

## **Skeleton/s in the Cupboard**

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*Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translations*

Malashri Lal (ed)

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In a much-controversial interview in the late 90s, the now deceased film-director Rituparno Ghosh had apparently proclaimed that Rabindranath Tagore had to be celebrated as a woman first of all. Of course, post Judith Butler, one knows that Ghosh was talking not about anatomy but first and foremost about performativity: the extent to which Tagore embraced the interiority and the ethic of care that is conventionally attributed to the feminine, the proclivity to the finer arts, the love of nature, the deep empathy for the marginalized, all pointing towards an archetypal woman who sits weaving and unraveling the fabric of life itself. However, such an archetype is not without its flaws, veering dangerously towards a stereotype with its structural hegemonic impact. Tagore's own involvement with the feminine traverses a somewhat similar terrain-perching precariously upon different social types, perplexed at the fluidity of nature which his female characters demonstrate, sometimes even beyond his authorial control. The anthology compiled and edited by Malashri Lal attempts to enter this labyrinth through skilled translations of Tagore's texts- some by herself and most by other well-known experts in the field. Radha Chakravarty's piece in the beginning about the performativity of translation itself is significant in the case of an anthology dealing with such a thematic. This art of "inspired ad hoc-ism" (phrase coined by the inimitable Sukanta Chaudhuri) has found its most fertile ground in the hands of proficient scholars and translators such as Supriya Chaudhuri, Aruna Chakravarty, Soham Pain, William Radice, Sanjukta Dasgupta to mention a few.

The logic of the compilation is compellingly circular: starting with his memoirs and letters, moving steadily outwards towards poetry, stories, songs and non-fictional prose, and ending with yet another form of life-writing, this time through travelogues. Yet there is a linear trajectory mingled with this somewhere, as though “the growth of a poet’s mind” needs the wrenching away from the personal. This strange commingling is resonant in Tagore’s own words- “*Bahiro pothey bibaagi hiya kisher khoje geli/Ay re phire ay*” (“Where dost thou wander, dear heart?/ Return to thy nest.” [Translation mine]). There is a strong awareness of the *kunstlerroman* lurking behind the editorial imaginary of the book. The movement outwards is a trajectory away from interiority- and yet without that cocoon, the soul of the artist is torn between the pleasures of exile/travel and the nostalgia for the home. In this anthology, this dilemma is traced in terms of the artist’s negotiations with what it means to be feminine, what constitutes the feminine, and indeed if cultural transactions of the feminine results in the reduction or in the amplification of the human.

The editor’s introduction is a succinct summary of Tagore’s encounters with the feminine throughout his life, almost following the same trajectory as the page of contents: as though the *tabula rasa* of Tagore’s mind was a palimpsest constantly registering moments of the occurrence of the feminine in the history of the family, the nation, the civilization and the arts. Dr. Lal strives to provide this analysis with a theoretical framework spanning across both the Oriental and the Occidental notions about gender. So along with Butler there is the invocation to the *ardhanarishwara* (half-male half-female). The instances where the theoretical frameworks seem a little lackluster show the tremendous complexity of the texts rather than any incompetence on the part of the critic. For instance, this section from the introduction might come across as slightly reductive to some readers: “To understand the feminine principle and give dignity to the woman’s mind and body, a writer must be gifted with an androgynous imagination ... Tagore entered the realms of the mythical to find icons for his androgynous imagination.” (Lal, xxi) The fundamental problem with such a statement is the haunting question that to what extent is this celebration of gender-ambiguity in Tagore a viable option considering that in his non-fictional prose about gender there is no mention of the material reality of gender-ambiguous existence? Why enter the mythical when the material is close at hand? However, Dr. Lal is correct in pointing out that “Tagore was not a polemical writer and one would need to read into the interstices” (xxii). So she claims that Arjun in *Chitrangada* is not just the archetypal male who

must embrace his androgynous partner, but also has a history himself of having to experience the life of a *kliba* (eunuch) in the name of *Brihannala* during his period of exile. In that sense, the editor speculates, Tagore's socio-cultural imaginary was aspiring to be almost a gender-neutral one, with an abiding ethic of equality. Two questions linger, nevertheless: the first, as stated earlier, relates to the break into the mythical (perhaps as a respite from the uncomfortable proximity of the material?). And the second refers to the dialectics of disguise: what one also must remember is that **even as *Brihannala*** Arjun inspired the love of his female student Uttara whom he persuaded into marrying his son; but Chitrangada could hope to retain Arjun's love only as *Suroopa* (beautiful, her 'feminine' appearance) while as *Kuroopa* (ugly, her warrior more 'masculine' appearance) she had to let go of this archetypal male only to meet him much later on another battlefield. The ramifications of such a detail are huge. Following the claims of Naomi Schorr one might even argue that the feminine resides more in the detail than in the larger story. So, the selective presentation of detail in the introduction might be symptomatic of a desire to retain Tagore as the epitome of cosmopolitan gender-equality in a fast-changing nation-state like ours. Still, it cannot be stressed enough that the glossing over in the case of this mythical detail (yet another interstice worthy of polemical attention) is not an editorial lapse, but a gesture at the larger problematic of gender which such texts must and are often forced to encounter.

