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Women in the inscription of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract :

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a liberal humanist who desired a new social order where women are not bound by shackles of patriarchy. Born into a progressive family, he had observed closely the stifling condition of 19th-century Bengal. His creativity captured the multifaceted torment on women in a conservative socio-cultural milieu. This paper analyzes the concept of emancipation of women in 19th century Bengal and discusses the struggle of a woman to achieve emancipation from confinement. The issues of child marriage, forced arranged marriage, poor condition of childbirth room, subordination of women, and women's helplessness in a joint family are all vehemently criticized with poignancy and insight. He advocates escape route of breaking the shackles of traditional roles of a woman to emerge victorious in the story.

The paper also examines Rabindranath Tagore's involvement with the wave of feminist approaches in his works in the nineteenth century Bengal. Acknowledged particularly for his collection of poems, stories, prose, novels, Tagore placed women at the forefront in his novels to convey feminism. His pen became the tool for expressing his belief for the betterment of women or empowering them through his different writings. His inscription generally focuses on women's equality, liberalization, freedom, dignity and rights. Tagore portrays the merciless society has obstructed the thoughts of the women to express their thoughts and feelings. The methodology used in the study is content analysis on the type of literature Tagore provided in his study about the women in his different stories and novels.

Key words: Women, patriarchy, struggle of woman

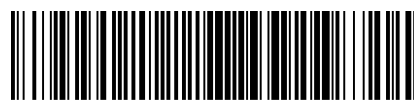


1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is one of the outstanding literary figures of all times. His contribution to Bengali literature is unique and unparalleled. The Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore was gifted, with art, poetry, and writing, which is easily witnessed in his writing. He is a well-known poet, dramatist, actor, producer, musician, painter, reformer, philosopher, novelist, and writer. In this regard, he is a versatile thinker. His fecundity of writing was amazing. In sheer quantity of work few writers can equal him. His writings include more than one thousand poems and over two thousand songs in addition to a large number of short stories, novels, dramatic works and essays on religion, education, politics, and literature.

Tagore was also a pioneer in the field of education. He established *Shantiniketan* School to educate the children. Though outside India Tagore upheld and interpreted the Indian philosophy of life, in his own country he was the severest critic of its social institutions and religious practices, which encouraged superstition and inequality and tolerated injustice. Indian first Prime Minister *Jawaharlal Nehru* highlighted Tagore's contribution in education in his book *Discovery of India*. Tagore not only uplifted Bengali literature but also contributed to mould the mind of whole India. In this way, he was considered a pillar of modern India. Though Tagore was essentially a poet, he was much more than poet in the Western sense of the term. He was a poet in the *Sanskrit* sagacity of the word, *kavi*, a seer, an intermediary between the human and divine. He sheds light and warmth and revitalized the mental and moral soil of his land, revealed unknown horizons of thoughts and spanned the arch that divides the East from the West.

Rabindranath Tagore as a protagonist constantly endeavors to highlight women's contributions to society. Though the women portrayed in his writings were in their conventional forms, they still influence society of that era. His writing contributed much to today's society and arose as a wake-up call for the women of today to voice their need for liberalization. Rabindranath Tagore, as a writer and poet, presented his words for the betterment of women's empowerment in that society. Tagore in the light of feminism exploring the ambivalence towards women. Tagore's ambivalence prevails in the representation of women characters in his short stories. On the one hand, Tagore shows female characters' complicity with patriarchal values while on the other hand; Tagore portrays women characters as inspiring heroines.



