



## The workings of patriarchal conservatism within the mental space of woman with reference to Tagore's *Noukadubi*

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### Abstract

My dissertation, 'The workings of patriarchal conservatism within the mental space of women with reference to Tagore's *Noukadubi*' intends to show how women become instrumental in carrying forward the patriarchal notions about marriage and husband. During Tagore's contemporary time, most of the marriages were arranged by the families of the prospective bride and groom. Very few bride and groom get any chance to meet as well as know each other before the marriage yet it was expected of a wife to obey, love and respect a person whom she hardly knows. According to patriarchy, the moment a person is assigned with the role of a husband, he becomes qualified to be worshipped by his wife. The tag of husband enables the person to achieve divinity. All the vices and virtues and also the various aspects of his psychological and physical characteristic features are overlooked. The women were so taken into by this patriarchal notion that for them the term husband becomes a visible reality. As a result, they were bound to be emotionally faithful not towards the person but towards the term husband. That is why in the novel when Kamala learns that Ramesh is not her actual husband, she can completely withdraw herself from the growing bond of love and attachment between her and Ramesh and when she finds out her real husband, she very quickly, without having a second thought about her previous relation with Ramesh, surrenders herself to her original husband. I intend to explain my argument further with the help of Monique Wittig's concept of gender as metaphysics of substance and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Sarat Chandra's Swami will also be referred to in my dissertation.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal, conservatism, instrumental, assigned, psychological, metaphysics, substance, psychoanalytical.

### Introduction

People often consciously or unconsciously give some kind of material dimension to certain words by repeating those words frequently. But in reality those words have no physical substance, they exist only as words. This phenomenon of assuming physicality to something that does not exist physically is known as metaphysics of substance. In her book *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler has referred to one such instance of metaphysics of substance, whereby feminist Monique Wittig remarks that gender is metaphysics of substance.

Gender is the primary identity marker that society dumps upon us the moment we are born, we are being declared baby boy or baby girl by the doctors. Later on in our individual lives we use gender in a way that it assumes a physical body. But it is only an abstract concept. Our sexual organs do not have any gendered meaning. The concept of gender, instead of having any material substance gains physical reality through frequent repetition. It exists only verbally. The patriarchal society has forced this artificial construction of gender on us only to consolidate its power by creating the male female binary. Therefore, with reference to the construction of gender a reification that is giving a concrete form to something that is abstract, takes place. Similar thing also happens in Rabindranath Tagore's famous novella *Noukadubi* (*The Boatwreck*) with respect to the idea of a husband.

The narrative of the novella revolves around the lives of these four characters -Ramesh, Hemnalini, Kamala and Nalinaksha. It describes the various intricately related complexities of their lives caused by an accident, the wreck of a boat. At the beginning of the novella we see a blooming romantic relationship between Ramesh Chowdhury, a student of law and Hemnalini, the sister of Ramesh's friend

Jogendra. Their relationship takes a cruel turn as Ramesh's father summons him to his village to marry Sushila, the daughter of an unfortunate widow whose late husband was a close friend of Ramesh's father. Ramesh was forced to marry the young girl. While the newly wedded bride and groom were returning with their other relatives to Ramesh's village, they experienced a boat wreck that took away the lives of Ramesh's father, mother-in-law and many other relatives. Only Ramesh and a young bride survived the accident. Ramesh took her to his home thinking her to be his wife and as they spent some days together as husband wife, Ramesh realized that this girl is not his wife Sushila but her name is Kamala and she is the wife of a doctor named Nalinaksha. After this revelation Ramesh took her to Kolkata and sent her to a girls' school and at this point, once again the intimacy between Ramesh and Hemnalini grows to the extent of a prospective marriage. However Ramesh postpones the marriage and sails Westward with kamala and in the steamer they meet Trailakya Chakraborty famously known as Khuro. Khuro takes this couple to his home to stay here for sometime in Gazipur. Meanwhile Kamala learns about her real identity and leaves the home. The story ends with Kamala's final reconciliation with her husband Nalinaksha. But in this liner narrative of a love triangle there are some facts which are extremely problematic such as Kamala's response to her relationship with Ramesh, her attitude towards Ramesh and her conception about husband and marriage.

Usually a man becomes a husband only after following the heteronormative rituals of marriage with a woman. Therefore, the term 'husband' is a kind of marker of a relationship that gets attached to a man only when he is married to a woman. So 'husband' is only a term that has no physical substance. It gets a physical body only when it is

attached to the body of a man. But this physicality is not very constant. If the marriage gets over the term 'husband' could no longer be applicable to the man. The term has only verbal reality, it exists only as a word but we repeat it so often that it appears to be something concrete. In the novella the character of Kamala also treat this term 'husband' as something physical that is why she prefers an abstract idea of husband over an actual relationship nurtured over a period of time.

