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SPECTRAL LABOUR AND FEMININE NATION: DOMESTIC INVISIBILITY, VIOLENCE, AND PEDAGOGIC POWER IN TAGORE'S LITERARY AND INSTITUTIONAL IMAGINATION

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of *spectral labour*—the invisible yet foundational emotional, reproductive, and symbolic work performed by women—within Rabindranath Tagore's literary and institutional imagination. While Tagore is often celebrated for his progressive portrayal of women and support for their education, his narratives and pedagogical writings frequently reinscribe normative gender roles, aestheticizing women's labour without granting it material or political recognition. Through close readings of *Streer Patra*, *Jogajog*, and *Ghare Baire*, the article illustrates how Tagore's female characters embody sacrifice, virtue, and pedagogic power, even as their affective and reproductive roles sustain both familial and national ideologies. Drawing on feminist materialist theory—particularly Silvia Federici, Angela Davis, and Sara Ahmed—the paper argues that the idealization of femininity often functions as symbolic violence. The educational models at Santiniketan and Sriniketan are also examined to show why and how women's roles as cultural nurturers are affirmed but structurally constrained. Finally, it has been shown that while the notion of *spectral labour* reveals the gendered foundations of Tagore's cultural nationalism, it must be situated within his broader pedagogical vision that aimed to harmonize the spiritual and scientific and cultivate human potential as part of a deeper ethical commitment to educational transformation.

Keywords- *spectral labour, domesticity, feminist materialism, reproductive violence, pedagogy, nationalism*

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Introduction

The question of women's labour—emotional, reproductive, and symbolic—has often remained at the margins of political discourse and literary representation, particularly in nationalist and reformist contexts within colonial India. In the literary and institutional imagination of Rabindranath Tagore, this marginality assumes a spectral quality: women are often present as moral ideals, aesthetic muses, and pedagogical agents, yet the materiality of their labour—both emotional and economic—remains structurally unacknowledged. This article seeks to foreground what may be termed *spectral labour*—forms of feminine work and care that sustain both domestic order and national idealism while being systematically rendered invisible in discourse and policy. Focusing on Tagore's fiction and educational writings, this study reveals how domestic and emotional labour, symbolic violence, and the idealization of motherhood operate as the unspoken infrastructure of his cultural nationalism.

While Tagore is often seen as a forward-thinking voice in the history of Indian modernity—both for his empathetic depiction of women characters and his support for women's education—his writings tend to reinscribe a normative model of gender relations and familial morals. Scholars like Rimi B. Chakravarty (2003) and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (2014) have pointed out the ambivalence of Tagore's attitudes toward women: on the one hand, his fiction move out of their internal lives and subvert their subordination, they also idealize them as protectors of moral and religious values. This article argues that such idealization acts a
double function and also attempts to seek the restriction behind it. On the one hand, it raises the feminine to a realm of symbolic power; on the other, it replaces the facts of material exploitation, emotional servitude, and enforced silence.

Feminist materialist theory is particularly trenchant in analyzing this contradiction. Scholars like Silvia Federici and Angela Davis have illustrated how women's unpaid reproductive labor—child-raising, care work, household work, and emotional labor—are the unseen foundation of capitalist and patriarchal economies. In Tagore's literary universe, such forms of labor are idealized under the rubric of sacrifice and care, concealing their exploitative aspects. In *Streer Patra* (1914), for instance, the female protagonist Mrinal voices her refusal to be dummied down as an ornament of the domestic sphere and thus rejects both her reproductive function and the affective duties it imposes. Her letter, which ends with the unambiguous statement that she will no longer live in her husband's home, becomes a withdrawal of femininity as utility—what Federici (2004) calls the political practice of escaping *reproductive captivity*.

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A complementary but very moving narrative occurs in *Jogajog* (1929), in which Kumudini is a victim of emotional and reproductive violence. Being everyday viciously treated by her husband just as a mere object of sexual consumption, Kumudini too decides to break their marital bond. Thus, one day when his torture reaches the peak, she leaves Madhusudan to take refuge in her natal home. But she has to rescind when she discovers she is carrying the child of Madhusudan. So, here we find Kumudini as the victim of reproductive violence on whom his beastly husband imposes the forced pregnancy. This becomes more evident as Kumudini herself, on the discovery of her pregnancy, ponders if this child in her womb is a token of their nuptial love or marital rape. Her reluctant return to Madhusudan marks not reconciliation but coercion under the burden of maternal expectation and societal norms. This moment exemplifies what Sara Ahmed (2010) terms "happiness scripts", wherein women are emotionally and morally compelled to re-enter oppressive domestic structures. Kumudini's return thus dramatizes the gendered weaponization of maternity, aligning with Federici's critique of reproductive labour as a mechanism of structural subjugation—recasting motherhood as not only unpaid work, but as a site of forced intimacy and biopolitical control.

