



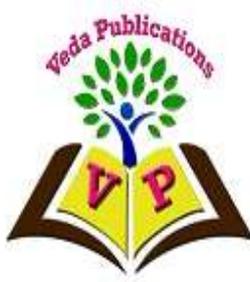
CREATING A SPACE FOR WOMEN: TAGORE'S GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS AS REFLECTED IN HIS SELECTED SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT



In the literary scenario of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore remains the undisputed leading figure. He leads by the virtue of his grand, erudite personality, as well as by his vast canon of literature which is at once wide, varied and illuminating. Tagore's literary outputs can be broadly divided into two categories- the first category consists of his societal writings focusing upon social, political, historical, cultural questions. This body of literature is mainly written in prose genres- novels, plays, short stories, novellas, essays; while the second category consists of his philosophical writings, focusing on the transcendental experiences, written mainly in poetic forms- poems, songs etc. Tagore's writings of the first category are remarkable for being a fine critique of the old school of writing and beliefs. Notwithstanding the general aura of the literary world of his times, Tagore carved out a niche for himself as a defiant and innovative litterateur. Regardless of his position as a wealthy, elite aristocrat, Tagore was able to connect with the common people around him with sympathetic approach. Tagore was also keen to redefine the gender perception as it prevailed in the contemporary society. Women were mostly excluded from the category of general humanity; they were decreased into a sub- category which populates the earth, who exist but only after men. Tagore, who was himself quite supportive of traditional ideals of feminine, found it problematic to altogether wipe women away from social sphere. Men were superior, provided the women were subservient- this philosophy did not appeal to Tagore. He strived in his own way to expose the fault lines which exist in our perceptions and behavior regarding women. The present paper focuses upon Tagore's gender oriented views as contained in his short stories.

Keywords: *Gender Consciousness, Power, Harmony, Victorian Morals*

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Rabindranath Tagore writes in his essay, "Woman";

"At the present stage of history, civilization is almost exclusively masculine, a civilization of power, in which woman has been thrust aside in the shade. Therefore it has lost its balance and it is moving by hopping from war to war" (Tag. and the Fem., p.303).

The essence of these lines is contained in two words "power" and "balance". Here, the man symbolizes power, and the woman symbolizes balance. By terming the man symbolic of power, Tagore explicitly hints at the violence which may lie in the nature of man. A woman, on the other hand, represents the harmonious side of human personality. This statement also hints at the basic temperament and nature of men and women. The personality of men and women is always shaped by some innate principles. Here, gender difference, or orientation comes to play an important role, for the nature, behavior and principles of people are largely determined by their gender. Providing people with their rightful places for the development of their personality is necessary. But, in our society only a particular gender is given the privilege to enjoy freedom- i.e. men. Men possess all the authority and women come at the receiving end of that power, or authority. In the gender sphere, the power- balance status quo has been maintained in the Indian society since times immemorial. What Tagore tries to drag our attention to, is the present state of our society which still runs on the age old patterns of gender specific behaviors and roles, while overlooking the differences between men and women in a positive light.

Tagore has definitely been a proto- feminist writer; perhaps the first among Indian writers of repute to produce narratives of women's actual condition in the world, and of their various desires, which were disregarded in the contemporary society. Calling Tagore a proto- feminist is necessary in this place, because his idea of women's equal place on this earth was largely based on the specific attributes with which we define a particular gender. He did not intend to break the customs of the society altogether, as it is evident in many of his letters, speeches and essays- rather, he wanted to provide women with their rightful place in this world. Tagore respected the natural disposition of men and women, and desired that the world also smoothly operates by ensuring harmony between the two. He desired it to be so that there remains no violation of each other's space and rights. His ideas of harmony and balance depend upon this mutual understanding of each other's potentials and their due respect. But, Tagore

was pained to see that men were trying to snatch away all the rights of women in the name of honor and discipline. He did not hesitate to accept that women are delicate by constitution. But, their delicacy does not always imply their weakness. Women are also able to perform tough physical works. However, there are some attributes which are found in women in plenty, as compared to men. In the same essay, Tagore writes; "Woman is endowed with the passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self- sacrifice in greater measure than man is. It is the passive quality in nature, which turns its monster force into perfect creations of beauty" (ibid, p.304). Here, Tagore emphatically asserts that the qualities which seem passive or less important to us are, in fact, the basis of the equilibrium on which the world stands. But, unfortunately the chauvinist male- mind is not ready to give preference to anything that is less coarse, less violent and less assertive. Since, the men came to realize that they have power, i.e. physical strength, they thought it necessary to exercise their power over them who were lacking it. In such a situation, who could have been an easier prey to their ambition than their own binary counter- part? By ensuring women's subordination, the patriarchal society aims at evading every threat to its monopoly.

