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Personhood, Voice, and Agency in Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore's female characters have been widely discussed in relation to marriage, widowhood, desire, rebellion, nationalism, and social reform. Building on this work, this essay distinguishes a character's capacity to act from the narrative space granted to her as a thinking, self-interpreting person, and examines her narrative personhood.

Here, narrative personhood is viewed as separate from narrative voice and agency and refers to the depth of representation afforded to a character's thoughts, ideas, and social and personal struggles. It concerns not simply a character's capacity to desire, choose, or act, but the extent to which the text represents those actions as situated within a reflective understanding of the self and the surrounding world. A flawed or contradictory worldview may itself constitute evidence of substantial personhood, depending on the narrative framing provided.

This essay argues that Tagore often gives women forceful desires and consequential choices, but less consistently grants them narrative autonomy beyond the gendered conditions through which they are introduced.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, personhood, narrative autonomy, gender representation, Bengali literature.

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1. Agency Is Not Personhood

Agency generally refers to a character's capacity to act, make choices, pursue desires, resist constraints, and impact the narrative's course. Martha C. Nussbaum's capabilities approach adds a crucial distinction between what a person does and the real opportunities available to her to do and be what she has reason to value. Tagore's women often exercise agency in this sense. They protest, desire, manipulate, refuse, leave, and challenge the circumstances imposed upon them. This essay uses "personhood" more narrowly to describe a representation of interiority that includes a character's opinions, values, contradictions, and self-understanding, rather than treating her social position as a complete explanation of who she is. The question is how women reflect on their lives and the world around them. Across these works, women's reflections are often introduced through their relationships with men and the immediate circumstances of their lives.

The argument draws on Harry G. Frankfurt's account of personhood, alongside feminist accounts of gender, development, and social capability. Frankfurt's framework is used here as a heuristic rather than a definitive test of literary personhood.

The corpus spans Tagore's short stories, novels, essays, plays, and dramatic poems, selected for their representations of women as central figures within the narrative or dramatic structure. The term *fiction* alone would be too narrow to describe this corpus, since works such as *Rakta Karabi*, *Tasher Desh*, *Chitrangada*, and *Gandharir Abedan* employ dramatic and poetic forms whose conventions shape the representation of female agency, interiority, and self-reflection.

In the dramatic and allegorical works, interiority is examined not only through narrated thought but also through dialogue, conflict, stage action, and the symbolic relationships through which characters articulate or conceal their understanding of the world.

1.1 Interiority and the Independent Self

Binodini in *Chokher Bali* makes the distinction between agency, narrative voice and narrative personhood especially difficult. Tagore gives her desire, intelligence, resentment, strategic judgement, and the ability to unsettle the household in which she lives. Her actions can be read through Nussbaum's account of how unequal social circumstances constrain women's capabilities, including their opportunities for affiliation and fulfilling relationships (Nussbaum 24–25). Frankfurt's account of reflective desire offers a second question. Does the narrative present Binodini evaluating her desires against values she can call her own, or does it repeatedly explain those desires through the deprivation attached to widowhood (Frankfurt 10–11)? The point is not that Binodini lacks an interior life, but that the narrative may keep returning to widowhood repeatedly as its dominant interpretive frame.

A related tension appears in *Chitrangada*. In the *Mahabharata*, she is raised putravat, like a son, because she occupies a dynastic position usually associated with male inheritance, while the epic also describes her beauty. Tagore's adaptation turns this coexistence into a conflict over femininity and desirability. *Chitrangada* seeks transformation in order to win Arjuna's love, then rejects the artificial identity through which she has tried to secure it. Her final demand to be recognised as herself challenges the equation of feminine worth with beauty. The drama first makes that equation central to her self-understanding. Citravāhana explicitly frames his daughter's role in terms of dynastic continuity. He declares that she will perpetuate the family line, explaining his position through the phrase 'putro mameyam iti me bhāvanā,' meaning 'this one is my son.' He then identifies her as a daughter designated under a specific customary arrangement (*Mahabharata* 1.207.20–22). The passage makes the terms of Chitrangada's familial value explicit. Although she

is a daughter, her position is defined through the expectation that she will fulfil a function conventionally associated with a son.

Read together, *Chokher Bali* and *Chitrangada* raise a question about the relation between agency and narrative centrality. Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other helps identify how female identity can be organised through the recognition or judgement of men (Beauvoir 6). Mahendra, Bihari, and Arjuna are not merely characters with whom Binodini and *Chitrangada* interact; their desires and judgements help structure the women's conflicts. This pattern should not be treated as proof that the women lack independent thought. The issue is how the narratives develop female values and projects, which are often tied to heterosexual recognition.

1.2 Desire and Transgression

Female desire in Tagore is often represented within systems of marriage, kinship, and gendered power. Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" offers a framework for examining how social arrangements organise sexuality and exchange, while Frankfurt's account of reflective desire directs attention to whether a character evaluates her own desires rather than merely experiencing them (Rubin 173–77; Frankfurt 10–11). Together, these frameworks help distinguish the social conditions that shape desire from the narrative question of how far a character can interpret and assess those conditions.

Binodini's desire cannot be separated from the deprivation imposed by widowhood. She is denied emotional, social, and intimate possibilities available to married women, and her attraction, manipulation, and hostility develop within that unequal order. The novel makes the causes of her conduct legible, but repeatedly returns to widowhood as its principal explanation.

Tagore makes the force of Binodini's desire explicit when he describes her as "ক্ষুধিতহৃদয়া" ("hungry-hearted"). Listening to Asha recount the experience of new love, Binodini "নববধূর নবপ্রেমের ইতিহাস মাতালের জ্বালাময় মদের মতো কান পাতিয়া পান করিতে লাগিল"; her mind becomes intoxicated and "শরীরের রক্ত জ্বলিয়া উঠিল" (Tagore, *Chokher Bali* 44). The metaphors of hunger, intoxication, and burning blood make desire bodily rather than merely abstract. Binodini does not simply envy Asha's happiness from a distance. She consumes its narration as a substitute for an intimacy from which widowhood has excluded her.

Her intelligence is equally visible in the way she questions and reconstructs Asha's account. The narrator says that "বিনোদিনী প্রশ্ন করিয়া করিয়া তুচ্ছতম কথাটি পর্যন্ত বাহির করিত," repeatedly asking to hear things again and, when the facts are exhausted, introducing imagined alternatives: "ঘটনা নিঃশেষ হইয়া গেলে কল্পনার অবতারণা করিত" (Tagore, *Chokher Bali*, ch. 11). These verbs describe an active interpretive process. Binodini interrogates details, tests possibilities, and uses imagination to extend what she has heard. The scope of this intellectual activity is significant. Her questions revolve around marriage and the possible rearrangement of romantic attachments. The passage therefore supports a distinction between intelligence and personhood. Binodini's intelligence is unmistakable, while the narrative arena in which it is exercised remains heavily organised around love, marriage, and the opportunities denied to a widow.