The narrative arc of *Ghare Baire* (1916) offers a parallel yet more ambivalent construction of female agency. Bimala, initially positioned as the ideal wife and symbol of the nation's moral interiority, is drawn into the public sphere of politics only to be implicated in a masculinist vision of nationalism that ultimately reinscribes her subordination. Her body becomes the site of symbolic violence, while her subjectivity is mediated through the male narrators. This structure echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation of the "epistemic violence" inflicted upon the subaltern woman—whose capacity to speak is either foreclosed or appropriated by dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988). In both texts, affective and symbolic labour performed by women remains crucial to the narrative and ideological scaffolding, yet it is never fully granted political agency or institutional recognition.

Tagore's pedagogy, especially in works such as *Shikshar Herfer* (1892) and *The Centre of Indian Culture* (1919), further involves gender with pedagogy and institutional ethics. In promoting a spiritually enriched and emotionally engaged model of education, Tagore reenacts, at the same time, conventional gender roles. Women are situated as moral concierges and cultural conduits within a pedagogic structure that largely prevents them from intellectual power or public leadership. The vision of community-making at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, with its progressive culture, is nevertheless an idealized division of labour in which feminine care is aestheticized but

not materially or structurally reorganized. As Tanika Sarkar (2002) observes, the image of the "ideal woman" in such reformist discourses becomes a repository of moral purity, yet this moral burden often legitimizes her political disempowerment.

By bringing together close literary analysis and institutional critique, this article argues that Tagore's vision of national regeneration—though deeply invested in cultural emancipation—rests upon an unacknowledged economy of gendered labour. The article conceptualizes *spectral labour* as a category that not only exposes the invisibility of women's affective and reproductive work, but also illuminates the ideological mechanisms through which such labour is absorbed into narratives of sacrifice, beauty, and spiritual elevation. In doing so, it offers a feminist materialist reading of Tagore's writings that interrogates the intersections of domesticity, violence, and pedagogy as key sites in the making of both womanhood and the modern Indian nation.

Review of Literature

Rabindranath Tagore's legacy as a poet, educator, and cultural reformer has generated a vast body of scholarship that spans literary studies, intellectual history, gender theory, and postcolonial criticism. Across this interdisciplinary field, scholars have engaged with his nuanced views on gender, his role in the formation of Indian nationalist modernity, and his contributions to educational theory. However, a feminist materialist interrogation of the intersections between his literary works and institutional practices—particularly in relation to women's reproductive and affective labour—remains largely underdeveloped. This literature review maps the critical terrain across which Tagore has been studied while foregrounding the analytical lacunae this article addresses.

Tagore's representation of gender has received sustained attention from historians and literary scholars. Tanika Sarkar (2002) explores the production of the "ideal Hindu wife" in nationalist literature and critiques Tagore's simultaneous romanticization and disciplining of feminine virtue. Partha Chatterjee's now-classic essay *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question* (1989) offers us a basic lens through which to view the inner/outer distinction in nationalist thought, which is regularly reproduced and complicated by Tagore's fiction. Uma Chakravarti (2006) further develops this argument by demonstrating how nationalist and reform movements relegated women to the sphere of privacy even when promoting their education or symbolic visibility. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (2014) provides a dense archive reading of Tagore's institutional work, mapping out his educational ideas at Santiniketan and Sriniketan but with no

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persistent focus on gendered labor in these frameworks.

In fiction, Tagore's representation of women's inertness and subjectivity has been under scholarly discussion. Radha Chakravarty (2003) highlights the "feminine voice" in Tagore's literature as resistance through literature, particularly in *Streer Patra* (1914). Equally, Swati Ganguly (2015) considers affect and ethical agency within Tagore's women figures. Yet both readings more or less prioritize symbolic agency at the expense of material subordination. Malashri Lal (1995) and Suchitra Gupta (2002) critique such limitations, pointing out how Tagore's female heroines are more or less deprived of structural autonomy, even though they wield moral or emotional power.

Feminist accounts of nationalism also place the gendered positions Tagore's characters inhabit in a broader context. Chatterjee's distinction between the spiritually uncontaminated interior (ghar) and the colonial-exposed exterior (bahir) provides a rich reading lens to view Bimala in *Ghare Baire* or Mrinal in *Streer Patra* (1914), who both languish within the home context even as they long for intellectual or political self-determination. Mrinalini Sinha (1995) builds upon this framework by examining colonial discourses' feminization of the nation herself, a rope Tagore utilizes while also quietly subverting. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) and Kumkum Sangari (1999) also examine how the category of woman is turned into a metaphoric site of cultural nationalism at the expense of real, embodied differences. More recently, researchers have been focusing on gender-institutional policy intersections. Mira Debs (2010) investigates how Santiniketan's women teachers negotiated the gendered lines of schooling authority. Reba Som (2004) and Amrit Sen (2020) analyzed Tagore's educational speeches and essays, frequently hailing their holistic aspirations but seldom challenging the gendered division of affective labour behind these institutions.

