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Emancipated Women in Rabindranath Tagore's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract:

Short story as a literary genre developed during the 19th century and has become one of the major literary forms of the 21st century. Rabindranath Tagore in India is considered to be one of the pioneer short story writers whose writings reflect maturity. He is regarded as the progressivist of the modern Indian short story writings. Tagore has been very successful in depicting woman psychology in his short stories. This paper through Tagore's selected short stories, "Aparichita or Woman Unknown", "Giribala" and "The Laboratory" seeks to investigate the fact that how the thoughts and actions of the woman protagonists in these short stories are unfazed by the male domination or the patriarchal societal norms and finally how through their progressive thought, courage and determination they protect their rights and in the process are emancipated.

Keywords: Woman psychology, Woman protagonist, Patriarchy, Emancipation, Woman empowerment.

One of the oldest forms of literature is short story which has existed through the ages in various forms like myths, fairy, tales, ballads and parables to name a few. If one enquires about the origin of Indian tales one could easily locate it embedded in the Vedas and Upanishads, the Puranas and the Panchtantra, Hitopadesh and Jatak Kathas. While evaluating the role and importance of short stories in modern Indian literature M. Rama Rao states:

We have had in India stories which lie embedded in the hymns of the Rigveda, or scattered in the Upanishads and the epics, the stories which constitute the Panchtantra, the Hitopadesha, the Sukasaptati, the Dasakumaracharita and the Vetalapanchvimsati in Sanskrit, the Buddhist Jatak Katha in Pali and a host of similar stories in modern Indian languages. (Rao 216)

Rabindranath Tagore the first Asian Nobel laureate had no forbearers in this art from Bengal and owes no debt to any foreign writer. The content, style and presentation of his short stories are exclusively his own. Rabindranath Tagore penned his first short story "Bhikharini" ("The Beggar woman") in 1877 when he was only sixteen. If one analyses Tagore's short stories one will discover that his early short stories are mostly based on rural encounters whereas his later short stories deal with the psychology of human mind especially woman psychology.

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. 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 dowry-gluttonous 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. During the 20th century the breaking

down of marriages as a result of non-fulfilment of dowry commitment at the time of the marriage ceremony was common and is still prevalent even in the twenty first century. 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 byway 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. Anupam feels inferior before her because of his inability to raise his voice for the right cause. Moreover, he feels that Kalyani has recognized him and in spite of that, she was so kind hearted that she does not show any displeasure for him. Anupam was very much impressed by the humanistic approach of Kalyani.

Kalyani's blooming persona is perhaps a reflection of Tagore's vision of the emerging modern women in India. Anupam's mother, loyal to her generation and customs, disapproves of Kalyani's nature. A strangeness perhaps makes her wonder if she herself could ever have the courage to defy her own traditional upbringing and become like Kalyani. She feels torn "between fascination and disapproval" (Mukherjee).

Kalyani's strength of identity gives courage to Anupam to overcome his repressed and inactive self. As a result, after returning to Calcutta, Anupam goes to Kanpur without the consent of his mother and his uncle. He repents for the insult caused to Kalyani's family and asks earnestly for the hand of Kalyani for marriage. Sambhunath Babu does not object, but Kalyani turns down his request as she wants to remain a lifelong spinster, by dedicating herself to the cause of women's education. However, Anupam, who has given his heart to Kalyani, on his part, decides to remain a bachelor, singing a song of which the refrain is "There's room here" (Mukherjee). Tagore through the character of Anupam conveyed to the men folk "Nevertheless, neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man" (Denny 95). The culturally constructed identities of masculinity and femininity are broken down in the portrayal of Anupam and Kalyani. Tagore in this way has deviated from the traditional way of constructing a female character.

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)

In Tagore's short story "Giribala" (1895), the protagonist Giribala, raises her voice of protest against her uncaring husband and takes revenge upon him. She is the first liberated woman character depicted by Tagore. Giribala is a beautiful, young, and the childless wife of a wealthy husband, Gopinath. Zamindar's son, Gopinath, watches a play in the nearby theatre and starts seeing a glamorous theatre actress, Lavanga Latika. Giribala is well aware of her beauty but her husband does not notice Giribala's charm as a beautiful woman. Giribala and Gopinath had a loving, romantic relationship when they got married. But things changed in course of time and Giribala's only companion was her faithful maid, Sudha. Sudha takes her to the theatre to confirm her suspicion. The play 'Maan Bhanjan' was being staged with glimmering lights and

magical songs. The act depicted 'Radha' in angry mood and 'Krishna' trying to convince her by surrendering himself to her feet. She witnesses her husband's lust for the stage actress. His indecent behaviour in the theatre disgusts her.

