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Feminine Consciousness in the Shorter Fiction of Rabindra Nath Tagore

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ABSTRACT

For centuries women in India and all over the world have remained under male subjugation. All the scriptures of the world including The Bible, The Quoran and Manu Smiriti have defined the role of women putting them in the confines of the household. But the spread of education and the influence of a few institutions and organizations have played a vital role in the emancipation of women from age-old shackles of social and domestic traumas and some signs of awakening among women have become visible. This paper attempts to study the patriarchal oppression leading to psychological emptiness in the woman protagonists in the selected short stories namely “Aparichita” or “Woman Unknown”, “The Laboratory” and “Giribala” and tries to show how ultimately with their progressive thought, self-belief and determination these woman protagonist come out victorious at the end.

Keywords: *Woman Psychology, Woman Protagonist, Patriarchy, Emancipation*

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1. Introduction

Feminism, as a new way of life, as a new perspective, came into existence in India with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman to strike at the roots, to belong and assert her identity in a traditional society. Like man, woman is born free but she is in chains, not always and everywhere. All women do not conform, they rebel, they reconcile, and they are both Kali and Durga symbols of destruction as well as creation during the Vedic period. Even, Sita, Savitri, Shakuntala and Droupadthi who make their appearance at later period in history and they were not said to be passive, submissive, docile and servile. Sita in ‘Ramayana’ has resisted the demoniac aggressiveness of Ravana. Shakuntala in ‘Mahabharatha’ proved the strength of her nerves by meeting the challenge of Dushyanta. Draupathi displayed the female violence by washing her hair in the blood of Dhushasana who has attempted to disrobe her in the court of Kauravas. Many feminists in India were influenced by the western third wave feminism and the new idea third world women. Loomba in the book, *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing*, observes:

It is easy to imagine why entrenched patriarchal traditions would seek to marginalize women’s movements by calling them un-Indian. In fact such rhetoric

seeks to disguise the Indigenous roots of women’s thinking or organization has not influenced Indian feminists. Cross fertilizations have been crucial to feminist struggle everywhere. But given the history of colonial rule, the burden of authenticity has been especially heavy for women activists in India (271).

2. Rabindranath Tagore: Short Background

The myriad-minded Rabindranath Tagore was not only a poet, a novelist, a dramatist, a painter, a musician or a short story writer but he was also a philosopher and a social reformer in the guise of litterateur. His every creation is immersed in a philosophy and demands a social reform in a certain context of the contemporary life. His poems, novels, dramas, every artistic creation leaves an impeccable message for the welfare of humanity in the society.

Tagore is credited to have written nearly hundred short stories out of which during 1890’s he wrote fifty nine short stories majority of these short stories are readily available in English in collections like *Glimpses of Bengal life*(1913),*Hungry Stones*(1916) *Mashi*(1918) *Broken Ties* (1925) *The Parrots Training*(1944) And *The Runaway*(1959). The woman characters of Tagore can easily said to be characters which make a deep impression in the mind of the readers because of his unprecedented



realistic approach. Tagore was very dissatisfied with the prevailing patriarchal system which suppressed the basic human rights of a woman.

3. Patriarchal Oppression in Tagore's Works

This paper attempts to study the patriarchal oppression leading to psychological emptiness in the woman protagonists in the selected short stories namely "Aparichita" or "Woman Unknown", "The Laboratory" and "Giribala" and tries to show how ultimately with their progressive thought, self-belief and determination these woman protagonist come out victorious at the end.

"Aparichita or Woman Unknown" (1916), is the story of women's liberation from the dowry system prevailing in society. Anupam, a postgraduate, an obedient son and an eligible bachelor, in spite of knowledge and acumen lacked the reasoning skills, "... and has been trained to follow the orders from the women's quarters" (Mukherjee). His marriage is fixed with Kalyani, an educated girl belonging to a rich family in exchange of a heavy dowry primarily to the satisfaction of the bridegroom's maternal uncle.

On the day of marriage the bride and her father are humiliated by the maternal uncle of the bridegroom who checks the weight and purity of the gold ornaments given to the bride. When Sambhunath Babu, Kalyani's father seeks Anupam's opinion in the matter of verification of the gold ornaments, he realizes that Anupam is under complete control of his maternal uncle and family. The goldsmith after carefully examining the gold ornaments of the bride certifies that the jewellery is authentic. However, after the dinner is over, Sambhunath Babu announces, "I cannot give my daughter in marriage to a family that considers me capable of stealing her gold" (Mukherjee) and the marriage is broken off.

