

Having experienced an uneventful arranged marriage with a husband who was 13 years older, she was never able to befriend him. Jyotirindranath Tagore, or Jyoti Babu as the world knew him, was more like a custodian to his young bride than a companion. And Rabindranath became her playmate. The young Robi, as she would call him affectionately, was mesmerised by Notun Bouthan, a chirpy little girl who looked more like a friend than a guardian and so they fraternised easily.

Being a progressive man, Jyotirindranath Tagore encouraged this friendship, and respected the need for the young minds to associate.

And friends they were...

"My new sister-in-law could cook well and enjoyed feeding people. As soon as I came from school, some delicacy made with her own hands stood ready for me. One day she gave me shrimp curry with yesterday's soaked rice, and a dash of chillies for flavouring, and I felt that I had nothing left to wish for..."

— **Chelebela (Boyhood by Rabindranath Tagore)**

Bengali culture also has a special place for bonding between the 'bhabi' and the 'debor' — a friendship that transcends any sort of definition — a close one could be a friendship that is built on respect, trust, and camaraderie.

Rabindranath and Kadambari's relationship was something of that sort, or maybe a little more, we cannot say for sure, but what we can agree on at the moment, is that these two creative souls certainly bonded over their love for literature, music, and drama.

Kadambari, an illiterate girl and daughter of the household accountant, learned her literature and mathematics after marriage. Being the intelligent girl that she was, Kadambari bloomed into a remarkable woman in her teens and became the centre of Jorasanko's literary activities.

It is believed that if it was not for this energetic and bold girl and her creative ideas and constant plying to improve Tagore's writing, Rabindranath would not have been able to rise to such incredible heights of fame.

On a personal front, things did not go too well for Kadambari as she never got close to her husband, who was almost always busy with estate affairs, creative dealings and meetings with the literary hub of the society, where he never took Kadambari. She felt belittled, neglected, lonely and out of place.

Unable to bear children, there was also the constant rebuking by the ladies of the household, tagging her as barren. Perhaps the pinnacle of shock came when Urmila, the daughter of her sister-in-law Shorno Kumari, whom she loved, adopted, and raised as her own, accidentally fell down a flight of stairs and died in her arms.

Her depression heightened and the only solace she received was from Rabindranath, his writings and the times they shared together discussing literature and poetry.

However, with time as the situation progressed, so did the lives of the members of the Tagore family and based on that flow, Rabindranath's marriage with Mrinalini was arranged, which Rabindranath obediently abided.

After the marriage to an 11-year-old Bhavatarini, later renamed Mrinalini, distance grew between the two former



friends and Kadambari was unable to bear the isolation.

Perhaps this was her reason to take her life, with an opium overdose on April 1884, just four months after Rabindranath's marriage, or perhaps it was something else, we would never know. The Tagore family always remained silent about her suicide and buried all evidence to evade gossip.

However, Rabindranath was deeply shaken by this tragedy as he had lost his childhood friend and confidante, and over the years would dedicate many songs and poems to his lost Kadambari, Hecate, Notun Bouthan...

"But where is the sweetheart of mine who was almost the only companion of my boyhood, and with whom I spent my idle days of youth exploring the mysteries of dreamland? She, my Queen, has died and my world has shut against the door of its inner apartment of beauty which gives on the real taste of freedom."

(Excerpts from a letter written by Rabindranath Tagore to C F Andrews)

Rabindranath kept alive the memories of his beloved Notun Bouthan through his writing. He penned the lyrics dedicating it to one "He—or Hecate"—The goddess

of magic, moon and the night, a loving nickname that he had given to his Notun Bouthan during their childhood days of friendship.

By Mehryn Mubdi Chowdhury
Excerpts have been collected from different books and online sites.

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

Model: Mysha

Styling: Tabinda

Makeup: Farzana Shakil's Makeover Salon

Wardrobe: Warez

Jewellery & Khussas: Chondon

Location: Chondon