Against this backdrop, feminist materialist theory offers a powerful yet underutilized framework. Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) and *Revolution at Point Zero* (2012) argue that the unpaid, invisible labour of women in domestic and emotional spheres is central to the capitalist social order. Angela Davis (1981) examines the overlapping areas of race, class, and gender in reproductive exploitation, while Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) develop a theory of domestic labour as surplus-generating work instead of private, natural duty. These arguments are pivotal to re-reading Tagore's literary and institutional works, which tend to aestheticize women's sacrifice without acknowledging its exploitative underpinnings.

Tagore's women, especially in *Streer Patra* (1914), *Ghare Baire* (1916), and *Jogajog*

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(1929), do affective and reproductive work in the name of moral obligation, epitomizing what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls the "feminist killjoy"—the woman who upsets happiness scripts by not doing compulsory care. Lauren Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" (2011) is also applicable here: most of Tagore's women are wedded to relational ideals—of marriage, motherhood, and service—that end up closing off their autonomy. These readings follow on from Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern woman as "discursively muted," a figure who can be symbolized but not spoken.

However, with all the fecundity of these intersecting subjects, there is one crucial lacuna in Tagore scholarship: his fictional portrayals of gender and his institutional experiments in education and rural reform have not been discussed collectively through the prism of feminist materialism or affective labour. Most existing studies isolate either the literary corpus or the pedagogical philosophy. Rarely are they brought into conversation in order to interrogate how both spheres depend on the moral and physical labour of women. This article addresses this gap by demonstrating how spectral labour—defined here as invisible, unpaid, and affectively demanded work—constitutes the foundation of both Tagore's literary imagination and his institutional utopianism. In doing so, this study contributes to recent scholarship that calls for a more politically grounded and materially aware engagement with modern Indian literature and thought. It brings together feminist political economy, affect theory, and postcolonial critique to examine how the nation is not only imagined but also *maintained*—often on the backs of unrecognized female labour.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated at the intersection of feminist materialism, postcolonial feminism, affect theory, and the politics of pedagogy. These frameworks together enable a multi-layered reading of Tagore's literary and institutional work—revealing how gendered labour operates not only as a structural reality but also as an ideological construct within the discourses of domesticity, nationhood, and education.

Central to this investigation is the lens of feminist materialism, particularly the work of Silvia Federici and Angela Davis, which interrogates the economic and ideological foundations of domestic labour. Federici (2004) argues that unpaid reproductive labour—cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, emotional support—is not a natural extension of femininity but rather a historical construction essential to the functioning of capitalist societies. In *Caliban and the Witch*, she locates the origins of this exploitation in the transition to capitalism, where women's bodies and

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labour were appropriated as sites of social reproduction. Similarly, Davis (1981) historicizes housework and maternal labour as racialized and gendered sites of oppression, emphasizing how Black and working-class women were doubly burdened by both economic exploitation and social expectations of care. These insights are crucial for reading Tagore's domestic women, such as Mrinal in *Streer Patra* (1914), whose emotional and reproductive labour is treated as a moral calling rather than recognized as structurally exploitative. The domestic sphere in Tagore's fiction and philosophy, then, becomes a concealed economic base upon which moral and nationalist ideals are built—rendering women's labour both indispensable and invisible.

Complementing this materialist critique is the framework of postcolonial feminism, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern and Partha Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist patriarchy. Spivak (1988) famously argues that the subaltern woman is constructed as an object of rescue in colonial and nationalist discourse, yet remains unheard—muted by the very narratives that claim to speak on her behalf. Her notion of "epistemic violence" illuminates the way in which women like Bimala (*Ghare Baire,*1916) or the orphaned Bindu (*Streer Patra,* 1914) are symbolized as moral figures while being denied discursive agency. Chatterjee (1989) similarly critiques how nationalist projects in colonial India upheld a gendered division between the "inner" spiritual realm, assigned to women, and the "outer" political realm, dominated by men. This ideological division maps neatly onto Tagore's texts, where female characters are often sequestered within the affective domain of the home even when they appear to act in political or moral arenas. Such readings reveal how nationalism—far from liberating women—re-inscribes traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of cultural authenticity.

The affective dimensions of this subjugation are further illuminated by affect theory, particularly Sara Ahmed's critique of emotional labour and Lauren Berlant's concept of *cruel optimism*. Ahmed (2010) identifies how happiness, care, and gratitude are disproportionately demanded from women in the domestic sphere, turning emotional labour into a moral imperative. In Tagore's narratives, women like Mrinal or Bimala are not only burdened with household duties but are also expected to perform affective roles—of patience, forgiveness, sacrifice—for the emotional coherence of the family or nation. Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism," which describes attachments to relational forms that hinder one's flourishing, is particularly apt in describing female characters who cling to marriage, duty, or nationhood even when these attachments are injurious. This framework allows us to view Tagore's idealization of motherhood and self-sacrifice not as benign virtues, but as emotionally exploitative scripts that regulate

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women's autonomy.

