INTRODUCTION

Bengali literary prose emerged in its contemporary form in the early nineteenth century. Around the middle of the century, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Bankimchandra Chatterjee among others perfected the idiom of modern secular writing. Bengali literature, however, has a much longer history, beginning with a lyrical tradition many centuries old. Historians have traced the origins of two of the streams of this tradition to the Buddhist scholarly works and hymns (*charyagiti*) written in the tenth century by the Bengali *acharyas*, who formed the bridge from eastern India to Tibet, and to the Brahmanic Sanskrit literature, which reached its peak in Bengal during the twelfth century.[1] The third and most pervasive stream existed in the early medieval (tenth- to twelfth-century) folk literature, in the narrative poems known as *mangalkavyas*; these were based on popular religious myths and stories that were current during the pre-Brahmanic mercantile era in Bengal long before the Turks came and set up their sultanate in Delhi. The Buddhist and the Brahmanic Sanskritic literary influences, which came from outside Bengal, and the folk lyrical tradition of the *mangalkavyas* converged in the fifteenth-century poet Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, a book of romantic lyrics on the love of Radha and Krishna. Although *Gitagovinda* was written in Sanskrit, its tonality, rhythm, and idiom were inspired by Bengal's indigenous tradition of literature in the popular dialects.[2] The *Vaishnava padavalis*, lyrics celebrating the love of the gods in human terms, descended directly from *Gitagovinda*, though their tone and images tended to be more devotional and less erotic.[3] In the course of time, the Vaishnava padavalis and the *mangalkavyas* became the two most important elements in the evolution of a Bengali literary style and idiom based on folk dialects and Sanskritic infusion (and later on Persian and Arabic infusions). A final development, which made way for the secular social orientation of Bengali literature, occurred in the early nineteenth century, when the language was hammered by a generation of socially con-

scious, progressive writers into a form suitable for writing essays and literary fiction relating to the lives of ordinary people. The medium of short stories, for which ease of expression and realism of theme and characters are vital, was shaped and perfected in the late nineteenth century, most of all by Rabindranath Thakur (in anglicized form Tagore), with whom we start this collection.

Bengali literature of the past hundred years is in many ways one of the most significant world literatures. A brilliantly prolific, diverse, and socially sensitive literature, its readership today probably runs to at least 20 million, out of a total of 170 million Bengali speakers. More important than the size of the readership is its sophistication and love of good writing. Educated Bengalis have always been voracious readers and have liked to think of themselves as connoisseurs of good literature. Perhaps their passion for literature is inversely related to their indifference to and even disdain for (as well as lack of success in) trade, business, and agriculture. Perhaps it also stems from the relative overgrowth of the educated urban middle class, which is quite large for a region as poor and as rural as the two Bengals combined. Certainly the Bengalis' interest in literature has much to do with the currents of Bengal's social history during the past hundred years, especially in the decades since the 1920s. This period in Bengal has seen enormous social and political changes and a series of upheavals and crises, and these, as we shall see, have had a significant impact on the literature.

My active interest in translating a selection from Bengali literature began some years ago, inspired mainly by three factors. First, I frequently encountered Western readers interested in non-Western literature who admired how Latin American literature reflected the turmoil of a society in flux. Their view of this relationship as unique seemed to reveal a doubt that such a literature could exist in Bengal, which has also been in much turmoil since the turn of this century. In trying to refute the implicit, and unjustified, doubt, I was frustrated by the lack of good recent translations from the large body of socially focused Bengali literature. Similar feelings may have provoked quite a few others into similar enterprises, for translations of such literature have recently begun to appear, and many more are in process. Second, the insistent curiosity of my non-Bengali Indian friends about how social change and transition have been reflected in Bengali literature, especially compared to the literature in their respective languages, was a more positive incentive that sustained me through the labor of translating. In a country of continental size and great linguistic diversity, a country in which one of the few convenient colonial legacies is the use of English as a common language, the desire for exchanging the cherished fruits of vernacular literature across the language barriers is no small motivation for the many translation projects under way. Third, about five years ago, while working with statistical and ethnographic data on women's socioeconomic status in India, I was increasingly drawn to take stock of and collect Bengali stories dealing in one way or another

with the gender aspect of oppression. Struck by the parallels and connections between the forms of oppression—by gender, class, caste, and tribal ethnicity—I sought a collection of stories that represented the interrelated forms and mechanisms of oppression at various levels of society.

