



## Feminism in Rabindranath Tagore's fiction

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### Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's writings, especially his novels bring out the erased portion of women's experience and show tremendous sympathy and understanding towards the plight of women which was quite an unfamiliar trend for most work of that period. Set in the Nineteenth Century Colonial Bengal, Tagore's writings portray the problems within Hindu custom and patriarchy, the uproar of spiritual and intellectual tension between Bengali Renaissance and tradition marked by the emergence of Colonial education and lives of Bengali, Hindu women in the juncture of all these social events. Controversial issues such as remarriage of Hindu widow, the need for female education, their emancipation and the oppression caused through social injustice have found significant place in his writing. Thus his writings are valuable documents of societal changes in its relation to larger social context of gender, nation, and politics.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, fiction, *The Sand of Eye*

### Introduction

His female characters come from diverse social settings and are inspirational as they struggle for space and autonomy. Through his works, Tagore is seen to break the false conventions of his society and thus liberating women from their bondages. Tagore's role in alleviating the minds of the Bengali reader is acknowledged anonymously today. Tagore's writings and how he projects women as the most significant transformative factor within social dimension.

Rabindranath Tagore's novel *the home and the world* offer a multidimensional portrayal of the society of the nineteenth century Bengal, and women's condition in it at that time. Tagore aligned his affections with the intellectual group "Brahmo Samaj" which concerned itself with the advancement of the society, and which was in support of those revolutionary changes in the society which aimed at casting away superstitions, ill-practices, and absolute customs. Tagore, similarly, was supportive of social and cultural changes which could make people more enlightened and free. He, as well as other followers of this intellectual motto supported emancipation of women, who had been the objects for oppression since ages. This paper is concerned with exploring the pattern of society. Its culture and women's role and importance in it, at the same time Tagore's portrayal of women's condition of his own time-period and his ideas regarding women's freedom. The point is to show how Tagore proposes to break the prevailing cultural mould of the time by introducing progressive thinking into his novel *The Home and the World*. Now the human civilization has progressed so well, and human beings have acquired the status of being the best creation of God.

They are always represented as the second or the other gender. Women and their lives have been one of shift dependency. The societal system is such that before marriage they are the accountability of their fathers, then of husbands

and at last, of their sons. They are not given any free space or liberty to make their own choices and to live freely. Such problems can be traced back to the age old notion of perceiving women as home makers and the emphasis on their marital responsibilities alone. Even in literature we see a long passage of struggle for identity on the part of the women writers or writings depicting women's experiences. Thus literature has always engaged in portraying, disproving and approving women's lives, their predicaments and their place in patriarchal society.

Women's writing and writing consisting of women's experiences have a difficult history of reader's reception. Starting from books of feminist criticisms to women's literature such as *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, *Second Sex*, *Laugh of Medusa*, *A Room of One's Own*, *Sultana's Dream*, To further illustrate my point I have chosen Rabindranath Tagore, Asia's first Nobel laureate (1913), who is a vital and convincing figure in the world of Bengali Literature. But he is equally read for his emphasis on social reformation including upholding the values gender equality.

His novels encompass vast range of issues. The issues of social inequality, religion, human relationships, human mind, society's false standards and contemporary political tensions have often found their way in his writings. Tagore's fiction, Women are illustrated in variety of ways. Tagore purposes the society of his times and develops his writings by relating them with ordinary Bengali Hindu family life. He criticizes the existing social injustices in his representation of the demoralized women who become conscious of their roles in society as well as the resources dormant in their own individuality. Through his long literary career Tagore explored woman as - the most creative transformative factor within social life. Tagore extremely aware of the condition of women and I find him to give significant time and thought on this subject which interests me as a student of Literature and

also as a woman, personally.

Rabindranath Tagore has shown a remarkable understanding of female mind and gave ample space to women and their lives and narratives in his novels, short stories and plays. Women from different social class, cast and character are present in his works. There are multiple perspectives, dynamic characters and diverse narratives in his works which one cannot miss. Tagore has shown an extraordinary notice of the plight of women in his Hindu society. The issues of dowry, early marriage, domestic violence and passivity of women have come out in his wonderful stories. In the midst of these social obstructions, female education is shown as a greater need in the Tagore. *Nashtaneer* or *The Ruined Nest*, is a good example of that. Then again, in the novel *The Sand of Eye*, Tagore portrays how the force of eagerness and desire can weaken any relation from its roots. Tagore also shows how a man disrespects the union and promises with his wife under the corrupt wishes of sexuality where he has no capacity to overcome it. It demonstrates the wrong Shila 10 treatments and disenchantment of a dishonest husband towards his naive and almost uneducated wife who never suspects his betrayal. At the center of the narrative we have an educated, self-conscious woman named Binodini who was windowed at her youth and her emergence in a traditional Hindu family, her inclusion in their relationships and her actions shape the novel as much as it problematizes the concept of respectable<sup>4</sup>.