Women's condition in the world has been an integral part of discussion in Tagore's narratives, especially in fiction and short stories. In the present paper I've tried to point out the similar instances in the short stories of Tagore. Tagore's short stories serve a wide range of interests but most of them revolve around the elementary human emotions and the society. In the context of Gender discussion, his narratives naturally turn in the favor of women, who were lacking weight on their side. Rabindranath Tagore's short stories are fine specimens of contemporary trends. Especially when it comes to the domestic world, not much is revealed about it in the open, except for a few instances of writings by social workers or women. Until Twentieth century, most of the literature was written by men, therefore, we had to rely on second- hand impressions that male authors gave about the domestic world. These impressions are not very reliable in the sense that the male authors largely manipulate the reality in order to communicate their own respective ideas. Most of them were influenced by the Victorian morals of chastity and virtue. One of the most famous contemporaries of Tagore, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay produced such virtuous heroines in his fictional narratives that the Indian society came to recognize women through those models. These ever



enduring and self-sacrificing heroines set the standard for female behavior in the contemporary times. It was an universally accepted truth in the society that women are born to serve (wo)men and their entire life must be nothing but an exemplary journey of restraint, endurance and sacrifice- that again conjoined with never ending affection and devotion. They had no right to complain, no reason to be unhappy, sick or sorrowful. In such an atmosphere of high, hollow ideals of female conduct, very few had the courage to expose the affectation which lied beneath these airy- fairy morals. Tagore tried to reveal it seriously that women are not just abstract virtues, that they have flesh and blood in their body just like their male counterparts, therefore they are also able to feel. Social practices and ideologies affected women. Tagore has tried to point out many evils which prevail in the society even to this date. Such evils also prevail in the most crucial part of women's lives- i.e. marriage. In his short stories like "Haimanti" and "Profit and Loss", Tagore has pointed out the evils of dowry system; and the condition of women in their in-laws house. Owing to the critical question of dowry, the father of every girl finds it to be a great distress to marry his daughter off. In order to get his daughter married in a respectable family, a father needs to arrange a good amount of money. In this process many fathers are compelled to borrow huge amount of money as debt, for whose repayment they struggle throughout their lives. In "Profit and Loss", Nirupama's father takes huge amount of debt from many people, but still he could not arrange the complete amount of money demanded by the father of the groom. The marriage rituals were stopped in the middle, but because of the insistence of groom, the marriage was somehow completed. But, owing to the failure of her father to produce money, both Nirupama and her father had to suffer immense humiliation at the hands of her in-laws. "Ramsundar often went to see his daughter, but he had no honor in his son-in-laws house. Even the servants looked down on him. Sometimes he saw his daughter for five minutes in a separate outer room of the house; sometimes he was not allowed to see her at all" (Tag. and the Fem., p.186). The girl was not allowed to visit her paternal home, and she was barred from seeing her father whenever he came to meet her as a punishment for her father's doings.

In another short story, "Haimanti", Tagore shows how women suffer at their in-laws home. Nobody wants to understand the feelings and temperament of the bride rather, she is expected to assume all the traditional roles as soon as she enters the household. Haimanti was selected by her in-laws

for their son, despite her above normal age for marriage in those times because, there was some economic profit involved. They all had assumed that the father of Haimanti was at a powerful position, and since she was his only child, all the money and the position of her father will naturally transfer to their son. But, as soon as it becomes clear that Haimanti's father had neither money nor such a position, her life at her in-laws home became difficult. She also suffered humiliation because she was not brought up in traditional ways, so her manners were different. She was educated, she was older and she was not of a traditionally religious sort- but as a matter of fact, everything could have been happily tolerated if her father had one lakh rupees in his bank account. Thus, dowry comes to play a very important role in the fortune of brides. Women were expected to fit into the family atmosphere as soon as possible because there was visibly no scope for kindness. However, in both of these stories, the grooms are not oppressive. They were, in a way supportive to their wives. While the husband of Nirupama spoke against his father when the latter was intent on cancelling the marriage, and planned to take her long with him; the husband of Haimanti secretly admired her and wanted to support her, but did not have courage to speak against his parents. Since, various roles of women in the household were more overpowering than her role as a wife, the relationship between husband and wife remained largely unkempt for. "The intensely private relations of husband and wife that a modern couple desire cannot grow in a natural and free manner within the joint family" (Towards Freedom, p.19). The educated Bengali youth was aware of his wife's rights, but still did not hold as much courage as to take decisions in her favor.