I used two primary criteria for selection: first, the story had to move me deeply; and second, its main character had to belong to one or more of the categories in this anthology's title: women, outcastes (or members of an oppressed ethnic group), peasants, and those among them who rebel. Then, to an enormous number of interesting choices meeting these two criteria I applied additional conditions to arrive at an anthology of manageable size with a clearly discernible and meaningful pattern. These secondary criteria, as I will elaborate, reflect currents of social change and events of major social significance, and provide a revealing variety of focus in time, region, and socioeconomic context. Most of the stories I finally selected have not previously been translated into English.[4]

Like many others trying to understand social processes, I turn to the literature of the society I study—Indian generally, Bengali specifically—for insights and for affirmation or negation of observations that have been made with statistical, sociological, and anthropological methods. Literature as social commentary helps me gain valuable insights not only into behavior, but also into the thoughts, beliefs, and motives underlying behavior. Literature helps me understand the microsociology of behavior within the layers of social relations: relations between individuals, between groups variously situated in society, between individuals and the group, and the contradictions in these relations. In a society characterized not only by hierarchical structures of privilege and oppression but also increasingly by class differentiation and class conflict, literature reflects and grapples with the tensions between these structures. These tensions, crucial to understanding social processes, are extremely hard to discern and measure with the standard methods of the social sciences.

The power relations and modes of oppression in society must be seen at multiple levels, in their many-faceted and interconnected patterns. Both oppression and the resistance of the oppressed are structured by gender, class, caste, and ethnicity, usually in combination. If we want to understand the modes of oppression and the modes of resistance and rebellion in relation to each other, then literature is a good place to look. For literary realism, which describes both the mental and the material lives of groups and individuals, is perhaps the only medium capable of revealing the nuances of the relations between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the dominant and the subordinate.[5]

In the course of searching through literature as social commentary, I began to select and translate stories from Bengali, my first language. I decided to use stories (and the authors' biographies for understanding the stories)

rather than novels, because I could thereby encompass, within a book of manageable length, several aspects of the social processes seen at different levels and from different angles, and I could also represent the many faces of oppression, of rebellion and quiescence, either strategic or fatalistic. By selecting stories by several major writers in the language, I could construct an interesting set of variations and parallels on the theme that would shed light on oppression at the social, familial, and personal levels and on the forms that resistance and rebellion take in concrete contexts. The subordinated, the oppressed, and the exploited in these stories are women, peasants, landless laborers, and other marginalized and stigmatized groups, in various combinations. In some cases they choose overt rebellion; more often they struggle in either the realm of consciousness or the arena of material means of power, or both. Sometimes they do neither, and the subject then is the disability of consciousness and will, as in "The Unlucky Woman" and "The Daughter and the Oleander," both stories of the indigent and declining sections of the middle class.

Although this collection includes some of the finest examples of the major literary currents, its purpose is not so much to precisely represent modern Bengali literature by way of the short story as to show the faces of oppression, the facets of power relations, and the figures of resistance and rebellion through the stories that I love and that move me deeply again and again. Set at various social levels and at different points of social change, the stories tell us about the ways in which oppression is rejected, passively or actively, in thought or in action, in silence or in tumult, in violence or in peace. The collection also incorporates, both as background and as foreground, some of the mass movements and major traumatic events that Bengal and neighboring areas have experienced in the course of this century.

THE CURRENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE REFLECTED IN THE LITERATURE

Some of the complexities of Bengal's social fabric are, on a broad level, shared by other regions in the subcontinent and other parts of the "developing" world. They reflect the contradictions of a society that is both traditionally hierarchical and variously in flux. What modes of dependence and subordination pervade a society that is at once closed and open, static and changing, contained and explosive, hegemonic and pluralistic? Where do we find the oppressed between quiescence and rage, between resistance and rebellion? Bengali literature offers a specific context to elucidate these questions. The stories in this collection describe the conflicts and dynamics of unequal relationships—between men and women, the upper and the lower strata, rebels and those rebelled against, the quiescent who accept hegemonic ideas (or the shrewd who feign acceptance) and the dominant elite. Some

stories also describe the relationships between the progressive and the reactionary elites as well as those between the progressive elite and the oppressed—relationships that in fact hold one of the keys to social change.

