



Madhurilata Devi



Renuka Devi



Mira Devi

Women in the World of Rabindranath — In Fiction and Family

The huge gap existing between men and women in respect of freedom enjoyed by the two sexes in our society has always been a source of great pain to me. That, to be sure, constitutes the main element of tragedy in most of my short stories.

by Zaheda Ahmad

The tragedy of women's life that he so movingly presented in his literature, haunted and destroyed the lives of his daughters.

THAT was true of course but not the whole truth since it was not short stories alone but his novels, plays and poetry also which had depicted, in equal measure and with similar care and concern, the suffering of our womenfolk — rich and poor alike — at the hands of a male dominated society. Here also, as in so many other respects, he is unique in the sense that neither before nor since do we find, in our literary world, such an impressive array of female characters who defied, dissented from and rebelled against the norms and practices of an oppressive patriarchal social system. To be sure, his ideals of womanhood and his views on various women's issues were never static. Throughout his long creative career his ideas went through a constant process of evolution and transformation in keeping with the changing shifts and turns in the inner and outside world of Rabindranath.

Similarly Henrik Ibsen's (1828-1906) "A Doll's House" (1879) — that noble literary expression of a woman's urge to seek and establish her own distinct human identity and fulfillment — did not appear to have moved Rabindranath much. Rabindranath's quarrel with another noted Bengali female writer and social worker Krishnabhavini Das (1864-1919) on the contents of ideal female education is another example of his doubts about the nature of education suitable for women's fulfilment. Those contradictions notwithstanding, Rabindranath was clear in his strong condemnation of female subjugation and denial of their human rights sanctioned by religion and ancient social customs and conventions. No wonder, while Krishnabhavini, under attack from various sources, almost instantly moved away from her radical stand Rabindranath could only move forward. Shortly after his literary encounter with Krishnabhavini, he came out with another first in *Chitrangada* — a play in which the royal heroine sought her own fulfilment in an equal partnership with Arjun, her male suitor. She expressly looked upon that relationship as a mutually satisfying bond nurtured not on the conventional ingredient of sexual demands and dependence alone but on a much more durable foundation built on shared ideals, pleasures and pains of life together. This was the ideal of a new womanhood though not entirely modern in the sense that Chitrangada while objecting to the use of women as sex object or symbol herself initially attempted to win over Arjun by the same questionable exploitation of female charms.

say that his women — Shashikala, Chandara, Haimanti, Mrinal, Kumu, Labanya — to name only a few, had, to a varying extent, radical non-conformist ideas on the whole spectrum of women's issues affecting their lives. To their creator, emancipation from bondage — religious, social, economic, and intellectual was equally essential for both males and females. Without that no human being could reach the full height of his or her potential. That is why we come across the term "emancipation" again and again in the vast creative output of Rabindranath's genius. And yet the fact remains that the poet, himself, in spite of all his longings, could not, in his private life, wholly escape from tentacles of an unjust social system. The tragedy of women's life that he so movingly presented in his literature, haunted and destroyed the lives of his daughters. He had three, the second of whom, was married at the age of eleven and died in two years' time of tuberculosis. Rabindranath never sent any of his daughters to any educational institutions but got them well-educated at home under his personal supervision and with the help of half a dozen European and Indian teachers. Anxious to get Madhurilata — his eldest daughter — married at age of 14 he found a suitable husband for her but at a hefty price of Rs ten thousand along with other handsome gifts in kind. Sharat, his son-in-law, was the son of another well known Bengali poet, Biharilal Chakrabarty. A lawyer by profession, who got an English Bar-at-Law degree after the marriage, later parted company with his illustrious father-in-law on some points of petty family squabbles. They never met again and it was left to the two — the loving father and daughter — to suffer the pains of separation in silence beyond the gaze of the outside world. She died, at the early age of

31, of the same disease as her younger sister and the father, who visited her occasionally at her home, usually in the absence of her husband, turned back without seeing her for the last time on the day she died. It is said that her "failed" married life inspired her father to draw the immortal literary portrait of Haimanti in one of his moving short stories.

