

Essays

Malashri Lal

Desire in Ageing: A Literary Perspective

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I

On his eightieth birthday, 7 May 1941, Rabindranath Tagore published a collection of poems titled *Janmadine* (On Birthdays) which captures both the joy of the passing years as also the trepidation about impending illness and death. Philosophical, accepting and poignant, these are exquisite lyrics that have imparted strength to generations of Bengali readers who are confronted with the same paradox of ageing. The opening poem has the lines:

My birthday today.
It's arisen from the dark, distant horizon
With a missive from Death.
Seems the faded garland of yesteryears is torn apart,
A new garland has to be strung today,
On a new birthday.¹

Tagore passed away a few months later on 7 August 1941 in Calcutta after a celebrated and productive long life as a global intellectual and Nobel Prize awardee, a patriot and a famous litterateur who was adored by his friends, family and disciples at Shantiniketan-- his abode of peace. During Rabindranath's prolific career, he wrote finely nuanced verses on every emotion in human experience including being bedridden with ill health and his faith in Healing. In the last days he dictated poems when he could no longer write and he overcame pain by extending affection to his caregivers. Two remarkable books which were the outcome of Rabindranath's thoughts on ageing, *Rogshojyaye* (In the Sick Bed) and *Arogya* (Healing) are almost therapeutic for readers in their senior years.

¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Janmadine* 1, translated by Malashri Lal.

A recent book, *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*, translated and edited by Somdatta Mandal gives insights of five women who were Tagore's caregivers: Pratima Devi, his daughter-in-law (Bouma), Rani Chanda who was the wife of Tagore's personal secretary, the novelist Maitreyi Devi, Nirmalkumari Mohalanobis, wife of the famous statistician Prasanta Mohalanobis, and young Amita Thakur, a grand-daughter-in-law to Rabindranath.² It is fascinating to see the feminine sentiments of care ethics interlacing with the poetic sentiments of the celebrated author-patient. Of these I take a few examples.

Elderly people are always reminded to wear warm clothes, so was Rabindranath by his *bouma* Pratima. In her words: "In the morning I saw him sitting with all the doors and windows open. From the open door, a white mountain peak was visible. Piercing through that eternal silence, the first rays of the sun entered the window and fell upon the white hair and forehead of the meditating poet; over his body blew the sweet touch of the new morning. 'Babamoshai, the cold has just set in. Only a shawl is not sufficient here.' He smiled and said, 'All of you are too scared of the cold; it is not cold at all here'.... He wrote:

The blue of the hills and the blue of the horizon
 Unite in the sky and earth in rhythm and sameness
 They bathe the forest in the golden sunlight of autumn.³

Rabindranath was fortunate in the many people who willingly looked after him, an entourage that organised doctors-- English as well as Indian--, capable men who planned his journeys, and the household women who were deeply tuned to his needs. The attributes of the caregivers were widely known: "That person's touch would have to be soft, and he or she should have an acute imagination and be able to understand everything at the slightest hint. Also he or she had to be always happy,

² Rabindranath Tagore, *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs*, trans. and ed. Somdatta Mandal (Bolpur: Birutjatiyo Sahitya Sammilani, 2021).

³ *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs* p. 13.

be very good at handiwork, and above all be a connoisseur of wit and mystery.”⁴ Celebrities may be attracting such devotion that is not available to common people enduring old age and suffering. Rabindranath was aware of this. Deeply appreciating the affectionate services he wrote a poem called “Nari” (woman) praising woman’s unstinting generosity, abundant energy, patience and glory. The original poem was addressed to Rani Chanda but changed to a more generic title with Tagore’s conviction, “Patients are like Gods for all of you. When a woman takes such responsibility upon herself, the world gives her the duty to serve and rear it. In that respect, women are universal. The world’s power for rearing is inherent within you too.”⁵

Feminist critique of care ethics may assess this scenario as a “male bias” but in the context of Indian middle-class values of domestic coexistence, the nursing responsibilities being largely of the woman is the established norm. As I have projected in my book *Tagore and the Feminine*, the writer was gifted with an androgynous imagination, and he created some of the most impressive women in literature and positioned feminist debates through numerous short stories and novels.⁶ Though his health was frail in the last few years, his voice remained strong, and the ardent appeal of the essay “Crisis in Civilisation” was penned just four months prior to his death.⁷ It’s obvious that a sharp mind and a weak body creates a sad disjunction in old age, the mind always striving for much more than the body can cope with.