The particular complexities of Bengal's social culture derive from the unique currents and crosscurrents of its colonial and postcolonial history. One major current, containing several related but distinct subcurrents, was the Bengal Renaissance, which reached its maturity in the late nineteenth century and was followed by the growth of its liberal nationalist subcurrent. Another major current was the consciousness of class exploitation, which fueled peasant struggles from the 1920s through the 1940s that ran parallel to and sometimes intersected the struggle for independence. The devastating famine of 1943 further politicized Bengal's peasantry as well as its intelligentsia, especially the younger generation of writers. The Partition of Bengal in 1947, attended by riots, massacres, and massive displacement of people as refugees, was the single most traumatic event in the history of Bengal. After two decades of quietude following Independence, peasant revolt erupted again in the late 1960s, although it differed from the earlier movement in form as well as in regional distribution. While the peasant revolts were being suppressed in northwest Bengal and in Bihar, the demand for regional autonomy broke out in East Pakistan, where brutal denial and repression led in 1971 to a liberation war that created Bangladesh amid massive casualties and displacement. These currents of social movement profoundly influenced Bengali literary thinking and expression. The tragic events, each with its painful aftermath, each rooted in prior social and political problems, have also shaped Bengal's intellectual, artistic, and folk consciousness, in large measure through the anguish of self-examination. Even the 1943 famine, at least as much man-made disaster as natural calamity, produced deep and lasting effects on the thinking and social consciousness of all Bengalis, not just the intellectuals.

The nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance brought a number of rationalist humanist changes in intellectual and artistic thinking and in social attitudes and activism—changes that historically shaped the Bengali intelligentsia. These had started in the early nineteenth century, roughly three decades before India's first nationalist revolt—or the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, as it is termed in the colonial historiography—after which the direct rule of the British Crown replaced the East India Company's mercantile rule. Initially, the renaissance was a product in part of the cross-fertilization of Vedic Hindu spiritualism and Western liberal rationalist ideas, specifically those of the French Revolution and the contemporary British liberal thinking. This creative crossing of ideas was primarily manifested in the social reform campaigns led by scholars like Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–91).[6] It also appeared in the universalist humanism of the Brahmo (Hindu unitarian) reformation, which involved some but not all the

social reformers, and which the more popular and deeply permeating Hindu revivalism of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda eventually eclipsed. The cultural influence of the Brahmo lifestyle persisted nonetheless, especially with respect to women's education and gender relations. The nineteenth-century cultural awakening in Bengal propelled, and was in turn propelled by, the early spread of liberal higher education among both men and women.[7]

A surge of progressive reformism rejecting obscurantist customs, the renaissance was characterized by rationalist and humanist thinking in a number of areas, including literature, academic studies, and methods of education. The combination of rationalist humanist ideas and pride in the best in Indian culture favored social reform, which prompted the hostility of orthodox Hindu society and, later in the nineteenth century, the rise of liberal nationalism.[8] As historian Susobhan Sarkar has noted, within this cultural awakening were two opposite flows, Westernism and Orientalism,

> not unlike the contending streams in the nineteenth-century cultural awakening in Russia. . . . The conflict did not take the form of two clearly divided camps. Rather, it was evident even in the thoughts and vision of single individuals, someone like Rabindranath, for example. . . . The Western affinity, or influence, however one views it, expressed itself in intellectual rationalism and humanist values, and thus in favor of social reform. In competition with this thrust towards rationalist humanism and social reform was a strong inclination to learn and uphold the true glories of the ancient Eastern civilization. . . . Rabindranath's enormous creativity owed much to his success in marrying the best of the opposite worlds into a special kind of cosmopolitan humanism that has enormous appeal to this day.[9](1982, 52–54, 58)

Sarkar sets the duration of this cultural awakening in Bengal at roughly one hundred years, from the time Rammohun Roy started writing and campaigning for social reform (in the 1810s) to the First World War, although he points out that "the creative reverberations of the Bengal Renaissance continued long after, and in many more forms than in the writings of Rabindranath himself and others" (1982, 79–80). David Kopf (1969), however, dates the renaissance from 1773 to 1835, based on the rise and decline of the collaboration between sections of the Calcutta intelligentsia and the British Orientalists centered at Fort William College, which for thirty-five years trained British civil servants in local language and culture and prepared the early textbooks in Bengali for that purpose.[10] This criterion is too limiting. Although the exchanges and the textbook-writing and translating teamwork between the Orientalists and the Sanskrit-Bengali pandits were an important initial element of the creative mixture of alien, opposite intellectual streams, their endeavors encompassed only a few aspects of the renaissance as a bourgeois cultural revolution within Bengali society and among Bengali intellectuals, artists, and writers. Rabindranath, the major literary product of the renaissance, started his writing career nearly fifty years after 1835, the

year of Macaulay's call for English education of Indians instead of Orientalist training of British officers and the end year in Kopf's periodization. As personal carriers of Westernism in the renaissance, David Hare and Drinkwater Bethune had a greater influence on the spread of secular liberal education and closer interaction with the Bengali intelligentsia in the first half of the century than did Orientalists like William Carey.[11] Even Henry Derozio, a Calcutta-born Portuguese-Indian who enjoyed a brief career as a young agnostic teacher of maverick brilliance at Hindu College before dying in 1831 at twenty-two, inspired a generation of bright young men (known as the Young Bengal group) to question authority and be patriotic at the same time. Shibnath Shastri (1847–1918), an astute observer and chronicler of the renaissance and one of its eminent figures, was firm in his view of the years 1825 to 1845 as the period in which the renaissance emerged out of the clash between the old and the new (Shastri [1903] 1979, 292). Everything considered, we can regard the period from the 1810s to the 1910s as the time of unfolding of the renaissance in Bengal, especially in light of our focus on social change and literature as social commentary. From this standpoint, the renaissance reached its maturity in the later half of the last century.

