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INTERROGATING THE AESTHETICS OF FEMININE IN TAGORE'S "FULFILLMENT" AND
"THE FAIRY'S IDENTITY"

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore is widely considered as a feminist as most of his literature represents the women struggling to liberate themselves from the shackles of men. Since his childhood, Tagore was brought up amidst the women, spent his life with his female companions in his confined palace and therefore could witness the realistic lives of women. This experience rendered him the path to create bold and beautiful women characters in his literature.

Simultaneously, Tagore also believed in the aesthetics of feminine. He indeed worshipped the feminine. He was surely mesmerized by the feminine beauty and was a devotee of it. His devotion towards the feminine is very subliminally represented in his poetry. Tagore had witnessed and experienced the beauty of the feminine and how man surrenders to it. Apart from poetry, Tagore has discussed the aesthetics of feminine in his short stories also. His stories 'Fulfillment' and 'The Fairy's Identity' are the epitomes of feminine aesthetics. These stories reveal the power of the feminine in a very subtle way, where being feminine is represented as being feministic and powerful.

Key Words: Tagore, Femininity, Fulfillment, The Fairy's Identity

"She is not in the world of the fairy tale where the fair woman sleeps for ages until she is touched by the magic wand. . . . At last, the time has arrived when woman must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power"- Rabindranath Tagore (Charulatha 173)

Tagore and Femininity

Rabindranath Tagore is widely considered as a feminist as most of his literature represents the women struggling to liberate themselves from the shackles of men. Tagore, since his childhood was brought up amidst the women, spent his life with his female companions in his confined palace and therefore could witness the realistic lives of women. This experience rendered him the path to create bold and beautiful women characters in his literature.

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When Tagore's literature is researched, it is analyzed that,

The social reformer in Rabindranath Tagore gave priority to women. They took the centre stage in his prose works. Tagore's portrayal of women characters in his short stories and novels changed consequent to the contemporary changes in the society. Due to English education and the influence of Western culture, women characters were no longer the submissive sufferers of patriarchy. They started to assert their individuality. The heroines created by Tagore during the third phase of his literary career are bold to have a futuristic outlook. (Charulatha 174)

Another researcher Santosh Chakrabarti observes that,

Rabindranath Tagore's socio-familial concept took a new turn as he began to probe the husband-wife relationship within the joint family set up. Gone is the tyrannical in-law and submissive son syndrome in which subservience to the patriarchal norm is the rigour, as Rabindranath Tagore sets out at the beginning of the twentieth century, to apply his mind to the taboo subject of women's emancipation.(Charulatha 175)

The society and cultural aspects construct the gender and sexuality. Men and women are constructed according to the social and cultural values. Men are made to learn self reliance and independence while the women are trained to take care of others and to thwart themselves. But Tagore shuns these constructs and rejects them out rightly in his novels and short stories.

The Feminist Betty Frieden too has observed in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), that the impulse for freedom must come from each individual woman who must find her own answers and her own experience and strategies for liberation.(Charulatha 201) Tagore also elucidates that "this female power embodied in the feminine form is offered as the triumph of the human spirit and woman is God's greatest gift descended on earth to bestow dignity and honor upon man and in his love for her, man finds his freedom".(Chaudhuri 15)

Apart from poetry, Tagore has discussed the aesthetics of feminine in his short stories also. His stories 'Fulfillment' and 'The Fairy's Identity' are the epitomes of feminine aesthetics. These stories reveal the power of the feminine in a very subtle way, where being feminine is represented as being feministic and powerful.

Fulfillment is a meaningful story of a young ascetic who had vowed that the human race should not be denied its right to heaven. He had learnt the incantation for immortality after several quests and practiced the incantation with all his austere soul in the forest. Apart from him, there also lived a poor girl in the forest who spent her days gathering twigs. She would carry fruit and spring water for the ascetic as a mark of respect. As time went by, the ascetic stopped eating and speaking to her. The girl endlessly served him and waited for his words in vain. But she continued her service sincerely and did not expect anything in return. She would pluck flowers and lay them on the ascetic's feet, would stand in the piercing sun and raise her sari-hem to give shade to him and also kept vigil. These activities of the girl described by Tagore prove the selfless service of a girl and how care and concern towards others make her a powerful feminine. Some days before the ascetic would speak to the girl but now he had closed his eyes in deep meditation. Nevertheless, the girl waited for him endlessly with hope.

Meanwhile Lord Indra became aware of the ascetic and asked the lovely Menaka to cut short the ascetic's penance. Menaka denied and asked Indra to send a mortal woman. She said to Indra, "King of the Gods, if you use a weapon of heaven to defeat someone of earth, it is heaven's own defeat. Is there no fatal arrow for a mortal that a mortal woman may guide?" (Winter 116)

As the month of Phalgun came, the ascetic opened his eyes as he wanted to go to a lonely cave. He opened his eyes and saw the girl. "He saw in front of him the twig gathering girl, a flowering *ashok*-twig in her looped up hair, the dress on her body dyed with the *kushumbha*-flower. It was as if she was at once known and unknown to him. It was as if she was a familiar song whose words will not come to mind. It was as if she was a picture at first drawn in outline and at sudden whim of the artist given color". (Winter 117)

The above words describe how the ascetic was mesmerized to witness the presence of the girl as she appeared both known and unknown to him. His feelings here showcase how he was carried away by the mysterious power hidden in the feminine beauty. The girl was now bloomed into a woman and the ascetic was touched

by her selfless service. He accepted her service, granted a spiritual fervor to the girl and went away to a far distant land.