In "A Wife's Letter", the story writer gives voice to the deplorable condition that women faced in the household, through the narrator Mrinal. Mrinal is a sensitive woman. Although she was a village girl who had seen the life of hardships and negligence that women usually got, yet she felt pained whenever she saw women being treated with cruelty. Mrinal recalls at a place in the story how an English doctor was taken aback to see the condition of women's living rooms, "I remember that the English doctor was astonished at the sight of our women's quarters, and scolded us angrily about the state of the lying-in room...There lights burn dimly; the air enters by stealth, like a thief; the courtyard is immovably choked with rubbish, the stains on the walls and floors reign undisturbed" (Tag. and the Fem., p.255). She further says that women had



become so habitual of their conditions that they never complained. It was a sort of psychological conditioning. Mrinal aptly comments, "When self-respect dwindles, neglect does not seem unjust for this reason, it causes no suffering" (ibid, p.255). Mrinal left her husband's home not because she received any sort of mistreatment herself, but because she realized that in our society a woman's life does not hold any importance. She was disenchanted with the ways of domestic and social life of women- that's why she decided to quit it. Bindu, the orphaned sister of of Mrinal's sister- in-law was humiliated in many ways at their home. In spite of Mrinal's in- laws being sufficiently prosperous, they did not want to carry the burden of an orphaned, unbeautiful girl. She was deceivably married off to a madman, and the entire household insisted on her staying with him. Mrinal's husband also advocated the same by recalling ancient parables of women's ever- enduring service for their husbands.

"You recalled the supreme instance of wifely devotion: how a wife carried her leprosy- stricken husband herself to his whore's house. You never felt the least embarrassment about proclaiming this tale of greatest cowardice in the world" (ibid, p.262).

Women were expected to remain true to their husbands, whether they deserved it or not. In the marital life of women both society and individuals hold importance. In many instances the husband remains good to the wife, but in many others, husband himself is the biggest oppressor of the wife. Men are always free to entertain themselves both inside and outside the home, as they wish to, but the women are supposed to turn a blind face to all their doings, and keep playing the role of a virtuous and chaste wife. In the story "Giribala", the eponymous character is a woman "overflowing with the exuberance of youth", but disappointingly she remains unnoticed by her husband. She came as a child bride at her husband's home, so they grew so accustomed to each- other's presence that Gopinath hardly ever noticed her growing into a youth. It is one of the many shortcomings of child- marriage, that being brought up together since childhood, the husband and wife are incapable of garnering romantic and sexual feelings for each other. Gopinath also did not notice Giribala's beauty and youth, rather engaged himself with a theatre actress named Lavanga. While Gopinath himself enjoyed going to the theatre, he never allowed his wife to accompany him because,

"...the theatre was a place not fit for any decent woman to visit" (ibid, p.222). Gopinath kept neglecting Giribala for the sake of Lavanga, so Giribala grew curious to see the woman whom her husband so very admired. She went to the theatre stealthily one day, and was awestruck to see the enchanting beauty of the world of art. She felt wretched at her own gloomy and monotonous condition. "Coming from her walled up terrace and joyless home, she had entered a region where dreams and reality had clasped their hands in friendship, over the wine cup of art" (ibid, p.222). Giribala leaves her home, when Gopinath elopes with Lavanga, and becomes a theatre actress herself. Gopinath comes to see the "new actress" who became quickly famous for her beauty and acting skills, and finds Giribala on the stage. Gopinath becomes mad with anger, shouting "I'll kill her." Gopinath was furious because Giribala destroyed the honor of his family. Although Gopinath himself kept doing all the immoral deeds, it did not spoil his honor because the responsibility of preserving the dignity lies only on the shoulders of women. This is one of the many ways of keeping women inside the house by citing the reason that they may get defiled easily. In another short story "The Girl Between", Tagore puts into light another essential responsibility that a woman carries on her shoulders- i.e. of giving birth to children. A woman is considered incomplete if she is unable to reproduce. Female barrenness comes with humiliation and stigma in the society. Since the responsibility of extending the family tree depends on women, they themselves remain highly anxious to give birth to a male child as soon as possible. The "The Girl Between" is such a story where the woman herself paves way for her miseries owing to her inability to produce children. Hara Sundari and Nibaran, who were apparently living a quiet and comfortable life, were deprived of children. Although Hara Sundari was an efficient home- maker and, she provides her husband with all sorts of household comforts, yet she is not able to satisfactorily live with her husband. Although Nibaran never showed his dissatisfaction on this matter, yet Hara Sundari was always anxious with the thought that she could not give her husband pleasure of children. It is as if all the virtues of women are not able to mend for her one inability. Hara Sundari sacrifices her easy- going married life, and gets her husband married to another woman. The marriage, however, proves to be a disaster, owing to the incongruousness and differences between a middle aged man and a child-bride. Hara Sundari was also anguished to see how her authority over her husband and household



loosened. "Of course a woman was meant to serve- but she was also meant to reign" (ibid, p.215). The young wife of Nibaran died after felling seriously ill due to a miscarriage. Nibaran returns to Hara Sundari only to find an invisible rift between the two.

