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FEMINIST APPROACH IN THE SELECTED ENGLISH SHORT STORIES OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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Abstract:

In the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Rabindranath Tagore made a cumulous bid to break free from the clichéd traditional norms and stereotypes in representing both gender and nation in colonial India. It is very necessary to restate the historical and political perspectives that have been integrated into the imagined narratives in order to track how the creative mind can be simultaneously transcendent and topical, allowing Tagore to perform both as a literary stylist and a historiographer. In terms of the issues of gender inequalities and gender justice, Rabindranath Tagore was steadily turning away from the customary depiction of the abject victimhood of Indian women as he tried to prioritise the well-being as opposed to the ill-being of women, the two categories identified by Amartya Sen in his emphasis that gendered resistance writing is about representation of women as active agents of social change. We are conscious of the Western stereotypes of third World women represented in first World Western feminist discourse that have been categorized by Chandra Talpade Mohanty as the Western standard for defining women of Asian cultures. My present paper seeks to find out different roles of women in the selected English short stories where they are evolved to torch the light.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Marital Life, Humanity, Abject, Radical Feminist.

Introduction:

The aim of feminism is to restructure the existing power equation of hierarchy implicit in patriarchy, in favour of a balance of power based on equal sharing and trust between sexes. In Tagore's short stories women have been portrayed in so many roles. Women have been depicted as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, widows and friends. They have been portrayed as dominating, strong, strong, soft, passive, intelligent, protesting etc. as politically conscious or characters. She has been viewed in various relationships with men and other women. They play a pivotal role in almost all short stories of Tagore. Being a realist, he draws the picture of society with knitted themes of human relations. Most of his short-stories reflect his perspectives on women's life and of ordinary people. Rabindranath Tagore presents the 'position'¹ of women vividly in his short stories. The women are simple and ordinary persons, leading their everyday lives with their joys and sorrows. Despite being a male writer, he portrays female psyche very authentically. He gave women both the

space and the individuality to express their views on love, patriarchy, marriage, and society at large. He presents them as individuals having much courage, forbearance, self-sacrifice and purity.

To start with, in the story 'Vision', he weaves the idea that true devotion and love never fails. The wife is symbolic of true love and devotion to her husband. The heroine Kumo loses her eye-sight because of the experiment of her doctor-turned-husband. But she does not put blame on him. Rather she is well content with what happened to her. She thinks that she was destined to be blind. She shows her strong will in preventing her husband to get married again, and, at the same time prays for his safety when a fierce storm breaks out. Kumo becomes an ideal woman who sacrifices even her life for the benevolence of her husband and welfare of her in-law's family. In Tagore's period, feudal system was prevalent and women were exploited by the outdated customs of the feudal society that enhanced their miseries and as a result they had to bear all hurdles of the society.

In another story 'The Living and the Dead', written and published in 1892, he once more criticizes the feudal morals and customs that ruled over the life of Bengali woman. Kadambini, a widow, was staying with her brother-in-law, Shaaradashankar in his house at Ranihat. She had no relative but she loved her brother-in-law's son very much. One night, she died suddenly. Her dead body was taken into the burial ground by four people. There, they waited for the firewood. Meanwhile, there was some movement in her dead body. The four people, out of fear, fled away from there. In fact, Kadambini had not died, rather her life-function had remained suspended for some time. But on seeing the surrounding preparation, she understood that she was taken as a 'dead woman'. So, she decided to go to her friend Yogmaya's house. Later on, she returned to her brother-in-law's house where she had to prove her being alive. In order to prove her alive, she took the brass pot and struck it on her forehead. The blood oozed out from there. Ultimately, she died by drowning herself into the well in the house and proved that she was alive, not dead. The story shows that the patriarchal system was blatantly inhuman and cruel towards women. Kadambini had known the fact that the society would not accept her again and, as such, she had no option except to die:

*"It went on raining all night, and it was still raining the next morning; even in the afternoon there was no let-up. Kadambani had proved, by dying, that she had not died."*²

In the story 'Mahamaya', Rajib and Mahamaya are shown in love. Both of them belong to a Brahmin family, but being poor, Rajib does not pass the standard of a perfect match. Hence Mahamaya is taken to the local market to be married to an old man. Soon her old husband is died of and she becomes a widow. When Rajib and Mahamaya meet together after this tragic incident, both of them decide to flee. The plot shows shows them as a married couple. But Mahamaya tells him not to force her to lift her veil. One full moon night, Rajib's feelings for her are aroused and he moves to her bed. As she was sleeping, he looked into her bare face, which was visible in the moon-light. He was horrified to see the

burnt face. His shriek roused her. She covered her head with the purdah and stood up. He requested her holding her feet to pardon him. Without saying a word, she got out of the room and after that she did not return to his house.

