

The Advent of the ‘New Woman’ in Tagore’s Short Fiction

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<p>Received: 11 Nov 2025; Received in revised form: 09 Dec 2025; Accepted: 14 Dec 2025; Available online: 20 Dec 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Patriarchy, Feminism, Emancipation, New Woman</p>	<p><i>The early twentieth century in India had the stage set for the changes to take place in the condition of women. Social reforms, education, individual freedom and feminist ideals led to emergence of the New Woman. Patriarchal traditional society considered women as sub-ordinate and not independent enough to lead a dignified life. The rights of woman were completely neglected. The society denied rights, oppressed and exploited women and much has not changed, this continues even in the 21st century. Though women have been given certain rights, they are left behind in decision making, remain marginalized, suffer inequality, injustice and are denied their rightful voice and space. The Renaissance Literature in India found writers and social reformers with ideals of emancipation for women to herald the advent of the new woman. Among them, Rabindranath Tagore through his transformative writings championed the cause for women’s freedom from patriarchy. Tagore’s portrayal of women characters in his fiction presents the image of the liberated woman. This paper endeavours to trace the advent of the ‘New Woman’ in Tagore’s short fiction which is presented in his women characters who chose to transcend from the traditionally exploited stage to that of an emancipated one. The women protagonists of his fictional writings from 1913 to 1941 are all self-assertive, liberated and emancipated. Tagore envisioned the new ideal womanhood in the creation of women characters and this is scrutinized through the short stories “Giribala” (1895), “Woman Unknown” (1914), “Letter from a Wife” (1914) and “The Laboratory” (1940).</i></p>

Rabindranath Tagore has touched every essence of society through his oceans of literature, whether it's his plays or poems and most importantly his stories. One such angle of his writings is feminism. Female characters are very well portrayed by Tagore. In particular, in Tagore's hands, women are complex, misunderstood characters who fall and fail under the heavy hand of tradition. Their sensibilities are thoroughly modern, even as they strain under the triple weight of poverty, patriarchy and colonialism. Today, it is the short stories that make him enduringly germane. The stories are sharp and satirical, and build to unflinching crescendos of tragedy. In his works through which not only he talks about the contemporary situation of women, their role in the society,

their efforts for self-alleviation, but also shows how they proved to be much better than their male counterparts.

Tagore was an educationist, a social reformer and a humanist. He was a proponent of freedom of individuality. His inscriptions had been a great support in the Indian Literary Renaissance. Continuing the legacy of social reforms from Raja Rammohan Roy and Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore also championed the cause of women’s liberation from patriarchy. In most of his fictions, the female protagonists take a centre stage than men. In his novels and short stories, Tagore deals with social problems of fundamental nature, the woeful conditions of Hindu widows,

eradication of “Sati” and the child marriage. In his later stage, through the portrayal of women protagonists he presents his radical views on women’s freedom. The emerging ‘New Woman’ concept in the Western society had its impact on his fiction writings also. The social reformer in Tagore gave priority to women. His portrayal of women characters in his short stories and novels changed consequent to the contemporary changes in the society. Due to English education and the influence of Western culture, women characters were no longer the submissive sufferers of patriarchy. They started to assert their individuality. Tagore has brought out his women out of the kitchen and placed them in the active stream of life. He challenged the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex. He has described the journey of his women characters from ignorance to knowledge. His short stories deal with this changing state of women.

This paper focuses on the short stories of Tagore that profess strong feminist values in the advent of the new woman. Tagore was a visionary and believed in many ideas that were much ahead of his time. In this paper, an attempt has been made to focus on the the advent of the New Woman in Tagore’s short fiction/stories that present his women characters who chose to transcend from the traditionally exploited stage to that of an emancipated one. The women protagonists of his fictional writings from 1913 to 1941 are all self-assertive, liberated and emancipated. How Tagore envisioned the new ideal womanhood in the creation of women characters is scrutinized through the short stories “Giribala” (1895), “Woman Unknown” (1914), “Letter from a Wife” (1914) and “The Laboratory” (1940).

Regarding Tagore’s portrayal of women protagonists in fiction, three distinct phases can be broadly identified in the span of sixty-five years of his writings. In the first phase (1881-97) they are portrayed and identified as the silent sufferers of patriarchal oppression. In the second phase (1901-12) which is noted as the Pre-Gitanjali period, his female protagonists’ attempt to protest against patriarchal subjugation failed. In his final phase, in the Post-Gitanjali period (1913-41), the women attack vehemently the patriarchal persecution and emerge as emancipated women. The heroines created by Tagore during the third phase of his literary career are bold to have a futuristic outlook. They are more emancipated and empowered to transform themselves in the twentieth century. They are all forerunners to the later day women characters depicted by the so-called staunch feminist writers. This made Tagore a visionary for the cause of feminism.