2. Background of the study

The most robust characteristic of Tagore's philosophy of life was his emphasis on the development of human personality. His deep-set conviction articulated that there is inherent contradiction between the claims of the so-called opposites. He effervescently portrayed the flesh and the spirit, the human and the divine, love of life and love of God, joy in beauty and pursuit of truth, social obligation and individual rights, respect for tradition and the freedom of experiment, love of one's people and faith in the unity of mankind. These seemingly opposites can and must be reconciled, not by tentative compromises and timid vacillation but by building a true harmony out of the apparent discordance. He acknowledges the inherent contradiction between the physical and spiritual, love of humanity and divinity, art and life, social duty and personal freedom, the love of own culture and the desire to see unity in diversity. Tagore believes in reconciliation between these opposite ideas by building a true harmony in expense of tentative compromises and discordance. However, mainly a poet, Tagore also made his mark as a writer of fiction- of novels and short stories. Tagore's short stories present society and accurately captures the conditions of women. His works from *Bou Thakuranir Hat* to *Char Adhaya* are mostly evident in caste, class, color, and creed. The reading of his short stories possesses a greater importance bearing different strands of ideologies and movements that flow into the making of a society culminating into nation building. His short stories are a blending of philosophy and ideology woven within a framework of objectivity. Issues of Nationalism, Women and Religion, Masculinity, are repeatedly reframed, readdressed and reinterpreted in his works.

3. Rational of the study

Rabindranath Tagore wrote short stories at every stage of his life. His first story "*Bhikarinni*" (The Beggar Woman) was published in 1877 when he was sixteen, and his last few stories- outlines rather than finished wholes were written a few months before his death in 1941. Tagore's short stories are based on the theme of nationalism, conjugality, position of women in society, untouchability, the illusionary idealism and love marriage conflict. In his literary works, he presents his characters with a vision for his country, which is very much pragmatic. The research aimed at bringing out the genius versatility of Tagore as a painter of women's heart by providing a fresh dimension to the reflection of contemporary ideas and counter ideas in depiction of women. The present research revisited the ideas of Tagore on agony of women, femininity and their way of dealing with their skirmish. Mostly his ideas on the emancipation of women are analyzed through his different works and the thesis validates



that all the issues dealt remain as crucial today as they were in Tagore's time. Tagore's ideas on these of each issue are so universal that they provide solutions to each problem eternally.

The study presents the women fighting for their equality and freedom and for their voice against the conventional disparaging attitude towards them. They have been called the '*Innovative Women*'. Though Tagore has written vast numbers of short stories, the present study mainly deals with following three short stories-

- The Living and the Dead
- The Gift of Sight
- Mahamaya.

4. Thematic analysis of the short stories

"*The Living and the Dead*" describes a peculiar situation in which a woman finds herself dead when she realizes that she is alive, and yet dead to the outside world. *Kadambini* was a widow staying with her brother-in-law *Saradasankar* in his house at *Ranighat*. She had no relatives left. *Saradasankar*'s son was her favorite and she spent her days nursing him. One night she died suddenly. Four Brahmin servants took her body to the burial place of *Ranighat*, near a pond. They brought the dead body to a hut and waited for the firewood. Meanwhile the dead body made some movements and went out of the hut. The horrified servants fled away. *Kadambini* was not dead actually; for some reason her life-function had been suspended. She understood that she was a '*dead*' woman.

Kadambini decided not to go to her brother's house and create problems there. Hence, with the help of a passerby she went to her friend, *Yogamaya*'s house at *Nishindapur*. *Shripati* was *Yogamaya*'s husband. *Kadambini* stayed there for a month not discussing her death' and escape, *Yogamaya* started to suspect *Kadambini*'s behavior, especially with her husband. He could not send a widow away. And now he decided to inform the news of *Kadambini*'s stay there to her brother-in-law. He visited *Saradasankar* and came to know that *Kadambini* was dead and gone. He informed this to *Yogamaya* in that night which led to an argument between them. *Kadambini* overheard all these and came to their room and announced that she was the '*dead*' *Kadambini*. *Yogamaya* fell unconscious, taking her as a ghost. *Kadambini* left the house at once and came straight to her brother-in-law's house at *Ranighat*. She got into the room where the child was sleeping after a bout of fever. When the child asked for some water she gave it to him from a bronze vessel, and the servants who came to the room then were shocked to see the '*ghost*'.