Sambhunath had raised his daughter very liberally and never considered her a burden for him hence this incidence of checking the purity of the gold jewellery just before the marriage ceremony had to take place leaves him with no option but to assert his self-dignity and ultimately refusal to hand over his daughter to Anupam who is incapable of protesting against his dowrygluttonous family. Tagore brings to light the fact before his readers that patriarchal dominance under the joint family system not only affects women, but also the younger male members of the family, as it

blocks their individuality and growth and their ability in decision making.

Everyone in the family of Anupam is enraged at the audacity of the girl's father. They threaten Sambhunath that it would be difficult to get his daughter married as according to the traditional societal norms no one will accept such girl as one's wife. Tagore asserts the self-dignity of the father Sambhunath who refuses to give his daughter in marriage to the member of such a mean-minded family and secondly on the part of bride Kalyani, who remains a lifelong spinster by way of protest against such an ugly insult. It is a revolutionary and proactive thought against such evil practices conceived by Tagore in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Tagore through the short story "Woman Unknown" suggests that to eradicate the dowry menace, the first step should be initiated within the bride's family itself. In this short story Tagore depicts that while on one hand, there are gender biases regarding the attitude towards men and women in the society; on the other hand, there is a progressive thinking father who takes a decision regarding his daughter's marriage that could have effectively ruined her probability of ever getting married.

In the due course of time Anupam comes to know that the girl has turned down many proposals offered in the last one year from the time their marriage was cancelled. He imagines that the reason for the rejection by Kalyani is that she languishes for him. He dreams that the girl's father "... swallows his pride and comes to our doorstep" (Mukherjee) with all humbleness and seeks his acceptance for marrying his daughter. However, nothing happens as he has dreamt. He feels an endearment for the girl, "My heart had gone out to the unknown girl: I could not call it back. She was just one step away from me, but suddenly the distance stretched out into infinity" (Mukherjee).

Traditionally it is the woman who dreams, longs and waits for her suitor to marry, and the man is always meant to make reasonable decisions. Here Tagore has deconstructed the conservative description of masculine characterization. Anupam's character is marked not only by his weakness and indecisiveness, but also by his imaginative bend of mind.

After one year Anupam and Kalyani were coincidentally travelling in the same train. Anupam was travelling with his mother, when at a junction, the stationmaster approaches Anupam with a request to vacate

the compartment since some English men have already reserved berths in that compartment. Anupam was about to vacate the compartment when Kalyani intervenes and informs the station master that as the compartment was not reserved from the boarding point and as Anupam and his mother had valid tickets hence it's not necessary for them to vacate the compartment.

This incident also highlights the racial discrimination that was rampant during the British rule in India. Kalyani's boldness, courage, and self-assertion were not common among the girls during Tagore's time. In the story "Woman Unknown", Tagore takes up one of the major evils of the society i.e. dowry and suggests an alternate solution to minimize the problem of dowry to some extent. In this story, he deals with the feminine problems of dowry, the need for better understanding of wife by a man, celibacy and the importance of women's education. Having dealt with all the female problems and finding solutions to them, Tagore becomes one of the pioneers of feminism in India.

In this regard P. K. Dutta states: Rabindranath's literary thought was developed and intensified in the Sabujpathra years. Most of the stories that Rabi wrote for that journal dealt with women as individual subjects engaged in negotiating with a problematic relationship in their marriages and with their household, but also women who created alternate life, some of which involved being single. (Dutta 9).

Tagore's story "The Conclusion" explores all the aspects of a child-bride Mrinmayee as she is given equal chances to accept Apurba as her lawfully wedded husband. Calcutta educated Apurba visits his native place in order to find a suitable girl for him. He falls in love with young Mrinmayee, a very innocent and free soul. She cannot be bound against her will. She loves her playmates so much that she refuses to part from them even after her marriage. She is not ready to leave them all for the sake of a stranger whom people call her husband. Apurba tries to win over her but all in vain. She refuses to accept any of his advances. Apurba gives up on her with a heavy heart as he does not want to force himself and his love upon her. He decides to go back to Calcutta and leave her at her parents' house. He tells her that he won't return until she wanted him to. After his departure, slowly, she starts to realize the depth of her relationship with Apurba and

starts missing her. On her behest her mother-in-law takes her to Calcutta and she gets united with her husband.

