



Women as the center of Tagore's short stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore Tagore's participation during the era of emancipation of women in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century Bengal.

Tagore always preferred taking a mid way when voicing his female characters where the characters come in from their different social, rural and cultural backgrounds to encourage the new found world. Rabindranath Tagore's works generally focus on the women set on the complicated and raveled nature of human relationships. Women were seen as chance takers who resisted the norms in the conservative Indian society by the world. He took a central road of "radical nationalism and proud traditionalism".

. They were bold but they grew in the story and learnt things from their circumstances and situations. Tagore The paper will focus on his three female protagonists- Mrinal from The wife's letter, Uma from The exercise book and Mrinmayi from The Conclusion, to portray how women voiced their individuality and became the real backbone of their respective stories.

Keywords- Feminism, devising, women, patriarchy, women-centric, emancipation

Introduction

The household of Tagore has always seen an amalgamation of modernity with traditionalism. The women in Tagore's house have always been the centre of emancipation of women. Tagore could not ever choose a side and was always seen in mid-way. The traditionalism was a very crucial part of Tagore's family which was deeply engraved in its social and personal construct, even though modernity was knocking at the door the traditions like purdah and compartmentalization was preserved.

Tagore has always had this ambiguity in his personality; he could never find a side and would always a middle road. This paper tries to explore three of his short stories – The Exercise book (Khata), The conclusion (Samapti), and the Wife's letter (Streer Patra).

The characters created by Tagore Uma, Mrinmayi and Mrinal are real life acquaintances or just well thought characters are still a matter of debate. Tagore was highly impressed by the wave of liberation of women where women had freedom and a voice of their own in the nineteenth century Bengal.

The era realized the importance of education for women. The Hindu Female School established in 1849 was later called Bethune School found its place in the baithak –khana of Raja Dakshinranjan's mansion.

Even though women education was paving its way still many people were not in agreement or acceptance of the same. Whereas, Tagore's household has given importance to women's education from the times of Dwarkanath Tagore. Women in Tagore house looked after the property after their husband's death. Dwarkanath's wife attended the parties hosted by him. Women crossed the four walls of the found their space outside too. They saw the World and didn't just stay inside their cocoon.

Though modernism was coming into being, women were still subjugated and ill-treated in the patriarchal society. Tagore seems to sense this tension and this can be seen in his female constructs- Mrinmayi, Uma and Mrinal.

The women of Tagore's household were all talented, some in writing, some in poetry etc, and therefore it becomes easier to understand Tagore's horizon to expect such wide range of emotions from his characters-Uma, Mrinal and Mrinmayi. But he also shows how their personal identity is squashed by patriarchal inhibitions.

Analysis of the stories

Mrinmayi, the protagonist of 'The Conclusion' the tomboy, has been seen as the person who creates ripples in an otherwise unperturbed life of her locality. In an era where women were only to be expected as shy and coy. She ridiculed Babu Apurba Krishna the educated man. His conscious decision to marry even after this episode to unusual Mrinmayi shatters his mother's hope for a coy and calm daughter-in-law.

The husband and wife is brought in a different realm by the third person narrator, Apurba seems to have married Mrinmayi to tame her otherwise indomitable spirit.

We see that maturity takes over her girlhood and her new changed 'self' is not what we see as Mrinmayi, the rustic girl.

Mrinmayi means clay mould that can change its form and that is what is seen as Mrinmayi moulds to what is expected out of her. Mrinmayi gives in to her social inhibitions and becomes a docile wife. The title 'The Conclusion (Samapti)', is actually the end of her own personality. Thus, if we frequently encounter her tomboyish laughter at the opening of the story, the laughter appears no more in the end. In its place, we have her squeamish, feminine sobs. Within the conventional romantic closure there is therefore an effacement of personality to accommodate a socially scripted version of normative femininity.

In Exercise Book, the second chosen short story, we see spirit of Uma, the protagonist, is curbed by the forceful interruption of the social norms. Though the name Uma signifies the warrior Goddess of Hindu mythology 'Durga'. Uma is not really seen having the deity's strength. Though, Tagore does take Uma a step ahead of Mrinmayi as Uma is seen educating herself. Her playful scribbling on the walls, on the books, her brother's thesis shows her interest towards education and how unconsciously she is driven towards it. This also shows that how women's writings were given no importance. Though she acquires the power of writing but her writing is of no use to the real world.