The exchange about the marriages that might have taken place sharpens this contradiction. When Asha suggests that Binodini might have married Mahendra, Binodini replies, "আমার সঙ্গে তো ঢের লোকের ঢের কথা হইয়াছিল। না হইয়াছে, বেশ হইয়াছে– আমি যা আছি, বেশ আছি" ("Many people had spoken of marriage with me; it is well that it did not happen—I am fine as I

am") (Tagore, *Chokher Bali* 45). The brisk, almost dismissive answer can be read as self-command, irony, or defensive concealment, as the earlier description of her "hungry" heart makes uncomplicated contentment difficult to assume. Even her claim to be "fine as I am" emerges in a conversation organised around the marriages she and Asha did or did not enter. Binodini can control the tone of the exchange, but she cannot easily make marriage irrelevant to its meaning.

Bimala in *Ghare Baire* presents a different problem. Her movement beyond the domestic world initially appears to enlarge her freedom, but her encounter with Sandip entangles desire with nationalism, performance, and political allegiance. Nikhil's commitment to her autonomy and Sandip's ability to mobilise her attraction create competing accounts of freedom. Bimala is not simply manipulated. She narrates, revises, and judges her own experience. The novel's first-person structure is therefore central to any claim about her voice. She can and does express opinions throughout the story. "দেখো, সমস্ত বাংলাদেশের মধ্যে কেবল আমাদের এই হাটটার মধ্যেই বিলিতি কাপড় আসছে, এটা কি ভালো হচ্ছে?" (Tagore, *Ghare Baire*, pt. 1, sec. 11). The central issue is not Bimala's inability to reflect. It is the limit of the reflection represented in the novel. She retrospectively recognises how completely she was swept up in her experience, yet this self-examination does not necessarily develop into a sustained interrogation of the political assumptions and consequences of the Swadeshi movement.

"আমার লজ্জা যে কোথায় গিয়েছিল তাই ভাবি। নিজেকে দেখবার আমি একটুও সময় পাই নি–আমার দিনগুলো রাতগুলো আমাকে নিয়ে একবারে ঘূর্ণার মতো ঘুরছিল।" (Tagore, *Ghare Baire*, pt. 1, sec. 4). The novel gives Bimala the ability to discourse and articulate her views, yet ultimately frames her political development through its damaging consequences. This is not to say that female characters cannot or should not be flawed. However, it is troubling that a woman who

steps beyond the domestic sphere eventually describes herself as having been "swept up," while the narrative frames her political awakening through the consequences of her divergence from her husband's position. Bimala has agency and voice, but the novel does not consistently represent her as developing a political framework through which she can examine the ideals she adopts and the assumptions underlying them.

As the movement becomes entangled with violence and personal loss, Bimala's retrospective narration frames her earlier political enthusiasm through regret. The novel thus gives her choices serious consequences while offering limited space for her to develop a sustained political analysis of the movement itself.

Charulata in "Nastanirh" has a different pattern of actions. Her attraction to Amal develops within a marriage marked by emotional absence and intellectual isolation. The narrative establishes her literary curiosity before her attraction becomes explicit: "লেখাপড়ার দিকে চারুলতার একটা স্বাভাবিক ঝোঁক ছিল বলিয়া তাহার দিনগুলা অত্যন্ত বোঝা হইয়া উঠে নাই। সে নিজের চেষ্টায় নানা কৌশলে পড়িবার বন্দোবস্ত করিয়া লইয়াছিল" (Tagore, "Nastanirh"). Charulata's reading is significant because it originates in her own inclination and effort. She does not simply wait for another person to provide her with an intellectual life.

The tension becomes more pronounced when Charulata's writing receives public recognition. After learning of the praise for her work, she finds herself unable to enjoy what might appear to be an intellectual victory: "চারু তাহার লেখার এই প্রথম প্রশংসায় এক-একবার খুশি হইতে গিয়া তৎক্ষণাৎ পীড়িত হইতে লাগিল। তাহার মন যেন কোনোমতেই খুশি হইতে চাহিল না।" (Tagore, "Nastanirh"). Her distress becomes clearer when she realises that Amal had planned to surprise her by publishing her writing and showing her a favourable review. Her response

complicates the idea that recognition automatically constitutes fulfilment: the achievement is hers, but its emotional significance has become inseparable from Amal's actions and from her interpretation of his response to her success.

Charulata's literary activity offers a form of intellectual self-development that does not translate into a sustained attempt to transform her domestic circumstances. This is not to say that Charulata lacks agency or that her writing has no value in itself. Rather, the narrative reveals a gap between the intellectual life she begins to cultivate and the possibilities available for sustaining that life independently. Even her literary achievement becomes a source of pain when it is mediated by her emotional attachment to Amal.

Frankfurt's distinction between desire and reflective identification clarifies one part of the argument, but it cannot by itself establish whether a literary character has been granted personhood. A novel may represent a character's reflection through narration, dialogue, contradiction, or retrospective self-correction; it may also restrict the future available to that character even when her thoughts are complex. This essay therefore distinguishes psychological complexity from narrative personhood. The former concerns the richness of a character's represented mind, while the latter concerns the extent to which the text allows her projects and future to matter independently of other characters' development. Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* provides a useful framework for examining the first distinction. Cohn identifies different techniques through which fiction represents consciousness, including psycho-narration, in which a narrator reports or interprets a character's mental life; quoted monologue, which presents thought more directly; and narrated monologue, which blends a character's idiom with the narrator's discourse (Cohn 21, 58, 99). A character may be granted access to her thoughts and feelings while her desires, achievements, and possible future

remain subordinated to another character's development or to the resolution of the plot. This essay extends Cohn's account of the representation of consciousness by asking not only how female characters' inner lives are narrated, but also whether their projects and interpretations of the world acquire significance beyond their relationships with others.

1.3 Transgression, Punishment, and the Limits of Female Freedom

The pattern established by Binodini's desire becomes more significant when placed alongside feminist scholarship on the relationship between women's sexual transgression and patriarchal punishment, particularly Devashish Kumar's "Desire as Transgression: Female Sexuality and Patriarchal Punishment in Indian Feminist Narratives" (Kumar 74–75). This subsection moves from individual cases to a broader narrative pattern: women may exercise agency by pursuing forbidden desires, challenging marital expectations, or departing from prescribed feminine conduct, yet their transgressions frequently lead to ultimate withdrawal, separation, or social exile.