Kadambini could bear no more. She screamed out, 'I did not die, I did not die, I tell you! How can I make you understand – I did not die! Can't you see; I am alive'. She seized the bell metal bowl that had been dropped on the ground and dashed it against her brows; blood gushed out from the impact. 'See here, I am alive!'

(The Living and the Dead, P-13)

Her brother-in-law and others rushed to the room. She told them that she was not dead but living. When at last she fails to convince the people around her that she is alive, she throws herself down into the well and by her death; she proves that she was not dead.

In "*Gift of Sight*" we find a psychological study of the emotions of a blind woman. *Kushum* herself tells the story of her life. She is not born blind. Her eyesight gradually becomes weaker and weaker after she has given birth to a dead child. The succeeding defences from the story spectacle the destitutions of *Kusum* due to early nuptial:

My baptism of fire began in childhood. Before I was fourteen years old I gave birth to a dead baby, and I myself came close to death. But if a person is fated to suffer sorrow, she is not allowed to die too soon. A lamp that is meant to burn long has to have enough oil: it mustn't go out until night is over. I survived my illness, true, but whether through physical weakness, or mental distress, or for whatever reason, my eyes were affected. (Gift of Sight, P- 132)

Her husband, a student of medicine gets a chance of testing his medical knowledge on his wife. The result is that her condition becomes worse and worse. When at last he brings a competent doctor to examine her, it was already too late. Soon afterward *Kushum* becomes totally blind. *Kushum's* husband now realizes his stupidity and is repentant for his past neglect of his wife:

"It was I who destroyed your eyes."

(Gift of Sight, P-136)

Then she tries to persuade him to marry again. However, he spurns the idea of it and swears by almighty God. The storywriter has made a subtle delineation of the different stages of the mental separation between husband and wife till there is a complete estrangement between the two. The husband goes to a small town to practice as a doctor. He earns a lot of money



and then he becomes selfish and hard hearted. A new chapter begins in their married life when one day the husband's aunt introduces to him *Himangini*, her cousin's daughter. His first reaction of shyness and hesitation is soon changed into a feeling of attraction. After a few span of time when the husband says to *Kushum* one night that he has to go away for two or three days, *Kushum* at once blurts out that he is a liar and that the truth is that he is going to get married. The end of the story provides an agreeable surprise when we find *Hemangini* married to *Kushum's* brother and there is repentance in the heart of *Kushum's* husband. He realizes the folly of his passion for *Hemangini* and sincerely feels happy that she has been married to *Kushum's* brother. A genuine and lasting reconciliation now takes place between *Kushum* and her husband.

“*Mahamaya*” is a love story of Tagore. *Rajib* and *Mahamaya* were lovers. *Mahamaya* was a reserved and serious type of woman aged twenty-four. She was rich and lived with her serious brother *Bhaminicharan Chattopadhaya*. Her parents were dead. People feared *Bhaminicharan* for no reason. *Bura Sahib*, the owner of a silk company, brought *Rajib* to that locality. His father was a dependent of the Sahib. When he died the English man looked after the child and when matured *Rajib* was appointed in the silk company. *Rajib* had been staying in a house near to *Mahamaya's*. Thus *Rajib* and *Mahamaya* had been playmates from early childhood. They were in love. One day *Rajib* proposed to her that they should elope and get married. Nevertheless, that was not acceptable to her. *Rajib* did not belong to noble family though he was a Brahmin. Hence, *Mahamaya's* brother would not allow their marriage. She was not willing to dishonor and disobey her hard brother. *Rajib* told her one evening that he would be leaving the place the next day with the Sahib. Meanwhile *Mahamaya's* brother appeared there. He had overheard what they discussed and went silently back to the house. *Mahamaya* told *Rajib* that she would go to his house and he had to wait for her. The ensuing extract from the story vibrantly shows the obedience of *Mahamaya* before patriarchal ethics and norms:

That same night Bhavanicharan brought a red wedding sari and called up Mahamaya 'Go put this on.' She came back wearing it. He then said, 'come with me'...No one had ever even hinted at disobeying Bhavanicharan's orders, and so with Mahamaya. The two started walking towards the cemetery near the river. It was not far from the house. An old Brahmin was lying there bidding for death. They came and stood by him. A priest was also waiting nearby the Bhavinicharan gestured at him. Immediately the priest arranged for the auspicious occasion and stood ready.