University education and Western science, philosophy, and literature were introduced in Bengal during the early nineteenth century at the initiative of Bengali social reformers and educators, and were later fostered by the Anglicists after the 1857 Mutiny. The spread of higher education, which infused the currents of liberal thinking and social change that permeated Western intellectual thought at the time, was accompanied by sustained growth and creativity in Bengali language and literature, a growth and creativity that were suffused with new interest and insight in the classics as well as the living traditions. The process of delving deeper into the purer aspects of Indian culture, combined with the Western intellectual infusion, produced much of the modern Bengali language and literary idiom. Higher education in Bengal—in both Western and Indian subjects—became a powerful tool for intellectual liberation from obscurantism and ascribed authority and for fighting prejudice and personal conservatism. The conflict between the progressive sectors of the middle classes and the reactionary sectors over social reform issues and social and personal attitudes shaped Bengali urban middle-class culture and creativity throughout the nineteenth century. Eventually, the liberally educated middle classes stood up against imperialism, propelled into the freedom struggle by the evolving elements of the renaissance. Then for the first time, initially as part of the *swadeshi* movement, the middle classes opened their minds toward the masses of the peasantry, who were engaged in their own struggles against the exactions heaped on them internally and externally.

Starting in the 1920s, this development generated a second current in Bengali society and literature: the growing perception of class stratification,

exploitation, and conflict and the perspective of social restructuring through consciousness and organized struggle. Powerful expressions of this perspective were seen not only in the reality of the struggles of Bengal's peasantry during the 1930s and 1940s, but also in the idiom of progressive realism in Bengali literature. The true limitation of the renaissance up to that time had been its lack of sensitivity to the struggles of ordinary people, the rural masses. "The educated community of the nineteenth century failed to understand the exploiting character of the British rule in India," noted Sarkar. "The protagonists of our 'awakening' had little contact with or understanding of the toiling masses who lived in a world apart" (1958, 31). Rammohun Roy was full of admiration for the French Revolution, but his writings contain no mention of any of the revolts that took place in rural Bengal during his lifetime. The indigo growers' agitation and strikes (1778–1800, 1830–1848), for example, receive very little notice in either his works or those of his immediate successors, with the exception of Dinabandhu Mitra's celebrated play *Nil Darpan* (1860). In the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, rural Bengal had seen at least two dozen localized revolts among various communities of peasants, tenants, weavers, and tribal people. Progressive intellectuals regarded these revolts with indifference; conservatives with hostility and contempt. The Bengal Renaissance, not unlike the Chinese May Fourth movement and the Russian renaissance, was narrowly confined to the urban and urbane middle class. Moreover, whereas nearly half the population of Bengal in the last century was Muslim, the leading figures in the Bengal Renaissance for the most part were Hindu, and their reformism mostly concerned the Hindu society (Wadud 1958; Joarder 1977). Although the spread of colleges and universities in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the entry of middle-class Muslim men and women into the mainstream of the highly educated had some effects in terms of cultural and literary creativity and gender relations, the ripples beyond the Muslim Bengali middle class were slight.[12]

Rationalist humanist literature generated within a small stratum of society can nonetheless have profound influence and power, far beyond its own time and circle. In spite of its limitations, "our 19th century 'awakening' . . . had a reality of its own, an impact on the country, a real contribution to make to modern Indian culture" (Sarkar 1979, 157). The surge of creativity inspired by Rabindranath's vast works clearly attests to the force of this process, as does the enormous energy later generations of Bengali writers had to exert to move away from the Rabindric style, perspective, and outlook on society.

Manik Bandyopadhyay is the best known of the post-1920s Bengali writers who moved away from the Rabindric perspective and scrutinized life in the huge and increasingly complex lower socioeconomic strata. These writ-

ers focused not only on the exploitation and struggles of the rural peasantry but also on both the urban underclass, which by that time had grown enormously, and the sectors of the middle class affected by Calcutta's decline as a commercial center, a decline in employment that was aggravated by the disruption of Bengal's economy by wartime inflation, the 1943 famine, and the riots attending the 1947 Partition.[13] Class consciousness and class struggle were now less obscured and distorted by the religious and sectarian communal prejudices that had channeled the rebellions of the preceding century. The pace of class differentiation had accelerated since the turn of the century. The ranks of the middle classes, variously experiencing instability and downward mobility, were troubled by doubts, a sense of inadequacy, and the chasm between their cherished values and the reality of their compromised lives.