Tagore's essay "Nārī" offers a significant point of comparison for examining the relationship between women's social roles, intellectual development, and representation as reflective subjects in his fiction and drama. The essay presents women as fundamental to the formation and preservation of human society, but it initially explains this importance through a gendered account of their supposedly distinctive nature. Describing women's role in sustaining social life, Tagore writes that women possess an impulse to bind themselves and others through "প্রেমে, স্নেহে, সকরুণ ধৈর্যে" ("love, affection, and compassionate patience"). He subsequently characterises the maintenance of social bonds as women's "প্রথম কাজ," concluding that "সমাজবন্ধনের এই প্রথম কাজটি মেয়েদের" ("this first work of social bonding belongs to

women"). Within this account, women's importance lies in their capacity to nurture, sustain relationships, and preserve the domestic structures upon which society depends. Tagore describes this function as an expression of women's nature, suggesting that the qualities associated with the maintenance of social life arise from an inherent disposition rather than from a role that women might independently choose, question, or redefine. He reinforces this distinction when he writes that women's domestic work is "তার আপন কাজ, সে তার স্বভাবসংগত" ("their own work, something consonant with their nature"). The language is significant. It presents women's social function not merely as an expectation imposed upon them, but as a role supposedly corresponding to their intrinsic disposition. Such a formulation risks making the gendered division of social labour appear natural, even as it recognises the indispensable contribution of women to collective life. (Tagore, "Nārī").

The distinction between desire and personhood matters most where the narrative makes a woman's transgression visible but leaves the meaning of her future uncertain. A character may act decisively and still be interpreted chiefly through the social category she violates. Conversely, a character's decision to return, refuse, or remain may itself express considered judgement. The analysis must therefore attend to the text's evidence rather than treating suffering or a constrained ending as automatic proof of diminished personhood.

1.4 Widowhood: Identity After Social Death

Widowhood is not only a social status in *Chokher Bali*; it shapes the opportunities through which Binodini can imagine intimacy, security, and recognition. The novel exposes the injustice of that restriction while also making widowhood the dominant frame through which readers understand her desires. Binodini's intelligence is evident in her ability to read the household, test

the motives of others, and manipulate the expectations surrounding her, making her more than a passive illustration of widowhood.

The ending makes the social limits on her choice especially clear. Refusing Bihari, Binodini says, "আমি বিধবা, আমি নিন্দিতা, সমস্ত সমাজের কাছে আমি তোমাকে লাঞ্ছিত করিব, এ কখনো হইতেই পারে না" ("I am a widow, I am condemned; I would humiliate you before all society—this can never be") (Tagore, *Chokher Bali*, ch. 11). Her reasoning shows that she understands the stigma attached to widowhood and anticipates its consequences for Bihari. She is neither unaware of the injustice nor without the capacity to decide; rather, she takes responsibility for preventing society from humiliating him.

Binodini then declares, "পরজন্মে তোমাকে পাইবার জন্য আমি তপস্যা করিব– এ জন্মে আমার আর কিছু আশা নাই, প্রাপ্য নাই" ("I shall practise austerities to obtain you in another birth; in this life I have no further hope or claim") (Tagore, *Chokher Bali*, ch. 11). The movement from this life to another birth postpones fulfilment beyond the social world in which she lives. The language of austerity and having "no claim" turns exclusion into self-renunciation: instead of demanding that the prohibition on a widow's remarriage be challenged, Binodini treats her own desire as something she must relinquish. Her refusal can also be read as an assertion of control and as an effort to protect Bihari, so it should not be reduced to simple passivity. Nevertheless, the singular available form of self-determination remains shaped by the very social judgement she recognises.

In "Kankal," Tagore brings widowhood, loneliness, female desire, resentment, and mortality into a narrative that initially appears to give its female protagonist considerable psychological depth. The woman's account of her loneliness is especially revealing because it

presents her not simply as a widow defined by social deprivation, but as an imaginative subject who constructs an elaborate inner world in response to her isolation. She recalls, "আমার কেহ সঙ্গিনী ছিল না। দাদা প্রতিজ্ঞা করিয়াছিলেন, বিবাহ করিবেন না। অন্তঃপুরে আমি একা" The repetition of "একা" ("alone") establishes the emotional conditions in which her imagination develops. Sitting beneath the trees in the garden, she imagines that "সমস্ত পৃথিবী আমাকেই ভালোবাসিতেছে, সমস্ত তারা আমাকে নিরীক্ষণ করিতেছে". This passage is significant because her fantasy is not merely an expression of vanity. It reveals a consciousness attempting to compensate for the absence of companionship by imagining herself as the centre of a world organised around her desirability. The emotional contradiction is captured in the final sentence: "হৃদয়ে অকারণে কেমন বেদনা অনুভব হইত". The fantasy supplies the attention her actual circumstances deny her, but it cannot resolve the loneliness from which it arises. (Tagore, "Kankal").

The story also complicates any argument that widowhood alone determines her understanding of herself. She explains that her husband died two months after their marriage and that she returned to her father's house happily. Her in-laws subsequently call her a "বিষকন্যা," or "poison maiden" (my translation), attaching a sinister identity to her following her husband's death. Yet she does not initially narrate widowhood exclusively as loss. She recalls her return home with the word "আনন্দে" ("happily"), and her later loneliness emerges from a more complicated combination of domestic isolation, frustrated desire, and the absence of a companion. Her account thus contains a tension between the social identity imposed upon her and the feelings through which she understands her own experience. Widowhood is an important condition of her life, but

it does not exhaust the psychological complexity of the woman Tagore represents. (Tagore, "Kankal").

That complexity becomes more precarious when her imaginative attachment to Shashishekhar, the family doctor, develops into the central organising principle of her emotional life. She describes how the multitude of men in her imagined world gradually diminishes until "জগতে কেবল একটি ডাক্তার এবং একটি রোগী অবশিষ্ট রহিল" ("in the world, only one doctor and one patient remained"). Her fantasy becomes increasingly specific: she dresses in a particular colour, arranges flowers in her hair, and sits before a mirror imagining herself from the doctor's perspective. She explains, "আমি তখন একলা বসিয়া দুইজন হইতাম" ("sitting alone, I would become two people"). She imagines herself as both the woman being admired and the doctor who admires her. This moment is particularly important for the concept of narrative personhood developed in the present essay. The protagonist does not merely experience desire but also reflects upon it, stages it imaginatively, and recognises the division between her actual solitude and the companionship she invents. Her inner life is neither absent nor psychologically simple. Her capacity for self-reflection is vivid, but it remains concentrated on the imagined fulfilment of romantic desire rather than expanding into a sustained interpretation of the social arrangements that have contributed to her isolation. (Tagore, "Kankal").

