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A Feminist Reading of Tagore's Selected Stories

*–Sarika Gupta**

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore has touched every essence of society through his oceans of literature, whether it's his plays or poems and most importantly his stories. One such angle of his writings is feminism. Female characters are very well portrayed by Tagore in his works through which not only he talks about the contemporary situation of women, their role in the society, their efforts for self-alleviation, but also shows how they proved to be much better than their male counterparts. He reflected the situation of women in all times, like in the time of the Mahabharata to the present times, in all communities, Muslim to Hindu. He showed how woman was treated by her husband, how she fulfilled her duties as a wife, a sister, and a daughter. In all, he beautifully painted the picture of feminism on his canvas of literature.

Keywords: Rokeya, Womankind, Kankal, Matriarch, Patriarchal, Hindu, Muslim, Ghater-Katha.

For assessing whether Tagore was a feminist or not it is necessary to have a glance at the socio-political conditions of his time, his contemporaries and his works. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a contemporary of Tagore. She was born on 9 December 1880 in Dhaka. She belonged to the minority Muslim community. In this community the women had limited opportunities for education. Rokeya was a self-educated woman. At the time of marriage she was 16 years old while her husband was 40 years old. He was a widower but his outlook was liberal. He supported his wife in her thirst for knowledge. Later she opened a school for Muslim girls. Rokeya wrote in Bengali about the exploitation of women. She wrote various essays about the need of education for girls. In one such essay titled 'Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl' which was published in The Mussalman on 5th March 1931 she wrote:

> We should by all means broaden the outlook of our girls and teach them modernise themselves. Yet they should be made to realise that the domestic duties entrusted to them cover a task on which the welfare of the country depends…. The future of India lies in its girls. The development of its

* *Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Kharkhoda, Haryana.*

> educational system on proper lines is therefore question of permanent importance…. In short, our girls would not only obtain university degrees, but must be ideal daughters, wives and mothers – or I may say obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers. (Das Gupta 98)

In another essay 'The Degradation of Womankind' Rokeya asked women to reflect on their pitiable plight. In another such essay she blames menfolk of not imparting education to the girls. She challenges men to quote from holy books if there is any prohibition against women obtaining knowledge.

Another self-taught woman who is related to Tagore was his elder sister, Swarna Kumari Devi. Being born in a distinguished family she had the advantage of association with great minds. She was 11 at the time of marriage and the age of her husband was 27. He was a broadminded person and he encouraged her to read and write. In her life span of 76 years she wrote various fictional narratives. She wrote essays on such subjects as male superiority, widow remarriage etc. She expressed her views about the need for education women and the welfare of widows.

These examples of cultured Bengali women bring into notice that the social and cultural atmosphere of urban Bengal was changing. Tagore's short stories deal with this changing state of women. His women characters in these stories resist the traditional role as portrayed by Tagore's contemporaries like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Chandra Nath Basu. A cursory reading of Tagore's short stories will prove that. The environment of Tagore family was liberal because they were members of Brahmo Samaj. Brahmo Samaj is famous for its liberated humanist ideals. The members of Brahmo Samaj were free from rigid caste regulations. Tagore also did not confirm to Hindu rituals.

Ghater Katha (Story of the Ghat) is Tagore's first short story. In this story Tagore has shown the silent suffering of women under the patriarchal system. A young woman prefers to end her life because her husband becomes a priest after deserting her. The husband rigidly adheres to his own principles and neglects his wife. Khata published in 1898, is the story of a child bride Uma. Her only crime 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 yet he does not like his wife to abandon domestic work and enter in the field of males. Tagore shows how this apparently educated males ravel in darkness. The subject of dowry has found place in his short stories Dena Paona. Nirupama is constantly humiliated by her in-laws for bringing less dowry. Her father, Ram Sunder, fails to give dowry. Nirupama does not want her father to pay dowry. She discourages him by saying that it is humiliating for her. Her in-laws treat her badly and she dies at last. Nirupama is an excellent example of Tagore's new woman. Tagore's next story Shasti (Punishment) was published in 1893. Chandara's husband falsely implicates her in the murder of his brother's wife. Although he knows that her brother has committed the crime. Police arrests Chandara. Chandara's husband has a peculiar opinion that if his wife is sentenced to death he can get another wife but a brother cannot be replaced. When the hearts of the brothers