Manik had been a writer for some years when in his late twenties the sharecroppers' Tebhaga movement began to spread through the villages in both East and West Bengal. The movement centered on the twin issues of where and how to divide the harvest between landlord and sharecropper. The peasants demanded a two-thirds share and also that the division take place in their own yards or storages rather than in the landlord's storehouse or barn, where he had the power to lift off a part.[14] The sharecroppers' movement, which had begun in the 1920s, gathered momentum through the 1930s, reemerged after the 1943 famine, and exploded in 1946, the year before the subcontinent was divided for the Independence.

The catastrophic Bengal famine of 1943 shook society at all levels. The tragedy resulted not from any major crop failure but from the deadly combination of administrative negligence, a callous "scorched-earth policy" on the war front near Burma, and rampant speculation in food. The famine killed at least three million, roughly four percent of the population of undivided Bengal at the time, and affected several times as many, making them indigent and disintegrating their lives.

Bengali intellectuals, writers, poets, and artists who were young during the Tebhaga movement, the 1943 famine, and the subsequent food riots and marches became radicalized in consciousness and creative expression. In their work they tried to confront the contradictions between middle-class sentiments and the realities of middle-class life, even within their own lives and surroundings. Manik had started facing those contradictions in his writing some time before these events broke out. More than any other writer of his time, he was troubled by the increasingly unbearable disparity between the changed realities of life and the unchanged literary sentiments. He criticized the shallowness of the work of the new wave of writers that emerged in the 1930s and the 1940s (known as the Kallol group, which included himself to some extent):

> How could one talk in the same breath of Hamsun and Gorky? How could one fail to distinguish between the storm in the emotional sky and the flood racking life on the ground? . . . Slum life came into literature, but not the reality of slum dwellers' lives. Nor had the reality of middle-class life really been revealed. . . . When a middle-class writer does not understand much about the peasants' struggle, he tends to see the deprivation of peasant life in terms of the failures of the middle-class life he is familiar with; he tends to see exploitation and oppression by material means in terms of the mental conflicts of the middle class.[15]

If we therefore set as a criterion for progressive literature the freedom from middle-class sentimentality when describing the life of the lower classes, along with respect for and acceptance of authentic dialect and idiom, we may consider Mahasweta Devi and Hasan Azizul Huq two of the best living writers in this particular tradition of literary realism. In an unpublished interview from 1983, Mahasweta said that although she had seen the momentous periods of the Tebhaga movement in the 1930s, the food riots of the mid-1940s, and the Partition, with its Hindu-Muslim killings, she was not a writer at the time. But at the end of the 1960s, another major social upheaval took place—the Naxalite revolt—which she has tried to document in her writing in as much detail as possible.[16]

The Naxalite revolt (roughly 1967–1971) was in large part a decentralized revolt of tribal and landless peasantry against landlords and moneylenders in areas of northern and central West Bengal and southeastern Bihar. The start of the revolt, and its name, is traced to the armed insurrection of tribal peasants in a village called Naxalbari in north Bengal. Related to and partly intersecting it was a militant revolt of radical-left urban youth, which was ruthlessly suppressed. The youth revolt, its internecine battles, and the police brutality in its suppression shook the ranks of the urban middle class in a way that the peasant revolts, both current and previous, could not. Although Mahasweta's first novel focused on the urban youth revolt, her subsequent writings described the turmoil in rural areas of Bengal and Bihar, the more pervasive turmoil that was not confined to the areas where the Naxalbari-type revolt had actually taken place. Her stories are full of anthropologically detailed narratives of the class-and-caste oppression and of the ongoing struggles and resistance in the tribal and outcaste hinterlands of southeastern Bihar and West Bengal.

The shattering experience of the 1947 Partition, accompanied by gang killings and riots—engineered partly by criminally opportunist politicans and partly by political nonintervention in a situation of rumor-fueled distrust—produced massive casualties and streams of refugees who overnight lost home, family, and friends. Moreover, unlike that of the Punjabi victims of the Partition, the suffering of the Bengali victims was protracted, like a death by a thousand cuts, by the demoralization and pathology of

living for years in a state of uprootedness, alienation, and stagnation. This protracted suffering features prominently in the writing of Hasan Azizul Huq. So too does the traumatic revelation of the ugly face of ethnic imperialism during the language movement in East Pakistan and the 1971 war of Bangladesh independence, which killed over a million East Bengalis and forced over ten million to flee their homes. Two of the four stories by Hasan Azizul in this volume provide a somewhat different angle on the peasant perception of their own oppression, on their thoughts and acts of resistance; the other two stories explore oppression as a moral crisis within the individual psyche: one in an upwardly mobile middle-class context, the other in a declining middle-class context.