The revelation that Shashishekhar intends to marry another woman for a dowry of twelve thousand rupees transforms this imaginative world into one of humiliation and resentment. The protagonist initially responds with laughter, demanding that the wedding be celebrated with music and lights. Beneath this performance, however, lies a growing sense of betrayal. She asks, "কিন্তু আমার কাছে এ সংবাদ গোপন করিয়া আমাকে অপমান করিবার তাৎপর্য কী" ("But what is the

meaning of concealing this news from me and insulting me in this way?"; my translation). Her question shows that she understands the doctor's secrecy not merely as the loss of a desired relationship but as an act of personal humiliation. She then declares, "পুরুষদের বিশ্বাস করিবার জো নাই।" ("Men cannot be trusted."; my translation). Her claim to have acquired "all knowledge" after the betrayal of a single man exposes the difference between the intensity of an experience and the adequacy of the worldview constructed from it. Her conclusion converts an individual injury into a universal judgement about men. The narrative therefore presents her as capable of interpreting her experience, but also shows how that interpretation becomes closed around the immediate emotional conflict. Rather than developing into a broader examination of the economic and social arrangements that make marriage a transaction, the significance of the dowry is absorbed into her perception of personal betrayal. The story acknowledges the material motive behind the doctor's decision, but the protagonist's response is directed primarily towards the man who has deceived and humiliated her. (Tagore, "Kankal").

Her subsequent poisoning of the doctor makes the distinction between agency and narrative personhood still more pronounced. Having secretly obtained a powder from the dispensary and learned from the doctor which substances can cause death, she mixes some of it into his drink. She then dresses in a Banarasi sari, puts on her jewellery, applies vermilion to the parting of her hair, and prepares a bed beneath the familiar bakul tree. The bridal imagery transforms the scene into a grotesque parody of the marriage she had imagined. The doctor departs believing that he is going to marry, while the protagonist stages her own final passage through the symbols of marriage. Her actions demonstrate calculation, secrecy, and a capacity to manipulate the circumstances around her; she is not simply a passive recipient of suffering. Yet the outcome does not provide meaningful redress for the social and emotional conditions that have shaped her life. Her retaliation does not

establish an independent future for her or alter the social world beyond this private catastrophe. (Tagore, “Kankal”).

“Kankal” thus complicates the relationship between agency, voice and narrative personhood. The protagonist acts decisively, has a distinct and vivid voice, but her actions do not secure a future beyond the conflict that has consumed her. The story ultimately encloses that voice within a narrative of desire, injury, revenge, and mortality. (Tagore, “Kankal”).

1.5 Motherhood: Moral Judgement and the Maternal Self

Motherhood presents a different form of totalisation. Unlike widowhood, which is associated with social deprivation, motherhood can appear to offer women moral authority: the mother can advise, protect, condemn, forgive, or suffer on behalf of her children. Yet this authority can become restrictive when a woman's political, ethical, or intellectual identity is interpreted primarily through maternal feeling. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 537–40) offers a framework for examining this limitation. If woman is constituted as the Other in relation to man, then even the apparently elevated position of motherhood may define her value through a relational role rather than recognise her as an independent subject.

Tagore’s adaptations of figures from the *Mahabharata*, especially Kunti and Gandhari, bring the relationship between female identity and moral authority into focus.

Kunti's abandonment of Karna is morally and emotionally complicated. She bears him when she is young, unmarried, and vulnerable to the social consequences of a pregnancy that could threaten her standing. Her decision to abandon him cannot simply be understood as maternal indifference, although the harm inflicted upon Karna remains undeniable. Her actions emerge from a social order in which a woman's sexuality and reproductive life are subject to severe restrictions.

Nor does her later role as a mother to the Pandavas exhaust her identity. Her decisions involve questions of duty, political survival, dynastic legitimacy, and the consequences of actions taken under constraint. The moral complexity of Kunti therefore cannot be reduced to whether she is a good or bad mother.

In *Karna-Kunti Sambad*, the encounter between Kunti and Karna concentrates the conflict into a personal appeal. Kunti asks Karna to join his brothers, but her request comes after years of concealment and abandonment. The scene gives her a voice and a difficult moral choice; it also makes motherhood the principal language through which that choice becomes legible. Most importantly, she is judged by the narrative itself for her actions. Kunti approaches Karna, asking him to abandon the Kauravas and join his biological brothers, presenting her request through the language of maternal recognition and belonging. She declares, "এসেছি তোমারে নিতে", and, when Karna asks where she intends to take him, answers, "তৃষিত বক্ষের মাঝে-- লব মাতৃক্রোড়ে". Her language makes the recovery of her son appear as an act of belated maternal care: she offers him not simply a place among the Pandavas but a place in her own body and affections. Yet the scene does not allow this appeal to remain an uncomplicated expression of maternal love. Karna's response exposes the history that Kunti's present tenderness cannot undo. He asks, "কেন তবে / আমারে ফেলিয়া দিলে দূরে অগৌরবে" ["Why, then, did you cast me away, far from you and without honour?"]. His questions shift the encounter from the promise of recovered kinship to the consequences of its earlier denial. (Tagore, *Karna-Kunti Sambad*).

Gandhari's political judgement is explicit in the *Mahabharata*. In the Udyogaparvan, she urges Duryodhana to abandon pride and avoid war, speaking as a moral and political adviser as well as a mother. She begins by challenging the assumption that royal power can be secured

through the pursuit of personal desire: "न हि राज्यं महाप्राज्ञ स्वेन कामेन शक्यते / अवाप्तुं रक्षितुं वापि भोक्तुं वा भरतर्षभ" (*Mahabharata* 5.127.21). Her advice develops into a theory of political self-government: "अविजित्य य आत्मानममात्यान्विजिगीषते" (5.127.27), warning that a man who has not conquered himself cannot successfully control his ministers or defeat his enemies. Gandhari thus identifies the connection between private impulse and public consequence, treating self-restraint as a condition of legitimate and effective rule. Her argument becomes explicitly diplomatic when she declares, "न युद्धे तात कल्याणं न धर्मार्थौ कुतः सुखम्" (5.127.39): war offers no assured good, and without dharma and material well-being, happiness cannot follow. She consequently urges Duryodhana to give the Pāṇḍavas their rightful share and to govern through restraint rather than pride (5.127.40–45). She articulates a coherent political framework in which desire, self-discipline, justice, diplomacy, and the welfare of the kingdom are interconnected. Her counsel is not simply an expression of fear that her son might die; it is an argument about the responsibilities and limitations of sovereign power.

