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FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S "A WIFE'S LETTER" AND
"THE STORY OF A MUSLIM WOMAN"

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore is known as poet, painter, philosopher and social activist but Tagore as a feminist shaped the underlying theme of women's issues in his writings. He is one of those pioneers of short story writers whose works present reality of society. He is recognised as one of the progressive and new Indian short story writers. Tagore has been champion in delineating women's psychology in his short stories and has commented against gender discrimination. Tagore's attention is on the female protagonists in his short stories titled, "A Wife's Letter" and "Musolmanir Galpo" or "The story of a Muslim Woman," They remained unaffected although the society in which they lived was governed by male-dominated norms and the ways in which they have been victorious in securing their rights thereby becoming the mentors for other women especially through their progressive ideas, boldness and commitment.

Keywords: Female, Search, Empowerment, Identity, Victory.

Introduction

The short story has been a part of culture ever since its dawn and hence can be observed to be ...One of the oldest forms of literature ... which has existed through the ages in various forms like myths, fairy, tales, ballads and parables to name a few (Banerjee 271-279)

As H.E. Bates observes about the history of short story

The history of the short story, through its phases of myth and legend, fable and parable, anecdote and pictorial essay, sketch, and even down to what the crudest provincial reporter calls "a good story," cannot be measured. The account in Genesis of the conflict between Cain and Abel is a short story: the parable of the prodigal son is a short story and in itself a masterpiece of compression for all time; the stories of Salome, Ruth, Judith, and Susannah are all examples of art that were already old, civilized and highly developed some thousands of years before the vogue of Pamela. (Bates 13)

In the Preface of Brander Matthews "The Philosophy of the Short Story (1901)" one can read the term short story used for the first time as a literary genre with his doubt about its nomenclature

Although the short-story still lacks a satisfactory name, it is now seen to be clearly differentiated from the longer novel and also from the tale which merely chances to be not prolonged. From both of these,

it separates itself sharply—from the novel by its brevity and from the more brief tale by its unity, its totality, its concentration upon a single effect or a single sequence nomenclature (Mathews 3)

The hyphen in the name was removed as Ian Reid notes short story as a term appeared for the first time in the supplement of Oxford English Dictionary in 1933. Reid remarks

The OED supplement of 1933 defined the term short story as designating a particular kind of literary product; then it gained formal admittance into the English vocabulary. (Reid 1)

Banerjee states about modern story

The modern short story as a literary form came to prominence during the nineteenth century with writers such as Poe and Hawthorne in the United States; Maupassant and Balzac in France; Pushkin, Gogol and Chekov in Russia and Sir Walter Scott in England. These writers with their great writing skill made the short story a dominant genre in the nineteenth-century world of literature (Banerjee 109)

Majority of the creative works produced around the nations were influenced from the pre-historic legends. India can be believed to be the storehouse of short stories because

In India storytelling is an ancient tradition; the testimony to this fact is the ancient myths be it *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, the fables and parables in *Panchatantra*, the *Jataka Tales* or the *Kathasaritsagara* which are considered to be storehouse of stories and has inspired and continue to inspire the modern short story writers. (109)

M. Rama Rao evaluates the significance of short story in new Indian literature

We have had in Indian stories which lie embedded in the hymns of the *Rigveda*, or scattered in the *Upanishads* and the epics, the stories which constitute the *Panchatantra*, the *Hitopadesha*, the *Sukasaptati*, the *Dasakumaracharita* and the *Vetalpanchavimsati* in Sanskrit, the *Buddhist Jataka Stories* in Pali and a host of similar stories in modern Indian languages. (Rao 216)

Short story came forth in India with the publication of 'Lachmania' (1868) in the second half of the nineteenth century by Fakir Mohan Senapati thereby the label of becoming the first complete modern Indian short story and on the other hand the publication of *Realities of Indian Life: Stories Collected from Criminal Reports of India* (1885) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt creating it as the first collection of short stories.

Indian short story writers such as K. S. Venkataramani, K. Nagarajan, Cornelia Sorabji, S. M. Nateshaa Sastri, Dwijendra Nath Neogi and Sunity Deves. However, the credit of instilling the actual life force in Indian short stories with its typical Indian style goes to Rabindranath Tagore whose short stories were characterized with the concept of conscious existence, imaginative romanticism and idealism.

