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Tagore's Handling of Marital Matrix: A Study of *The Wreck*

*–Sonia Soni**

Abstract

In every society, without any exception of caste or culture, life has never been easy for women, but the way life used to take turn for little Bengali girls after marriage was a matter of great surprise and sadness for Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was never comfortable with the inequality of man-woman relationship. He always advocated equality of rights and respect for both the sexes; therefore he made his writings a medium to preach equal liberty for men and women. His phenomenal work of art, *The Wreck* depicts the matrix in married life of Kamala, Nalin, Ramesh and Hem. All the characters of this novel are bound in the clutches of chance and fate but finally emerge as victorious. The novel presents the psychological development of Kamala from a child-bride to a responsible wife, and through her character the novelist has highlighted the importance of female education and questions the custom of arrange marriage in the contemporary Bengali society.

Keywords: Chance, Faith, Marital matrix, Dogma, Psychological development, Radical, Extra-marital pulls.

> The very psychology of men and women about their mutual relation is changing and becoming the psychology of the primitive fighting elements, rather than of the humanity seeking its completeness through the union based upon the self-surrender. (Tagore 61)

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the most radical and romantic souls of his times, has depicted the gamut of complexities, confusion and continuity in the married lives of Hindu wives in his novels, short-stories and non-fiction. Tagore's presentation of matrix of married life is not just husband-wife relationship, rather it encompasses a lot more angles which affect this co-relationship, such as the presence of in-laws, extra-marital pulls and omnipresent social-cultural influences in the lives of man and woman. Being a son of *Zamindar*, Tagore spent a pretty long time in the countryside and here,

* *Assistant Professor of English, Arya PG College, Opp. Bus Stand, GT Road, Panipat - 132103, Haryana (India). Email: soniasoni.rewari@gmail.com*

he came in direct contact with common folk of Bengal. His heart moved to see the dreadful condition of Bengali married women.

The never ending intention of Indian male to govern the whole range of politics was forced to be limited only to the household. This dominance was marked not by any love or respect, but helpless surrender of the woman to the physically and socially powerful man. Thus, "Household relations had to be shown as supra-political ones, relations of power represented as purely emotional states" (Sarkar 39). However, Tagore denounced the inequality of man-woman relationship. He was uncomfortable about the power that man assumes at home. He asserts in *Rabindra Rachnavali*, "…true power of our society can be unleashed only when we seek woman's blessings in all forms without any false assumption of power to rule her" (Tagore 209).

Marriage has always been considered an important phenomenon in Indian society. Marriage is defined by Eva Hunter as a "cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring" (Hunter 127). But, several times, marriage does not bring equality and companionship for women, rather traps her individuality, independence and self-realization. Kate Millett remarks that this 'power politics' in the institution of marriage makes woman merely a 'utility item' to be used by man. In the contemporary Bengali society, conjugality was treated as the most vital project in the entire matrix of household relations as that imbibed the absolutism of one and total sub-ordination of the other partner. In fact, the husband-wife relationship became the mirror image of the entire colonial arrangements, where men were the epitome of the colonizer and women of the colonized. The Bengali husbands implicated those torturers on their wives which they were receiving in the outside world. A satirical poem hints at this fact:

> The Bengali male goes out
> And gets thrashed everywhere he goes
> The Bengali male appears terrible
> only within his home (qtd. in Sarkar 40)

The act of domestic tyranny by husbands was a mean to ease the effect of colonial tyranny implicated on them by the colonizers. They used to treat their wives as their private property as Karl Marx says, "Marriage . . . is incontestably a form of exclusive private property" (qtd. in Mitchell 110). The position of Hindu wife was not better than a cattle or cow given as a dowry at marriage time. Men treated women almost as slaves and educated wives were not welcomed by husbands because it would hurt their superiority complex. Tagore was against any false imposition of power under the guise of wrong declarations in the religious documents. He trenchantly avers in *Rabindra Rachnavali*:

> I feel both shame and pain to quote those *slokas* from *Manu Samriti* written in utter abuse of women. I [will] refer only to [those] here where Manu explicitly states that women are solely responsible for the cardinal passion of man, viz, sex passion, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity and envy. They have no real identity of their own. (Tagore 320)