Tagore's *Gandharir Abedan* reworks Gandhari's counsel in the *Mahabharata* by changing the grounds on which her appeal is articulated. In the Udyogaparvan, Gandhari's warning to Duryodhana is framed principally as political and ethical judgement: she questions his fitness to rule, insists on the necessity of self-restraint, and warns against war. Her argument does not need to rest on her identity as a mother or as a woman; it rests on the consequences of ambition and the responsibilities of political power. Tagore's dramatic poem retains the question of royal responsibility, but makes its gendered implications more explicit. Gandhari reminds Dhritarashtra that the protection of dharma has been entrusted to him as king, "তুমি রাজা, রাজ-অধিরাজ, / বিধাতার বাম হস্ত; ধর্মরক্ষা-কাজ / তোমা-'পরে সমর্পিত" (Tagore, *Gandharir Abedan*). Yet she also

declares, "তবে আজ রাজপদতলে / সমস্ত নারীর হয়ে নয়নের জলে / বিচার প্রার্থনা করি," shifting from an argument about the ethics of rule to a demand for justice on behalf of women. Her description of male conflict— "পুরুষে পুরুষে দ্বন্দ্ব / স্বার্থ লয়ে বাঁধে অহরহ"—further distinguishes the political strategies through which men pursue their interests from the suffering borne by women drawn into their conflicts. The difference between the epic and Tagore's adaptation, then, is not that one gives Gandhari a political voice and the other portrays her only through her maternal role. Rather, Tagore reframes an ethical and political problem through the gendered consequences of power, making women's suffering and their exclusion from the decisions that produce it part of the question of justice.

This tension becomes particularly significant when read alongside Tagore's own account of women's social role. In his discussion of the domestic sphere, he writes:

"Wherever there is something which is concretely personal and human, there is the woman's world. The domestic world is the world where every individual finds his worth as an individual, therefore his value is not the market value... This domestic world has been the gift of God to woman" (Tagore, *English Writings* 229).

This passage elevates the domestic world by associating it with love, human dignity, and the recognition of individual worth. Yet it also assigns women a distinctive sphere whose value derives from its emotional and relational character. Read alongside Beauvoir's critique of women's position as the Other, Tagore's formulation raises the question of whether this elevation of women's domestic role also restricts the forms of personhood available to them.

Gandhari embodies this contradiction. Her intervention demonstrates that maternal feeling can produce political insight rather than merely private emotion. She recognises the consequences

of Duryodhana's ambition, challenges her husband's partiality, and insists that justice must apply even when the guilty person is one's own child. Nevertheless, the drama locates much of her authority within the moral world of motherhood, sacrifice, and domestic responsibility.

Kunti and Gandhari demonstrate how maternal experience can produce complex moral and political judgement. Their stories do not prove that motherhood erases personhood; they raise the narrower question of whether female authority is most readily recognised when it can be explained through sacrifice, kinship, or maternal love.

1.6 Maidenhood: Femininity, Youth, and the Formation of the Woman

The totalisation of womanhood does not begin only after marriage, widowhood, or motherhood. It can also be traced in the representation of the young woman before she enters these identities. Tagore's young heroines frequently possess vitality, movement, unconventionality, and even rebellion. Yet these qualities are often organised around the quality of femininity. Unconventionality must be reconciled with feminine desirability, and apparent freedom will ultimately be accommodated within heterosexual romance.

Feminist critiques of conventional femininity help frame the roles of maiden, mother, and sexually transgressive woman. Susan Fraiman’s *Unbecoming Women* challenges the assumption that a woman’s development follows a straightforward path toward greater autonomy; female development can instead involve disorientation and reduced authority (Fraiman x–xiii). Applied to Tagore’s young heroines, this framework asks whether youth opens a space for open-ended self-development or functions mainly as a transition toward an expected feminine role. The comparison is suggestive rather than direct, since Fraiman studies British women writers and Tagore’s works belong to different literary and historical contexts.

Chitrangada's upbringing becomes associated with the question of whether she is sufficiently feminine to be desired by Arjuna. She begins to understand her natural self as potentially incompatible with romantic fulfilment, and her transformation into an idealised form of feminine beauty becomes central to the dramatic conflict. Her development consequently takes the form of a negotiation between the freedom she already possesses and the femininity she believes she must acquire to secure love.

This demand can be read as a movement toward self-assertion. The route to that recognition introduces a tension absent from the initial coexistence of identities in the epic. Her development therefore raises the question central to Fraiman's critique. Does the narrative enable a young woman to develop beyond prescribed femininity?

Mrinmayi in "Samapti" offers a different example. Her mobility, refusal of convention, and indifference to expected feminine behaviour give her a freedom that precedes romantic longing. The narrative initially presents marriage not as a desirable fulfilment but as a threat to this freedom. When the older women repeatedly instruct her to abandon her habits, the narrator observes that they succeed in making marriage appear to her as a "যাবজ্জীবন কারাদণ্ড" (a life sentence), followed by "ফাঁসির হুকুম" (Tagore, "সমাপ্তি"). Her refusal "আমি বিবাহ করিব না"—therefore emerges not as an inexplicable childish impulse but as a response to the restrictions that marriage is expected to impose on her. This interpretation becomes more complicated when Apurba asks whether she loves him. The narrator explains that a question whose answer may sometimes be simple can involve psychological complexities that cannot be expected of a girl. Yet the passage has already shown Mrinmayi repeatedly expressing her unwillingness to marry and her indifference to Apurba's departure. By locating the difficulty in her psychology, the narration risks

making her clearly stated preferences appear less authoritative than the emotional transformation Apurba hopes to discover in her. The final scene completes this movement through the image of a "হাস্যবাধা" that remains unfinished until it is brought to completion by "অশ্রুজলধারায়": Apurba understands her embrace and kisses as the conclusion of a long-delayed emotional process. The contrast between laughter and tears gives the ending its emotional force, but it also establishes a particular standard by which Mrinmayi's change becomes legible. Her earlier laughter, movement, and refusal belong to an immature state; tears and physical intimacy signify the arrival of a love that the narrative can finally recognise. The ending of "Samapti" can be read not simply as the culmination of Mrinmayi's emotional maturation but as the narrative resolution of a process of coercive social adjustment. The narrative does not grant her earlier declarations of disinterest the same interpretive authority that it grants her final expression of intimacy.

In "The Indian Ideal of Marriage," Tagore defends early marriage through an argument that marriage should precede the height of sexual attraction and that love should be cultivated within the institution. He writes that the husband is presented to girls as an idea rather than as an individual, "not a person but a principle" (Tagore, "The Indian Ideal of Marriage" 524). He later distinguishes women as "the Mother" and "the Beloved," assigning each a spiritual function. These formulations are relevant because they show how Tagore's own prose can idealise women through relational roles even while attributing them social and moral power.

2. The Woman as Symbol: Rebellion Without Autonomous Revolution

The preceding sections have examined how widowhood, desire, motherhood, and maidenhood can become dominant frames for representing women. A related question emerges when women rebel against those frames or against larger social structures. Tagore repeatedly

imagines women who reject oppressive marriages, challenge political authority, or disrupt established hierarchies. The following readings examine whether female resistance becomes the basis for an independently imagined future or is redirected toward a male figure, a romance, or a restored social order.

2.1 Rebellion as a Prelude to the Man: Nandini and Ranjan

Rakta Karabi offers a clear case of female resistance within an oppressive industrial order. Nandini moves freely through Yakshapuri, challenges its routines, and insists on human feeling in a system that reduces people to labour and extraction.