Mahamaya knew instantly that she was going to be married to the dying man. She did not raise even the faintest of objection to it. In a dark house, dimly lighted by the fire from two nearby funeral pyres, the wedding ceremony was carried out with unintelligible religious incarnations mixed with distressful cries of the dying.

(Mahamaya, P- 155)

However, that night she was brought by her brother to a hut for the dying, at the bank of the river. There she was married to an old dying man. She became a widow the next day. She decided to end her life by “*Suttee*.” *Rajib* came to know about it and wanted to prevent ‘*suttee*’ with the help of the *Sahib*. Nevertheless, unfortunately the *Sahib* had gone to *Shonapura*, giving *Rajib* one-month’s leave. Meanwhile there was terrible wind and rain. *Rajib*, very much dejected, decided to end his life, and so he started to go out. However, it was raining outside. Suddenly someone knocked at his door. A woman appeared there drenched in rain, her head completely covered with a cloth. It was *Mahamaya*, who escaped from the pyre, due to the tempest and rain. She told him that she had kept the promise of coming back to his house. She wanted to know whether he would accept her, who was only the old *Mahamaya* in spirit. She would stay with him only if he promised not to remove her *purda* or not to look at her face. If he was not willing, she would go back to the pyre. He replied that he would die if she left him. As requested by her they went to *Shonapura* and started living there. Their life was not at all happy because of her *purda*. Days and nights passed, keeping them separate and away. One full moon night his feelings were aroused. She was sleeping. He went to her bed. He looked into her bare face, which was lit by the moon-light. He was horrified to see the burnt shocking face. His shriek roused her. She covered her head with the *purda* and stood up. He requested her, holding her feet, to pardon him. Without saying a word, *Mahamaya* got out of the room. She never returned to his house.

5. Conclusion

This study of the stance of contemporary women represented in the short stories of Rabindranath Tagore. It is mainly concerned with the ambiguous position of female characters in these representative short stories. To be more precise, it clarifies female characters' complicity with patriarchal values and norms and at the same time their rejection of those patriarchal ideologies and assertion of self as inspiring heroines. His short stories, written originally in Bengali and later translated into English, are world renowned and as proficient as any other short story writers' work in the world. Tagore has been compared to



such masters of the short story, as *Tolstoy, Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekov, and Guy de Maupassant*. Tagore's stories reveal the fact that he had great insight into women's heart.

Shrinivasa Iyenger says about Tagore's women,

"The women in his short stories, of course, are splendidly womanly, frail and fair, yet wise and strong; always or almost more sinned against sinning. Tagore plumbs the depth of the womanly heart, and behind the seeming wiles and gestures, he sees reserves of devotion and sacrifice" (Iyenger, 2019)

Tagore brought out the pathos of women caused by various situations in the house. Women had to face several problems in their houses. Tagore is an artist of rare lyrical powers, who understands the human soul. Tagore's stories are devotional, mystical, sublimated ecstasy. They are the thought of a seer, the perfect union of beauty and truth. His short stories bear the impress of his poetic genius. We find in them rich emotionalism which is the soul of the lyric. At the same time they give us a realistic picture of the poor and middle- class society in the villages and small town of Bengal. Tagore's stories do not focus on incidents rather they bring out the hopes and disappointments and frustrations, joys, and sorrows that are inherent in life. Each story reveals to us a particular aspect of the human heart. Consequently, we find unfettered imagination. Tagore's stories often set in rural Bengali village and are peopled by underprivileged sector of society.



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