This act of Kamala was a result of the patriarchal norms and rituals of marriage that she has been made to valorise by the patriarchal society. The husband wife relationship is granted by the social institution of marriage. According to hindu martial rituals a man and a woman become husband and wife only after enchanting the seven sacred vows together. But if marriage is a union between a man and a woman then, these vows are not at all necessary for a union to take place. These are only ritualistic performance that people being a part of the society are compelled to perform. The things that are important for a union are mutual consent, love, affection, trust and respect for each other. And in the lonely sandy river bank, it was Ramesh's affection for the young bride that makes him accept the bride as his wife. For a brief span of time they were enjoying the bliss of conjugality without taking the sacred vows, although then they were not conscious of the fact but on the steamer when Ramesh was fully aware of Kamala's real identity, his awareness did not come in their way to restrict them from enjoying each other's company. They were performing their newly found household activities quite delightfully. But kamala being a patriarchal conservative woman advocates the institution of marriage. So she acts almost like a robot when she learns about her true identity from Ramesh's letter to Hemnalini, that Ramesh has very carelessly left behind in the bungalow and went off to Allahabad and that letter eventually falls into Kamala's hand. After the revelation she very mechanically turns herself away from Ramesh and very instantly devotes herself to the person, her real husband who till then, for Kamala was nobody but a name written on a paper. And when Ramesh in a letter expresses his love for her, kamala instead of being grateful to the person who has protected her against all odds, sacrificed his own love and whom she once takes to be her lawful husband and even pines for his love, she feels disgusted. Although Ramesh had avoided any physical intimacy with her, she was outraged and embarrassed to know that she had been thrust into such proximity. The person whom she should have respected the most, she instead held him responsible for all her miseries. Kamala has negated the very essential and fundamental aspects of human psychology. Human beings are intrinsically bound to build bonds and relations of various types with various people. They need the support of their friends, family and well wishers. Our intimacy with people is determined by shared feelings and emotions between us and the people who are related to us and we grow this intimation very gradually, considering someone's attributes his mental and physical affiliations. For example, in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's famous novella Swami the female protagonist named Soudamini was married to Ghanashyam against her will. Before her marriage she had a romantic affair with a neighborhood boy named Naren. Therefore, though she had taken the sacred martial vows

with Ghanashyam yet she did not accept him as her husband immediately after their marriage. She grows a gradual attachment with the person only after seeing his persistence, his honesty, his mental integrity and his benevolent nature. She starts respecting him and develops a strong feeling for him and finally she ends up loving him. Only then she accepts Ghanashyam as her husband. She loves him not because he was her husband but because he was a man worthy of loving. But kamala does not bother herself to consider all these facts, the only thing that matters to her is that, if the man is her husband she must love and respect him. She has been brought up in a patriarchal society so she never even thinks of not confirming the rules. Kamala's attitude towards Khuro as well as his daughter Shailaja was very natural and spontaneous. She had a very strong bond with both these persons. She loves Khuro because from the very beginning Khuro was very fond of her and he loves her as his own daughter. Kamala finds a friend in Shailaja. They become very close in a short while and Kamala felt very sad to depart from them and she also cares for their feelings. Khuro always comes to her rescue so she loves and respects him all the more and remains very grateful to him. But when it comes to Ramesh she becomes very ruthless. The way she discarded Ramesh and moved on, was something very inhuman. She acts like a machine. Instead of having some attachment with Ramesh and living for so many months together, she faces no dilemma to come to the decision of leaving him. The moment she came to know about her real identity, her real husband she very instantly dedicates herself to him. But if we notice Ramesh, he oscillates for a long period of time before taking the decision of accepting Kamala as his wife. But Kamala never had a second thought. Ramesh was traumatized to think over all the possibilities of Kamala's suicide. But separating herself from Ramesh generates no sense of trauma in Kamala. Here she nullifies the fundamentals of human psychology, whereby Separation always inevitably leads to trauma. The novella was situated in Bengal in between late nineteenth century and early twenty century. Although the age was an age of resurgence and reformation yet the society has not completely done away with conservatism. And as a part of this conservative patriarchal society, Kamala has internalized the hackneyed notions about husband, whereby a husband should be regarded as a god by his wife. But this internalization was not a fault on Kamala's part because patriarchy functions on the basis of the hierarchical arrangement of the sexes where male is regarded as superior and female is regarded as inferior and a man or a woman is made aware of this binary since his or her infancy by society. There are various kinds of apparatuses that are operating in our society to make us follow the rules and norms, among them, the ideological apparatus like our parents, family and friends are more effective. In this novella Shailaja acts as an ideological apparatus. Her encouragement was added to the process of Kamala's internalizing the patriarchal conceptions and notions. Since Kamala was an orphan and was not very wanted in the household of her maternal uncle, nobody has really cared to guide her to be a proper woman, to show the essential coquettishness and coyness that a woman is always expected to show in a male dominated society. Before her meeting with Shailaja Kamala never felt it necessary to

veiled herself in Ramesh's presence or she had not even showed any unnecessary shyness before him. But owing to Shailaja, Kamala learns how to devote her husband with all her heart and how she should always be very attentive to fulfill all his needs.

### **Conclusion**

Kamala, the sati-sabitri archetype indulges herself in pursuing her ideal of an abstract connubial love and pledges eternal devotion and service to her almost unknown husband and mother-in-law that translates into being a nurse, attendant, cook and companion for her. She has reinforced that the hindu incantations during a ceremonious wedding that has united two random people together by fluke circumstances is much more powerful than the conviction of a deepening reciprocal relationship between two other people.

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