Ranjan complicates her narrative position. Nandini repeatedly invokes his anticipated arrival, associating him with freedom and transformation, while he remains absent for much of the drama. Yet the Sardar acknowledges Nandini's own role in producing the conditions for rebellion. "এতদিন কীটের মত নিঃশব্দে মাটির নীচে গর্ত করে সে চলেছিল, তাকে মরবার পাখা মেলতে শিখিয়েচ তুমিই।" His words recognise that Nandini has taught the workers, previously moving silently underground like insects, to spread their wings, even at the risk of death. Nandini, however, tells the Professor, "আমার রঞ্জনকে এখানে আনলে এদের মরা পাঁজরের ভিতরে প্রাণ নেচে উঠবে," attributing the workers' anticipated transformation to Ranjan's arrival rather than to her own intervention. The contrast is significant and telling. While another character explicitly acknowledges Nandini's role in awakening resistance, she herself locates the promise of collective liberation in an absent male figure. (Tagore, *Rakta Karabi*).

Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other helps clarify the distribution of revolutionary significance (Beauvoir 6). Nandini possesses the courage and moral imagination to challenge Yakshapuri, yet the play also associates the coming transformation with Ranjan.

Tasher Desh presents a related but distinct structure. The Prince enters a society organised around rigid rules and introduces movement, unpredictability, and the possibility of living otherwise. He brings a freedom that he already possesses into a world where such freedom has been suppressed.

The Queen's position makes transformation consequential in a different way, but the movement toward liberation remains closely associated with the Prince's arrival. This raises the question of whether she becomes an independent author of change or whether her liberation is mediated by a possibility first introduced by a male outsider.

Read alongside Tagore's ideal of feminine power as nourishing and stabilising, this structure invites a question about who has the authority to define freedom. The Queen is not merely a passive participant in the transformation, as she openly acknowledges her own unrest when she tells the King, "আর বসে থাকতে পারছি নে" (Tagore, *Swarabitan* 42). Her responses indicate that she has already begun to question the established order, rather than simply accepting the Rajkumar's ideas. Yet when she asks, "মানুষ হতে পারব আমরা?" (43), her question also raises the problem of who can authorise the transition towards freedom. While it could be read as the Queen asking about her people as a collective, it is still the fact that the mantle of the revolutionary is not given to the woman who rebels from her restrictions, but to the man who arrives from a heritage of freedom.

A related tension emerges in *Chandalika*, where Prakriti's assertion of desire and her subsequent reflection complicate the relationship between agency and liberation. Like Bimala in *Ghare Baire*, Prakriti is not simply a passive recipient of social expectations. She acts upon her desires and becomes conscious of herself through the consequences of those actions. Yet the exercise of agency does not, by itself, resolve the constraints through which she understands her

own identity. Both works therefore resist an uncomplicated equation between the ability to desire and act and the achievement of freedom. Their differences remain significant. Bimala's experience is shaped by the competing political and personal claims surrounding her, while Prakriti's self-understanding develops through a more direct confrontation with desire, recognition, and its consequences.

In "Manbhanjan," Giribala escapes an oppressive marriage and enters the public world of theatre as an actress. In a society that regulates women's movement, sexuality, and reputation, this departure is a substantial act of self-assertion. She does not merely protest against Gopinath; she leaves the position he has assigned her and establishes a public identity beyond the household.

While Giribala's refusal also challenges the ideal of woman as a source of domestic stability, it follows a wider pattern: when women leave the domestic sphere, their departures are often narrated through their effects on male counterparts and presented as comeuppance for a bad partner, rather than as a form of freedom women might exercise even in the presence of good men. When Gopinath disrupts Giribala's performance, the audience cries out, "'দূর করে দাও' 'বের করে দাও'," while Gopinath, in a broken voice, threatens, "আমি ওকে খুন করব, ওকে খুন করব" (Tagore, "মানভঞ্জন"). The police drag him out, and the story concludes: "সমস্ত কলিকাতা শহরের দর্শক দুই চক্ষু ভরিয়া গিরিবালার অভিনয় দেখিতে লাগিল, কেবল গোপীনাথ সেখানে স্থান পাইল না।" Giribala has thus acquired a public identity as a performer, and Gopinath is the one excluded from the spectacle. Yet the ending defines her triumph through his humiliation and expulsion.

In *Streer Patra*, as in *Manbhanjan*, the articulation of female agency remains closely tied to the woman's relationship with a man. Mrinal's letter gives her the means to articulate her refusal of the domestic order and to make her departure known to her husband. Yet the reader encounters

this decisive act through an address to the man she leaves, rather than through an extended representation of the process by which she arrives at liberation. Her voice is unmistakably her own, but the narrative's emphasis on what she has to say to her husband raises a distinction between the expression of agency and the representation of a woman's life beyond marriage.

Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other helps illuminate this movement. Chitrangada first attempts to become the woman Arjuna will recognise, then insists that recognition extend to the person she already is (Beauvoir 6). Her self-assertion contests the equation of feminine worth with beauty, although the conflict first makes her own identity appear incompatible with desirability.

The broader implication is not that a woman's recognition by a man is inherently illegitimate, but that the narrative should allow her identity to exceed the terms on which she becomes desirable.

3. Women Beyond Female Suffering: Anandamoyi and Shailabala

The argument that Tagore's women are often constrained by the narrative category of womanhood requires qualification. Anandamoyi and Shailabala possess opinions, initiative, and a sense of self that cannot be explained through personal suffering alone. Their relative freedom does not automatically make them the narrative's central subjects, however; it may show that female autonomy is most readily imagined when it operates within a role that supports or disrupts a larger male-centred plot.

Anandamoyi's moral independence allows her to challenge caste prejudice and religious orthodoxy. Her worldview is essential to the novel's resolution, yet her authority is expressed largely through motherhood. Her agency is real, but the novel's principal ideological crisis remains

organised around *Gora*'s development. "তোমরাই যদি এত উঁচু জাত আর ভগবানের এত আদরের, তবে তিনি একবার পাঠানের, একবার মোগলের, একবার খৃস্টানের পায়ে এমন করে তোমাদের মাথা মুড়িয়ে দিচ্ছেন কেন?" (Tagore, *Gora*). She directly challenges religious and caste-based distinctions. "আমি যদি খৃস্টান বলে, ছোটো জাত বলে কাউকে ঘৃণা করি তবে ঈশ্বর তোকেও আমার কাছ থেকে কেড়ে নেবেন।" (Tagore, *Gora*). However, the narrative still attributes her outlook to her position as mother and nurturer.

This distinction becomes more revealing when considered alongside Tagore's own formulation of women's social function. In the passage quoted by Chakravarty and Chaudhuri, Tagore describes woman through the metaphor of soil. She sustains growth while also keeping it within limits, and her supposed qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion, and self-sacrifice enable her to nourish, heal, and preserve life (Chakravarty and Chaudhuri 13). Such a formulation assigns women a vital function, but it also locates that function in sustaining and regulating a life whose principal movement may belong to someone else.