Through '*Mahamaya*', Tagore expresses his opinion that the man-woman relationship cannot continue without passion, and such artificial and compromising marriage-ties make the life unbearable.

Tagore did not conform to the patriarchal views. He depicted the female characters being powerful and brighter than the male. He reveals them spiritually high and strong-minded. As for the story, '*The Devotee*,' it is an expression of teacher (Guru)-Student relationship. Despite her marriage to a man, her heart does never feel any sort of emotional bonding with him but her emotional response is with full vigour for her teacher. The plot leads us to a point where the lady realizes it fully that the fulfillment of her love lies in her reunion with her teacher. On his teacher's returning from Benares, she decides to leave her husband and return to her first love. In this way, the story conveys the idea that a pure soul can never be false and compromising. The depicted woman, here shows her purity of mind. She leaves home to find a space for her to lead a sanctified life.

Through the female characters, Tagore not only portrays the existing situation of the women, viz. their roles in the society, their efforts for self-alleviation, but also shows how they often prove to be much better than males. He portrays the pathetic situation of women at all times. In the story, '*The Laboratory*' Tagore recalls the myths of '*Kunti*' and '*Draupadi*' in the context of a Muslim woman's life. He shows here how woman was treated by her husband, and how she fulfilled her duties as a wife, a sister, and a daughter. Through the portraits of female characters, he emerges as a progressive thinker in the context of women's fight for survival in a patriarchal society which is based upon the theme 'Feminism'³. His stories show that he believed in the emancipation of women and their freedom from social restrictions. He firmly believed that with given equal rights and opportunities, they might occupy their rightful place in society side by side with men. In this respect Tagore was much ahead of his times as a *kind of feminist*⁴ in the making.

Tagore as a feminist writer brought out the pathos of women caused by various situations in the houses. For example, in the story, '*Cloud and Sun*', the writer compares the human life with cloud (shadow) and sun. Life is here viewed like a serio-comic play. The story of Shashibhushan and Giribala is a tragic one, reflecting the conservative norms of contemporary upper caste society that patronizes widowhood. The plot of the story tells us of the early marriage of Giribala and the imprisonment of Shashibhushan. When the latter got released from prison, a long time has passed. When Shashibhushan came to his village, he saw Giribala, now a widow living as a destitute woman in the village. In the first scene of the story, a young man named Shashibhushan is seen reading attentively a book and a young girl named Giribala throwing black plums towards the small-barred room. Shashibhushan gets lost in all the scenes and memories of the bygone days. But as he sees Giribala, his eyes are filled with tears. The narrative seems fully loaded with unspoken

suffering and pathos.

Obviously, it was a common sight of widowhood in Rabindranath Tagore's time either because of the early marriage or ill matched marriage to an old person. Woman had to bear problems even in the houses of rich families and as such, this symbolic story is at once realistic and allegorical.

In a few stories, we face the problems of the wife in a joint family, the conflict of loyalties between what is due to her husband and what is due to her parent's family. But this problem becomes complicated when her husband, is weak-willed but adamant and does not co-operate with her and yet harbours jealousy and ill-will for her. Numerous new relationships grow up and the unfortunate wife has to adjust herself to these problems without forgetting her old ties. If she is Star-crossed, she may have to adjust with a *co-mistress*⁵. If she loses her husband, she will be treated a little better than a maid servant and retained only on being tolerated by her 'in-laws'. If she has some additional responsibility to a younger brother or sister, she may find it more difficult to reconcile to her divided loyalties. In fact, this situation has been shown in the story, 'Elder Sister' (1895) based on sister-brother relations. It is a sad tale of plethora of griefs in a family. In it, Jaygopal is married to Shashi and they live a simple life. Shashi's mother dies leaving a small baby as her brother, Nilmani. Shashi becomes a sort of her little brother's mother but her husband does not relish it.