The anthologized texts have been chosen with a lot of care: particular attention to detail has been paid in the choice of narratives where the woman is almost a secondary appearance, incidental to the story. The editorial logic has been generously inclusive, looking for (by her own admission) the place of the feminine in this world-view (xvii). Even in a story like 'The Guest' (*Atithi*), where the young boy is at the focus of attention, the spurring factor/s behind each of his travels have been the loving women in his life- his mother who lurks in the metahistory of the story, and Charu (and her mother) in the narrated story. In that sense, 'The Guest' provides an image of feminine love as both bonding and bondage, something that seeks to nourish and fetter the (male) artist's young mind. This picture of the Woman as an irresistibly charming hindrance to the 'growth of the poet', who still must grow outwards away from the woman is reflective to an extent of the poet's own life. While Kadambari (sister-in-law) was the inspiration to much of his early poetry (anthologized in the collection), Mrinalini (wife) was the anchor from which he attempted to sail far away. This similitude between the art and the life of the artist is also matched by a duality between the two. While in stories like *Denapaona* and *Joutuk* (the first

anthologized here) the author sticks firmly to his position against dowry, in many of his letters to his wife and some memoirs (not anthologized here) one finds his anxiety to collect the amount which would make an adequate dowry for each of his daughters. Again, here one can detect a subconscious procrustean effort to cancel out contradictions between the artistic practices of the poet and his practices of everyday life. But it is truly in these contradictions that Tagore and the feminine emerges as a concept which is perplexing to his modern readers.

It would be anachronistic to claim that Tagore was parochial in his construction of the traditions of the 'West' and the 'East'. In the times of nascent nationalism it was but a matter of need to define the Indian woman in a certain way: moulding the image of the Brahmo Samaj lady as the ideal. The daughter from *Kabuliwalah* (anthologized) or those from *Samapti* and *Postmaster* must all grow up to be the soothing presence of humility and learning which is *Labanya* (from *The Farewell Verse*) rather than the evanescent ghostly lover of terrestrial vanity in *Monihara*, or the glamorous and snobbish *Ketaki* (*The Farewell Verse*) whose Western education smacks of glib empowerment devoid of self-improvement. Yet the discerning feminist reader of *Labanya*'s farewell song of sacrifice must also note the irony of how this ideal has seeped unaltered into the modern educated bourgeois consciousness as the epitome of the ideal woman: itself an anachronism in praxis. If one has to critique the anthology for anything, it must be for the lack of this sense of irony with which one may trace how Tagore's involvement with the feminine (like much of his other legacies) been inherited. W. B. Yeats' 'A Prayer for My Daughter' speaks of the duality that the benevolent *pater familias* must experience in times of transition: whether he desires the 'ceremony of innocence' from the *nostos* or the heady adventure from the turning gyres of the future for his daughter, is his never-ending dilemma. In Tagore we have found our Eastern mind, torn by this same dilemma, unable to choose between *Urvashi* and *Savitri*, producing diverse forms of art for the daughters of the civilization.

The title of the review is consciously provocative and perhaps aptly disappointing for the 'scoop-hunting' reader. The intention was not to (re)produce stories from Tagore's inner quarters like some gossip-column but indeed to inspire an intertextual echo from another story by Tagore by the title *Kamkal* ('Skeleton'). The woman in this story is a ghost, appearing like "a vision in a dream" where she narrates her life story. A widow from a tortuous marriage, she spends a lifetime of unrequited desires and in the end kills herself in her brother's antechambers dressed

as a perfect bride. Notwithstanding the potboiler potential of the narrative, what is significant is that this is the same woman whose skeleton hangs in the schoolroom of the young narrator for anatomy lessons. The story is an apt metaphor for the anthology just reviewed: the feminine haunting the author and the anthology at his peripheries, over-spilling the categories which seek to construct and theorize it, even as its skeleton remains at the heart of this art.

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