Finally, this study draws on the politics of pedagogical power, especially through the works of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, in relation to Tagore's educational philosophy. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) critiques the "banking model" of education and advocates for a dialogic, emancipatory form of learning that empowers the marginalized. Illich (1971), in *Deschooling Society*, further critiques institutional education as a vehicle for social reproduction and ideological conformity. Tagore's own philosophy of education—presented in *Shikshar Herfer* and *The Centre of Indian Culture*—reverberates with these critiques, emphasizing freedom, creativity, and community-based learning. However, Tagore's institutions also reproduce certain gendered assumptions. Women were often positioned as natural caregivers and moral nurturers within these spaces, echoing the affective labour they performed in the home. Thus, even within the transformative and emancipatory pedagogical models, pejorative gendered hierarchies of labour persisted—veiled by discourses of care and cultural preservation.

Moreover, these theoretical frameworks illuminate the ideological operations of gendered labour in Tagore's work. Feminist materialism foregrounds the economic and structural dimensions of domesticity; postcolonial feminism reveals the discursive containment of female agency; affect theory exposes the emotional coercion that sustains these systems; and pedagogical critique interrogates the reproduction of gender norms within supposedly radical educational practices. Through their convergence, this study aims to unearth the *spectral labour* that sustains both the domestic world and the national imaginary in Tagore's corpus.

Discussion

Streer Patra: A Feminist Materialist Reading

Rabindranath Tagore's 1914 short story *Streer Patra* (*The Wife's Letter*) (1914) represents a radical departure in Bengali literary convention in providing a first-person narrative voice to a woman, Mrinal, who emerges from the trap of her domestic drudgery. While the tale is traditionally feted for its proto-feminist sensibility and radical vision of female independence, a feminist materialist reading uncovers richer planes of structural analysis around reproductive and emotional labour, gendered displacement, and the ghostly constituency of women's work in patriarchal economies. Rabindranath Tagore's 1914 short story *Streer Patra* (*The Wife's Letter*) (1914) represents a radical departure in Bengali literary convention in providing a first-person narrative voice to a woman, Mrinal, who emerges from the trap of her domestic drudgery. While the tale is traditionally feted

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for its proto-feminist sensibility and radical vision of female independence, a feminist materialist reading uncovers richer planes of structural analysis around reproductive and emotional labour, gendered displacement, and the ghostly constituency of women's work in patriarchal economies.

At its heart, *Streer Patra* is not just a protest about self-expression—yet it is a searing critique of the invisible work that keeps the bourgeois home going. Protagonist Mrinal is not a rebellious romantic heroine, but a woman who comes to an awareness of the economic and emotional exploitations that lie beneath her putatively respectable position. Her decision to leave her husband's home is catalyzed not by personal resentment alone, but by the suicide of Bindu—a lower-caste orphan girl whose life is brutally sacrificed to the same domestic system that Mrinal occupies in a more privileged position. Mrinal writes, "Bindu was the only one who truly needed me in that house. When she died, the last tie was cut" (Tagore, 1914). This recognition mirrors what Silvia Federici defines as the severance of female solidarity under capitalism, wherein the domestic sphere enforces a hierarchy among women while masking their shared alienation (Federici, 2004).

Feminist materialism, particularly as articulated by Federici and Angela Davis, foregrounds the role of reproductive labour—the unpaid, invisible work that sustains social life, such as child-rearing, cooking, emotional caretaking, and sexual availability. Mrinal's monologue critiques these forms of labour as the very conditions of her oppression. She does not lament the lack of love in her marriage but the reduction of her selfhood to ornamental utility: "I was just the lotus in the household's decorative pond." Here, Tagore critiques the ideology of domestic femininity not as benign affection but as a labour relation that extracts value without recognition—what Davis calls "the gendered logic of domestic servitude" (Davis, 1981).

Mrinal's refusal to return is not merely an emotional reaction; it is an assertion of labour withdrawal. In Marxist-feminist terms, her departure is a strike against the symbolic and material conditions of gendered labour exploitation. Unlike literary heroines who seek fulfillment through alternative love or salvation, Mrinal chooses solitude. "I am not returning," she declares, thus detaching herself from the reproductive economy of the house and the gendered expectation of forgiveness. This exit from the home can be interpreted as what Federici (2004) calls a "refusal of femininity as a function."

Further, Mrinal's literacy functions as a tool of resistance and counter-violence. The story is structured as a letter that will never be responded to, a monologic text that shifts power from speech (dialogue) to written authorship. In colonial Bengal, literacy was a privilege closely tied to

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class and gender hierarchies, and women's access to it was often curtailed to maintain their domestic roles. Mrinal's very act of writing signifies a break from reproductive silence into discursive agency. She appropriates the written word not to re-enter the symbolic order, but to reject it—an act that can be read alongside Gayatri Spivak's theorization of the subaltern woman's speech. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern woman is doubly muted—by patriarchal and colonial systems. Mrinal's voice, while articulate and forceful, does not enter a discursive community of reciprocity; it is exiled communication. Her letter is a speech act of refusal, a momentary rupture in the symbolic fabric that will likely remain unread or dismissed by its male addressee.