His youngest daughter, Mira, had an even more unhappy married life. She too got married by paying a steep dowry but could not buy her the happiness that he desired for her. That son-in-law, Nagendranath Ganguly came from a family far below Rabindranath's socio-economic status. He went abroad for higher education at his father-in-law's expense, came back, trained as an agricultural scientist but left his wife and two children in a few years time. The poet, when he selected and sent him abroad, had entertained such high hopes of engaging him in his social and educational work in rural Bengal. But Nagendranath, obstinate, petty minded and with a violent temper, had other dreams and plans for his own life. Mira, the poet's life long companion, suffered in silence too, never mentioning her estranged husband's name for once even in her autobiography. Her tragedy the poet bore with exemplary patience and forbearance but it nevertheless left its scar on him.

Rabindranath's series of letters written to Nagendranath, and published three years ago, give a very moving account of the poet's suffering. They are also a real-life testimony to his courageous and radical views on women's rights and position in our society. One only wonders if the poet, being the most illustrious scion of one of the most distinguished families of Bengal, had to endure a fate like this what about the lot of the countless other ordinary women of Bengal? It is a cruel and unjust society indeed that brings down the high and low together not on a glorious mission but to put them at more or less the similar level of personal misery.

The writer, who teaches history at Dhaka University, is editor of *Shomoy*, a view-weekly.



Access to credit is human right

Women Lead a Credit Revolution

by A M Ahmed

A quiet revolution is taking place in northern areas of Bangladesh. Elsewhere, poor rural women are denied credit and thus economic opportunity. Here increasingly large numbers are now regular savers and borrowers with commercial banks. The gulf between two different worlds — of commercial banking and poor and illiterate women — are not only closed but actively bridged.

in Ulipur District proudly show their bank passbooks (photo). Formed five years ago, the fifteen women of the group have begun to do something remarkable that their menfolk were unable to achieve — successfully combat poverty. Women, more than men, work together more co-operatively in groups. The began by doing some rickshacking to a small scale, then bought a rickshaw,

and started some trades (*paan* and *biri* selling). Trained by NGO, Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) the group have successfully taken several loans from RAKUB to develop group and family income-earning activities. Led by the women, the families of one poor village in a poor district are slowly escaping poverty and entering a more hopeful world. Gaining access to credit from the banks seemed impossible not so long ago. Now both the women and the banks are experienced and confident. "The revolution is reality."

Not the Doll's House: In Praise of Noora

by Rebecca Haque

FOR years, I have been an insignificant member of the infamous and undeservedly reviled "silent" majority. (Of course, as my students and my friends know only too well, I really am not so silent most of the time.) However, in these days of social divisiveness between reason and unreason, between bigotry and enlightenment — in a phrase, between light and darkness — I am forced to recognize my innate political consciousness and cannot therefore easily discard or reject the burgeoning awareness of a profound social responsibility. This is, I see now, part of the burden of being an educated and privileged woman in a land drenched with the blood and tears of millions of unjustly neglected, less-educated, and less-privileged women crying out for recognition, for respect, for *raksha*.

Let, I beseech you, let Noora see the light of day; let her breathe the fresh, clear air of truth and goodness and knowledge. Do not stifle her; do not cripple her; do not, ye stalwart inheritors of Bangali renown, do not let Noora be buried alive under the dark heavy stone of superstition, ignorance and hypocrisy.

What do women want? This is the simple question which needs to be addressed in direct and unequivocal terms, now more than ever when the rising mist of discord over the issue of women's public role threatens to cloud the vision of even some of the most clear-sighted and intelligent and rational male members of our society. What do we want, you ask? In simple terms, without going into mendacious throat-cutting ideological arguments, Bangali women, as child-bearers and nurturers and home-makers, want peace and a better future for their offsprings.

right direction. An educated working-woman is a more responsible woman: she is aware of her dual private and public obligations. It is impossible for a Bangali woman to divide her work into clearly demarcated separate spheres. Psychologically, emotionally, a man may with impunity split himself between his domestic role and his public role, and come home at the end of the work-day pleasantly anticipating — or more likely, expecting, demanding — rest, a hot meal, and the gentle ministrations of the "angel in the house". A woman, on the other hand, carries her concern for the family with her wherever she goes; ideas of nurturance, of growth, of welfare are always uppermost in her mind.

she, above all, has a keener, more rewarding (though not always consciously articulated) awareness of the need for mutually fulfilling ways of expressing and reinforcing ideas of familial and communal harmony.