In the creation of short story writing Rabindranath Tagore had no predecessors whom he imitated the style of any western short story writer as the content of his short stories was completely his own. At the age of sixteen, he wrote his first short story titled "Bhikharini" ("The Beggar woman"). The evaluation of Tagore's career as a short story writer will put across the fact that he penned mostly about the rural Bengal whereas psychological assessment of humans with special reference to women got the majority of his short story writing "Banerjee" (2017) mentioned that, Tagore is credited to have written nearly hundred short stories out of which during the 1890s, he wrote fifty nine short stories majority of which 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).

Tagore's delineation of his female characters in his short stories creates a deep impression in the mind of the readers as the presentation of the women characters are shown in a very realistic way. The prevailing male-dominated system of the society angered the writer as he was against the patriarchal norms suppressed the

human rights of woman. In the short stories of Tagore, patriarchy depicts itself as an important socio-cultural power that commands and demands its own social structure.

Tagore shows the gender discrimination primarily caused by the exploitation and the marginalization of women by males due to biological distinction leading to a psychological vacuum as encountered by the female protagonist of "A Wife's Letter" and "Musolmanir Galpo" or "The story of a Muslim Woman". Tagore highlights the fact that in spite of the societal conditions which were absolutely unacceptable for women. These women characters through their reformist ideas and freedom come out victorious at the end.

Ray writes about his short story "A Wife's Letter":

A Wife's Letter is the first attempt by
Tagore to create a pro-woman piece
of writing... (Ray 281)

The story is about the modern female protagonist Mrinal who after being married for fifteen years, discards her husband's house and goes to Puri forever and from there pens a letter to her husband. She got married in her childhood and entered into the joint family of her husband as the second bride. Mrinal's comments

That I had beauty, it did not take you long to forget.
But you were reminded, every step of the way, that
I also had intelligence. (Tagore, "A Wife's Letter",90)

Mrinal's mother also concerned about the fact that she is wise. Her only comrades were the cows in the stable with whom she often ended up describing her self-composed poems. Mrinal was compelled to live in unhygienic situations during her childbirth which culminated in the delivery of a stillborn female baby. Bindu's contact with Mrinal made her rebellious. Mrinal's sister-in-law was Bindu who due to her family was reluctant to face all the tortures after being married to a psychic person. Mrinal determines to go from her household and desires to take Bindu to pilgrimage to get rid of dangerous environment of her house. Whereas Bindu on the other hand was unable to face the emotional domination from her own relatives and committed suicide before Mrinal could take her for pilgrimage. However, even after demise, Bindu was criticized for her own hardships. Mrinal presented her ideas about her spouse and the patriarchal society in her letter. Simmi Gurwara has the same opinion

In the early years of her marriage, she was captivated by the magic of their sexual life. She eagerly looked forward to a physical union with her husband and enjoyed it immensely thinking physical intimacy to be -all end-all of her married life. (Gurwara 90)

She addressed her spouse with satirical remark in the letter and at the end of the letter, she feels emancipated from all her suppression.

Tagore presents the numerous social issues of the caste system, male-dominated society, lack of equal chances and child marriage which was prevalent during his age. Tagore through the character of Mrinal has shown these several social injustices and paints Mrinal's pain because she proves herself by being artistic, skilful and presentable in her opinions. Through her poetry, Mrinal provided vent to her suppressed feelings and raised her voice and opinions on gender equality and emancipation from the grasp of patriarchal norms. The letter which Mrinal penned the back of embroidery in which "there is no hiding the starkness, no grace, no adornment". (Tagore, "A Wife's Letter",194).

In those days, it was considered that according to Hindu religion a female who became writer, was assumed to become a widow very soon. Tagore addressed issues of female suppression by male-dominated society in his short stories and suggested women's evolution through the third person narration, but here he selects the first person narration. Mrinal, modern woman protagonist, to narrate her own experience in "A

Wife's Letter". Tagore has foreseen the modern age of liberated women who will definitely emerge in the future. Mrinal's effort in writing this letter is connected with the opinion of Helen Cixous, the French Feminist, who, in *The Newly Born Women* (Cixous, 1987) suggested females that

She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing, which, when the moment of liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history. (Cixous 18)

Mrinal is the first female protagonist in Indian literature to protest in the male-dominated society through her efficacious writing.