change they admit their crime in court. The judge thinks that they are trying to save Chandara. Chandara is sentenced to death. When her husband wants to meet her in jail for one last time she refuses. This is her self assertion and self-respect. Chandara is Tagore's new woman who resists patriarchal supremacy. In Manbhanjan Tagore shows the resistance of a married woman. Giribala is the wife of Gopinath. Gopinath never pays attention to her. He regularly visits theatre to watch plays. Giribala also secretly visits theatre. Gopinath elopes with actress Lobongo and shatters the hopes of the manager to cast her in his next play. Giribala is selected for the lead role in this new heroine-centred play 'Monorama'. Gopinath cannot bear this and he threatens to kill her. Thus Tagore successfully portrays the patriarchy which is egoistic, irrational and over powering. Tagore's rendering of a heroine who retaliates is really supreme. Tagore dealt with theme of extra-marital relationship in his short stories Madhyabartini and Nishithey (In the Dead of Night). In Madhyabartini, Harasundari persuades her husband Nibaran to marry another girl as she herself is unable to produce a child. When Nibaran marries Sailabala, Harasundari feels neglected. She has to abandon her bed which belonged to her for twenty seven years. This story creates the ideal patriarchal stereotype of the self-effacing wife. Harasundari is depicted as an ideal wife who does not care for her personal agony for the happiness of her husband. Sailabala dies out of illness during pregnancy. Now it seems irreconcilable for Nibaran to return to his first wife. In Nishithey also a dying wife implores her husband to marry again. Her husband Dakshinacharan confesses of the attraction he feels towards the daughter of his wife's general physician. In his intimate relation with his second wife Dakshinacharan feels haunted by his dead wife. He is grasped with the feeling of psychological guilt.

Kankal (Skeleton) depicts the unfulfilled desire of a young woman. Her spirit is restless even after her death. The sprit says that her skeleton is hanging in a classroom and the teacher is teaching the basics of human anatomy to his students. The spirit narrates to a young man her sorrowful story. She tells him that her husband died just two months after their marriage when she was only 16. She returned to her parental home. There she got infatuated with Sashisekhar, her brother's doctor friend. But Sashisekhar was engaged somewhere else. When he was about to go for his marriage she mixed a toxic substance in his drink and also consumed it herself. Then she dressed up like a bride and waited for her union with her eternal love. She thought that she would unite with her lover as a spirit. Tagore shows aptly that in those social surroundings women could not express their desires. They would die with agony in their hearts. Their youthful desire would remain unfulfilled.

Tagore held the society responsible for its insensitive attitude towards women. In his short story Ginni (The Matriarch) Tagore shows how Ashu is ridiculed and scolded by his own school teacher Shibnath Pandit for playing with dolls with his younger sister. Playing with dolls was considered a pure feminine trait. Thus by playing with dolls a boy was feared to acquire that femininity. From that day Ashu starts adapting himself in patriarchal environment. He assured himself that he would never do anything that will be interpreted as an act of feminisation and degrade his maleness.

In his short story Darpaharan (Pride Surrendered) Tagore visualises 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 jealousy for her. He finds some solace in his knowledge of English language which his wife does not know. Harish tries to dissuade 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, gender rivalry". (Das Gupta 119)

In colonial Bengal the state of women's education was not good. There was a superstitious feeling among Hindu households that an educated girl becomes a widow soon after marriage. In the patriarchal society the condition of women was abject. More over education was considered only as a means of making the girls economically self dependent. There was no such vision of making education a means to achieve enlightment of mind. Hindu revivalism would take it as a means of better understanding of religious tracts. However Tagore efficiently scripted the faults of patriarchal system and championed the cause of women education. In his post Nobel Prize winning period he penned down pro-woman stories more fiercely.

He wrote Streer Patra (A Wife's Letter) in 1913. In a letter written on 17th May 1941 Tagore wrote that "It's in my short story 'Streer Patra' that I supported the women's cause for the first time…." (Das Gupta 122). The story is about gradual evolution of a woman from non-entity to a person conscious of her identity. Mrinal was 12 years of age when she was married. She writes the letter at the age of 27. In these fifteen years she could not find the atmosphere of the house worth living. She points out that her intelligence remained a threat for her in-laws. She writes that she would find pleasure in poetry writing amidst the various compromises she had to make. Mrinal first questions and then rejects the supremacy of patriarchy. The letter begins with the word 'Sricharankamaleshu' meaning the letter is addressed to his 'lotus feet' and ends with 'Tomader Charantalasroychinno' meaning 'freed from the shelter beneath your feet'. She signs her own name 'Mrinal' instead of the title of 'Mejo Bou' given to her. The escape of Mrinal may be compared to the escape of the heroine of the play 'A Doll's House' of Henrik Ibsen. In this story Rabindranath protests against the enslavement of girls in the name of marriage.

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