Importantly, Tagore does not resolve the narrative with reconciliation or tragedy. There is no punishment for Mrinal, nor is there catharsis. Her rejection of domestic life is left open-ended and unredeemed, emphasizing what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls the "feminist killjoy"—the woman who disrupts the affective economy of happiness expected from domestic femininity. Mrinal's departure is not framed as an empowered escape into liberation but as an ethical withdrawal from complicity in the violence of everyday patriarchy.

In conclusion, *Streer Patra* offers a potent critique of the domestic institution not simply as an emotional space, but as a site of unpaid, invisible, and affectively demanding labour. Mrinal's letter articulates a form of feminist materialist consciousness, positioning the bourgeois household as a microcosm of structural violence against women. Through the registers of exile, authorship, and refusal, Tagore crafts a feminist intervention that continues to resonate with contemporary struggles around gendered labour, emotional servitude, and the right to withdraw from systems that do not recognize one's humanity.

Jogajog: Reproductive Violence, Emotional Labour, and Gendered Captivity

Jogajog (1929), one of the later novels by Rabindranath Tagore, offers a gruesome picture of how emotional, sexual, and reproductive labour are imposed upon women in the garb of marriage, respectability, and familial order. At its core, the novel makes a theatrical presentation of the psychological and corporeal entrapment of Kumudini, a gentle, introspective woman married into a wealthy, domineering household ruled by the brutally hyper-masculine Madhusudan. Through Kumudini's trajectory, Tagore provides one of his most layered critiques of the violence embedded in patriarchal domesticity—not through sensationalized physical abuse, but through coercive affect, sexual entitlement, and reproductive captivity.

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Madhusudan embodies the figure of the self-made capitalist patriarch—ambitious, vulgar, and ideologically invested in dominance, both economic and personal. His treatment of Kumudini as a sexual and emotional possession typifies what feminist materialist theorists like Silvia Federici (2004) identify as the commodification of women's bodies in the domestic sphere. Kumudini is expected to serve not only as a passive recipient of Madhusudan's sexual advances but also as a source of moral and emotional equilibrium—a paradoxical demand that forces her to perform affective labour even as she is degraded. As Angela Davis (1981) notes, women's domestic roles often require them to "mend" the very structures that oppress them in the name of 'adjustment', a theme that resonates deeply in Kumudini's reluctant complicity.

A central crisis in the novel emerges when Kumudini, exhausted by her emotional subjugation and Madhusudan's violent libido, flees to her father's house—an act of temporary resistance that echoes the retreat Mrinal enacts in *Streer Patra* (1914). However, the nature of departure and return of Kumudini is far more dramatic and intricate. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, Kumudini begins to question whether the child is a result of nuptial affection or of marital rape—a phrase unspoken in the text but implied through her introspection. This moment marks a turning point in the novel: Tagore subtly exposes how reproductive roles are not only naturalized but intrumentalized within marriage. Kumudini's internal struggle—whether to see herself as a mother or a victim—reveals the emotional coercion embedded in the script of maternity.

As Sara Ahmed (2010) argues, patriarchal cultures operate through "happiness scripts" that moralize women's endurance. In *Jogajog*, Kumudini's pregnancy becomes a tool through which these scripts reassert their force. Her decision to return to Madhusudan, though framed as a reconciliation, is undergirded by social pressure, emotional guilt, and maternal expectation—not by agency or desire. This coerced return does not signify forgiveness or emotional resolution but rather a capitulation to the ideological violence of the family, which mandates the containment of female autonomy within the reproductive imperative.

Tagore sketches Kumudini's inner world with remarkable psychological depth. Her silences, hesitations, and moments of despair are rather the acts of interior resistance, than being the indications of weakness. However, as Gayatri Spivak (1988) has observed, the subaltern woman's cries get attention only when she conforms to the codes of intelligibility available to her, particularly through the roles of mother, wife, or martyr. Kumudini, despite her resistance, ultimately succumbs to the system through her pregnancy—her subjectivity, as usual, gets overwritten by the discourse of care and sacrifice.

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Yet, *Jogajog* stands out in that it does not romanticize Kumudini's return. There is no celebration of maternal bliss, no idealized reconciliation. Instead, the novel ends on an unsettling note, forcing readers to confront the reality of reproductive violence and the spectral nature of women's labour—both emotional and corporeal—within domestic institutions. Tagore, though not offering a radical solution, reveals with unflinching clarity the structures that trap women in cycles of service, sacrifice, and silent suffering.

Through *Jogajog*, Tagore thus anticipates many of the critical insights of feminist materialism and affect theory. Kumudini's story reveals not only the economic and sexual foundations of patriarchal marriage, but also the emotional scripts that sustain it. Her narrative is not one of liberation, but of exposure—laying bare the cost of femininity in a society that equates womanhood with compliance, care, and compulsory reproduction.

