Gandhiji was the life-long friend of Tagore. His thought naturally influenced Tagore. No man in India has done more than Gandhiji for the elevation of women and their rightful place in domestic and public life. A passionate lover of humanity, an implacable foe of injustice in whatever form or sphere, it is no small wonder that Gandhiji so greatly espoused the cause of women. Through his long life of service to the

① James W. Furrell. *The Tagore Family*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2004

nation he preached forcegully against the wrongs done to women in the name of law, tradition and even religion. He spoke out fearlessly against enforced widowhood, *purdah*, the dedication of girls to temples, prostitution, early marriage, dowry system, and economic bondage of women.

The geographical environment influences human expressions. Matriarchal influences persisted in Bengal. The topography which has resulted from the meeting of the three rivers exerted a great influence on the Bengali mentality and naturally, on Tagore. In the ancient social system of Bengal, the women had a preponderant role. The Bengalis built a diverse social system that contained certain characteristics of both the matriarchal and patriarchal societies, according to necessity. In Bengali society, unlike in the rest of India, a daughter, after marriage, does not lose the identity of her father's family. Bengal adopted a system of its own because its culture is not the unmixed Gangetic culture, but a blended culture of Gangetic, Rarhi and Brahmaputra valley cultures. Its Dayabhaga system of laws allows girls to have a particular type of legal relationship with their parents.

Tagore knew well the Indian Dharmasastras. He was in the line of the seers and sages whose words were a poetry of unsurpassed beauty, sweetness and light. Tagore wrote with the same mystic vision about the union of joy and immortality. His poetry and prose embraced vast horizons and he caught the beauty and the music of the Eternal, of which he was a witness and a mouthpiece.

Tagore was an ardent student of the Dharmasastras and he derived some of his reformist ideas from them. There are many Dharmasastras, Sage Manu, of course is accepted as the first law-maker. Many phases of the individual and social life are dealt with in the *Manu Dharmasastra* which Tagore discussed in the course of his various writings. In some of his essays he discussed *Manu Dharmasastra: Man, The Religion of*

Man , Personality , Sadhana , Creative Unity , The Centre of Indian Culture , and Nationalism. He dealt with man, his life personality and spirit, his relationship with the universe, the four *Ashrams*, or four stages in the Hindu's life, the student, the teacher, meditation, second birth, the school and the university, the ideal of marriage, the woman and her place in the society, the Indian conception of nation, nationalism, and the spirit of freedom and, finally, his conception of the soul and the consciousness, the creative spirit, the superman, the realization of the finite and the religion of the forest. Being a poet, Tagore felt the Eternal through the sensorium, and saw it through mode of beauty. Any elaboration of Tagore's exposition of the various aspects of life dealt with by the *Dharmasastras*, couched in a language of extraordinary beauty, fails to do justice to his powerful and beautiful expositions. As a great writer, Tagore had his own ideas on *The Law of Manu*. The following is a comparison between *Manusmṛti*, *Manu Dharmaśāstra* and Tagore. From this comparison it can be seen that Tagore differed from them. Here are some excerpts:

The form, in which for the reason of a reciprocal marriage of hearts the bridegroom is mated with the bride, is called Gandharva. It originates from a couple's passionate desire of being united with each other. ①

The Gandharva marriage is based on mutual consent. The bride-groom selects the bride. Romance, outraged parents, absence of ceremonial solemnization characterizes this type. ... Manu would try to eliminate all that goes by the name of "romance". He would put marriage on a mental and moral plane. The sex urge there certainly is, but it should be brought under the control of intelligence.

① English translation of M. N. Dutt. *Manusmṛti*. New Delhi: Sanskrit Text, Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishtan, 1998, p. 98

Marriage should be arranged by parents. One should marry first and then learn to love, and not “fall in love”, and then marry. That would not be real love, it would be desire, and desire should be brought under control as much as possible. ①

Manu gives the name of Gandharva to marriage by mutual choice, and signifies his disapprobation by stigmatizing it as “born of desire”. The way to marriage, which is shown by the torchlight of passion, was not for its goal – the welfare of society, but the satisfaction of desire... If the institution of marriage has to be regulated strictly from the social stand-point, room cannot be found for the personal wishes of the people concerned. ②

Having bathed with the permission of his Guru at the termination of his vow, a Brahman shall marry a wife of his own caste, possessed of auspicious signs. ③

Manu advises endogamy, that is marriage in one's own group. Such marriage will attract souls of similar nature, and there need be no fear of confusion of castes... Manu is averse to indiscriminate amalgamation of different ethnic stocks. ④

It is humiliating that some of our countrymen are opposing this Hindu Inter-caste Marriage Bill by Hon. Mr. Patel under the notion that it will injure Hindu society if it is passed. They do not seem to consider that those who are already willing to accept the social

① Kewal Motwani. *Manu Dharmasatra: a Social and Historical Study*, Ganesh & Co. Private Ltd, Madras, 1958, p. 114

