



**GURUDEV RABINDRANATH TAGORE- THE POET PAINTER:**

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN IMAGE IN HIS PAINTINGS**

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**Abstract:**

Rabindranath Tagore was an accomplished poet, philosopher, writer whose creative prowess is well known to the world. He made India proud by being the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. His writings have been very radical and he has voiced strongly about women empowerment portraying women as the central characters in many of his writings. Interestingly, Tagore took to drawing and painting as an extension of his creative expressiveness in his sixties. His dexterity in handling the medium is a fact that many of us are not well aware of. My area of focus in this research paper would be to explore the works of Rabindranath Tagore as an artist. Though he had no formal training in art, yet in fourteen years of his career as a painter, he made more than three thousand drawings and paintings. I will not be discussing all his works, but my area of interest is the visual representation of his woman images in his art. My humble attempt would be to emulate and explore the relationship between the poet and the painter and make a critical analysis of some his woman images in his drawings and paintings.

**Key words:** Rabindranath Tagore, Poet painter, Woman image

**Introduction**

Rabindranath Tagore is undoubtedly the cultural icon of India, son of the soil made us proud by being the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize<sup>1</sup>. His persona was quite enigmatic with flowing white beard, long robe and riveting brown eyes. "Gurudev "as he was fondly addressed by all, was an accomplished poet, writer and philosopher and his creative prowess is well known to the world. He has to his credit of writing the National anthems of two countries.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Tagore took to drawing and painting as an extension of his creative expressiveness in his sixties. His dexterity in handling the medium is a fact that many of us are not well aware.

<sup>1</sup> Awarded Nobel prize for his Book Gitanjali ( Song Offerings) in 1913

<sup>2</sup> He has written National Anthem for two countries- India and Bangladesh.





As he says, “The world speaks to me in colour and my soul answers in music.” His paintings and drawings have been a major influence on the Indian contemporary art.

### **Family of achievers**

Born in a rich progressive Bengali family<sup>3</sup>, he had many influences and inspirations as a child as his house in Jarasanko (Kolkata) was a cultural and social hub of activities. His grandfather, Dwarkanath Tagore was a social reformer and follower of Brahma Samaj ideology. He came from a family of musicians, theatre personalities, social activist and civil servants. Two of his nephews Abanindranath<sup>4</sup> Tagore and Gaganendranath<sup>5</sup> were accomplished painters.

### **The Painter**

Painting as an expression of his innermost thoughts and emotions came relatively late in his life. He was already an established poet and writer and was in his late sixties that he took to his doodling and visual renderings more seriously. Painting for him was more of an extension of his poetic consciousness and it was only around 1924 that he took to this medium of creative expression. He had the habit of doodling and making pen sketches on his manuscripts and this deep desire to explore the visual realms of art made him draw more intently in his later life.

His bonding with ink, pen, brush and colour continued till the end of his life, and he had made more than two thousand drawings and paintings by then. As he rightly puts it, “In Art man reveals himself and not his objects.” He has the credit of being the first Indian artist to exhibit his drawings and paintings across Europe, Russia and the USA in 1930.

### **Style of work**

He never had any formal training in painting and never learnt the technique in any art school. He could have if he wanted to take formal training but since he was already very deeply involved in creating modern Bengali literature that he could not make time for learning drawing as a discipline. However to paint seriously, he found his own style and evolved his own techniques. What started as doodles in his manuscript corrections became more decorative and rhythmic interplay of lines and curious shapes. His journey as an artist began, when these forms, birds, animal and primitive artefacts took on to a separate page and became as a complete drawing rather than a manuscript scribbling.

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<sup>3</sup> Born on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1861 and died on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1941.

<sup>4</sup> He was the principal artist and creator of "Indian Society of Oriental Art". He was also the first major exponent of Swadeshi values in Indian art.

<sup>5</sup> He was an accomplished painter and cartoonist of Bengal school and one of the earliest modern painters of India.