Ghare Baire: Gendered Agency, Affective Nationalism, and Domestic Ideology

Ghare Baire (1916) is perhaps Tagore's most complex political novel, offering a rich site for examining how the ideological apparatuses of nationalism, domesticity, and gender intersect to produce, co-opt, and ultimately fracture female agency. The protagonist Bimala, caged within the "inner" domain of the home, becomes the object through which competing visions of masculinity—Nikhil's liberal humanism and Sandip's militant nationalism—struggle for dominance. Her transformation from the ideal housewife into a political subject is framed as a moral and emotional awakening; yet, a closer analysis reveals that this transformation is staged, mediated, and ultimately delimited by male-authored ideologies that construct her subjectivity within patriarchal-nationalist frameworks.

At the novel's outset, Bimala is portrayed as the embodiment of the "inner" sanctum of the nation—what Partha Chatterjee (1989) theorized as the "home/world" dichotomy, where women symbolize the moral essence of the nation while being sequestered from political modernity. Nikhil, her husband, initially plays the role of a radical reformer by encouraging her to step into the "world" through exposure to political thought and social interaction. Yet, his gesture is not without paternalism—it is Nikhil who "permits" her awakening, shaping the boundaries of her agency through the logic of enlightened patriarchy. Her participation in the public realm is thus not autonomous but scripted within the moral constraints of her domestic role.

Sandip, by contrast, showcases a hypermasculine nationalism, one that seduces Bimala not only ideologically but erotically. Her attraction to Sandip blurs the lines between romantic desire,

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maternal devotion to the nation, and abstract political ideals. In this convergence, we see the gendered structure of nationalist spectacle: Bimala is not an actor in the Swadeshi movement but its symbolic screen—invested with meaning by male desire, political ambition, and moral fantasy. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) would argue, Bimala's "voice" emerges only insofar as it is legible within these masculine discourses; she speaks not as an autonomous political subject but as an idealized vessel of national morality or betrayal, depending on who is reading her.

This masculine construction of agency is further intrigued by affective and maternal registers. Sandip's nationalistic rhetoric repeatedly invokes tropes of Mother India, relating Bimala's love for the nation with maternal sacrifice. Her guilt and eventual disillusionment are shaped not merely by political failure but by a perceived failure in moral motherhood—toward both her husband and the imagined community of the nation. As Sara Ahmed (2010) notes, affective economies structure the circulation of emotion to uphold ideological formations. In *Ghare Baire*, Bimala's emotions—love, guilt, devotion—are not internal truths but ideologically activated affects that bind her to both domestic duty and nationalist fervor, only to leave her stranded when those systems collapse.

Importantly, Bimala's agency is both mobilized and annulled through her symbolic function. She becomes a political actor only when her body and voice serve nationalist desire—once she acts on her own affective insight, realizing Sandip's corrupt motives and the violence bred by exclusionary politics, her narrative significance diminishes. Tagore's narrative, though sympathetic, reinscribes her within the moral interiority of the home, returning her to Nikhil's ethical worldview. In doing so, the novel reinforces what feminist materialists like Angela Davis and Silvia Federici critique: the reduction of female political subjectivity to emotional and moral labour, subordinated to male-authored structures of nation and family.

Thus, *Ghare Baire* dramatizes the gendered contradictions of political modernity. Bimala's journey from home to world is neither linear nor emancipatory—it is mediated by romantic and political abstraction, filtered through patriarchal nationalisms, and curtailed by affective obligations. Her "transgression" becomes intelligible only through moral repentance, not political agency. In this sense, *Ghare Baire* does not simply depict a woman caught between ideologies; it reveals how femininity itself is constructed as the ideological terrain upon which nationalist and domestic powers contend—often at the cost of real female autonomy.

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Gendered Labour and Affective Contradictions in Santiniketan and Sriniketan

While Rabindranath Tagore's *Santiniketan* and *Sriniketan* projects have been widely celebrated for their innovative approaches to education, rural reconstruction, and cosmopolitan pedagogy, a closer examination reveals significant gendered contradictions embedded within their structures. Conceived as alternatives to colonial, mechanical schooling, these institutions aimed to blend creativity, nature, and community labour into holistic models of self-realization. However, when viewed through the lens of feminist materialism and affect theory, it becomes evident that these visionary spaces also depended on deeply entrenched gender-coded divisions of labour, especially in domains of care, pedagogy, and service (Ahmed, 2010; Federici, 2004; Davis, 1981).

In *The Centre of Indian Culture* (Tagore, 1919), Tagore articulates a vision of Indian education that moves beyond rote learning, emphasizing instead the cultivation of aesthetic, spiritual, and communal values. He criticizes Western education for producing "living machines" and calls for an organic connection between teacher and student, labour and learning. Yet this affective language often romanticizes labour, especially when it is rendered invisible through moralization. The nurturing of students, the maintenance of a serene domestic environment, and the subtle management of emotional well-being—these crucial forms of work, although never named as such—were frequently performed by women and structured as natural extensions of their femininity rather than as specialized labour (Chakravarty, 2003; Bhattacharya, 2014).