II

If the desire for poetry framed Rabindranath’s advancing years, my thought shifts to women who lay dying, and their need for care giving. I have selected three examples: Premchand’s *Buri Kaki*, Githa Hariharan’s *The Remains of the Feast* and Krishna Sobti’s *Ai Ladki* since they reflect on different kinds of desire.

⁴ *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs* p. 22.

⁵ *The Last Days of Rabindranath Tagore in Memoirs* p. 85.

⁶ Malashri Lal, *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translation* (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 2015).

⁷ Bashabi Fraser, *Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), p. 215.

Buri Kaki published by *Hans* magazine in 1921 is about a nameless old woman, the ubiquitous ‘aunt’ with a nephew and his wife who are occupying her home under the pretext of being her caregivers. In actual, she is severely neglected physically as well as emotionally, the nephew occasionally suffering a twinge of conscience but the wife has no such qualms. The story is about a celebration at home to which hundreds of guests are invited and a grand feast prepared, but the old woman is told to stay in her room till all the guests have eaten and left. She is hungry, dreams of the food, smells the fragrance of cooked spices, ventures to the kitchen to satisfy her curiosity and is suddenly hauled up by the niece-in-law, accused of stealing food and shoved back into her room with stern admonitions. Here are some soul stirring lines:

Catching hold of the old woman's hands, she said, “Were you feeling stifled in your room? The guests have not had their meals, no offerings have been made to the gods yet, but you are getting impatient for food! People will say the old woman is not fed properly; the hag is bent upon shaming us! She eats the whole day! Go back to your room; you will be given food when all the others are served and not before.”⁸

The desire for food is a basic need. With age when most other occupations are curtailed or denied, food shifts to the core of the imagination. Sociologically, an old woman is not a welcome guest, so loneliness and longing exacerbates the bodily hunger. *Buri Kaki* is forgotten by the family and no one serves her the *poori aloo* she is hankering for. In the dead of night her grand-niece brings in a small box of eats that she had saved up and *Buri Kaki* devours it with glee but also wants more. Finding her way to the garbage heap of discarded, *jootha* plates, she licks the remains with a great sense of satisfaction. That’s how she is discovered by the errant caregiver—the niece-in-law who is now stricken with remorse.

This story breaks many stereotypes of female ‘natural’ instinct for caregiving. Like Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand had an acute eye for social realism. “If there were a being in the world whose eyes could look into other people's hearts, very few men or women would be able to face up to it,” said Munshi Premchand. Unlike Tagore, Premchand’s focus was on the lower rungs of society and he was also encountering the emergence of modernity in India. This story picks up an important trope about the exploitation of the elderly, property-owning woman who has not been educated to

⁸ <https://www.youthaffairz.in/premchand-boodhikaki2.html>

safeguard her rights. It also builds focus on the importance of food as a centre of desire for elderly people. Younger caregivers think physical debilitation is naturally accompanied by the loss of appetite and other disinterests in the functions of living. This is not so.

Another remarkable story about the desire for food is Githa Hariharan's "The Remains of the Feast" (1995) situated in the sickroom of a ninety-year-old Brahmin widow, Rukmini, who is now quite bedridden. All her life she has observed the strictest codes of piety through deprivation in food, clothing and ornamentation. Her deepest affection, fortunately reciprocated, is for her great granddaughter who is twenty years of age and utterly patient with the old woman. One day Rukmini starts her craving for forbidden food -- street food from the market, a smuggled bottle of coca-cola, a cake from the Christian bakery—and the list goes on. In the narrator's words:

"So we began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother and I. I smuggled cakes and ice-cream, biscuits and samosas, made by non-Brahmin hands, into a vegetarian invalid's room. To the deathbed of a Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure home-cooked food for almost a century."⁹

The ethics of care function under the strange dilemma of fulfilling the wishes of a dying woman or observing the strict codes of family discipline. One's understanding of elder psychology will determine the outcome. The denials of a lifetime surface in the longings expressed in the dying moments and these are, in fact, a castigation of a society that has imposed control on the simplest of human desires—that is, for wholesome food. Moreover, a Brahmin widow is compulsorily dressed in a dull saree, kept away from all community events, and expected to live by only serving others, silently. Githa Hariharan joins a long line of reformist thinkers who strategize social upliftment for such women by spreading awareness of their plight. Rukmini's story is set in contemporary times to show the carryover of ancient prejudices in the inherent customs of middle-class homes. Rukmini asks to wear a red and gold saree one day—which, unlike the food, is a desire that cannot be fulfilled by the great-granddaughter. But when Rukmini dies and her body is being dressed for her final journey, the young caregiver tries to place a red saree on her deprived, shrivelled body-- an attempt easily thwarted by the gate-keepers of tradition.

