

Women in Tagore's selected short stories

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Abstract

Tagore's short stories offer a sensitive and critical representation of women's lives within the patriarchal social order of colonial Bengal. Moving beyond idealized or submissive portrayals, Tagore presents women as psychologically complex individuals negotiating emotion, duty, desire and resistance. His female characters often occupy domestic spaces, yet their inner lives reveal profound conflicts shaped by gendered oppression and social constraint. In stories such as "The Wife's Letter" (Strir Patra), the protagonist's assertion of voice becomes a powerful act of defiance against marital and social domination. Similarly, "Punishment" depicts female silence as a form of resistance, exposing the injustice embedded in familial and legal structures. Tagore also critiques the institution of marriage in narratives like "The Broken Nest" (Nashtanirh), where women's intellectual and emotional aspirations remain unfulfilled. Through empathetic characterization and psychological realism, Tagore foregrounds women as subaltern figures whose experiences are marginalized yet deeply significant. His short stories challenge social orthodoxies and articulate an early feminist consciousness, making them vital texts for understanding gender, subalternity and modernity in Indian literature.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, women's representation, patriarchy, subalternity, gender and identity, colonial Bengal

Introduction

I have different strata of my life and all my writings can be divided into so many periods. All of us have different incarnations in this very life. When we come out of one period, we are as if born again. So we have literary incarnations also. (Galpaguchha 853)

The legend of Bengali Literature Rabindranath Tagore left his mark in almost every sphere of literature that is to say novel, drama, short-story, songs and poems and so on. He is equally popular and his genius is universally accepted even in today's world. His grandfather, 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore was a personal friend of Queen Victoria and his father Maharishi (a great saint) Debendranath Tagore was a leader of the Brahmo Samaj. The entire family of Rabindranath Tagore were educated and progressive in their outlook and being influenced by the Western culture they were in support of the emancipation of women. While studying in London Rabindranath Tagore observed the lifestyle of women there and the freedom the British women enjoyed and compared with them the status of the women in Bengal.

Rabindranath Tagore was dubbed 'Gurudev' (Master Teacher), 'Kabiguru' (Master Poet), 'Biswakabi' (World Poet) for his poetic achievements and awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for a collection of poems, Gitanjali. He was the pioneer of the short-story form in Bengali Literature. After Tagore got the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, he went on a tour to the Western countries on invitation for lecturing. There he noticed the status of women and became aware of women's liberation. As a result, the emerging New Woman concept in the Western society had its impact on his fiction writing also. Rabindranath Tagore was very dissatisfied with the prevailing patriarchal system in Bengal which suppressed the basic human rights of a woman. The social reformer in

Rabindranath Tagore gave priority to women. As literature reflects the ever-changing reality of life, Tagore tried his utmost to portray the real picture of women in the age-old patriarchal society. Tagore's portrayal of women characters in his short-stories and novels showed his antipathy to gender-hierarchy. Due to English education and the influence of Western culture, Tagore's women characters were no longer the submissive sufferers of patriarchy. They started to assert their individuality. Rabindranath Tagore was the first writer who gave more space to women in his writings. In contemporary society, this liberal-minded writer allowed women to perform on the stage while he was sitting behind. The heroines created by Tagore are courageous by nature and they stand apart themselves from the track of tradition. They are more emancipated and empowered to transform themselves in the twentieth century. They are all forerunners to the later day women characters depicted by the so-called staunch feminist writers. This made Tagore a visionary for the cause of feminism.