*“When Nilmani cried, Jaygopal was extremely irritated, so Shashi would clasp him to her breast trying with all the force of her embrace to soothe him. And when her husband's sleep was disturbed by Nilmani's crying, and he shouted out in fury, full of aggression towards him, Shashi herself felt guilty and embarrassed. She swept him, out of earshot, and soothed him to sleep again with meek and adoring repetitions of 'My treasure, my jewel, my precious.'”*⁶

Jaygopal is worried that the baby will be entitled to Shashi's father's wealthy estate, and as he is a lazy and disreputed fellow, he has his eyes on this fortune and for this Shashi has to struggle hard to protect her brother and his estate. She even faces the inhumanity of her shrewd husband. Their life is almost ruined by this property fight, ever since Shashi sides with her brother's rights. Only after securing legal protection from the court, she dies. In this way she keeps promise of her brother's safety up to the last moment of her life.

The burdens of marriage weighs much more heavily upon woman than on man. Simone de Beauvoir, the noted champion of 'The Second Sex' is of the view that history of humanity is a history of systematic attempts to silence the female. Her celebrated remark is 'one is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman' and this is clearly delineated in the character of Mrinmayi, ('The Conclusion'). She with her boyish manners tries to live according to her individual will but social norms hinder her individual personality:

*“Her short crop of curly hair reached down to her shoulders, and her big dark eyes showed no sign of fear or shyness”*⁷

Again, the story, 'Mashi' (1914) is a very heart-rending story. It is an attack on early marriage. Due to early marriage, the girls are not mature enough to understand their domestic duties. So, there remains a gap between husband and wife disturbing their 'marital life'⁸. The story is a totally dialogue-based story. The dialogues enhance the effect of it. In it, Jatin, the male character, is on death-bed and his Mashi (maternal Aunt) is taking care of him. He yearns for his young wife, Mani, to meet him but she has left his home in order to attend her new born little brother's 'annaprashan ceremony' (a ceremony that is performed when a child is first given rice). Mashi pretends that Mani is in the house and she prepares food and soup for him. She has made a shawl for him. But doctors have advised that she should not visit the sick-room too often. She is too tender-hearted. Jatin takes the shawl, and touches it tenderly and feels as the soft of the wool was Mani's own. But he desires to meet her. From the servant, he comes to know that she has gone to her father's home three days ago. In the end of the story Mani returns with her father but that is of no use because all the emotions for her have come to an end. Jatin also realizes the void of emotion.

In the story 'Skeleton' (1926), the protagonist, a child widow is regarded as 'poison bride,' causing the deaths of the men with whom she unites. She is a lifeless skeleton, who has emotions and dreams but cannot fulfil them. The story begins with the situation that the child-widow who had died many years ago, her body had been donated to a school, which kept her skeleton for classroom study. One night, a young student, sleeping in a room next to where the skeleton was kept, suddenly when he heard something in the room. Her spirit came out from the skeleton. She, throughout the night, narrated the young man of her life story. As she narrates her story, readers come to know the loneliness she has suffered from in her life. Married early, she became a widow soon. When she grew mature, she became a beautiful woman but withered away in neglect. The plot introduces one doctor who came to stay in their house as a tenant. It shows the prospect of a possible union between them. But the plot leads to a heart-rending turn when the doctor is heard to have been married to someone else. She could not bear it. On the evening of his wedding, the girl took silently some poison from his office and put into his drink. Soon thereafter, as flutes are played, he left for the bride's house. She dressed herself as a bride. The story ends with a twist:

*"My wish was that when people came and found me, that slight smile would still be intoxicatingly present on my red lips. My wish was that when I slowly entered my bridal-chamber of Eternal Night, I would take that smile with me. But where was the bridal chamber? Where was my bridal attire? Woken by a clattering sound within me, I found three boys learning anatomy from me."*⁹

The story, 'My Fair Neighbour' (1900) moves on the progressive theme of widow re-marriage. In it, a poet begins to love a widow neighbour, but he conceals his feeling for her as the remarriage of widow women is acceptable in society. However, he writes beautiful love poetry to ease his passion. On the superficial level, the story seems to be a funny story that a person who loved a girl deeply remains behind his friend, who with his poems impressed the girl. However, if we think deeply, the story is an indication of social

change as the girl-loved is a widow and is ready to marry again. This story presents Tagore's radical approach of 'feminism'.

