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## Portrayal of Women Characters in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Garden*

**Purnima Bali**

Research Scholar,  
Deptt. of English  
Himachal Pradesh University,  
Shimla (H.P.)

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second sex*

A woman's attempt of self discovery leads her to interrogate that she has not been only born as a woman but she becomes one. Her true identity is smothered by pervasive, dominant and oppressive patriarchal culture which pushes and assigns her a place away from centre to the periphery of existence. She reinstates her experience as woman, so that she can acquire autonomy over her being and discover her true self.

In the patriarchal set-up women and their virtues have been relegated in favour of men. The virtues related to women such as marriage, mothering, home-making are no longer considered valuable, are in fact labelled as inferior. This discrimination begins right from the childhood. The acceptance of the male superiority is included from the very age when one is not even in a position to question the do's and don'ts of the society. The roles become so deeply enrooted in the subconscious that often the roles are taken for granted and accepted without any protest or opposition. The woman is supposed to have the virtues of compromise, loyalty, devotion, tolerance, generosity and submissiveness not only to the husband, but to his whole family whereas status, power, dominance all come under the role of a man.

Rabindranath Tagore's novella *The Garden (Malancha, 1913)* is a study in the obsessive psychology of a woman who nurses the nightmares of loneliness. Tagore has experimented with the woman's beloved self. Neerja is the embodiment of love, but she is so possessive that she can not tolerate the presence of a rival in her husband's love for her. And the main focus of attention in the story is the intensified love for her husband, Aditya.

One another, more interesting aspect of her love is her love for the flower garden, as she says: 'When after our marriage I learnt that this garden was as precious as your life, I never let a division grow between it and myself. Otherwise I would have picked a fight with that garden; I wouldn't have been able to bear its closeness to you. It would have become my rival. But you know very well that my constant effort has been to make it one and the same with me. I have become completely inseparable from it' (699).

To her the garden is symbolic of her control over her limited world. She is an active partner in her husband's love life as also an enthusiastic co-worker of her husband in the nurturing of the garden. She is deeply agonized when during her illness she finds that a distantly related sister of Aditya, Sarala has been inducted into the household for

assisting in the work of the garden. Firstly she tries to assert her rights by asking Sarala not to enter the orchid-house and when it fails because Sarala has Aditya's confidence. She argues with her husband, not to allow Sarala to do any work in the garden. 'She may know about orchids better than me or even you. Even then, I still say the orchid room is yours and mine only, Sarala has no place there' (697). Her garden fixation has an ontological correlation in love for her husband which she can never lose by any means. She is embodiment of jealousy because in the enfeebled state of her illness she lives under the constant fear of losing her husband's love for her rival. Her persuasion with her husband to marry Sarala off to Ramanand even persuading Raman to marry Sarala is a ploy to get her out of the way. Her jealousy bursts its bounds and she tries all methods to belittle and humiliate Sarala not only before Aditya but also in the presence of the servants. As Krishna Kripalani comments:

More tragic than her physical misfortune is its effect on her mind. She who was generous when she was happy becomes unjust and vindictive when deprived of her happiness (373).

Neerja's frustration at being disconnected from the garden has effect of drying up her humanity and filling up her mind with jealousy. Her manifestations are closely linked with Sarala's name. The very moment she sees her, she gets annoyed and frustrated with anger. 'What caused her most hurt and misery was that Aditya's distant cousin, Sarala (678). She loses no opportunity to remind her husband how she had cherished the garden till it had become almost her very self. But late on, Neerja feels that she is being vindictive towards Sarala and becomes pentinent. In the last phase of her life, Neerja is actuated by a passionate desire to perpetuate her presence in her world with her husband and in the garden as both are correlated to each-other.

Sarala on the other hand represents another side of the beloved type of woman. Tagore has cast her as an emancipated woman who is neither irresponsible nor reckless. In spite of her love relationship with Aditya and Neerja's jealousy for her, she is always alive to her duties to Neerja. But the basic part of her character is firm determination and more significantly her active participation in the freedom movement. Rabindranath's active support for the participation of women in the freedom movement takes on a more definitive shape in the case of Sarala. She even goes to jail for raising her voice against British rule. Sarala hereby stands a fit example of the active women participation in the freedom struggle.

Sarala shows that an educated woman could remain unmarried even at the age of thirty-one. She lost her mother when she was six years of age and her father two years later. She was brought up by the elder brother of her father who happened to be the husband of the sister of Aditya's mother. The crisis in the life of Aditya came ten years later after his marriage when Sarala had to take shelter in his house because of the death of her uncle. Though many offers of marriage from suitable persons had come to her but she still remained unmarried. She told Aditya that she rejected those proposals because of her attachment to uncle's garden but Aditya believed that her love for him; about which she was ignorant herself was the real cause. Neither Aditya nor Sarala were ever conscious of

the love for each-other till Neerja's jealousy made them realize their feelings for one-another.

Neerja was seriously ill after the death of her child and there was little hope of her recovery. She got to know about the management of the garden by Sarala and Aditya. She imagined that they had been enjoying the task as it was affording them an opportunity of being together. Having failed to get Sarala married to Raman, Neerja's cousin-in-law, she requested her husband: 'Extraordinary girl. That is why I say, let her be the headmistress in that girls' school in Barasat. They have pleaded so many times' (697). But Aditya refused by saying that it would be as bad as sending her to the Andaman island. He considered it his duty to stand by Sarala because her uncle had not only educated him but also had helped him in setting up the gardening business by lending money. But Sarala realized the situation and said:

'It's very clear to me that I should not stay here any longer. I would have been happy to tend to Didi, but it isn't my fate to do so. I have to go away- wait, let me finish. You heard the doctor say she doesn't have much longer. In this short time you must pluck away the thorn from her mind. At least for these few years don't let my shadow fall over her life' (716).

In the story, Rabindranath has presented the love of a married man for another girl in such a way that it became hard even for the staunchest upholder of conventional thinking to condemn Aditya. Aditya himself pleaded that there was nothing wrong in his relation with Sarala, that there was no Neerja when he and Sarala had played and spent the childhood together.

The climatic scene comes as a fitting close to the morbid path of a destruction of self through frustration. Though the novella does not delve into the deeper and profounder aspects of Neerja's despair, it does show that "No tragedy is greater than the poverty of spirit which paralyses our capacity to love and to forgive" (Kripalani 373).

The interest in Rabindranath Tagore's novels is mainly anchored in the struggle of his principal characters, particularly his women characters, to achieve self-actualisation or self-definition out of their situation. Tagore's preoccupation with his women characters seem so obsessive that in almost all his works main protagonist is a woman.

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