One day his penance was done. Lord Indra came to him and said, "You have won the right to heaven". But the ascetic replied, "In that case there is no need of heaven". Indra said, "What is it you want then?" The ascetic replied, "The twig gathering girl of this forest". (Winter 119)

The last lines of the story are strongly related to the theme of femininity. Tagore abruptly ends the story but the effect of climax is so bewildering that the story remains in the reader's mind forever. The last dialogues of the ascetic prove the power of feminine. The ascetic at the beginning of the story had vowed for the rights of heaven and immortality. But the transformation of the ascetic at the end is quite capturing and meaningful. The ascetic's reply that there is no need of heaven and elevating the girl's position not only into the status of heaven but more than that and seeking her instead of heaven is the beauty of the story. Hence it is quite clear here that Tagore did believe in the beauty of feminine which was equal to the beauty of heaven and even more. According to him, the girl's presence and her selfless love was indeed more than heaven. This renders the meaning that the aesthetics of feminine is deeply embellished in Tagore's stories.

The Fairy's Identity is a beautiful story of a prince who is in search of a true fairy. The prince was past twenty and marriage proposals rushed to him. But the prince wasn't interested in any of them as he desired to marry a fairy from fairyland. His father, the king and his ministers were helpless and unaware of the fairy and fairyland. So the minister's son, who was the friend of prince, was called for help. He reports to the king that "Great King, ever since your son heard tales of Fairyland his one desire has been to marry a fairy". (Winter 132) Thereafter, the king issued an order to find the whereabouts of the fairyland, but in futile. The minister's son was called again and he reveals that the prince heard the fairy tales from a fellow called Mad Nobin, who roams in the forest playing his flute.

Mad Nobin was brought to the king and he said that fairy land existed below the picture mountain and beside the lake Desire. Nobin tells to the king, "Fairies can be seen, but they can't be recognized. They live in disguise. Sometimes they show who they are as they disappear, and then they are never caught". (Winter 113) The prince had thought it to be true and hence went in search of the mountain and lake. He took up his abode near the lake in a deserted temple. He never gave up his acute desire of a meeting a fairy and marrying her even in these difficult times.

One fine dawn he could hear the flute tune, and suddenly he felt that he would meet a fairy. He mounted on his horse and went down the lake Desire. There, "he saw a hill girl sitting near the clustering lake lotuses. Her pitcher was full of water but she did not rise from the lake's side. The dark girl was wearing a *shirish* flower in her black hair above the ear, like the first star that comes out at twilight". The prince went to her and asked her, what fairy are you? Listening to this question, she burst into laughter and it sounded like the unstoppable sudden rains. Then the prince was happy and thought "It seems my dream has come true- the song of her laughter matches the tune of that flute!". (Winter 135)

Mounting the horse he invited her and the girl went with him without a second thought. He took her to a deserted temple and said "now cast off your disguise!.....I desire to see your fairy form". (Winter 135) But the girl replies that she is a forest girl and doesn't know of any disguise. When the prince again persuades her to see her fairy form, the girl bursts into ripples of laughter. Listening to her laughter the prince is delighted and decides to marry her.

The king was informed that his son had married a fairy and so he sent forth the elephants and palanquins. The prince tells the hill girl that now they both had to go to the palace. But the girl was not ready. "Her eyes brimmed over with tears. She remembered her pitcher left at the water's side; she remembered spreading her grass seeds to dry in the yard of her house; she remembered her father and brother had gone hunting and were due to return. She remembered her mother setting up the loom under the tree and softly singing as she wove the clothes that would one day be part of her marriage gift". (Winter 136)

Though the girl refuses to go along, she was forcibly taken away by the prince in a palanquin to the palace. Everyone at the palace wondered what kind of fairy was Kajori, the hill girl. But the prince convinced all of them that she had come to the palace in her disguised form. Many days passed but the prince couldn't even

glimpse any fairy form. "Waking up in the bed in moonlit night, the prince tried to see if a little part of Kajori's disguise had not fallen away. He saw the dark girl's black hair spread loosely out, and her body like the image of a goddess carved perfectly from black stone. The prince thought, "Where is it the fairy hides herself away, like dawn behind the screen of darkness at night's end?" (Winter 137)

As the days passed the prince had become a laughing stock in the palace and forest. So, one morning he warned and threatened her that, she must reveal her true fairy form on the full moon night of Kartik before everyone. Kajori frightfully agreed. The prince was pleased and on the full moon night he dressed himself as a groom and waited eagerly in his room decked with flowers for his fairy bride. He waited till the bright moon sank in the west and the flute began to play. The hill girl Kajori, was nowhere seen in the palace. Everyone in the palace queried him where's the fairy. But then, the prince realized and was reminded of Mad Nobin's words, "A fairy shows who she is as she disappears, and then she is not to be caught". (Winter 138)

The story denotes how an eminent writer like Tagore could create such a phenomenal theme. Probably none in the world of literature have carved the beautiful characters like Tagore. Tagore is unique as he pictures and constructs a woman as a fairy. Though the title of the story is 'The Fairy's Identity', Tagore makes the readers well aware that according to him every woman is basically a fairy and if one tries to impose and dominate her, she disappears. Tagore's ideology on the concept of women, femininity and feminism are very subtly shown here through this story. His creation of the simple hill girl, her feminine beauty, her vanishing when she is tried to control by the prince, all these aspects make us realize how profound were Tagore's thoughts about women. The tale is realistic and the moral of the story should be adopted in the real lives. The story clarifies that if a woman is dominated by man, she abandons him and he loses her. This story of Tagore is another epitome which represents the beauty and power of the feminine. The title of the story is very relevant and meaningful and connected to the theme.

Hence the above findings are evident enough that these two stories written by Tagore are not only feministic but also feminine and celebrate the aesthetics of feminine where feminism meets femininity in a very meaningful and subtle way.

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