Uma's exercise book is a place where she is herself, the scribbling and quotes from the texts she reads, little caricatures she draws are her unconscious identification with Joshi, her maid servant all finds its way in her exercise book.

Uma's Khata is an extension of her own self. The life that she is scared to share with anyone finds its way in her book, her Khata.

Once Uma is married, her Exercise book also receives intense humiliation in the sarcasm at her husband's house. Pyarimohan, a typical male chauvinist despises female education and calls it useless. Uma's exercise book encounters harsh predicament. It is physically distorted by her husband as pen and paper in woman's hand was considered as a prelude to widowhood.

Uma finds solace in her Exercise book, whenever the situations seems unfavorable to her. She seeks refuge in her Khata, the space she has allotted to herself.

When her husband dismantles her brain-child, her exercise book she is seen accepting it with subjugation.

The final comment from the narrator shows Pyarimohan's exercise book too but no one is seen as snatching and destroying his childhood from him.

This presentation of presence of two Exercise books and the treatment done to it portrays how the female self is curtailed by forceful interventions of patriarchy. Writing becomes metonymic of the autonomous self-hood of Uma. Probably her husband could sense this and thus Uma's self expression is seen being destroyed by her

husband. Though we see that the warrior named Uma faces defeat but the narrator succeeds to retain the resoluteness in his protest, muted but bold in its character.

The wife's letter (Streer Patra) is a portrayal of another protest by Tagore. The wife in the title is actually the found voice of the wife in the story. The third person mode of storytelling is very unconventional but it unfolds the story in a very different way. The story is actually the letter written to the husband by the protagonist.

The beginning in itself is quite radical:

"...to this day I have never written you a letter. I have always been at hand, you have heard many words from my lips and I too have listened to you. But there has never been an interval in which a letter might have been written"

Mrinal is seen neither submitting nor transforming herself, rather has she stood straight to her viewpoints. She crosses the doors of her married life house and her mere identity of a wife. Mrinal as seen in the story is deprived as a daughter, a wife as well as a mother.

Mrinal doesn't given in to the limits of patriarchy rather questions her existence; she mentions in the letter that this letter is not addressed from the second daughter-in-law of the family. She sees two suppressed women character; her sister in law and Bindu and hence wants to break the jail of women subjugation and taste freedom. Mrinal's sister in law is an ideal Hind wife who doesn't have a voice of her own and lacks courage to live and love openly.

Her initial stir is caused by the love she receives from not so beautiful Bindu. Bindu and Mrinal share a companionship which is very different. Bindu was infatuated with Mrinal; and she cannot contemplate her love for Mrinal as it was not allowed in the society and hence she is compelled to live the life of a wife.

Bindu's suicide is an act of self-assertion for Mrinal as non-acceptance of the norms of the patriarchal society. In her letter she mentions that she will never return to this home as she has seen Bindu and what it means to be a woman in the domestic world. Mrinal wants a life of her own and not one owned by someone else.

She didn't want to end her life like Bindu and opts for something radical. She did not search security in the house under the patriarchal gaze rather decided to explore the infinite opportunities in the world.

The identity of Mrinal shifts from just being ' Mejo Bou' to her own self where she does not have to follow the trivial set rules, set habits, set phrases and set blows. She finally had a self-identity that she did not know existed and that came into being after the suicide of her beloved partner Bindu.

Finally, Mrinal decides to undertake a journey of her own choice, but will she succeed and find an identity of her own is the question unanswered. The third person narrator does not really resolve this query.

Conclusion

Thus all the three tales The Conclusion (Samapti), The Exercise Book (Khata) and The Wife's Letter (Street Patra) unfolds the female psyche.

The short stories unravel the contemporary women and the hindrances they have to face. Tagore's depiction of women in all three characters are different shades showing patriarchy subjugates the women.

These short stories acknowledge the desire and the urgency to allow contemporary women to script a space of their own.