Simon De Beauvoir's the two prerequisites for woman's freedom

Economic independence and liberation from orthodox traditions of society. (Beauvoir 328)

Mrinal pens this letter from Puri, where she lives forever at the age of twenty-seven after fifteen years of married life. Tandon remarks

A woman's story, inevitably silenced by androcentric

Culture, narrated from a woman's point of view by

Women writers in itself is a challenge to the male power (Tandon 96)

Bindu's demise awakened Mrinal's understanding. It motivates Mrinal's identity and changes her into an emancipated woman. After fifteen years of conscious existence as a wife suffering from endless pain as a human being. Mrinal feels that her contentment cannot be gained as a wife but as a woman. She announces that she will live like Meerabai, and ends her letter with the words

Breaking free from the shelter beneath your feet, Mrinal (Tagore, "A Wife's Letter", 107)

It is to be noticed here that she puts her signature in the letter as „Mrinal“ and not in the nomenclature attributed to her - "Mejo Bou," the second daughter-in-law. The acquisition of name Mrinal is symbolic of a person's identity, and by this signature, Mrinal declares that she has left her individuality as "Mejo Bou" the second daughter-in-law of the family and has selected to explore her own self. Tagore's creative works had a grave impact on the traditional socio-cultural system of his period and on account of his liberal opinions, he had to encountered considerable remarks from the orthodox Bengali scholars.

"Musolmanir Galpo" or "The story of a Muslim Woman" published in 1955 in *Ritupatra*. The tale is about Kamala, who was protected from the hands of one dacoit, Habir Khan when she was disowned by her own family members who believed that Kamala had lost her caste by searching shelter in a Muslim's house. Habir Khan, on the other hand, permits Kamala to continue staying in his house where she can perform Hindu religion. During her stay, she was never convinced to convert her religion into Islam. Kamala felt that humanity is the best caste and religion. Habir Khan, despite being a Muslim, defended her and provided shelter to her when she was rootless. She was handled with care and heed. No man was permitted near the house where Kamala was living. Khan's son visited Kamala secretly culminated in the emotional relation between them. Then one day she stated to Habir Khan

Father, I have no religion of my own. The man I love is my religion. I could not find the grace of God in the religion which deprived me of all love and dumped me to the garbage heap of neglect. The deity there humiliated me every day. I can't forget such insults. Father, I discovered love for the first time in your house. I realized that the life of a destitute like me has some value. I worship the deity which has sheltered me through the respect of such love. He's my God—he's neither Hindu nor Muslim. I've accepted your second son Karim; my life and my religion have mingled with him. You can convert me to Islam, I've no objection—may be, I belong to two faiths (Tagore, "The Story of Muslim Woman" 1)

Despite being discarded by her family, she secured her sister Sarala from the dacoits who assaulted her bridal palanquin. The last lines of the story signify a definite human message

Uncle, my pranam to you. Don't be afraid, I won't touch your feet. Now take your daughter back home. Nothing has made her untouchable. Tell my aunt I had to take her grudging food and clothes for long, and never thought I could repay your debt like this. I've also brought for Sarala a red silk sari and this brocade sitting mat. If my sister is ever in trouble, let her remember that she has a Muslim elder sister to protect (Tagore, 1)

Tagore through the modern female protagonist of this story, Kamala shows modern female who is revolutionary in nature and has broken her faith in Hindu religion and achieves spiritual and mental contentment in being a Muslim. Meherjan is treated her due honour, respect and above all affection in Habir Khan's household.

Conclusion

The short stories titled "Wife's letter" and "Musolmanir Galpo" or "The story of a Muslim Woman" delineates how Rabindranath Tagore has shown his women characters as revolutionary, courageous, confident, focused "and conscious of their identity" (Banerjee 271-279). The female protagonist of these short stories defied the male-oriented norms of their period i.e. to remain crushed and guided the cause of female liberation from the chains of male-dominated society. They protested in a strong manner against the male-oriented society and through their effort, power, and strong will come out victorious. Similarly Seema Malik says about Astha in Manju Kapur's that...Astha is Kapur's *A Married Woman* that...Astha is Kapur's *New Woman*, 'conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve a life for herself, to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes.' (Malik 171)

These short stories are very short, but they leave a deep impact and appeal to humanity as a whole. The revolutionary ideas of Mrinal and Kamala gets transplanted in the minds and hearts of the social members. This is the art which excellent creative writers like Tagore can create. As has been correctly stated

Rabindranath's success as a master short story writer was

actually ensured by his essentially lyrical temperament

since ... there is a close affinity between a short story and lyric (Bandyopadhyay 62)

In Tagore's short stories female protagonists perform like men that stands for masculinity. So, we can figure out that they are modern women. Even the writer tries to balance the relationship between male and female. Women characters have feminine qualities but her deeds show that they are revolutionary women. In these short stories they represent a modern women who act like revolutionary women characters in the Indian society. The writer gives justice for the women's role by showing them as new women who seek their individual identity in the conventional world. They wish to create new history by highlighting themselves as modern women.

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