Tagore's educational philosophy—especially as outlined in *Sikshar Herfer*—consistently reasserts the value of service and affection, aligning education with moral cultivation and care (Tagore, 1928). However, this ideal frequently mapped itself onto gendered expectations. While men predominantly filled roles as thinkers, planners, and public intellectuals, women—whether as students, teachers, or staff—were more often expected to embody the institution's emotional and aesthetic ethos. They were to model simplicity, humility, and moral strength—what Sara Ahmed (2010) might call "affective scaffolding," wherein women stabilize institutional emotion without recognition of their labour.

In *Santiniketan*, while female students and staff were admitted and at times encouraged to participate in intellectual life, their presence was subtly circumscribed by roles in domestic management, care-taking, and the arts. Tagore's letters to C.F. Andrews and Rathindranath Tagore (his son and institutional administrator) frequently refers to "harmony" and "order" within the ashram, maintained through soft regulation rather than discipline (Tagore, 1915–1940; Visva-Bharati, 1983). This order, however, was not gender-neutral. The emotional labour required to

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maintain such harmony—organizing festivals, ensuring cleanliness, mediating social interactions—often fell to women, whose contributions were framed as spontaneous acts of love rather than structured institutional responsibilities (Sarkar, 2002; Chakravarty, 2003). Thus, Chakravarty argues that even though Tagore envisioned women as "equal moral beings," their institutional roles were often symbolic. They were celebrated as muses and nurturers rather than as agents of policy, critique, or pedagogy.

In *Sriniketan*, which focused on rural uplift and community development, the same pattern persisted. Women's roles in craft training, child welfare, and hygiene education were treated as "natural extensions" of their nurturing instincts, not recognized as technical expertise. Meanwhile, men led agricultural experiments, administrative planning, and external policy coordination. The gendered bifurcation of labour—intellectual/technical for men, affective/domestic for women—mirrored the very hierarchies Tagore sought to critique in colonial and industrial institutions (Bhattacharya, 2014; Chakravarty, 2003).

This contradiction between rhetoric and structure—between the language of equality and the persistence of patriarchal roles—must be understood not as a personal failure, but as a systemic limit within Tagore's modernist utopia. It is important to recognize that Tagore was a pioneer in advocating for women's education and intellectual autonomy (Som, 1996; Chakravarty, 2003). However, as feminist critics have noted, the practical distribution of labour within Santiniketan and Sriniketan did not always reflect these egalitarian ideals, with women often tasked with emotional and aesthetic maintenance that remained unacknowledged (Sarkar, 2002a; Chakravarty, 2003). As feminist theorists like Silvia Federici (2004) and Angela Davis (1981) argue, progressive institutions often rely on unpaid or invisibilized labour, especially from women, to maintain their ethical and emotional ideals. Tagore's institutions, for all their innovation, were not immune to this structure of reproductive exploitation. However, Tagore did endeavour at it and thus he sketches characters like Bimala in *Ghare Baire* (1916), Mrinal in *Streer Patra* (1914) or Kumudini in *Jogagog* (1929).

Furthermore, as Spivak (1988) cautions in her critique of the subaltern, the feminine voice is often constructed as moral presence rather than political agent- their political agency is silenced. In this sense, Tagore's idealism—imbued with spirituality and humanism—ironically reinforces the very gendered hierarchies it attempts to subvert. In *Santiniketan* and *Sriniketan*, women contributed to the moral and emotional legitimacy of the institutions, yet their labour was rarely politicized or formally acknowledged. The institutions might have aspired to emancipation, but

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they remained tethered to a domestic-nationalist vision where femininity was honoured in abstraction and labour was romanticized but invisibilized in practice. Reba Som (1996) also writes "Tagore welcomed women into his educational and artistic spaces, but the functions they performed often conformed to inherited norms of nurturing, grace, and self-effacement" (Som, 1996, p. 164).

However, we must not forget that Tagore's inner bent of mind was spiritual. He believed it is through the awakening of the inner *spirit* the realisation of the *inner strength* comes and its nurturing begins from the very domestic sphere we are born and brought up, through our practices. Thus, *femininity* being "spiritualised" has a far broader meaning. Through this Tagore attempts to bring about the holistic development of the women while lovingly nurturing the universal human values considering the time and the backdrop of action. Thus, he writes "The idea that the education of women should be different from that of men, because their lives are different, is a mistake. The full development of humanity is not possible if one half of it is denied the right to think freely." Hence, despite the contradictions embedded in institutional practice, Rabindranath Tagore's contributions to the cause of women's education and emancipation were profoundly discreet, logical and advanced. Had Tagore been guided by such motif of confining the women to stereotype gender roles prescribed by the patriarchal society then we would have never come across such portrayals of women seeking autonomy, whether through literacy (*Streer Patra*, 1914), emotional rebellion (*Jogajog*, 1929), or political awakening (*Ghare Baire*, 1916). The inner strength of these female characters, all fighting in their own *possible* way from their own boundaries following Indian values and ethics maintaining their dignity, still inspires the feminine world, still speaks to the heart of feminine resilience and self-realization, and still continues to empower women, navigating tradition and transformation. Thus, at a point, even Reba Som (1996) herself acknowledges while critiquing Labanya's character in *Sesher Kobita* (Tagore, 1929) that Tagore envisioned a space for women not merely as moral exemplars, but as individuals capable of intellectual achievement and creative expression.