In most of the stories and novels, Tagore has shown the possibilities women have of which they themselves are generally kept unaware. His works show how women were denied autonomy and it in turn the possibility of their personal growth was also demolished. In *The Ruined Nest* we can see the male ego and false sense of pride is hurt when they come in touch with a woman who is not naive and unintelligible. To develop my thesis, I have chosen Rabindranath Tagore's popular novel *The Sand of Eye*, novella - *Ruined Nest*.

If in today's world we consider women subordinate because they are weaker than men, does it anyway show that human mind has ever evolved, or that, are we really greater than all the other species found in nature, for we possess power in our minds. The question mark becomes bigger and bigger as much as we brood on the points like this. Patriarchy has always had the law of forcing women one step behind men. They have almost no choice in their lives, instead of being good wives to their husbands and to pile up children children because in the sacred texts of every religion it has been considered to be their prime duty. In context of liberation of women, equality and many more, are in fact ineffectual changes to be seen only from outside, a change only for the external image. Strikingly, reality remains the same as it was ever before. Consequently, in most of the countries, women have got rights equal to those of men, but the question is, are they really free to exercise their freedom? The answer is a big "no". Women are being harassed sexually, being raped everywhere, which is nothing but exercise of power against their sexuality. Women are doomed to suffer because it is a woman who is impregnated and bears the marks of violence on her body. In general perception, woman still has not evolved out of their image of a body which is only meant to play with.

By the mid-Twentieth century came suffragette movement which opened up the discussion about what we exactly do

with our women who constitute half of this world. Feminism started as a criticism of gender roles in the society. Feminists argued that the gender roles were created by men of their own benefit. Since the 1950's feminists were broadly critical of family patterns, which were considered to be faulty at that time. The dominant family type at that time was joint family system especially in Indian society. Joint family system had created a polarized atmosphere within the family where women were on one side, performing their ritual like duties of household; while men were on the other side of the scene, controllers and masters. Essentially, feminists viewed the organizations of the family system as a breeding ground where patriarchal values were learned by an individual. The society, on the other hand, a macrocosm of family system itself exercise same authority over women, who are generally regarded as inferior constituents of the society. Who is considered to be a visionary author, realized the ill-practices which were done against women. Rabindranath Tagore in his novel *The Home and the World* (1919) tried to explore these problems inherent in Indian society, in the backdrop of Indian national freedom movement. Tagore's purpose is to bring into light, state of women in earlier twentieth century in the suitable background of freedom struggle, which constitutes a general atmosphere of social unrest and enthusiasm, thus dragging attention of every class, creed and age group of society.

Women, the weaker sex was not allowed to come outside the territory of house and take part in the functioning of outer world. The main reason behind were that, firstly, women were considered to be inferior in mental as well as physical abilities. Secondly, women were considered nothing but companions and subordinates to men. In every relationship women subordinates to men. In every relationship women constitute the other and inferior part, whether in the relationship of husband-wife, son-daughter, brother-sister or father-daughter. The male counterpart, in every relationship, remains the controller and master.

I would have you come into the heart of the outer world and meet reality. Merely going on with your household duties, living all your life in the world of household conventions and the drudgery of household tasks, -you were not made for that! If we meet and recognize each other in the real world, then only our love will be true. Prohibition of widow marriages, child marriage, polygamy and lack of education were chief evils of the society. Issues of female education and emancipation remained in the agenda of nationalists at that time but never quite achieved. Tagore is the novel is presenting the idea with the help of Nihilish is the mouth piece of Tagore's liberal ideas. His understanding and support also extend to even those people whom he does not politically agree with. Nihilish befriends and funds a popular activist of swadeshi, Sandeep. Thousands of people are attracted with his charismatic personality, whom he easily always with himself. Sandeep gradually becomes a frequent visitor at the drawing room of Nihilish, and gets chance to converse with Bimla as well. Bimla, too is attracted toward him. She finds views of Sandeep to be very energetic and forceful. Sandeep, being fully aware of her devotion, makes opportunist use of her. In spite of all congenial support provided by Nihilish, Sandeep persuades Bimla against her own husband.

He even persuades Bimla to steal gold from Nikhil's case. Sandeep suffers from excessive hubris and narcissist attitude to make use of her people for his own cause. He says at a place that Bimla is a ripe fruit, whom he must pluck. His lustful desires do not spare a bosom-friend's wife. The contrasting views of two men, Nikhil and Sandeep, provide two different attitudes for woman, for one she is an individual who recognizes her potential and promotes, and for the other she is an object of pleasure. Bimla's character undergoes development in which she gradually moves towards realization.

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