Anandamoyi's character both fulfils and complicates this ideal. Her nurturing disposition does not make her intellectually passive. Instead, it becomes the basis of a moral authority that challenges the very social conventions she is expected to sustain. She is able to thrive within this role because Tagore allows nurture to become a source of judgement and independent conviction. Yet her example also exposes the limits of that freedom. Her autonomy and ideals are most fully recognised through the maternal and ethical work she performs in relation to others.

Shailabala offers a related but more comic possibility. Her widowhood does not reduce her to mourning or social exclusion. She is lively, clever, and able to unsettle the men around her. Yet *Chirakumar Sabha* remains organised largely around the anxieties of a male bachelor community

and marriage. Shailabala can manipulate and outwit that world without becoming the primary centre of its narrative development.

The contrast with characters such as Binodini is consequently not that Anandamoyi and Shailabala possess personhood while other women do not. Rather, the narratives place different pressures on the expression of female personhood. Where widowhood, desire, marriage, or sexual transgression becomes the principal condition through which a woman is represented, her individuality may be repeatedly interpreted through the social consequences of being a woman. Where her role permits her to nurture, mediate, or disrupt without making her own suffering the central problem, a wider range of personal qualities can emerge.

Anandamoyi and Shailabala therefore qualify, rather than overturn, the argument. They show that Tagore can represent women with independent convictions and authority. The remaining question concerns narrative position and whether their own development becomes the principal subject, or if it chiefly sustains, transforms, or illuminates the lives of others.

4. Beyond Gendered Suffering: The Interior Lives of Tagore's Men

The comparison with Tagore's male characters is not intended to establish that men possess agency while women do not. The comparison instead asks whether male characters are more often granted a sustained philosophical, moral, or psychological trajectory beyond the immediate circumstances through which they are introduced. Men, too, experience rejection, but the consequences of rejection are not represented in the same way. In "Aparichita," Kalyani refuses marriage after the humiliation surrounding her proposed marriage: "'আমি বিবাহ করিব না।'" When the narrator asks why, she answers, "'মাতৃ-আজ্ঞা,'" which he initially misunderstands before realising that she means her motherland. The narrator subsequently explains, "সেই বিবাহ-

ভাঙার পর হইতে কল্যাণী মেয়েদের শিক্ষার ব্রত গ্রহণ করিয়াছে" (Tagore, "Aparichita"). Kalyani's independence is represented as an alternative to marriage. Amit, by contrast, can retain his interpretation of love after his separation from Labanya and still marry Ketaki. He explains, "একদিন আমার সমস্ত ডানা মেলে পেয়েছিলুম আমার ওড়ার আকাশ; আজ আমি পেয়েছি আমার ছোট্টো বাসা, ডানা গুটিয়ে বসেছি। কিন্তু আমার আকাশও রইল" (Tagore, *Shesher Kobita*). Amit's metaphor allows him to distinguish marriage from the loss of his independent emotional and intellectual world. He can enter one relationship without surrendering his interpretation of another. The contrast, then, is between the narrative possibilities available to them after rejection. Kalyani's independence and marriage are presented as mutually exclusive, whereas Amit retains both the freedom to interpret his experience on his own terms and the possibility of marriage.

The contrast between *Chitrangada* and *Shapmochan* further complicates the relationship between female agency and the terms of romantic intimacy. In *Chitrangada*, *Chitrangada* actively seeks to win Arjuna, but does so by asking the gods to transform her appearance, "কর মোরে অপূর্ব সুন্দরী। দাও মোরে / সেই এক দিন" (Tagore, *Chitrangada*). In *Shapmochan*, the apparent reversal is that Aruneshwar, whose disfigured appearance leads him to conceal himself from Komolika, determines the conditions under which she may know him. When she asks to see him, he replies, "আমার গানেই তুমি আমাকে দেখ" (Tagore, *Shapmochan*), directing her to experience him through his music rather than through sight. He thus makes concealment a condition of their intimacy, even as Komolika longs for the freedom to see her husband. The situations are not identical: *Chitrangada* seeks transformation to gain Arjuna's affection, whereas Aruneshwar's concealment arises from his fear of being rejected. Yet in both cases, the relationship develops within terms that limit what the woman can bring to it and demand from it. *Chitrangada* alters her

appearance to become desirable to Arjuna, while Komolika must initially accept Aruneshwar's restriction on seeing him.

In some of Tagore's stories, a male character's suffering does not become the sole explanation for his identity. A man may be introduced through exile, grief, or a failed relationship and still be represented through conflicting impulses and changing judgements. In *Ghare Baire*, Nikhil realises Bimala's growing discontent with his methods and her infatuation with Sandeep. "আজ এ কথা স্পষ্ট বুঝেছি, বিমলের জীবনে আমি আকস্মিক মাত্র; বিমলের সমস্ত প্রকৃতি যার সঙ্গে সত্য মিলতে পারে সে হচ্ছে সন্দীপ। এইটুকু জানাই আমার পক্ষে যথেষ্ট।" Bimala herself describes his resolution. "অথচ স্বদেশী কাণ্ডর সঙ্গে যে আমার স্বামীর যোগ ছিল না বা তিনি এর বিরুদ্ধে ছিলেন তা নয়। কিন্তু 'বন্দে মাতরম্' মন্ত্রটি তিনি চুড়ান্ত করে গ্রহণ করতে পারেন নি।" (Tagore, *Ghare Baire*). Nikhil is resolute in his ideals and unwilling to bend even to gain his wife's approval or win her affections.

"Kabuliwala" offers an important complication. Rahmat's identity as a father is central to the story. This makes him a useful counterexample to any simple claim that male characters are never reduced to a single relational role. His paternal identity is central, yet the story also represents his anger, violence, vulnerability, and the social conditions of migration. After learning that a neighbour has denied owing him money for a Rampuri shawl, Rahmat stabs him during their quarrel. The narrator recounts, "…. সেই দেনা সে অস্বীকার করে এবং তাহাই লইয়া বচসা করিতে করিতে রহমত তাহাকে এক ছুরি বসাইয়া দিয়াছে। রহমত সেই মিথ্যাবাদীর উদ্দেশে নানারূপ অশ্রাব্য গালি দিতেছে...." (Tagore, "কাবুলিওয়ালা"). The story presents him as both a loving father and a hot-tempered man whose response to an insult cannot be explained by fatherhood alone and has serious consequences.

This complication matters. Rahmat can be affectionate and violent, emotionally vulnerable and impulsive. His paternal love does not erase his temper, just as his crime does not entirely erase his capacity for tenderness. The reader encounters a man whose character contains contradictions that cannot be reduced to a single moral or emotional category. Even though the story ultimately centres on his separation from his daughter and his recognition of Mini's changed circumstances, the implication of a life beyond the immediate narrative gives Rahmat a degree of psychological extension.