The self- effacing temperament of women was an outcome of centuries of conditioning. Individuality of women was rejected, and they were taught to forget about their existence as human beings who do have right to enjoy freedom in their own way. The extent of this ideological slavery (or to say in better terms- devotion) of women is shown in the story "The Gift of Sight". In this story, the narrator Kusum had a miscarriage, after which her eye sight suffered. She was gradually losing her eyes, but her husband was intent on treating her eyes himself. Her husband, who was studying medicine, started giving her his own treatment, in spite of calling a qualified doctor. Kusum's brother opposed this, and called an English doctor who prescribed her different medicines from her husband. But, out of her sheer devotion towards her husband, Kusum dumped the medicines prescribed by English doctor into a well. Her husband's experiment took away her eyes altogether, but she remained as uncomplaining as ever. When Kusum's husband expressed his agony for destroying her eyes, she says;

"Don't worry you took what belonged to you. Suppose my eyes had been destroyed by some other doctor's treatment- what comfort would have been in that? If it was inevitable that no one could save my eyes, the only consolation of my blindness is that my eyes were taken by you. When he had insufficient flowers for a puja Rama tore out his own eyes and offered them to God. I too have given my eyes to a god..." (The Post., p. 251)

Apart from marriage and relationship between husband and wife, various other types of emotional relationships also appear in Tagore's stories. It was a matter of great fuss if a woman was involved in a romantic relationship with a man, apart from marriage. Women did not have any freedom to choose their partner. In the story "Mahamaya", the eponymous character is involved in an emotional relationship with Rajiblochan. Both of them shared a platonic relationship until they decided to get married. But, as soon as Mahamaya's brother gets to know that they have decided to marry, he makes her marry a dying man, who dies soon afterwards.

Mahamaya's brother arranges for her to perform Sati with her dead husband, thus cleverly eradicating the cause of stigma- i.e. Mahamaya

herself. For the sake of honor, he does not hesitate to burn his own sister alive. "...marriage is the altar on which she [woman] is sacrificed to this male god called 'husband'" (Lit. and Gen., p.205-206). Mahamaya, however escapes the burning pyre and secretly goes to Rajiblochan's house. Here, her story takes an interesting turn. Mahamaya, who faced terrible consequences for loving Rajiblochan, and somehow managed to escape her death - was not accepted by Rajiblochan- because the funeral pyre had burnt away one cheek of hers. A woman's beauty seems to overlap all her dedication and affection. Another story, "The Story of a Muslim Woman" addresses the question of defilement which comes to women as easily as it can get. Kamla, whose marriage caravan was attacked by dacoits, was saved by a pious man Habir Khan. Although she returned home as untouched as ever, it was conceived that she has got defiled. A woman's religion and society is more likely to desert her whenever the slightest circumstance arises. Kamla becomes a Muslim by marrying a Muslim man out of disgust for such a society and religion. Women struggle to exist amidst such challenges which surround their world from every side. Still, they emerge more honest, courageous and emotionally stable as compared to men.

In many of his novels, Tagore has drawn such women characters who surrender themselves in front of the demands of the society. There are only a few places where he has created defiant and outspoken women, who could stand for themselves, but, at the end of the day, they are also subdued in front of moral policing, social scrutiny and emotional pressures. Conversely, in his short stories, Tagore has developed his female characters in much fuller perspective. "It may be stated that Tagore's women-centric short stories represented the New Woman as a significant transformed identity in a more assertive format than in his novels..." (Rad. Rab., p.101). Here, the women come forward and act, in spite of staying passive towards the changes that took place in their lives and outside. Mrinal, Giribala, Mahamaya and Kamla are such characters who react in their own ways against the notions of "...gendered body, body images, body politics, commodification of the female body and its concomitant stereotypes, and sexual desire" (ibid, p.101). In the process of creating some space for women, Tagore explored many genres- including poems, plays, novels, essays to short stories. His thoughts on gender are also diverse. Ranging from conventional to complex, there are varied sort of women in his literary oeuvre, who represent the heterogeneous society. Tagore's



purpose was to say that confining a living being into pre- defined limits or expectations is not possible. Tagore envisioned a society where everyone has its share, and the classification should only be on the basis of congenital capabilities. Suppression and violence are not the part of a healthy civilization- and the progress of the society depends on the collective endeavor of sexes.

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