Rabindranath Tagore selected the backdrop of his stories not only from the rural setting but also from the urban area. Not all of the stories are about the village people only. A majority of his short-stories are set in Kolkata to show the city-life where the deprived and the downtrodden classes lived their life simply devoid of any opportunities. At the same time he was also charmed by the rustic surroundings which inspired him deeply. His love for nature and village life and his endeavour to portray the reality of the exploited villagers in order to reduce their suffering is quite evident in his short-stories. Tagore's stories mostly deal with the social, political, economic and psychological issues. His stories are primarily intended to give enjoyment to the readers but later on there was a touch of moral lesson for the readers. Tagore's concern is to raise the moral and ethical ground of the readers as he is trying to expose the dark and

filthy side of the society. In this way Tagore continuously tried to introduce a sense of justice and benevolence into the reader's soul. In his short-stories he recurrently pleaded for social justice, protection of the helpless, education of the illiterate, and empowerment for women and children. Tagore skilfully projects human relationships with all its probable shades and complexities in almost each of his story. Emancipation of women and children, education of the depressed classes, and eradication of class-system are some of the recurrent issues in the short-stories of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore portrays in his short-stories and novels of the Post-Gitanjali period the character of emancipated women.

Tagore makes his female protagonists a vehicle for the attack on male-domination and through his short-stories he suggests that the women should take the initiative to eradicate their misfortune by getting education and by making their thought process progressive. Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps the only writer in Bengali Literature who from his first short story "Bhikharini" ("The Beggar Woman") to the last one "Laboratory" ("The Laboratory") described the various life-style of women along with their extended form such as the position of women in the male-dominated society, family, discriminatory treatment towards women, their dishonour, disgrace, grouch, their happiness, sorrow, exploitation, reaction, protest, struggle for existence and much more similar incidents. As Tagore wrote his short-stories for a long period, with the passage of time throughout these stories the real picture of the then society was projected. Rabindranath Tagore sympathises with women and he believes that women were victims of the masculine civilization. His concern was to provide equal status to women and thereby create a healthy civilization where both men and women complement each other.

In the first phase of his story writing Tagore's women are confined within the domestic world. Afterwards they learned to raise their head from that dungeon hell. The lives of women were at stake in the hands of the terrible practices such as social superstition, inequality among men and women, child marriage, the blemishes of noble birth, premature widowhood, the practice of 'Suttee', polygamy, dowry system is quite obvious in the short-stories of Rabindranath Tagore.

The first story in this phase is 'Bhikharini' ('The Beggar Woman') where Tagore portrays the character of Komol and her mother very beautifully. Komol's mother is the daughter of a landlord and in the presence of her husband her life is going on smoothly. But, with the death of her husband misfortune prevails in her life. Women were completely dependent upon their husbands in the then society and without the help of their husbands their lives became problematic as well as miserable. Komol's mother is also not an exception. Komol's widow mother becomes destitute and helpless after the death of Komol's father. Komol also has to face difficulties in her life. Though she is in love with Amarsingh, she has to marry a dishonest, tyrant, villainous person in the absence of Amarsingh. As Amarsingh is in the war and as Komol's mother is facing utmost poverty, she has to take the decision and is compelled to marry Komol with that rouge. Returning from war Amarsingh never accepts Komol's love. He fails to feel the agony of Komol's mind. Komol is unhappy under the torture of her tyrant husband. Amarsingh is unable to help

Komol although he is aware of all the sufferings of Komol. This is because Amarsingh has faith and belief upon social rituals. With utmost sorrow and agony in her mind and as a victim of the torture of the social order Komol surrenders herself to death. As a consequence, Komol's widow mother, already suffering from utmost poverty, becomes a maddened beggar woman mourning the death of her only daughter, Komol. How the women in contemporary society were treated is quite evident in this short-story of Tagore.