Tagore highlights that illiteracy was imposed on women to mould their desires according to the wish of men so that the married life would be dominated by males only and women had no say in it. The minds of women were conditioned in such a way that they took pleasure only in household works and dressing up. Rakhmabai summed up this view, "Reduced to this state of degradation by the dictum of the *Shastras*, looked down upon for ages by men, we have naturally come to look down upon ourselves" (qtd. in Sarkar 442). Failing to pay heavy dowry, parents used to marry their daughter to a much older man who would either be a widower or already husband of two to three wives at a time. Child bride did not enter in her in-law's house as a mistress of the house, but as the lowest slave in hierarchy of family members and the ultimate way to get rid of this humiliation and gain some power "was to bear sons and arrange their marriages as soon as possible in order to reach the exalted status of the mother-in-law" (Ramabai 72). Thus, the position of women in the sphere of domestic life was not good and healthy one. They were considered passive, sub-standard and good for nothing by their husbands. From centuries, women are perceived in reference to men. Gilbert and Gubar comments in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. But, the woman who refuses to be selfless and acts on her own initiative irritates the society and is unwelcomed" (Gilbert and Gubar 74). Though, some missionaries and men of great insight emerged as their advocates, still the situation was same. However, Tagore cherished a well balanced view about love as well as institution of marriage, as he puts in *Sadhana*:

> We do not love because we do not comprehend, or rather we do not comprehend because we do not love. For love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us. It is not a mere sentiment, it is truth, it is the joy that is at the root of all creation . . . It is equality and love which should form the basis of married life and the relationships surrounding this institution. (Tagore 88)

In most of his novels, Tagore has described the problems of married women and their isolated condition in joint family. Whether it is Binodini of *A Grain of Sand*, Kamala of *The Wreck,* Charu of *The Broken Nest* or Kumudini of *Relationships,* all heroines of Tagore are struggling emotionally or socially, not to talk about economically as economic independence was the luxury which is impossible for these poor women. It is interesting to note that most of Tagore's heroines are childless even after so many years of marriage and it adds to their humiliation and mental tortures. Sometimes, mental incompatibility with the husbands and intrusion of 'third person' shatter their married life. Tagore explains:

> The tension between the cultures in which a woman is nurtured till marriage in her father's home and her sense of surprise and shock as she has to face very different value system in her marital home. The refinement of the young bride opposed to the crude culture of her husband's family and the resultant culture shock as well as her valiant effort to accommodate with the callous environment of marital home often in silence, in tears and rage is a common

> theme that has been explored *ad infinitum* in the Bengali fiction. (Dasgupta, Chakravarti and Mathew 201)

Extra-marital affair is a prominent factor in Tagore's novels and short stories that brings turmoil in the married life of many of his characters. But, *The Wreck* is a bit different in this regard where the matrix in married life is not because of sexual attraction towards 'the Third one' but because of strange games of fate. Tagore's *The Wreck (Naukadubi)* is modeled on the theme of Hardy's fate and chance. Characters in this novel are more sinned against than the sinning. In his prelude to the novel, published a few years after the publication of *Chokher Bali*, Tagore himself throws light on the role of fate and chance in shaping the conjugal life of the characters especially of the heroine, Kamala. This novel not only presents the psychological development of Kamala from a child-bride to a responsible wife, but also shows the importance of female education and questions the custom of arrange marriage in the contemporary Bengali society where man and woman were forced to marry without any former introduction especially when they hardly knew anything apart from their names and sometimes not even that. For the first time in *The Wreck*, Tagore focuses on the turmoil of Bhramo and Hindu Samaj, where a Bhramo girl and a Hindu boy want to marry. Later, he has repeated this theme in *Gora* also. This novel presents a strange and adventurous love story of Kamala, Ramesh, Hemnalini and Nalinaksha. Ramesh is deeply in love with Hemnalini and wants to marry her, but his Hindu background doesn't permit him to do so. His orthodox father forces him to marry the daughter of his old friend. Afraid of his father's strictness, Ramesh can't protest and hopes that "some accident might still prevent the marriage" (Tagore 05). He averts his eyes at the time of the ritual of *shubhodrishti* and this childish protest gives an absurd turn to his life:

> The wedding duly took place, but Ramesh refused to recite the sacred formula correctly, closed his eyes when the time arrived for the "auspicious look" ... wore a hang-dog expression, and kept his mouth shut during the jesting in the bridal chamber, lay throughout the night with his back turned to the girl, and lift the room as early as possible in the morning. (Tagore 06)

