



# Madhurilata Devi Women in the World of Rabindranath The huge gap existing be-

spect of freedom enjoyed by tween men and women in re 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 Rabindranath Tagore in a letter to his younger son in law in 1922.

HAT was true of course but not the whole truth since it was not short ries alone but his novels. avs 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 respect, 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.

Thus in 1878 we find Rabindranath, not yet out of his teens and on his first ever visit to the west, while holding men responsible for the deplorable condition of our women wrote. "it is not due to male oppression but because of the laws of nature that women have to take care of their children within the bounds of family life." A decade later he entered into a bout of polemics. in the pages of "Bharati and Balak", journal edited by his eldest sister Swarna Kumari Devi. with the Marathi feminist leader Ramabai who preached the gospel - inflammable and unacceptable in the eyes of Indian males — of equal gender ability. Joining in the fray, the editor once commented, "how could the writer [Rabindranathl be so sure that women can receive and assimilate ideas but cannot create? This is something utterly beyond our comprehension."

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.

Similarly Henrik Ibsen's (1828-1966) "A Doll's House" (1879) — that noble literary expression of a woman's urge to seek and establish her own distinct human identity and fulfilment - 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 not withstanding. 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 chitranagada - 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 Chitrongada while object-

exploitation of female charms. From then on Rabindranath never had to look back. It is impossible to do justice, in a few lines or with a broad brush, to do full justice to the full range of Rabindranath's female characters. We can only

ing to the use of women as sex

object or symbol herself ini-

tially attempted to win over

Arjun by the same questionable

say that his women - Shashikala, Chandara, Haimanti, Mrinal, Kumu, Labanya - 10 name only a few, had, to, a varying extent, radical nonconformist 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 fatherin-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

Fiction and Family 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 iather to draw the immortal literary portrait of Haimanti in one of his moving short sto-His youngest daughter.

Mira, had an even more un-

happy 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 fatherin-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 let ters 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 post tion in our society. One only wonders if the poet, being the most illustrious scion of one of the most distinguished family 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 per sonal misery.

The writer, who teaches history at Dhaka University, is editor of Shomoy, a views-

for group and family projects

We have now paid back the

first two loans for group and

family projects. Some have

bought cows for fattening,

others for rice husking and

one or two for a marriage cele-

bration. A few of us go each

week to the local branch of the

### Not the Doll's House: In Praise of Noora she, above all, has a keener, by Rebecca Haque more rewarding (though not

OR 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 socialresponsibility. 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 unjustiv in

spect, for raksha. 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 clearsighted 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 homemakers, want peace and a bet

ter future for their offsprings.

glected, less-educated, and

less-privileged women crying

out for recognition, for re-

A woman - no matter which particular segment of society she comes from - invariably and unequivocally wants work, meaningful work. A woman can be seen at her best when she is given the opportunity to combine homework with work outside the home. An independent income, however small or large it maybe, enhances a woman's self-esteem and makes her a far nobler human being than she hitherto had been. This sense of self-worth has farreaching implications: a confident working-woman is a positive role-model within the family and will also undoubtedly generate aspirations for education and other social advantages in the minds of less-advantaged sisters of her neighbourhood or community. thus initiating the first step in the quiet revolution; a step. more importantly, taken in the

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.

right direction. An educated workingwoman 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 workday 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. This particular trait in the female of the species is not, as some men might erroneously think, a hindrance or obstacle in the way of the work a woman has to do outside the home. Rather, a woman who wants to or must work outside the home is usually very aware of her own value as a productive (and I mean "productive" in all its connotations - social, economic, as well as biological) unit of the social infrastructure; she knows the value of money because she has had to earn it with her own labour: she knows the true value of time because she must com-

plete a wide number and vari-

ety of jobs both inside the

house and outside it within a

fixed and limited duration: and

ket, 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

always consciously articulated)

awareness of the need for mu

tually fulfilling ways of express-

ing and reinforcing ideas of

familial and communal har-

For example, efficient

women find time for meaning-

ful 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 mar-

What more do we need? We obviously need to re-educate ourselves. Bengal can be golden again if we will only open the windows of our minds so that the rays of the sun can dispel the putrid odour of disease and decay. We need more light, not darkness. so that the raven-haired, doeeyed Nooras of Bengal can truly become Noor Jahans - torchbearers, pathfinders, healers, and poets of our land.

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.



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

### She has been through Hell and Writes like an Angel AYA Angelou loves language - "I love the disappointment, because the delight of Afro-Americans at

Maya Angelou Mentally scared

have done, Angelou wrote

about it as part of her critically

acclaimed five part autobiogra-

phy: I. know why the Caged

Bird Sings, Gather Together in

My Name, Singing and

Swinging and Getting Merry

Like Christmas, the Heart of a

Woman and All God's Children.

because so many adults claim

to live pious lives and the

young people think all adults

thought I would tell them that

yes I have done certain things

that I wasn't proud of but I

have forgiven myself and gone

Angelou says she expected

worldwide condemnation for

the revelations but instead re-

ceived praise.

are perfect," she says.

"I wrote about these things

LV Lound 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

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.

but was later found beaten to

"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."

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 prosti-

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

being in a country ruled by Blacks for Blacks was met with By Gloria Ogunbadejo suspicion and resentment. But the experience, to-"It may be necessary," she gether with other setbacks and says, "to encounter many defeats in order to know who we

> and go on." Other disappointments include a brief marriage to a South African freedom fighter which foundered because she

are, what we can overcome,

what makes us stumble and fall

and somehow miraculously rise

was unwilling to conform to the wishes of her traditional

husband. She spent time in Cairo as editor of the Daily Arab Observer, and then went to Ghana in an attempt to find her roots and hopefully a spot to which the African-American diaspora could return. Her

time in Ghana also ended in

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." Angelou's latest work,

Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now (Virago, London. £ 9.99), focuses on the basic human values she has not always been afforded because of the colour of her skin: kindness, honesty, goodness and

respect. In it, she talks about what being a woman has meant to her. But asked about feminism, she says: "Ask me about womanism, this I know about; not feminism. Sometimes femi-

nism can be not very inviting." She celebrates her femininity. Her complexion is as radiant and smooth and 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

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, cheefful and had some courage to love someone." - Gemini

inviting."

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## a Credit Women Lead

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.

Sadargram women's group

by A M Ahmed

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 ricehusking to a small scale, then bought a rickshaw,

Revolution 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.

Group secretary Asma Khatun, explains their latest joint venture "we've bought 3 decimals of land, on mortgage, for Tk 8,000 and we are farming it ourselves. We have borrowed three times from RAKUB, a total of Tk 166,000 group is still undergoing training from RDRS and must complete this before receiving a certificate of eligibility to receive a bank loan. These days, they spend 2-3 hours each morning receiving awareness and literacy education from a women volunteer. Most of their husbands are very poor either day labourers rickshaw pullers, and they can only manage to save one taka each per week. But their group fund has grown to Tk 1,400 and, in a few months they should qual-

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 wonlen and the banks are experienced and confident. The revolution is reality.

bank to deposit our savings and to repay these loans." Elsewhere in the village, a new women's group has been formed inspired by their female neighbours' success. This

ify for commercial bank loans.