The clarity of his poetic thoughts was translated into visual renderings as his drawings and paintings have a great sense of rhythm and vitality. With simplified yet bold lines he was very modernist in his approach and exercised complete freedom of expression. Coloured ink on paper was his favourite medium of expression and despite starting very late in his life, he made thousands of drawings and sketches. With the power of his creative imagination he made works that had mysterious human faces, birds, flowers and mystic landscapes. As Tagore quotes, “Art is the response of man’s creative soul to the call of the Real”. His forms seldom looked real and were more like an exchange between the familiar and the unknown, the inhabitation of one in the other has led him to forms that are as expressive as they are inventive. Rabindranath Tagore left his paintings untitled as he believed in leaving them free from literary imagination, and also to free them from his own concerns as a writer. The idea was to give his viewers the experience to encounter his paintings with their own sensibility and experience them as per their understanding. Yet his rendering of the figures are informed by his experience of the theatre as a playwright, director and a poet.

### **Journey as a painter**

Tagore had no formal training in art and while making correction in his manuscripts he would doodle forms and shapes, which sometimes be transformed into pleasing rhythmic patterns and forms quite like surrealistic and abstracted shapes. His journey from drawing in oblivion to a famed artist for which the credit goes to Victoria Ocampo<sup>6</sup> she was a well read and articulate lady who was Tagore’s hostess when he went to Argentina in 1924. She appraised his sketches which she had happened to see in his manuscript. This encouraged and gave Tagore the confidence to paint more intently and hence his journey as an artist begun. With this new found confidence and the inspiration from the contemporary art movements from the west, Tagore surged ahead in his artistic pursuits. With the help and support of his personal acquaintances with the art and artists of many countries, he realised that even without formal training, he could exercise his creative expression into visual expression. The West at the time was experimenting a lot into freedom of expression with abstraction. At that point Tagore also felt that a painting can be considered excellent even with imperfect craftsmanship, if the composition is expressive and harmonious. His stay in Europe from 1912 to 1929 harnessed his intent and ability to draw and paint with enlarged perspective and confidence in spite of his lack of technical training.

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<sup>6</sup> She was his hostess when he went to Argentina in 1924, she appraised his sketches which she saw in his manuscript





**Women in his writings:** Women characters in Tagore's writings have always been depicted as strong willed, bold having inner strength. They are not projected as passive receivers but progressive women from all walks of life. His range of characterization is wide as he depicts his woman characters belonging to various sections of the society. Despite facing the traditional life, they are outspoken free-minded and free-spirited women. Though Tagore's characterization of women is against the storyline of social oppression, religious hypocrisy and caste system, yet his women are portrayed as strong, opinionated who fight for their rights and fight against social oppression. Be it his character of *Damini* in ' *Chaturanga*', or *Chandalika* or *Shyama*. His real life muse Kadambri Devi ( his sister-in law) comes alive in his novel *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Nest*) made into a film *Charulata* by the renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray.

In his writings he has projected women as the quintessence of inner strength and perseverance. He was a visionary writer and had shown empowered women characters in his writings far ahead of time.

**Women in his paintings:** An artist is always in search for inspiration that can come from anybody or anywhere around him. Did the women in Tagore's life be his real muse? Did he paint them? Though his mother died when he was a boy, there have been some fascinating women who have influenced his writings and his paintings and their reflections are seen in both of his creative zones. We know of them as Kadambri Devi (his sister-in-law), Mrinalini (his wife) and Victoria Ocampo (his friend from Argentina). It is known that he was very close to Kadambri Devi( who was his elder brother Jyotindranath's child bride) Being of his age<sup>7</sup>, they were playmates and literally grew up together, sharing a love for poetry. She later became his muse and also his biggest critique, as Rabindranath Tagore used to share his poetic creations with her. At the age of 22 Tagore was married to Mrinalini who was just 11 years of age. Four months after their marriage, Kadambri committed suicide. It was a shattering experience for the young Tagore, however he nurtured his fondness for her and she remained his inspiration and his muse all along his life. Her presence was felt in his writings and his paintings till his death. This painting titled, " *Portrait of a Woman*" (image courtesy artetc) , is not dated, but as per sources it is the portrait of Kadambri Devi. The heavy black veil, the frontal look and the expression in the eyes makes the work very captivating. Drawn very simplistically with the colour green used very aesthetically to bring out the contrast with the black in the painting. Tagore