Tagore’s short stories and novels of the Post-Gitanjali period portray the emancipated women. His heroines of this period become a vehicle for the attack of male-domination, advocacy of women’s education, and cause of the emancipation of women. Further side-by-side by re-reading and re-inventing the female protagonists portrayed by Tagore in the three phases of his writings, it is found that Tagore had drawn a parallel to the different feministic schools of thoughts propounded by the first Liberal feminist writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, and John Stuart Mill who were predecessors to Tagore. His portrayal of women characters also reflects the Marxist Feminism of his time. Some of the characters he created possessed the qualities of the hardcore later day Feminist ideologies like Radical Feminism, Lesbian Feminism, Eco-Feminism and Post-Feminism of the Second Wave Feminism prevailed during 1960-80. This exemplifies Tagore as a Visionary of Feminism in India.

“Giribala” is the first short story, in which the protagonist raises her voice of protest against her uncaring husband and takes revenge upon him. Giribala, the heroine is the first liberated woman character depicted by Tagore, much earlier than his other more radical women characters of **Sabujpatra** period beginning from 1913. Giribala is the beautiful, young, and the childless wife of a wealthy husband, Gopinath, who was not under her control. Her husband does not notice her bloom from a child-bride to a beautiful woman. She is well aware of her beauty, but that is of no use to attract her husband who has deserted her in his infatuation for a stage actress Lavanga. This is reported to Giribala by her maid Sudha who is her only relief to escape from her loneliness. One day, Giribala visits the theatre stealthily without her husband’s knowledge as it is felt by him that the theatre is a place not fit for any woman of a decent family. She witnesses her husband’s lust for the stage actress. His indecent behaviour in the theatre disgusts her. She gains courage to teach her husband a lesson. Nevertheless, her husband Gopinath does not return home for some time with no intimation as to where he has gone. Giribala also leaves home when she hears Gopinath has eloped with the actress Lavanga. The proprietors of the theatre have introduced a new actress in her place and staged it successfully. Gopinath happens to see the new play “Manorama”. He finds out to his dismay the new actress is none other than his own wife Giribala. Gopinath cannot bear this and he threatens to kill her. Thus Tagore successfully portrays patriarchy which is egoistic, irrational and over powering. Tagore’s rendering of a heroine who retaliates is really supreme. She takes revenge on her husband by joining the same theatre as an actress. Moreover, the theatrical profession was not considered as a respectable one for a family woman in those days.

Giribala's emancipation is the first step towards Tagore's experimentation with a chain of liberated women. Through Giribala's character, Tagore has suggested a solution to women's oppression. Women's identity is not shaped individually, but in relation to others around them. The gender pattern of socialization in the society has resulted in forming different patterns of identification for men and women. Men learn self reliance and self-dependence while women learn to take care of others and to thwart themselves. Giribala breaks the rigid old tradition of passivity of wifhood. As an emancipated woman, she becomes an initiator as a defender on the part of the wife in this social scenario. Giribala's emancipation has not happened suddenly. Giribala derives inspiration from the story of Krishna and his consort Radha played on the stage. Krishna has not visited Radha for some days. His absence makes her feel lonely. When Krishna arrives to see Radha, she does not respond to him. By way of expressing her grief, she ignores his presence. Krishna's effort in entreating her by abasing himself at her feet does not soften her heart. Seeing this, Giribala imagines herself as an offended Radha and she realizes her womanpower to vindicate her pride. Tagore's portrayal of Giribala's character is to kindle the awakening of womanpower in the minds of other women. Her maid Sudha is also the root cause for the awakening of self, of woman power and to revolt against her husband's male oppression, right from the beginning of the story. Tagore has created a woman character from a feminist perspective nearly nine decades before the ideology was evolved. This reveals how Rabindranath Tagore justly interpreted the female psyche. The message conveyed by Tagore, is that women should take care of women in order to liberate themselves from male oppression and attain self-fulfillment. A woman like Giribala gets confidence from the support received from the same sex. Tagore has realized that it is the women themselves who are responsible in many ways for the denigration or improvement of women from sorrows and problems inflicted upon them.

In the short story "**Woman Unknown,**" the protagonist Kalyani protests the dowry menace by rejecting the marriage itself, dedicating herself to the cause of spreading women's education. Tagore believes that for the eradication of dowry, the protest should come from within the family setup. Tagore's concept of the New Woman is apparent in the creation of Kalyani who discovers her identity. Tagore breaks the gender bias in the portrayal of Kalyani and Anupam with whom her marriage is broken. Kalyani brought up by her widowed father, is rebellious, fearless, resolute, and practical in her outlook devoid of womanly qualities and Anupam, brought up by his widowed mother is passive with womanly qualities of

obedient, anxious, indecisive, and fantasy-prone. The socially constructed binary oppositions of man and woman for active and passive qualities are broken down in the portrayal of Anupam and Kalyani. The characterization of Kalyani is similar to the opinion expressed by Simon De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, who declares, "one is not born, but rather she becomes a woman" (267). Tagore delineates Kalyani as a representative of the emerging New Women, who breaks the age old traditions and conventions by patriarchy. Radical feminist theory holds that marriage is the primary cause of persecution of women and they consider marriage should be rejected in theory and practice. Tagore has reflected the same in the short story "Woman Unknown" even three decades before the Radical Feminism itself evolved.

