

## Influence of Kadambari Devi in Rabindranath Tagore's Paintings

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### ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore began painting relatively late in his career when he was in his sixties. Nevertheless he produced thousands of works and was the first Indian artist to exhibit his works across Europe, Russia and the United States in 1930. His painting style was very individual, characterized by simple bold forms and a rhythmic quality, and later served to inspire many modern Indian artists. Tagore painted landscapes, animal figures and human faces. The human faces are a prominent constant in his artistic works. His painted faces depict various moods: fear, romantic, melancholy and many more to say. This paper intends to analyse who were these women who inspired Tagore to produce such paintings.

**Key Words:** women, veil, darkness, emotion

"I know not who paints the pictures on memory's canvas; but whoever he may be what he is painting are pictures; by which I mean that he is not there with his brush simply to make a faithful copy of all that is happening." Rabindranath Tagore **Jivan Smriti (My Reminiscences)**

With no formal training Tagore began painting at the age of sixty-three. He referred to his art as *sesh boyosher priya*- an affair in the sunset of life. He said that the only thing he possessed from his young days was training in rhythm and sound. His inner rhythm has been manifested in his paintings of human figures. He is popularly known as *Gurudev*- India's most cherished renaissance figure, who won Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 and glorified India. Most of us know him as an author, educator, philosopher, reformer but he was also a painter. His paintings make us think as well as his novels do. Tagore's paintings are less cultured by critics and commoners. Tagore did not name his paintings and thereby he did not limit his paintings of literary imaginations.

The human faces are prominent constant in his artistic works and speak of his undying interest in his human persona. It is indeed an interesting fact about Tagore's painting that they began with an reassurance of his poems in form of doodles. It seems that his paintings were started as child's play but gradually Tagore became serious about painting. He writes to Indira Devi in Santiniketan-"I was

very busy. Now Holidays have begun. I am thinking of just to sit in a corner and paint. I don't feel like using my pen..." We can realize that Rabindranath was engrossed in painting so much that he even did not wish to write then.



Rabindranath Tagore

Tagore began painting when he was seeing around him in Santiniketan painters like Nandalal Bosu, Ramkinkar Baij and Benodbihari Mukherjee. His paintings seemed unreal and somewhat surreal to the critics. Rabindranath painted different moods and forms of women. He was influenced by his sister-in-law Kadambari Devi, his wife Mrinalini devi and Victoria Ocampo.

Kadambari Devi seemed to be present in Tagore's paintings. He has felt her presence even in his landscapes: the narrow path of the river shrouded with trees on either side leading to the horizon. The painting of a heavily veiled

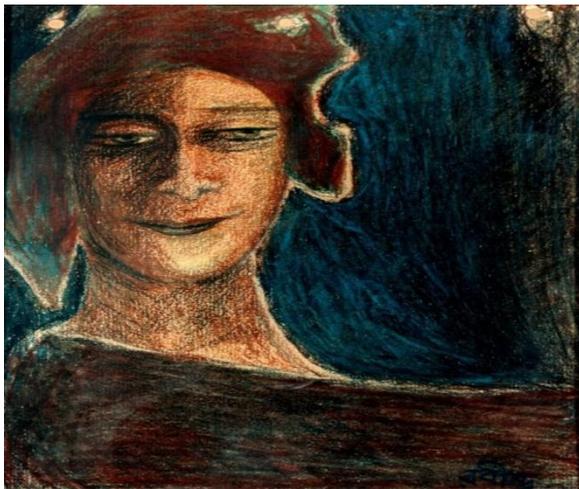
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woman surrounded by darkness is widely believed to be that of Kadambari Devi.



### VEILED WOMAN

Some of his paintings hauntingly bring out a strange sense of melancholia and death, reflecting the loss of Kadambari. The sad faces, the shades of grey and black in most of the paintings, and Tagore's references to Kadambari as subject of painting take us to the creative subconscious of the artist. With dense crosshatching technique he created mysterious tonalities in many of his works.



### UNTITLED HEAD

In 1927 soon after his arrival to Buenos Aires Tagore met a 34-year-old beauty, Victoria Ocampo. She had serious literary interests and had read Andre Gide's French translation of *Gitanjali*. Tagore named her Vijaya and his *Untitled Head* portrays a western beauty which could have been Victoria.

Tagore painted a lot of women faces and they speak of various moods: mysterious, brooding, dramatic wonderment and fear. He lived with the memories of Kadambari Devi and the death of her haunted him throughout his life. He wrote

in 1917 to Amiya Chakravarty: "Once, when I was about your age, I suffered a devastating sorrow, similar to yours now. A very close relative of mine committed suicide, and she had been my life support, right from childhood onward. And so with her unexpected death it was as if the earth itself receded from beneath my feet, as though the skies above me all went dark. My universe turned empty, my zest for life departed."

In fact, as one moves through the later paintings of Tagore there is an overpowering sense of darkness and the grotesque, an aspect that is also brought out in the numerous mask paintings that depict the subject in pain. At the same time Tagore was also collaborating with Nandalal Bosu, frequently drawing from him the representation of the everyday details. With Nandalal, Tagore also embarked upon the woodcuts of *Sahaj Path*, the Bengali book for children where images from everyday life were used for pedagogic purpose. So contradictory nature of Tagore can be seen at this period.

After the demise of Rabindranath's mother, Kadambari Devi took care of him and they became close friends gradually. She became Srimati in Tagore's writing and the lifetime influence and inspiration for his painting. Kadambari Devi has been immortalized in Tagore's paintings. Rabindranath's paintings mesmerize even today. His approach was modernistic. Japanese painting and the geometric figures have influenced him. When we think of his painting it wonders us how from creating doodles an artistic genius can grow. Rabindranath's paintings deserve more attention just like his literary works.

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**Citation:** Disha Mondal, "Influence of Kadambari Devi in Rabindranath Tagore's Paintings", *Journal of Fine Arts*, 2(3), 2019, pp. 10-12.

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