THE AUTHORS, THEIR TIMES, AND THEIR STORIES

The stories in this collection were written over a span of roughly ninety years, from the early 1890s to the early 1980s. This period, as we have noted, has been marked in Bengal by the culmination of the renaissance, the struggle for independence, the galvanizing peasant movements of the years from the 1920s to the 1940s and of the early 1970s, and the traumatic episodes of the famine, the Partition, and the Bangladesh war. The period was one of epochal transition experienced in several related forms, including the decline of the *zamindari* (absentee landlord system) as a significant socioeconomic feature, the growth of both the urban middle classes and the affluent farmers on the one hand and the landless laboring poor on the other, and the exposure of remote rural regions to urban customs, artifacts, and the sometimes violent intrusions of economic development.

When arranged according to the chronology of their writing, the stories show a striking thematic and idiomatic sensitivity to the structural changes in Bengali society over time, the major upheavals and dislocations, and to the related change of sociopolitical focuses in the intellectual psyche of Bengal. The 1930s and the 1940s constituted, in the intensity and rapidity of change and turmoil, the great divide in Bengal's social history. In the stories we see the central characters shift from the middle classes to peasants and slum dwellers, from upper-caste Hindu families to outcaste and tribal communities, from the myth-shrouded closed villages before the "green revolution" to those tribal communities rudely disrupted by economic development. Correspondingly, we see a change from quiescence under hierarchic social order to social conflict, from hegemony to ideological resistance and questioning of oppressive norms. We see a shift from a universal idiom to a subaltern idiom, from the social milieu of the educated middle class (*bhadralok*) to the stark lives of the lower classes (*chhotalok*). And perhaps most interestingly, we see the juxtaposition and interaction of these opposites at the level of both social relations and individual consciousness.

The stories are written by one woman and four men. Among the most important writers in the Bengali language, they represent the main genres of literature as both art and social commentary. As I was preparing this manuscript, someone asked me why I included many more men than women writing on women. Not having given much thought to the gender of each author, I was struck by the question's unstated presumption, which also made me take more conscious note of the delicate, sensitive tone of some of the male authors, especially Rabindranath and Hasan Azizul, and of the strident boldness of Mahasweta. I grew more convinced than ever that Virginia Woolf was right when she spoke, apropos of Coleridge's remark that a great mind is androgynous, of the "man-womanly" and "woman-manly" quality of creative minds.

Rabindranath (1861–1941) grew up and received his education in a family that was like a brilliant constellation of literary and artistic talents, involving itself in a number of journalistic and educational enterprises with the enthusiasm of pioneers. Undoubtedly, Rabindranath was the family's brightest and most prodigious member, bringing many facets of highly original creativity to fruition through his long life, which he lived in a strikingly organized, stable, and steadily focused manner, despite his many personal losses.[17] He himself considered his outlook, family environment, and work very much a product of the time.[18]

Apart from developing a whole new musical tradition by fusing classical and folk music, designing a new format of drama, and establishing in Santiniketan an innovative center of learning from elementary school through college, Rabindranath was a phenomenal literary creator. He was a poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright, as well as the first major writer of modern short stories in Bengali (as distinct from the tales and narrations based on the epics and the *Panchatantra* fables). His short stories, about ordinary people's lives and emotions in real social contexts, shaped and perfected this medium in the Bengali language. Most of his nearly one hundred short stories were written between the 1880s and the 1920s; their themes and tone are sensitive to the ongoing social changes through this fifty-year period, which saw the culmination of the Bengal Renaissance and the rise of nationalist sentiments.

His five stories in this collection were written in 1892–93 and 1914–15; he wrote the first three when he was just over thirty and the last two in his early fifties, when, having lost his wife and two of his children, he was totally occupied with writing, raising his other children, and running the twelve-year-old Santiniketan center. The passage of those twenty years is reflected in the stories in their social situation, the characters and their interactions, and the author's examination of oppression, especially of women, and rebellion. In an early story, "The Living and the Dead," a woman kills herself publicly to prove that she was not dead as assumed. In a later story, "Letter

from a Wife," a woman writes her husband a letter of denunciation after leaving her materially comfortable but restrictive and prejudiced marital home. For both women, the catalyst is the power of love for a child or a childlike character, a love she is not allowed to act upon; but the form of rebellion differs according to the time: shaming by suicide in the first, leaving the marital home in the second. It was not uncommon in nineteenth-century Bengal for a man to marry a second time if the first wife was childless, even if he loved her (as in "The Girl in Between"). By the 1920s, however, a middle-class extended family in Calcutta would find it hard to have their son remarried while his wife lived and stayed on, no matter how much they resented her, though they could hasten her death, as in "Haimanti," a method that has persisted in one form or another.