In his short-story named "Ghater Katha" ('The Tale of the Ghat') Rabindranath Tagore describes the pathetic end of a widow girl Kusum who was married in her childhood like her playmates Amal, Bhuban, and Sworno. Child-marriage was a terrible practice then and after going to their in-laws' house most of them were returned to their native village becoming a widow. All the happiness, enjoyment of a young girl was prohibited for them and they were compelled to lead a life of rigorous widowhood. The protagonist of this story Kusum also returned to her father's house after becoming a widow. The pathetic story of her painful life deprived of all the pleasures of life at a young age is described through one of the 'ghats' of the Ganges. When Kusum suffers the curse of her premature widowhood, a young priest who comes in their native village resembles her dead husband and Kusum follows the religious rituals as guided by this young priest. But her soul is not happy by following only the rituals. With the passage of time Kusum is getting attracted to the young priest and her suppressed desire takes the form of a dream in her sleep. But, she is unable to express her secret affection and the dissatisfaction of her mind to the priest. In the eyes of the society she is only a widow whose only concern is to follow the rigorous religious rituals. She has no right to think other than her dead husband even in the core of her heart. If reality is expressed Kusum would be an object of hatred for everyone in the society. So Kusum considers herself as a guilty one who feels attraction to another person other than her dead husband. Even the priest, after knowing her mind, suggests she should forget him and he himself escapes from that village. Through the voice of the 'ghat' of the Ganges Rabindranath Tagore describes the tragic end of her life and how Kusum is compelled to commit suicide by drowning in that particular 'ghat'. No one from the society responds to the premature death of a young widow but her story narrated minutely through the voice of a 'ghat' is quite ironic.

The dowry system regarding the marriage of women was a cruel practice in the nineteenth-century Bengal. Most women during that period were neglected, tortured, oppressed and humiliated not only by the society but by their close relatives, near and dear ones only because of this custom of dowry. Most of them found peace only by embracing death, by committing suicide. It is as if women were the victims of the sacrificial post of social superstition. Rabindranath Tagore depicts through his story "Dena Paona" ('Debts and Dues') the utmost humiliation of women in the contemporary society of Bengal. The protagonist of this story Nirupama being a girl from a lower middle-class family becomes the victim of the heinous practice of dowry. After spending a few days in her childhood she becomes a prey of child-marriage. From the very beginning Nirupama has helplessly observed the bargaining made about her for marriage. "The groom demanded as a dowry a lot of money and expensive articles as gifts. Not giving the matter another thought,

Ramsunder agreed; such a groom could not be allowed to go free under any circumstances.” (Stories 26)

But, Nirupama's father Ramsunder ultimately fails to give the entire dowry at the time of marriage. As the bridegroom is generous and as Ramsunder burdened with the thought of his daughter to marry, the groom's family pays all the dues shortly, only in such condition the groom's family completes the marriage. The bride Nirupama has nothing to do with all these matters. Her concern is whether the in-laws allow her to come to her father's house or not. “Then father, will they no longer permit me to visit you?” (Stories, 28) Unfortunately, Nirupama's father fails to pay the dues to his daughters' in-laws. Only for this reason the intensity of humiliation, negligence, and torments of Nirupama in her in-laws knows no bounds.

Even as regards meal, no attention was paid to what Nirupama partook of. If some kindly neighbour made a reference to some fault, the retort promptly came, “That is more than enough”. The inherent message behind this was—if the entire sum of money had been paid, Nirupama would have been well looked after. (Stories, 29)

After being humiliated a lot, Nirupama protests before her father and urges him not to give money to her in-laws.

Niru answered, “It is an insult only if you hand over the money. Does your daughter have no honour at all? Am I just a money-making machine that I am held in regard only when I can draw in money and not otherwise? Besides, my husband does not want this money. No, father, you must not insult me by giving me more money.” (Stories, 32)

Her husband has to leave the house because of his service just after their marriage.

Nirupama, the child-wife, facing the humiliation, oppression, and exploitation of her in-laws, is indirectly compelled to commit suicide. The funeral procession of Nirupama, the eldest daughter-in-law of the family takes priority rather than making sorrow for the premature death of Nirupama, the child-wife. Rabindranath Tagore sympathetically sketches the pathetic life of Nirupama. She has nothing to do and no role to play in the destruction of her life. How the existence of women suffers in the hands of society's ethical awareness is depicted in this story.

The eldest daughter-in-law had breathed her last---the obsequies were performed with a lot of pomp and splendour. Word spread far and wide about the manner in which she was bade farewell.