⁹ <https://newint.org/features/1995/02/05/feast>

Not all ageing women are quiet sufferers of patriarchy, Krishna Sobti suggests in her powerful story *Ai Ladki* (Listen Girl!), published in 1991, a dramatic exchange between the elderly, aggressive Ammi and her silent daughter who has chosen to remain unmarried. Ammi's biting words are a curious defense of conjugal life and motherhood: "The body dies, not the soul. Water dries, but not blood. It flows in one's children, and in their children" she says, or, "Ladki, a pitcher full of water is better than a vast desert."¹⁰ Expressed here is the old woman's desire to control the daughter's choices and her refusal to accept the limitations of her failing body. The story opens with Ammi complaining that the room is kept too dark till the reader recognizes that the lights are actually turned on and Ammi's vision is fading. Her recumbent body has festering sores which Susan the professional nurse periodically attends to, the doctor pumps her with injections – yet through all this, her adversarial stance towards the Ladki/daughter propels a constant tirade.

It is believed that Krishna Sobti wrote this story while attending on her mother, an experience by which she gained insights into ageing and the mind's resistance to the inevitable deterioration of the body. Sobti's literary flair turned this into a much larger issue — of how women perceive their progeny and the future of a family when they are no longer present. Hence the desperate call to their sons and daughters to marry and bear children — the bloodline is to be kept sacred.

The story is filled with sentiments that are often expressed by the aged:

- Ladki, there is no place for old people either in someone's heart or in someone's house. And here am I, occupying an entire room. After I am gone, spread a carpet and play your music here.
- Old age robs one of dignity. It's hard for anyone who enters it. Operations, doctors, medicines, injections, oxygen. The doctor probes the whole body — jabs hundreds of needles. What is left of this body now? Only my voice remains.
- The body is a cloth. Wear it and enter the world. Take it off and go to the other world. The other world — the world of others. Not one's own. Listen, ladki, in the beginning parents

¹⁰<https://www.purplepencilproject.com/book-review-listen-girl-by-krishna-sobti/#:~:text=In%20the%20long%20period%20of,with%20the%20living%20before%20dying>

hold their children's hands and teach them how to walk. But, when the parents grow old, they become the children of their children.¹¹

III

In conclusion, one may recall that literature is said to hold up a mirror to life. The mind of an astute reader is almost voyeuristic as stories unfold into scenarios that have not been experienced personally but which reside in the realm of possibility. As one grows older it is a useful occupation to turn the pages of a book to find accounts that may match one's own experiences of a weakening body, social marginalization, loneliness, uncertainty and doubt. Reading negates the self-absorption and self-focus that elders are prone to, along with an error or perception that one is a unique, singular sufferer. Through literature one comprehends the narratives and coping strategies of others in imagined spaces. Yet each individual is destined to live out his or her journey mitigated by whatever positive forces that can be garnered. In Rabindranath Tagore's words, "Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm, but to add colour to my sunset sky."¹²

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¹¹ <http://www.littlemag.com/2000/sobti.html>

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1917), p. 76

Malashri Lal, Professor in the English Department (retd.), and Former Dean, University of Delhi, has authored and edited seventeen books. These include *Betrayed by Hope: A Play on the Life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* (2020) co-authored with Namita Gokhale, that received the Kalinga Fiction Award. *In Search of Sita* (2009), *Tagore and the Feminine* (2015) and *Finding Radha* (2019) gathered much acclaim. Malashri Lal's latest book is her debut collection of poems titled *Mandalas of Time* (2023) which blends her cosmopolitan experience with the memory of India's epics and legends, magnificent landscapes and metonymic associations. Her poems and stories have been published in *Indian Literature*, *Confluence*, *The Beacon*, *Setu*, online portals and anthologies. She received research fellowships at Harvard University, Bellagio, and Newcastle. She has been a Senior Consultant to the Ministry of Culture, and member of international book award juries including the Commonwealth Writers Prize, London. Malashri Lal serves on the English Language Board of the Bharatiya Jnanpith, and is currently Member, General Council, and Convener, English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi. Among other recognitions, Malashri Lal received the Maharani Gayatri Devi Award for Women's Excellence, 2022. (<http://malashrilal.com/>)