In the short story, 'Housewife' (1891), Tagore shows how Ashu was ridiculed and rebuked by his own school teacher, Shibnath, when he came to know that he (Ashu) played with dolls with his younger sister. Playing with dolls is still considered a pure feminist feature. Thus, it was feared that the boy would acquire the feminine qualities. From that day, Ashu started to behave as a boy. He assured himself that he would never do anything that will be considered as being feminine and make low to his male chauvinism. Ashu "*realized that to play with your little sister on a school holiday was the most shameful thing in the world, and he could not believe that people would ever forget what he had done.*"¹⁰

'Exercise book' or 'Khata' (1898) is the story of a child bride, Uma. Her only sin is that she is literate. She writes down her emotions on a notebook which is torn away by her husband. Although he is an educated youth, he does not like his wife to abandon domestic work and enter in the field of males. Her Exercise book becomes a symbol of her enlightened self. She writes about her life on the pages of Exercise book. Along with the girl, her exercise book is also humiliated by her in laws and husband. Pyarimohan, her husband voices the prevalent social norms by criticizing the female education. According to Pyarimohan

*"Reading and writing, once started, would lead to play- and novel-writing and household norms would be endangered. As he thought further about the matter, he worked out a most subtle theory. Perfect marriage was produced by a combination of female and male power. But if through women's education female power was weakened, then male power would prevail unchecked; and the clash between male and male would be so destructive...."*¹¹

The subject of dowry has found place in the short story 'Profit and Loss' (1891) Nirupama is constantly humiliated by her in-laws for bringing less dowry. Her father, Ram sunder, fails to give her enough dowry. Nirupama does not want her father to pay it.

Nirupama said to her father,

*"Do you think I have no honour? Do you think I am just a money-bag, the more money in it the higher my value? No, Father, don't shame me by paying this money."*¹²

She denies him by saying that it is humiliating for her. Her in-laws treat her badly and she ultimately dies. Nirupama presents an excellent vision of Tagore's 'new woman' as she resists this social evil. Nirupama is like an '*abject*'¹³ to her in- laws. The short story is one of the best examples of '*binary*'¹³ difference between man and woman.

In '*Fury Appeased*' (1895), Tagore shows the protest of a married woman. He discusses with the marriage of a man who falls out of love with his wife. Gopinath, a Zaminder, who got married at a very young age to Giribala. But he makes another affair

with Labanga. One day “*Labanga, the leading actress in the play, disappeared, whisked away on a boat-trip by Gopinath.*”¹⁴ Tagore dealt with theme of extra-marital relationship in his short stories-

‘*The Intervening Woman*’ (*Madhyabartini*) (1893) and ‘*In the Dead of Night*’ (*Nishithey*) (1894).

In the short story, ‘*Pride Surrendered*’ (*Darpaharan*) (1903), Tagore envisions his new woman. Child bride- Nirjharni has equal talent of writing like her husband, Harish. Her fame as a talented writer spreads among her husband's friends and acquaintances. Harish feels jealous of her. He finds some solace in his knowledge of English language which his wife does not know. Harish tries to check her from writing. In an essay writing competition, Nirjharni wins first prize. It is only after this that Harish accepts her as a talented writer. This story is a gendered documentation of women's education, companionate marriage and gender rivalry.

After obtaining Noble Prize in 1913, he penned down pro-women stories more fiercely. The heroines created by Tagore, in the short stories, during the third phase of his literary career (1913-41) are bold and emerge in a different image, encounter their situations with self- defiance. This made Tagore a visionary for the cause of ‘feminism’. In the course of our being engaged with studying Tagore, we have become increasingly aware that Tagore’s ‘contemporaries’¹⁵ require an exhaustive compendium that deals with their contribution to the evolution of Bengali culture.