② Rabindranath Tagore: *The Indian Ideal of Marriage. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 529

③ English translation of M. N. Dutt. *Manusmṛiti*. New Delhi: Sanskrit text, Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan, 1998, p. 98

④ Kewal Motwani. *Manu Dharmasatra: A Social and Historical Study*. Ganesh & Co. Private Ltd, Madras, 1958, p. 114

martyrdom should not have any further coercion, passive or active, from any governing power, to oblige them to observe against their will such conventions as are not based upon the foundation of moral laws. ①

Men should never give any license to their wives in day and night; by keeping them engaged in commendable pursuits, they should keep them under their own control. ②

If a wife obeys her husband, she will, for that reason, be exalted in heaven. ③

In the present age, the wrong is in woman's lack of freedom in her relationship with man, which compels her to turn her disabilities into attractions, and to use her untruth as her allies in the battle of life, while she is suffering from the precariousness of her position. ④

The following is the general idea of Tagore on the above-mentioned *Manusmṛti* :

Many of the laws and social regulations guiding the relationships of man and woman are relics of a barbaric age, when the brutal pride of an exclusive possession had its dominance in human relation such as those of parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and servants, teachers and disciples. The vulgarity of it still persists

① Rabindranath Tagore. *Hindu Intercaste Marriage. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 741, Vol. III

② *Manusmṛti*. tr. ed. M. N. Dutt. New Delhi: Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishtan, 1998, p. 391

③ Kewal Motwani. *Manu Dharmasatra: a Social and Historical Study*. Ganesh & Co. Private Ltd., 1958, Madras, p.112

④ Rabindranath Tagore. *Hindu Intercaste Marriage. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 741, Vol. III

in the social bond between the sexes because of the economic helplessness of woman. ①

It is a religious responsibility for women to live the life which is their own for establishing and maintaining human relationships requiring the highest moral qualities. ②

At the same time, Tagore developed his own worldview on Indian women and about Indian women.

Tagore knew the importance of women in the world:

The human world is the women's world. ③

In God's world women have their magic wands everywhere, which keep their hearts awake. ④

Wherever there is something which is concretely personal and human, there is woman's world. All her forces instinctively bring things to some shape of fullness. ⑤

In Tagore's mind, woman is somewhat even greater than man:

Woman is endowed with the passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self-sacrifice in a greater measure than man is. This passive quality has given woman that large and deep placidity which is so necessary for the healing and nourishing and storing of life. ⑥

Women have the vital power more strongly than men have.

① Rabindranath Tagore. *Women and Home. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 553, Vol. II

② Ibid. p. 554

③ Rabindranath Tagore. *Women. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 411, Vol. II

④ Ibid. p. 412

⑤ Ibid. p. 413

⑥ Ibid. p. 412

They are the mothers of the race, and they have a real interest in the things that are around them, that are the common things of life; if they did not have that, then the race would perish.^①

Woman is not less necessary in civilization than man but possibly more so.^②

Woman has been an inspiration to man, guiding most often unconsciously, his restless energy into an immense variety of creation in literature, art, music and religion. This is why, in India, woman has been described as the symbol of Sakti, the creative power.^③

But Tagor knew deeply that Indian women were suffering from unequal positions:

Women of India, like women everywhere, have their share of suffering.^④

He called for equality of women and men and the women to assert themselves creatively:

Women will have their true place.^⑤

It is not that woman is merely seeking her freedom of livelihood, struggling against man's monopoly of business, but against man's monopoly of civilization where he is breaking her heart every day and desolating her life.^⑥

Woman should use her power to break through the surface and

① Ibid. p. 412

② Ibid. p. 414

③ Rabindranath Tagore. *Women and Home. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 552, Vol. II

④ Ibid. p. 553.

⑤ Rabindranath Tagore. *Women. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 412, Vol. II

⑥ Ibid. p. 414

go to the center of thing. ①

The union of man and woman will represent a perfect co-operation in building up of human history in equal terms in every department of life. The future Eve will lure away the future Adam from the wilderness of a masculine dispensation and mingles her talents with those of her partner in a joint creation of a paradise of their own. ②

Tagore appealed to women for their own emancipation, freedom and rights:

The time has come when woman's responsibility has become greater than ever before, when her field of work has far transcended the domestic sphere of life. ③

And in the future civilization and the women, the feebler creatures-feebler at least in their outer aspects, who are less muscular, and who have been behind hand, always left under the shadow of those huge creatures, the men-they will have their place, and those bigger creatures will have to give way. ④

Woman can bring her fresh mind and all her power of sympathy to this new task of building up a spiritual civilization, if she will be conscious of her responsibilities. ⑤

Just because woman has been insulated, has been living in a sort of obscurity, behind man, she will get her compensation in the civilization which is waiting to come. ⑥

① Ibid. p. 413

② Ibid

③ Rabindranath Tagore. *Women. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 2002, p. 413, Vol. II

④ Ibid. p. 414

⑤ Ibid. p. 414

⑥ Ibid. p. 414