The whole confusion starts when after the shipwreck Ramesh finds Kamala alive on the river side and mistakes her as his wife Susheela, who has already died in the boat-wreck. Kamala takes Ramesh as her husband and starts treating him as a devoted wife. Tagore describes her sincere feelings when he writes, "In the dense darkness she found comfort on the heaving chest of Ramesh" (10). Ramesh also sees her as "his future helpmate . . . as his girl-bride, his adored mistress, and chaste mother of his children . . . bringer of joy and prosperity to his home" (13). After three months of marriage, one day Ramesh discovers that Kamala is not his wife, but wife of someone else who may or may not have survived in the boat tragedy. He begins to sleep separately and keeps Kamala at a safe distance. However, Kamala in her ignorance lies down next to him, clinging to his chest. She wants to be in the company of her husband and as from childhood she is taught that husband is God. She doesn't protest his wish to send her to boarding school. Even when she is sad, she never shrinks from her duty

of a devoted wife. While traveling in streamer, she takes care of Ramesh's food, his likes and dislikes. Her relation with Ramesh shows that though she is very young, yet her heart is filled with womanly love.

The novelist presents a contrast elevating the sufferings of Kamala when she meets Sailaja, uncle Chakrabarti's married daughter, who is very fond of her husband and keeps on talking about him all the time. Kamala naturally feels the contrast of her married life with her friend as she knows nothing significant about Ramesh. Here, Tagore also criticizes the attitude of mothers-in-law through sharp sarcasm when he says, "Such phrases as 'Hold your tongue!' 'Do what I tell you!' 'Young girls shouldn't say 'No' so often,' had never been dinned in her ears. Consequently, she faced the world with body erect and head high, a graceful plant with a tough stem" (152). The queer comparison with Sailja's conjugal life makes Kamala perplexed; moreover devoid of her mother-in-law's company she does not know how to win the heart of husband. It is really very cruel of mothers-in-law not to understand the feelings of young or almost child daughters-in-law. In the beginning of the novel, Kamala receives very bad reception by her in-laws. Tagore points out that when Kamala enters in Ramesh's house as a bride, she has to bear a lot of criticism due to the shipwreck and "no one offers to entertain her; in fact people shunned the very sight of her" (12). Without committing any mistake, Kamala has to bear all the humiliations as she is considered responsible for the shipwreck.

Fate and chance are given a lot of importance in shaping the marital matrix of his characters by the novelist. With the passage of time, Ramesh starts feeling a soft corner for Kamala and decides to bid farewell to Hemnalini's love. Here again, fate plays with him and Kamala happens to find the letter of confession that Ramesh has written to Hemnalini. After reading the letter, Kamala realizes the real face of the problem and is filled with guilt as she has been living with a man who is not her husband. The guilt forces her to leave the house in search of her real husband, Nalinaksha. Kamala is quite sure that her husband must be alive. Like a typical Indian woman she thinks, "If I would be a true wife to him I must live to prostrate myself at his feet. Nothing will rob me of this guerdon. While life endures he is not lost to me. The Lord has preserved me from death that I may serve him!" (268). Through Kamala, Tagore highlights that woman with a pure heart can achieve anything she aspires for. So, in one way or the other, Tagore makes Kamala join the tradition of Sita and Savitri who got their husbands back after so many miseries. The search of her husband becomes Kamala's sole mission and it reflects her individuality and optimism. In the course of her search, Kamala has to work as a servant in Nabinkali house. Here, she gets the first sight or *shubhodrishti* of Nalinaksha, who visits the house to treat Nabinkali's husband. Kamala's love and devotion to her husband falls in the category of *bhakti* as she feels that her suffering has reached its climax and God has granted her relief. Kamala wonders how such a man can be the husband of a wretch like her. There is Godly calm in his face:

> She prostrated herself before Nalinaksha's chair, touched the ground with her forehead, and kissed the dust. Alas! That she was debarred from serving him! Her heart was sick with the consciousness of devotion thwarted. (282)

Quite strangely, Kamala shows no psychological conflict in leaving Ramesh. Though, the marriage is never consummated, but she lived with Ramesh for a long period. This shows her love for her real husband, who is Nalinaksha. This also paints the love of Indian women for their husbands that develops soon after completing the seven circles of the holy fire, sometimes without knowing even the name. Ghose makes a befitting comment, "As soon as she learns of the wreck she is eager to return to Nalinaksha. Ramesh is totally forgotten, as something foreign" (Ghose 72). Kamala represents real Indian woman whose husband is her God. She is simple, traditional and pure-hearted, yet confident and determined. She is the symbol of love and devotion. Kh. Kunjo Singh states:

> Kamala excels all the traditional heroines of Tagore like Asha, Sharmila and Niraja, by her qualities of humility, self-restraint and self-effacement. Tagore seems to believe that such women can bring the much needed stability to the restless domestic world dominated by men. (Singh 60)