So much has been written in English about Rabindranath's works that we need not go into detail here but simply note some points specifically relating to the five stories in this collection. His storytelling contains a unique blend of opposites. The influence of the romantic-lyrical harmony of the Vaishnava padavalis ("full of freedom in meter and expression," in his own words), which he first read in his precocious early teens ("obtained surreptitiously from the desks of elder brothers"), is pervasive in all his writings, not just his poetry. In short stories, the other influence is Western, especially of Chekhov and Turgenev, and in some of his later stories, of Shaw and Ibsen. The obvious parallel between "Letter from a Wife" and "A Doll's House" has been drawn by Chakravarty (1965) among others; but there are also some very meaningful, more subtle differences, to which I will turn shortly.

The sensitive, androgynous mind of Rabindranath is strikingly presented in the five stories in this collection. These are some of the most sensitive portrayals of the female condition in various situations and at different levels of society that I have come across in my search. I also selected these five for their interesting variation in the source and mode of oppression and the forms in which oppression was experienced and rebelled against or transcended. Four of the protagonists are middle-class women in the early nineteenth century—three in the city and one in a village—and one the wife of a landless laborer. The class aspect of oppression is muted, although other societal aspects of oppression are not. This is partly because, though it existed, the class aspect of social conflict did not quite come into focus for the Bengali intelligentsia before the turn of the century. That focus grew sharper only from the 1920s on, with the rapid increase in the number of landless people as the sharecropping peasantry became destitute, as the agrarian struggles rocked the countryside, and as the 1943 famine produced its devastation.

Class conflict is muted even in the later writings of Rabindranath, though class division is not, partly because of his humanist ideology, his belief in the essential universality of human feelings and thoughts, irrespective of class,

creed, and social position. His subject is, above all else, the mind and feelings of the individual in relation to specific circumstances and social mores. Thus his stories are the least bound by time and place, while at the same time they portray a specific time and place in minute detail. They enable anyone to relate to the essentials of the oppression and the rebellion or transcendence. While reading of Chandara's punishment of Chhidam for his unintended insult of their love, we can imagine another headstrong girl in a different class, in a different society; yet we see the monstrous oppression of the girl and her man as something wrought ultimately by the exploitation of the landless peasant in rural Bengal, by the vulnerability of the poor compounded by their illiteracy, and by the oppressive hold of the mores that can make the lips speak what the heart does not mean. Mrinal's reason for leaving her marital home and the autonomy of thought that she asserts in her letter to her husband reveal modern feminist consciousness; but her reference to Meerabai, the sixteenth-century Rajput queen who left her marriage and palace life to be free to sing for the god of her love and who took as her guru a Chamar *bhakti* poet, pulls us back to her time and context. The mature Mrinal was once a village girl married at twelve into an urban family; within its confines she taught herself to read, write, and think, as was quite common in the urban Bengali middle class by the turn of this century, when the initial stirrings of nationalist sentiments inspired interest in biographies of legendary rebel characters. A spirited woman denouncing her narrow-minded husband and even leaving him for that reason is perhaps a little more common today, though today she would probably not have as her inspiration Meerabai's spiritual rebellion. Yet the instances in recent years of the suicide-murder of young wives connected with dowry dispute, and the abetted self-immolation of Roop Kanwar at eighteen on the funeral pyre of her husband in Deorala, Rajasthan, heighten the significance of this story: not only Mrinal's moral outrage at society's cruel indifference to female life, but also her emulation of Meerabai, who gave up her marriage rather than either her spiritual quest or her life. In a society in which marriage is the equivalent of sacrament for women, in which the presence of widows and unwed women is considered inauspicious, and in which leaving one's husband is regarded as sinful, Meerabai's life remains a truly revolutionary counterpoint.[19]

In the five stories by Rabindranath, the oppressor is ultimately some aspect of the cultural ideology and the social situation in which both men and women find themselves trapped because of some socially bred dysfunction of the individual will and psyche. The tragedy lies in the distortions that their personalities and relationships suffer under the tyranny of social mores and beliefs, in the havoc that ingrained ideas can play on human mind and behavior. The climax comes with the realization that habitual notions have led one to blindness, to closed doors, to barriers from more humane choices,

ultimately to becoming one's own jailer. It is then too late to change the rules, even though the nature of the problem has been perceived. All that remains is the shattering knowledge that the ideas one has always lived by are wrong, oppressive, and mindless. The loss, the unraveling of accustomed life, is often terminal, beyond redemption. Only in "Letter from a Wife" is there no tragedy of conscience for the protagonist. She loses her battle against bigotry to protect a helpless girl, but she remains morally undefeated and resists the formidable powers of intimidation to which others succumb as a matter of course. She challenges the balance of power between her values and those of her husband and his family, rejecting the ideology they live by and their double standards. Mrinal's humane courage contrasts with the defeatism of her counterpart in the husband of "Haimanti."