"Aparichita" offers another male–female comparison. Kalyani refuses to proceed with a marriage after Anupam's family humiliates her, and she later commits herself to education and work rather than allowing marriage to determine her future.

Kalyani's commitment to education suggests a future that exceeds the failed marriage. This is important counterevidence to the idea that Tagore's women are always confined to romantic outcomes. The analysis should therefore ask not only what the narrative withholds, but also what forms of independence it explicitly imagines. In "Aparichita," Kalyani refuses to marry again after the breakdown of her proposed marriage. The narrator learns that she has rejected another suitable match and immediately imagines the emotional consequences of her decision:

এদিকে আমি শুনিলাম, সে মেয়ের নাকি ভালো পাত্র জুটিয়াছিল কিন্তু সে পণ করিয়াছে, বিবাহ করিবে না। শুনিয়া আমার মন পুলকের আবেশে ভরিয়া গেল। আমি কল্পনায় দেখিতে লাগিলাম, সে ভালো করিয়া খায় না। সন্ধ্যা হইয়া আসে, সে চুল বাঁধিতে ভুলিয়া যায়। তার বাপ তার মুখের পানে চান আর ভাবেন, 'আমার মেয়ে দিনে দিনে এমন হইয়া যাইতেছে কেন।'

(Tagore, "Aparichita")

The passage is revealing because Kalyani's refusal becomes the occasion for the narrator's pleasure and imaginative activity. He pictures her as neglecting food and appearance, growing despondent while her father worries over her, and the narration details his imagined picture of Kalyani more than Kalyani's lived life. These details do not establish Kalyani's actual emotional condition. Her decision is therefore filtered through a familiar narrative of feminine suffering, in which refusing marriage becomes legible through the distress it supposedly produces. The narrator subsequently imagines himself as the person who might relieve that suffering, turning her refusal into part of his own heroic and romantic fantasy. Kalyani's choice is acknowledged, but the narrative initially gives greater space to his interpretation of what that choice must mean.

However, Tagore does not represent Kalyani as merely passive or governed by romantic disappointment. During the train incident, she confronts a man who attempts to force a change in the passengers' arrangements. When the narrator begins calling for porters, Kalyani intervenes:

শুনিয়া আমি 'কুলি কুলি' করিয়া ডাক ছাড়িতে লাগিলাম। মেয়েটি উঠিয়া দুই চক্ষে অগ্নিবর্ষণ করিয়া বলিল, 'না, আপনি যাইতে পারিবেন না, যেমন আছেন বসিয়া থাকুন।'

বলিয়া সে দ্বারের কাছে দাঁড়াইয়া স্টেশন-মাস্টারকে ইংরেজি ভাষায় বলিল, 'এ গাড়ি আগে হইতে রিজার্ভ করা, এ কথা মিথ্যাকথা।'

(Tagore, "Aparichita")

Here Kalyani acts decisively by challenging the attempted coercion, addressing the station-master in English, and refusing to let the narrator's anxious response determine what happens. Her agency is practical, public, and directed towards a concrete injustice.

Nevertheless, the narrative's distribution of perspective remains significant. Kalyani's words and actions are reported by the male narrator, whose descriptions also shape how readers

are invited to perceive her. Her educational commitment is stated, but the reader is not given a comparably sustained account of how she understands this work, what principles guide it, or how she interprets her decision not to marry.

The problem is not that Kalyani lacks agency, nor that her commitment to education is insignificant. It is that her independent life remains largely mediated by a narrator whose emotional investment repeatedly draws the story back towards himself. The story therefore offers meaningful counterevidence to the claim that Tagore's women are always confined to romantic outcomes, while also illustrating how a woman's agency can be recognised without granting her an equivalent narrative voice.

In "Samapti," the relationship between female development and male fulfilment takes a different form. Mrinmayi's unconventionality initially unsettles the expectations surrounding marriage. Her refusal to behave as a compliant bride and her attachment to freedom outside the domestic sphere make her resistant to the role that marriage is supposed to assign her. Amulya, meanwhile, chooses her as his bride in accordance with his own preference rather than the conventional expectations of his family. His choice establishes a question that revolves around whether the woman he has selected can eventually become a partner within the marital arrangement he desires.

Mrinmayi's confinement in a room after the marriage marks the force with which this question is posed. Her resistance is treated as a problem of immaturity, and the narrative's movement towards reconciliation depends on a change in her emotional relationship to Amulya and to marriage. Her development fulfils the husband's initial decision to choose a bride for himself. The marriage that first appeared unconventional because Amulya rejected his family's

preferred arrangement ultimately becomes the setting in which Mrinmayi is expected to mature into the relationship he has chosen.

The asymmetry is important. Amulya's preference is presented as an expression of individual judgement; Mrinmayi's independence, by contrast, becomes something that must develop towards marital understanding.

Shesher Kobita presents a different question about the authority of competing philosophies of love. Amit’s romantic idealism and tendency to turn relationships into intellectual propositions give him a strong hold over the novel’s conceptual world. Labanya is not passive. She thinks independently, questions him, and recognises the limits of a relationship organised around romantic performance. Her decision not to marry Amit is an act of judgement, not a failure of agency.

The ending does not simply erase Labanya. Both characters move away from the relationship they once imagined, and Labanya’s refusal is decisive. Nevertheless, Amit’s philosophy of love receives sustained articulation, while Labanya’s future beyond the relationship recedes from the narrative’s centre.

The distinction is therefore not between men who have agency and women who do not. It is between the capacity to act and the narrative space to become the sustained subject of one’s own development. The examples also show that this pattern is uneven, not universal.

5. Conclusion

Tagore’s women are memorable partly because they resist the roles assigned to them. Binodini refuses resignation; Bimala crosses the boundaries of domestic life; Charulata discovers intellectual and emotional possibilities; Kunti and Gandhari make consequential moral choices;

Nandini challenges an oppressive system; *Chitrangada* questions the terms on which she is desired. It would be inaccurate to claim that these characters lack agency.

The essay's narrower claim is that agency and narrative autonomy do not always coincide. Some characters' actions remain closely framed by widowhood, desire, marriage, or motherhood; others, including Anandamoyi, Shailabala, and Kalyani, qualify this pattern by showing moral independence, social confidence, or a future beyond marriage. These exceptions prevent the argument from becoming a claim that Tagore could not imagine women as people or that he could not imagine female freedom. They make the question more precise. We must ask under what conditions a woman's independent outlook becomes central to the narrative, and under what conditions does it remain subordinate to another character's development?

Ultimately, the question is not whether Tagore could write complex women or imagine female freedom. His works repeatedly show that he could. The question is how consistently that freedom becomes a sustained narrative future, rather than remaining organised around the social condition, romantic relation, or symbolic function through which a woman first becomes legible.

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