Most of Tagore's novels and short-stories deal with the turmoil of arrange marriages. It is for the first time, Tagore talks about the problems in love marriage that too inter-caste. Marriage of a Bhramo girl and a Hindu boy was a next to impossible task at that time in the Bengali society, as Bhramo used to be considered as *Pirali* Brahmans. Hemnalini, daughter of a broad minded Brahmo, Ananda Babu, is the first heroine of Tagore who dares to love an inter-caste boy, Ramesh and wants to marry him. Open-minded Ananda Babu also gives his consent to this marriage without any objection to Ramesh's religion. Hemnalini truly loves Ramesh and trusts him blindly. Even after Ramesh's decision of postponing the marriage, she has deep faith in his character. As Tagore says, "Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark" (Tagore 06 *Greetings of Sunrise Verse* 60). She never blames Ramesh for any tragedy in her life and believes that circumstances have forced him to do so. Kh. Kunjo Singh highlights:

> She exhibits a rare constancy of love and loyalty towards Ramesh, but the latter's indecisiveness, lack of grit and inability to release himself from the grip of circumstances overtakes him render their love unfruitful. . . She wore an air of supreme melancholy and resignation that was like a permanent twilight on her features. (Singh 59-60)

Despite everything, she still loves Ramesh. Her love for him is the extreme of devotion. Tagore doesn't show Ramesh's reconciliation with Hemnalini, but the readers are quite aware of that her love for Ramesh is pious and unshakeable. Her self-less love forces Sisir Kumar Ghose to say, "She is the first of a type that recurs in Rabindranath, the prototype of Sucharita, Kumudini and Lavanya, Tagore's dream daughters" (Ghose 72).

The matrix of marital lives of Kamala and Nalinaksha and Hem and Ramesh has a number of turmoils but Nalin's mother brings a sigh of relief. She tries to resolve the complications in the married life of not only her own son and daughter-in-law, but of Hem and Ramesh also. It was surely the result of the transformation in the Bengali society, which changed the attitude of Indian mothers-in-law and now they are more on the side of friendship with the daughters-in-law. Santosh Chakravarti observes:

> Rabindranath Tagore's socio-familial concept took a new turn as he began to probe the husband-wife relationship within the joint family set up. Gone is the tyrannical in-law and submissive son syndrome in which subservience to the patriarchal norm is the rigour, as Rabindranath Tagore sets out at the beginning of the 20th century, to apply his mind to the taboo subject of women's emancipation. (Chakravarti 94)

Terror-stricken Kamala fears about her mother-in-law's views about her; however, Nalinaksha consoles by saying, "In the course of her life mother has forgiven many sins. Surely she can forgive you for what was not a sin at all" (Tagore 358). Commenting over this, Das Gupta and Chakravarti say, "In one sentence, Tagore sets Kamala free from the ruthless Hindu stricture of subjecting women to go through the ritual of *agnipariksha,* a trial by fire to validate her purity, as in the classic case of the suffering Sita in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*." (Das Gupta and Charakvarti 200)

The two heroines of the novel are complete women. They face harsh realities of life, but remain optimistic. Both men of the novel are not stereotypes as they respect the women in their lives. The lives of Kamala, Nalin, Hem and Ramesh are full of complexities and confusions, but with their intellectual abilities and strength of character they solve all the problems. The matrix of Kamala and Nalin's married life entangles not because of some outsider, but because of fate and to the relief of the readers they solve it. While portraying the character of Nalin and Ramesh, Tagore shows how modern and far sighted he was from his own age. In this novel, he not only presents different layers of women's personality, but also of men who are kind and benevolent to women. Tagore says in *Sadhana*, "We do not love because we do not comprehend, or rather we do not comprehend because we do not love. For love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us. It is not a mere sentiment, it is truth, it is the joy that is at the root of all creation…" (Tagore 88).

Krishna Kripalani observes, "Tagore has inexhaustible sympathy and admiration for Bengali woman but little for the male of his race" (Kripalani 156). Kamala manages to escape from the matrix and guides other characters. Tagore has written a lot about women not only in his novels, but also in his novellas and short-stories. He cannot be hailed as a "feminist" in an ardent sense of the word, still his writings reflect a considerable understanding of woman's psyche, her status in social structure and strong urge to gain freedom and power for decision making in the family as well as in the society. Tagore has established the individuality of woman more than man and it is this individuality which ensures her dignity, self-respect and sexual-independence in the society.

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