Thus, Tagore not only opened the doors of Santiniketan to female students when higher education for women was still rare in colonial Bengal, but also encouraged women to participate in literary, artistic, and intellectual life. Tagore publicly critiqued practices such as child marriage, purdah, and female confinement, aligning himself with early feminist reformers within the Brahmo Samaj and beyond. He believed that education must nurture the *inner freedom of the soul*, and this applied equally to men and women. His promotion of co-educational learning, women's artistic

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production, and his willingness to challenge orthodox gender norms through personal and literary practice marked him as a *radical humanist*. Thus, even as structural limitations persisted within Santiniketan and Sriniketan, they coexisted with a *visionary impulse* that sought to reimagine women's place in the nation, the family, and the world of knowledge.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's literary and institutional imagination presents a field of generative contradictions—where the feminine is both honoured and contained, where ethical ideals meet material silences. While his fiction and educational philosophy (Tagore, 1892; 1919) often spiritualize womanhood, this spiritualization must be understood within the cultural and historical matrix of his time. Tagore did not seek to reduce women to domestic ideals; rather, he imagined the domestic sphere as a site for the awakening of inner strength, from which self-realization and social transformation might begin. His notion of femininity, when read generously, evolves not as sheer moral examples but as a way to holistic development, deeply rooted in dignity and self-respect.

This becomes evident specifically in his portrayals of women such as Mrinal, the *stree* ("wife") in *Streer Patra*, Bimala the heroine in *Ghare Baire,* and, the connecting thread Kumudini in *Jogajog*, all of whom thrive under the shackles of domesticity and societal expectation in search of voice, agency, and intellectual freedom. They are active and dynamic figures- potential women whose strength lies in their ability to negotiate autonomy without disavowing cultural or ethical values. In this regard, Tagore's legacy must be acknowledged for its profoundly discreet and forward-thinking commitment to women's emancipation. Tagore (1915) unequivocally asserted in his *Strisikha* (translated as *Education to Women*), "Whatever is worth knowing is worth knowing equally by men and women, not for practical utility but for the love of knowing". highlighting his belief in intellectual equality and the intrinsic value of women's education.

Thus, contrary to the prevalent materialist and affective readings we must interpret Tagore as a *mind*-maker and not a mere teacher who realised that- "Most people believe the mind to be a mirror, more or less accurately reflecting the world outside them, not realizing on the contrary that the mind is itself the principal element of creation." (Pallavi, 2021) Thus, his emphasis on nurturing the mind, body, and soul stands as a lasting inspiration, steering educational practices toward a more integrated and enriching model of learning and personal growth (Gardner, 1983; Goleman, 1995). According to Tagore (1917) "the highest education is that which does not merely give us

information but makes our life in harmony with all existence", and thus he has always attempted to merge the spiritual with the scientific. Tagore's advocacy for integrating arts and sciences highlights the value of a holistic education that cultivates both critical thinking and creative expression in students. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). He believed that interdisciplinary education, by breaking down traditional boundaries and enabling the flow of ideas across fields, nurtures innovation, sharpens critical thinking, and develops the problem-solving skills necessary to confront today's multifaceted global challenges. (Johnson, 2010; Banks, 2008; Levinson, 2005) Thus he felt the curriculum should include both spiritual and scientific knowledge. Tagore resisted the undue emphasis on materials, infrastructure, furnishings, and curricula that imitated Western educational models in India, viewing such imitation as both unnecessary and cost-prohibitive for the common people. Like Swami Vivekananda, Tagore rejected the pursuit of sterile, lifeless knowledge devoid of real human value and spiritual depth. Hence to reduce Tagore to this contradiction alone would be to overlook the ethical and pedagogical vision that animated his work. He did not seek to confine women but to cultivate their humanity within the structures available to him.

Future research may find value in comparative engagements—with Begum Rokeya's direct feminist activism, Gandhi's strategic deployment of moral womanhood, or Freire's dialogic pedagogy—to examine how various reformers negotiated the relationship between gender, nation, and education may further illuminate on it. Nevertheless, Tagore's works still speak to the resilience of women negotiating tradition and transformation. They continue to inspire pedagogical models that value care, creativity, and selfhood—not as burdens but as foundations for ethical nation-building. As we grapple with the legacies of colonial education, neoliberal academies, and nationalist resurgence, Tagore's vision continues to inspire efforts toward holistic, empathetic, and art-infused learning being firmly grounded on Indian value-based knowledge system.

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