The story "Tyaag" features a marriage between a Kayastha orphan girl and a Brahmin boy through a trick played by the girl's uncle that hid her true caste. However, after getting married, the girl refuses to build a relationship based on a lie and reveals her true identity. After initial apprehensions about "polluting" his caste, the boy proclaims that his love for his wife is more important to him than his religious ties. A common feature in all these characters is the pride in their identity as a woman, instead of being defined as a wife, a mother or a daughter. Their rights and wrongs were not shaped by what the society expects of them. They did not leave behind their passions and hobbies after marriage and weren't afraid to look at sources of acceptance and love apart from their marriage. They challenged the concepts of dowry, feminity, chastity of widows and honour.

These characters challenge the conventions of the world as we know it even today and it was only Tagore who could create them, a century ago. In "Broken Nest", the story revolves around three people-Bhupati the husband; Charu the wife and Amal, Bhupati's cousin. Each one of them is being given equal chance to do whatever they want to do with their lives. Bhupati is a caring husband; he caters to all the needs of his loving wife. He also gives space to her in order to pursue her own interests. As he remains engrossed in his work Charu spends most of her time with Amal as they share common interests and dreams. Meanwhile after suffering losses in business Bhupati needed to share his feelings with his wife. But Charu has no inclination to hear about her husband's woes. She longs for Amal, who stops coming to their house on learning about Charu's interest in him. As things move on, Amal goes out of city forever and Bhupati too decides to leave to go to a distant place in search of job. He leaves up to Charu whether to stay back or accompany him. She chooses to stay back. Tagore was deeply touched by caste discrimination in his society. Being a high caste himself, he never had to experience humiliation of such sort, but he felt uneasy to see such things around him. He raised his voice on many such occasions.

In one of his stories "The Patriot", Tagore has shown on full scale such



hypocrisy of people. They called themselves patriots by wearing Swedish clothes, but their hearts were still deep rooted in the traditions of medieval period. In the story Kalika is deeply interest in taking active part in the Swedish movement by shunning foreign made goods. She also forces her husband Girindra to join her in the show off her newly acquired patriotism. She even mocks him for not donning khadi and often labels him unpatriotic. On their way to one such patriotic meeting they see a poor old man being beaten brutally by some high-class peoples mistakenly he might have touched one of them. Girindra wants to help the man in distress but Kalika sternly refuses to do so. Tagore has portrayed the inequality and the treatment which was meted upon the low caste people in this gloomy story.

Another issue related to social equality was of being outcaste. In the days of Tagore, if a person belonging to any high clan did something against the norms of the society; his family was announced from the clan and many a times debarred and boycotted from the village. There prevailed a rigid caste inequality and it was not tolerated by the society when such violations were made. In those days such a treatment was the highest most punishment to the social offenders. Such decisions were taken by the elders of the clan and were regarded as final and all were required to follow the decision. The defaulters may also get the same treatment from the society.

The story “Renunciation” is about such social taboo. Hemanta gets married off to a girl called Kusum who is projected to be of high caste. After their marriage it is revealed that the girl belongs to a lower caste. Whole household is against keeping the newly wedded girl, but the groom refuses to do so. He also comes to know that if he leaves the girl, she would probably die of shame and heartbreak. In a strange turn of the story, he comes between his wife and his family and asks his father to renounce him too if he wishes to throw his wife out of the household.

4. Sum Up

For Tagore to write such a thing was considered a bold step as such incidents were unheard of. The refusal of the son defying his father to give equal status to his wife could ruin the whole world for him. According to the principle of feminism, women in the society should be treated equally irrespective of caste, colour, creed and gender. Tagore’s India was awakening to such social changes. In order to inspire his

people to bring positive changes in their lives and to put forth such few examples from the people around him, Tagore wove his short stories about the topics which were close to his heart. He had art of weaving human emotions around social issues like equality very intricately, delicately and effectively. Tagore gave all the freedom to his heroine to make her decisions even though initially she seems to be insane. Only he could think of that in the time when women were allowed to do so in the common households. Equality in relations especially husband wife relations was one of the main aspects of Tagore’s short stories. Most of the times he wrote what he saw in the contemporary society but at times, in order to convey his message to the people and also to bring about changes in the society through his writings, Tagore projected what he wanted to see in his society.

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