He wrote the story, ‘*A Wife's Letter*’ (*StreerPatra*) in 1913. Written in an epistolary form; the story is about Mrinal who has written a letter to her husband. She is writing a letter for the first time in their fifteen years of married life. Writing from Puri, a religious place, she remembers her childhood and how she came into his family as the second bride in his joint family. Mrinal further adds to this by saying how her mother was in trouble when she knew that she was intelligent. She used to write poems at her husband's house secretly, her only friends were the cows in the stable. The entry of Bindu, sister-in-laws' younger sister, is now dependent on her elder sister after the death of her father, in her life brings a change and through these characters, Tagore shows the women as dependents in the house. The suffering that Bindu bears and her attempt of committing suicide shows the extent of emotional abuse, a woman suffers and is blamed even after her death for the errors that haven't been committed by her. Mrinal, unable to bear the suffocating environment of the house, decides to leave behind everything with the pretention of going on a pilgrimage and to decide secretly to take Bindu along. But she receives the news of Bindu's suicide.

In the then prevailing scenario, Tagore has created Kalyani in the story ‘*The Woman Unknown*’ as a role model, a marvellous New Woman' who rejects the notion that a woman's only future is that of a housewife, and that motherhood is the supreme fulfillment of her life. Radical Feminist theory holds that marriage is the major cause of women's oppression. In ‘*The Woman Unknown*’ (1914), the bride and her father are humiliated by the maternal uncle of the bridegroom who checks the weight and purity of the gold ornaments being given to

the bride by way of dowry for Kalyani, the daughter of a doctor, SambhunathBabu of Kanpur, is fixed.

Tagore's changing concept of woman finds its fulfilment in the creation of the character- Sohini in the story, '*The Laboratory*' (1940). It is an interesting story about a typical emancipated modern woman. He creates Sohini as a model of the modern woman of a self-assertive and independent nature with a futuristic outlook who believes in women's empowerment. She has a social consciousness of spreading scientific knowledge among the youth, which she inherits from her husband.

Once she comes across a Bengali civil engineer, Nandakishore, who has a laboratory in Calcutta and has a passion for scientific research. In Sohini's first meeting with Nandakishore, she tells him what the local trading community thinks of him. As he is a Bengali, he has no sense of business; it is the Punjabi traders who will succeed. Nandakishore is surprised at her observation and pleased to have come across such an intelligent girl. The spirit of her character comes shining from inside her. It is clear that she knows her worth. They share a common faith. He makes her also involve in his scientific research activities. She has her own individuality. Sohini, an unchaste woman, according to conventional standards is a tower of strength to the man of action. She has chosen to be faithful to his memory in trying to build up the institution (laboratory) he had started.

Equality of the sexes, casteless society, and mutual faith between the couple in marriage, and profession and position of power for women are the messages conceptualized by Tagore through the characters of Sohini and Nandakishore. Their love is not limited to mere physical. There is a bond of respect and gratitude which takes their conjugal life to a higher plane. He has shown a remarkable understanding of a woman's psyche, perceives the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocates gender freedom and decision making power of women in the family and in larger society. What Tagore realized then has become a subject of debate in the twenty first century and then it is accepted that housekeeping should also be considered as a job, which should be paid suitably by the husbands. Tagore has gone into the crux of the problem several decades in advance.

Tagore was very much concerned about the economic deprivations of widows. He makes Sohini the 'New Woman' to fight for her husband's property both legally and using her womanpower and ultimately, she wins. Sohini not only uses her feminine weapons whenever she needs to, more importantly applies her analytical mind and sharp intellect. Tagore believed that by natural instinct, women are creative and graceful. Indeed Tagore reluctantly approves of the tricks, women sometimes employ. He names it as woman's strength.

Conclusion:

We find that the modern women in Tagore's short stories can shlep beyond lines of control with remarkable determination. Through their performance, their femaleness and their sexuality, there emerge enabling powers that permit them to reject social and cultural behavioural correctness held as the norm by the contemporary discourse of national politics

in colonial India, as well as its social pride and prejudice. Tagore's short stories pass over and transgress into the deterritorialised space of liberation of the mind, spirit and body, in that same seemingly skewed, ironic order.

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