She gains courage to teach her husband a lesson. Visualizing the play she imagined herself as Radha, and Gopinath as Krishna. She decides that she will make Gopinath fall at her own feet one day. One night Gopinath came to the house and asked for the key of the vault as he needed some money. Giribala was hurt and angry over the fact that despite Gopinath coming after a long time ignored her completely. She refuses to give the key. Angry and frustrated over Giribala's refusal Gopinath thrashes her and snatches all her ornaments and leaves the house. Eventually Gopinath elopes with the seductive actress Latika.

A Few months later, Gopinath hears of the emergence in the theatre circle of a beautiful new actress who has taken the place of Latika. The proprietors of the theatre have introduced a new actress in her place and staged it successfully. Gopinath very curious about the mysterious beauty goes to see the new play "Manorama". The curtains rise and Gopinath is dumbstruck as in front of him, he sees, his wife Giribala, dazzling the stage as the gorgeous 'Radha'.

The theatrical profession was not considered as a respectable one for a married woman during the twentieth century but Giribala broke the traditional stigmas and emerged emancipated. She takes revenge on her husband by joining the same theatre as an actress and earning name and fame. Through experimentation with Giribala's character, Tagore has suggested a solution to women's oppression. "Tagore conceives of this solution on the pay-you-back-in-your-own-coin formula, for Gopinath's chief intoxication lies with theatrical performance" (Chakrabarti 85-86).

Women's identity especially during the twentieth century society was shadowed in respect to that with man. Men learn self-reliance and self-dependence while women were always instructed to learn to take care of others and to thwart themselves. Giribala breaks the age old tradition of obliged wifedom. As a liberated woman, she becomes a pioneer to change the status of the wife in this social scenario. Seeing the play, Giribala realizes her woman power which helps her to win back her lost pride.

Tagore's portrayal of Giribala's character is to kindle the awakening of womanpower in the minds of women folk. In this regard her maid Sudha played a very significant role for the awakening of self in Giribala and also in providing her the courage and self-belief to revolt against her husband's male oppressive psyche which was evident, right from the beginning of their relationship.

Tagore wrote the short story “The Laboratory” (1940) in the twilight years of his life. It is an interesting story about a typical emancipated modern woman. Tagore has envisioned the ideal New Womanhood in the portrayal of the protagonist, Sohini. Tagore 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 is a woman with the social consciousness of spreading scientific knowledge among the youth, which she inherits from her husband.

Nandakishore, who has a laboratory in Calcutta and has a passion for scientific research met charismatic Sohini. Nandakishore is 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” (SSS 263).

In this story Tagore presents a very unconventional marriage in which the groom spends money to marry his bride unlike the vice versa. Through the groom i.e. Nandakishore, Tagore suggests that women should not be humiliated for their economic dependence on men. Nandakishore makes an unconventional marriage with Sohini, by breaking all the norms and strictures of the society. The concept of friendship between husband and wife is also first introduced by Tagore in this short story.

Nandakishore used to say, “An engineer husband and a wife only a home maker minding the kitchen are not acceptable. The knots that bind them are not the same. I will make them uniform” (SSS 264). He claims that he and Sohini belong to the same caste by temperament. Sohini is the only character in Tagore’s short stories, where she selects her man. In Tagore’s words “The situation from which Nandakishore had raised her was neither secluded nor very pure. But this obstinate and indomitable man cared nothing for society’s norms and strictures” (SSS 264). They share a common faith. He makes her also involve in his scientific research activities. She is a woman with an individuality of her own.

Nirmal Kumar Sidhanta in this regard states, “. . . Sohini, an unchaste woman, according to conventional standards, a tower of strength to the man of action she has chosen, faithful to his memory in trying to build up the institution (Laboratory) he had started” (18). Tagore through the characters Sohini and Nandakishore conceptualized a society where there would be equality irrespective of caste, colour or sex and there would be a mutual faith and respect among the partners in professional and personal life. It would not be an exaggeration to state the fact that Tagore clearly understood woman’s psyche and their unequal position in the society thereby leading to gender discrimination and hence very strongly advocates for gender equality.

An accident while performing an experiment in the laboratory leads to the sudden demise of Nandakishore leading to the closure of the laboratory. Sohini successfully gets back the laboratory after winning over all the legal litigations. Tagore was very much concerned about the economic deprivations of widows. Hence through this story Tagore presents an empowered

widow Sohini, who fights for her husband's property legally and ultimately wins. Sohini uses her wit and feminine grace to perfection. Sohini confesses: "How else have women survived through the ages? Feminine wives need clever planning, just like the rules of battle; but of course one need to top it up with some honey as well. That is a woman's natural fighting style" (SSS 268).