For example, efficient women find time for meaningful interaction after work not only for their loved ones and dependants, they also make time for themselves: they gossip (a very necessary human activity, as psychologists have recently discovered), for gossip enables women to share knowledge and sometimes gather knowledge about areas of life inaccessible to them personally but essential for successful transaction in the great circle of the world inside and outside the home; they go on shopping trips to the market, and they entertain themselves by having parties — all activities indicative of their sense of a wholesome camaraderie among women as a group.

What do Bangali women need? Clearly, we need to be recognized as a politically vital and economically viable entity of the social fabric. Clearly, all of us need to be assured of safety in the work-place. Clearly, there must exist a sense of mutual amity and respect between co-workers of opposite sexes — men must show the same degree of courtesy (or indifference) to their female co-workers as they are wont to show to their mothers and sisters and daughters.



Independent income enhances a woman's self-esteem. — photo: AKM Mohsin

Clearly, we need to be recognized as a politically vital and economically viable entity of the social fabric. Clearly, all of us need to be assured of safety in the work-place. Clearly, there must exist a sense of mutual amity and respect between co-workers of opposite sexes — men must show the same degree of courtesy (or indifference) to their female co-workers as they are wont to show to their mothers and sisters and daughters.

Let, I beseech you, let Noora see the light of day; let her breathe the fresh, clear air of truth and goodness and knowledge. Do not stifle her; do not cripple her; do not, ye stalwart inheritors of Bangali renown, do not let Noora be buried alive under the dark heavy stone of superstition, ignorance and hypocrisy.

The writer teaches English at Dhaka University.

She has been through Hell and Writes like an Angel

By Gloria Ogunbadejo

MAYA Angelou loves language. "I love the sound of the human voice." But the award-winning African-American writer took a vow of silence for five years because she thought she had killed a man.

She took her vow of silence after being raped by one of mother's lovers at the age of seven. When she came out of hospital she gave the name of the rapist who was put on trial. He was released the next day but was later found beaten to death.

Overwhelmed by guilt and convinced she had caused the rapist's death, she took a vow of silence and did not speak for five years. "I thought my voice had actually killed a man. I thought this was dangerous because it meant that anybody, even those I loved, could just be killed by my voice. So I just stopped talking."

disappointment, because the delight of Afro-Americans at being in a country ruled by Blacks for Blacks was met with suspicion and resentment. But the experience, together with other setbacks and racist attacks, Angelou insists, have left her wiser but not embittered. One of the positive lessons she learned was that "a lot of what I call Afro Americanisms had their origin in Africa. Ways of speaking, moving, treating other people, were all actually Africanisms. I had always believed that we (Black Americans) had been stripped of our culture through slavery, but this was not the case and it was a fabulous experience to find this out."

As an adult, she says, "though I do not condone this act of violence, I am able to understand what provokes and impels people into and out of things. I don't know that I've ever recovered. But because I don't carry the bitterness of it, I have not been as wounded."

Rape and five years' silence are not all the waitress, singer, dancer, actress, activist, editor, film-maker — and above all, writer and mother — has endured in her 66 years.

Born in St Louis, Missouri in 1928, Angelou says she was deeply mentally and physically scarred by the racism she watched her parents endure and she felt herself. She became a prostitute at the age of 18 when she says the man she was dating was desperate and she was "too green," or innocent. For a time she was also in charge of two lesbian prostitutes.

Angelou says she expected worldwide condemnation for the revelations but instead received praise.

Yet she has risen above these searing experiences. "To be angry is very good," she says. "It burns out things and leaves nutrients in the soil. You should always be ready to be angry at injustice and cruelty. But bitterness is like cancer. It eats up the host."

Rather than try to bury the past as many others would

She celebrates her femininity. Her complexion is as radiant and smooth as that of a younger person. She is a statuesque 180 centimetres (6 feet) tall and carries herself with pride and grace. "I believe there is a difference between being an old female and a woman," she observes. "Being born with certain genitalia, you live long enough, that is an old female. But to be a woman, that's something else. To have some grace, humour, passion, that is inviting."

Any regrets from her extraordinary life? "Regrets are a waste of time. But I would like to be a Christian" and be remembered as a "kind, merciful and inclusive person. A woman who was funny, cheerful and had some courage to love someone." — *Geraint News*



Maya Angelou: Mentally scarred

Sadargram women's group

The writer is a freelance journalist based in London.