Consoling Ramsunder, people described to him at length what a splendid last journey she had had.

On the other hand, a letter came from the District Magistrate, “All arrangements have been made, immediately sent over to my wife”. Raibahadur's wife wrote back, “My dear son, I have looked out for another bride for you, hence take leave and come over immediately”.

This time double the amount of money has been settled as dowry and will be paid directly. (Stories, 34)

The women characters of Tagore can effortlessly make a deep impression in the mind of the readers because of their

realistic approach. “Aparichita”, (“Woman Unknown”) is the story of a bride's family protesting against the dowry system prevailing in society. Kalyani, who is an educated girl belonging to a rich family, has her marriage fixed with Anupam, a postgraduate who is also very obedient to his family, in exchange for a heavy dowry. On the day of marriage the maternal uncle of the bridegroom checks the weight and purity of the gold ornaments given to the bride and thereby humiliates the bride and her father a lot. After enquiring about Anupam, Kalyani's father Sambhunath realizes that Anupam is under complete control of his maternal uncle and family. However, after the dinner is over, Sambhunath Babu announces not to give his daughter to such a family who considers him stealing his daughter's gold jewellery and the marriage is broken off. Sambhunath had raised his daughter very liberally and never considered her a burden for him. After that incident he refused to hand over his daughter to Anupam who is totally incapable of protesting against the wrong behaviour of his family. Tagore asserts the self-dignity of the father Sambhunath who refuses to give his daughter in marriage to such a narrow-minded family. As a result of which Kalyani remains a lifelong spinster only in protest of such an ugly insult. Through this short-story Tagore projects a revolutionary thought against this evil practice of dowry. Tagore also suggests that in order to eradicate this menace, the bride's family itself should take the first step and also emphasises upon the importance of women's education.

In the short-story “Kankal” (“The Skeleton”) Rabindranath Tagore describes the story of an unknown girl through her own voice when she becomes a skeleton and how her desires are suppressed by the patriarchal society. Though the girl is full of life, in her feelings of love, emotions, and imaginations and rich with physical beauty her normal childhood is smashed by the curse of widowhood. It was then social practice for a woman that her only duty was to take the good care of her husband, son and her husband's family and being a widow her duty was to follow the rigorous religious rituals for the wellbeing of her dead husband and nothing other than that. The skeleton in this story describes how unhappy she was with her in-laws and how her husband tortured her mercilessly. The skeleton says, When I was human and very young, there was a person I was mortally afraid of my husband. The feelings were similar to a fish struggling against the line of an expert angler. It felt as though some complete stranger had snatched me away from the calm tranquillity of my world of water and there was no chance of a respite or reprieve. Within two months of marriage, I was widowed and relatives and mourned and wailed on my behalf. Putting together various signs and symbols, my father-in-law informed my mother-in-law that I was what was generally regarded in the scriptures as ‘venomous woman’—innately poisonous.

(Best Short Stories, 55)

The neglected, tormented life-story of the child-wife is expressed through her own voice when she becomes a skeleton. The girls were married between the ages of six to ten and afterwards they had to lead such a pathetic life till death.

In conclusion, Rabindranath Tagore's short stories offer a profound and forward-looking engagement with the condition of women in colonial Bengal. By foregrounding women's inner lives, emotional conflicts and moral

dilemmas, Tagore moves beyond conventional patriarchal representations to articulate a nuanced critique of gendered oppression. His female characters – often situated within domestic and social constraints – emerge as sites of resistance, agency and ethical self-awareness. Through psychological realism and subtle narrative strategies, Tagore exposes the limitations imposed by marriage, family and social orthodoxy while simultaneously envisioning alternative possibilities of female autonomy. Reading these stories through feminist and subaltern perspectives reveals Tagore's contribution to early gender consciousness in Indian literature, making his short fiction enduringly relevant to contemporary discussions on women, power and social justice.

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