Tagore firmly believed that women are creative and graceful by nature, but sometimes if need arises they have to employ wits for getting their work done which he has beautifully presented before his readers through the short story "The Laboratory".

Contrary to the notions of the twentieth century Indian society Tagore did not treat widows as a curse in society; rather he creates a space, even for a fallen woman to look beyond the ordinary households. Tagore allows them to participate not only in the freedom struggle, but paves away towards scientific temperament to aspire beyond the ordinary restrictions.

Instead, Sohini likes to spend the money in the development of scientific research among the Indian youth in memory of her husband, which could be the true tribute to her husband's soul. Tagore delineates Sohini as a representative of ideal womanhood who withers all the superstitious inhibitions, which tie up the Indian women. Sohini is compassionate towards animals; she has a firm determination to build a hospital for the lame and blind dogs and rabbits in the biology lab. Sohini is affectionate by nature, she loves her grandmother and she rushes to look after her during her illness, leaving behind the laboratory. The tenderness and humanity of Sohini make her a complete woman. Through Sohini's character Tagore envisioned a new age where men would initiate women's education and women would contribute their might in social service like the development of scientific research.

Sohini agrees that she might be impure in body, but pure in mind. Her bad "desires and heaped-up sins" (She: A Collection of Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore 272) are burnt on the funeral pyre of her husband. She claims: "The sacrificial fire is burning right here in this Laboratory" (SSS 272). Sohini's courage in admitting her weakness and her determination in carrying out the research in the laboratory to accomplish the ambition of her husband is a bold construction of Tagore. By Sohini's plurality of sex, Tagore attacks the men who practiced polygamy.

Sohini has a detached outlook towards her life and role as an individual and dedicates herself in scientific improvement. She defies the social restrictions imposed on her as a widow. She does not succumb to the mere sentiments of motherhood; she dares to unveil Nila's birth identity, which any ordinary woman will never dream to do so. She reveals the fact that Nila is not Nandakishore's daughter and cannot inherit his property. An illegitimate child is a disgrace for a mother but she admitted her sin in public which is a not a normal act to the then contemporary society. Tagore has intended to do that through Sohini. She does not behave as a

conventional mother. Tagore through Sohini announces to the womenfolk that a woman's identity not only lies as a mother or a wife but as an individual human being.

Sohini is the prototype of Rabindranath Tagore's ideal, emancipated woman, who asserts her individuality and will power on men. From the feminist perspective, Sohini's character possesses the qualities of women of Post-Feminism.

In the short story "Laboratory" Rabindranath Tagore has depicted a new age where there is no more patriarchal oppression. There is the reversal of role to that of matriarchal force, where women gain the upper hand. Beyond physical charm and chastity, a man attempts to perceive the intelligence and spiritual beauty of a woman. A woman has the choice of selecting her man. Equality of the sexes is maintained. A mother and a daughter break all the social conventions and values in regard to that of sexuality. As a widow, she regains her right to the property of her husband through a legal battle.

Tagore's experimentation and ideas for women comes to a complete shape. Through the three selected short stories, "Aparichita or Woman Unknown", "Giribala" and "The Laboratory" it is observed how Rabindranath Tagore has depicted his female characters as very bold, courageous, assertive, self-reliant and conscious of their identity. They are unconventional in the sense that they are no longer passive, suppressed suffering women of the traditional type and herald in every way. Woman's liberation from the sexually indifferent husband in the story "Giribala", Kalyani's celibacy and devotion to social work as a mission of her life and as a way of protest against dowry system in "Woman Unknown and Sohini's woman empowerment to save her husband's laboratory in "The Laboratory" are all exemplary characters of Tagore as defined in the later day Feminist ideologies. They come forward to educate themselves and pursue a career. They rebel and revolt against patriarchy and come out victorious. Tagore gives solutions to the problems of dowry, sexual oppression, arranged marriage and suggests for regaining individuality, freedom from the patriarchal setup of the family system, and the need for women empowerment, through these women characters. Tagore's creation of such emancipated women characters several decades before the Feminist ideologies evolved proves the fact that Rabindranath Tagore was a harbinger of Feminism far ahead of his time.

Although the above short stories ended in terms of length but there is always a feeling in the minds of the readers that these stories did not end there. The element of change generally with the protagonists of the above short stories gets transplanted in the minds and hearts of the readers which will remain there for a very long time. Therein lay the beauty and mastery of female emancipation which few geniuses like Tagore can create. As has been rightly said "Rabindranath's success as a master short story writer was actually ensured by his essentially lyrical temperament since ... there is close affinity between a short story and lyric"(Bandyopadhyay 62).

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