The five stories by Rabindranath in this collection are also extraordinary love stories; the love heightens the tragedy, making poignant the chasms unexpectedly opened up and unbridgeable. The heroines are each spirited, bolder than the men, even in the face of great adversity; the source of their oppression, their consciousness of it, and the nature of their response vary interestingly and meaningfully among the stories.

Kadambini, the meek and demure childless widow of an extended family in "The Living and the Dead," is convinced by a strange turn of circumstances that she has "crossed the river of death," that the spirit of her dead self is somehow stranded with the living. Profoundly alienated in this way from her regulated life, she suddenly feels freed of all the accustomed rules of conduct and movement in a way she had never thought possible when she was "alive." In the end, it is her love for a baby not her own that dispels her existential disorientation and also liberates her from habitual self-effacement. After crossing miles of deserted village paths alone on a rainy night to see the baby, the "ghost" of her timid self confronts the now fearful family and proceeds with uncharacteristic boldness to demonstrate that she is indeed alive.

Mrinal, the daughter-in-law of an affluent conventional family, shelters a plain orphan girl nobody wants around. Her love for this adolescent child, her surrogate daughter, mobilizes her courage, consciousness, and integrity to the fullest; it makes her rise in rebellion against what she is supposed to obey, or at least acquiesce in, like everybody else; it prompts her to reject all the rewards for such obedience.

Haimanti's college-student young husband loves and admires her guileless humanity and spirited spontaneity, products of an upbringing removed from the customs and the stifling process of female socialization among the petty gentry of the nineteenth-century urban Bengal. He loathes the hypocrisy and tyranny of his patriarchal family, which has cramped his own spirit and personality and is set to crush hers. He is similar to Mrinal in his humane revulsion for conventional tyranny, but he is her antithesis in his self-conscious inability to act upon it and defend the one he loves. By failing

to fight to save what he cherishes, he ends up loathing himself, condemned to degenerative and destructive self-pity.

In "The Punishment," a naive poor man, tired after a grueling day of exploited labor and panicked by a terrible situation, inadvertently insults his conjugal love with his unthinking use of the socially programmed line "a wife can be replaced but not a brother," and he loses his wife irrevocably. All his attempts to retrieve the mistake are sharply rejected by the outraged young woman. The story focuses on the devastated young husband as much as on the shocked wife, both victims of the oppressive social hierarchy and the treacherous norms that, internalized through repetition, substitute for thought and violate true feelings. The wife, Chandara, is an ordinary village woman except for her keen resistance of the husband's jealous efforts to control her and her anger at belittlement. This story has been interpreted differently by Sidhanta (1961, 287) as the story of a husband callously willing to let his wife die to save his brother because he could always get another wife. So it has seemed to the wife, and it is one aspect of the reality of their situation. The author, however, dwells on other aspects of the man's emotional reality, the betrayal of feelings by mores and the intimidation of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, elements that make it a complex story of love and oppressive power relations—the tragedy of a man without social power who seeks the marital power that will allow him to dominate.

"The Girl in Between" is not just about a woman's suffering in polygamy but also about the introspection that leads her from romantic naivete to mature awareness. Harasundari comes to know the pain of recognizing her own emotional deprivation when she was a bride herself and had regarded herself as happy. "Woman serves, but she also reigns. How could it become so polarized that one woman was only a servant and the other only a queen! That took the pride out of one's service and the happiness out of the other's power." Once a believer in the capacity of love to be endlessly generous, she still tries to remain steadfast for her weak-willed, dull husband, despite the pain it causes her and the sad contempt she comes to feel for the unworthy object of her devotion. She faces the consequences of her mistaken premise about love unflinchingly. More than a victim, she is a tragic heroine, poignantly aware of the unexpected forms of human weakness she has unearthed in the ironic course of life as she looks into the depths of her romantic disillusionment and despair.

These five female protagonists are extraordinary characters, in different ways. Interestingly, each one is a childless wife who entered an extended family as a child bride and was removed from her natal family. The deprivation of filial bonds is undoubtedly an important aspect of the oppressiveness of female life in that context. The patriarchal customs of marriage isolate the young woman from her natal home and family by mandating her early marriage into a different clan and community and by requiring her to adapt to