*Portrait of a Woman*

<sup>7</sup> Kadambri was 7 years old when she was married to his elder brother Jyotindranath Tagore.



has used the white to highlight the nose of the woman in the painting. It somehow becomes the focal point and focuses the eyes of the viewer to be stationed on the face. It balances the white colour in the eyes and subdues the starkness. The quality of Tagore's women forms was that they were not representational, but at the same time they were also not a complete denial of their nature and essential feelings. He has painted innumerable faces of women with full intensity, yet the expression is always reticent, peering intently as if scanning the viewer. There is always a strange sense of melancholia in his colours and even in the strokes of his ink drawings, perhaps it is a constant reminder of the death and loss of kadambri devi.



*Portrait of a Woman*

His woman faces were less distorted than his male images, but were invariably gloomy and sad. Perhaps unconsciously or consciously it was reminiscent of his state of mind of the trauma of losing his child hood mate, his confidante and muse Kadambri who committed suicide. Tagore was not able to deal with the loss and



*Portrait of a Woman*

hence the melancholia continued in the poet's creative subconscious leading to these visual representations of the woman images. Tagore's woman images also addressed the issues of social disparity, gender discrimination and duality of society when dealing with women. Many of his images had masks, heavy veils with most of the woman he painted had their hands and body



covered in saris or in flowing veils. This image was used as a metaphor by the poet painter both in his writings and his paintings. It highlighted the plight of women during that era in our society.

In his career as a painter spanning about fourteen years, Tagore showed great variation and potential by experimenting with various styles, themes and materials and always had this tendency to try something new. Victoria Ocampo was another woman whom Tagore had great regard for as when he went to Buenos Aires in 1924, she not only was his gracious hostess, but had read the translated version of *Gitanjali* and would discuss poetry with him. Tagore dedicated a series of poems titled 'Purabi' to her, which he wrote when he was there. She had encouraged Tagore to paint more seriously and not just doodle in his manuscripts. Some years later, she also organised a gallery place to display Tagore's paintings. This painting titled "*the Head*" (*Westerner*) could be a reflection of her image that he painted.

### The Poet Painter:

When you have two very profound creative talents- the visual and the verbal they do tend to colace. This makes him more unique and great as the Poet Painter of India. His women characters from his novels found way in his paintings, as writing was his first love and painting came to him later. In this painting of "Portrait of a woman", again in memories of his very famous character of novel *Ghaire Baire (The Home and the* in varieties of brown. With his play with textures, he is able to project the the housewife. With strong lines and the on the nose, adds an interesting characterization of the image of the face.



Lady with Flowers



Head (Westerner)

a frontal profile, evokes Bimala, from his famous *World*). This work is painted understanding of line and pathos of the sad story of use of white dab of colour dimension to the The painting titled, "*Lady with a flower*"<sup>8</sup>, maybe reminiscent of the delicacy and the innocence of his character of Kamala from his novel *Noukadubi* (Boat Wreck). It is a side profile of a woman. The expression is very

<sup>8</sup> All painting photographs image courtesy *artect*





subtle and serene. The focus is on the face and again, Tagore has used the colour white in the flower to add an element of mysticism and bring out the contrast in the painting.

### Conclusion:

When one takes an overview of his paintings and drawings from 1927 to 1941, one is amazed at his creative genius. The richness in his colour, the themes ranging from fantasy, drama, rhythmic patterns, curious shapes of anthropomorphic figurations in ink and colour all established him as an artist par excellence despite his lack of formal training. His philosophic approach and freedom of expression enhanced his ability to create his own style has made him a name to reckon in the contemporary Indian art world. The fact that he was a multi-dimensional personality, a great poet, writer, music composer added more substance into his visual renderings of drawings and paintings. The faces and woman forms painted by him express variations of mystery, romance, drama, fear and mostly melancholia. In his writings and his drawings he has dealt with the social hypocrisy, religious dogma, captive and closed existence of contemporary Bengali women. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore- the poet painter has made India proud. His legacy to promote art and culture continues not only in Shantiniketan but in the whole of the country

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