"**Letter from a Wife**" (*Strir Patra*, 1913) is an epoch-making short story which created uproar among the conservative Bengali society of that time. Among the other stories, "Strir Patra" is judged as the feminist masterpiece and to substantiate the claim Sanjukta Dasgupta quotes from Tanika Sarkar, a letter of Rabindranath written on May 17, 1941, where in the poet states, "It's in my short story 'Strir Patra' that I supported the women's cause for the first time" (Dasgupta 189) The protagonist Mrinal is the successor of Nora of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). The young Tagore in his late twenties was annoyed with the ending of *A Doll's House*. At the age of fifty-three, the matured Tagore, as a crusader for individual freedom of women created Mrinal. The story is about gradual evolution of a woman from non-entity to a person conscious of her identity. Mrinal was 12 years of age when she was married. She writes the letter at the age of 27. In these fifteen years she could not find the atmosphere of the house worth living. She points out that her intelligence remained a threat for her in-laws. She writes that she would find pleasure in poetry writing amidst the various compromises she had to make. Mrinal first questions and then rejects the supremacy of patriarchy. The letter begins with the word 'Sricharankamaleshu' meaning the letter is addressed to his 'lotus feet' and ends with 'Tomader Charantalasroychinno' meaning 'freed from the shelter beneath your feet.' She signs her own name 'Mrinal' instead of the title of *Mejo Bou* given to her.

In this story Tagore protests against the enslavement of girls in the name of marriage. Mrinal breaks all the shackles of patriarchy and emerges as an independent woman from the joint family system. Tagore, the artist uses the strategy of epistolary form to get into the mind, voice and experience of Mrinal. It is a treatise on women's liberation and individualism. How the metamorphosis of womanhood of Mrinal, from the exploited stage of traditional wife to that of a freedom-

seeking woman happens, is forcefully expressed by Tagore. Mrinal attacks the age-old tradition, and vehemently criticizes the fundamental problems of patriarchal oppression like dowry, denigration of womenfolk, inhuman treatment in providing accommodation, denial of education, loss of identity, and lower self-esteem. She ridicules the preaching of moral values by citing the story of devoted wife like Nalayani from Hindu scriptures, which sanctified women and made them unaware of their victimization. Mrinal's sensibilities are awakened by the tragic tale of the orphaned girl Bindu, whom she is unable to protect from suicide after married to a lunatic. Tagore's compassion for womenfolk is reflected through Mrinal's feeling that a woman shows no mercy to another woman. In "The Laugh of Medusa" the French feminist Helen Cixous also sends a hard hitting message to womenfolk, "don't denigrate woman, don't make of her what men have made of you" (885). Tagore's thinking was very similar to the later day feminist ideology. Tagore has advanced the woman's cause for emancipation through the portrayal of Mrinal. In the evolution of Mrinal, from a traditional housewife to a human being, Tagore's progressive and feminist outlook supporting women's emancipation is complete.

Tagore wrote the short story "The Laboratory" in the twilight years of his life. Tagore has envisioned the ideal New Womanhood in the portrayal of the protagonist, Sohini, a Punjabi girl. Tagore creates Sohini as a model of the Modern Woman of self-assertive and independent nature with a futuristic outlook who believes in women's empowerment. She is a woman with social consciousness of spreading scientific knowledge among the youth, which she inherits from her husband. Through Sohini's voice, Tagore ridicules and rejects all the evil practices enforced upon the young widows by Hindu orthodoxy like eating only once a day, performing "Shraddha" ceremony for the betterment of their husband's soul in the other world, repressions of their sexual passions etc. Tagore believes such a woman's voice will have a more impact on the young widows. In this story, Tagore has envisioned a new age where equality of sex is maintained. Sohini is a rare woman character who violates all traditional values for the sake of her idealism. She could stake her life to save the laboratory. She succeeds in her attempt of unconventional marriage, wins over the widow's right to the property of her husband, and maintains her individuality of her own self by not confining to mere identity as mother or wife. In feminist perspective, Sohini represents the woman as idealized in the Post-Feminist ideology. In uniting individualism and idealism, Sohini is the New Woman of Tagore.

The general view of Tagore is that he is a humanist and an idealist. Tagore's humanism was not blind to the prejudices of patriarchy. His idealism never made him forget the harsh realities of the world. He was fully aware of the pathetic condition of women and strove for their betterment. He believed that unless women were free from oppressions and given equal opportunities there could be no peace or real happiness. In fact, Tagore's greatness is that he was a champion of women-freedom. His portrayal of Indian womanhood takes a complete shape heralding the advent of the New Woman of the new age. It is also observed that his portrayal of women protagonists reflect the women of feminist ideologies evolved before his lifetime and after. It is this quality of Tagore that distinguished him from his contemporaries. Thus, Tagore was much ahead of his times and he can unassailably be called a Modern Feminist.

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