



CHANDORA AND MRINAL— TWO CONTRASTING CHARACTERS PRESENTED BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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Abstract:

Tagore took an active part in Bengal Renaissance which took place during the 19th century. He wrote about the rights of women and the need of women's education. It seems that his women characters project different virtues and morals of traditional Indian life to demonstrate moral path to human beings. In the male dominated society like India, the husbands dominate their wives in many traditions in the conjugal life. Chandora is symbolic of how society imbrutes women and ravages their rights. Feminine voices are often silenced and women are considered to be sacrificial and dispensable. Tagore's Mrinal, however, is an emancipated woman who prioritises self-esteem and independence instead of being servile to her husband. She faces stark opposition and societal pressures to curb her free spirit, however, she finally responds to her true self and resolves to become a writer. Chandora embraces death silently while Mrinal is bold enough to leave her husband and lead her life independently.

Keywords: dehumanization, women, punishment, protest, freedom.

Certain social malpractices came under review during the Bengal Renaissance. Intellectuals of the Bengal Renaissance attempted to exorcise the hauntings of evil customs and brought about a much needed social and cultural amelioration. Reconstruction of women's social status was one of the agenda. Tagore took an active part in Bengal Renaissance which took place during the 19th century. He wrote about the rights of women and harped upon the exigency of educating women. These reformers might have been censured for their embarrassed stance regarding the lack of education and adherence to superstitious 'unscience' in the women of their region but at the same time they are lauded for being pioneers who amended existing regressive social values pertaining to women. In Indian context the notion of womankind is majorly discussed with the mythic ideal women characters from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. The entire image of the Indian woman has been embodied by the perfect model of *Sita* and *Savitri*. Women

were dexpected to function in an exemplary way in multiple character prototypes such as that of a caring mother, loving sister, docile wife or a repressed victim of patriarchy. Tagore's women characters in literary writings show the underlying socially and morally accepted values of traditional Indian lives which would act as a code of conduct for other Bengali women. In the context of Indian culture and society in ancient era, the women have equal status and rights as with men in all fields during the early Vedic period but it begins to turn down in medieval period of India. During the Medieval period women were treated as inferior to men.

Women in Ancient India were treated as equals with men. Various conquests and the introduction of different religions brought about a reduction in the status of women and labelled them inferior to men. In order to guard themselves, Indian women started using 'Purdah', a kind of veil which resulted in the restriction of freedom of women. People started to consider a girl as burden. Even some of the orthodox traditions in different communities such as Sati, Jauhar, and Devadasi have been projected to exploit women. Some of these practices are still observed in isolated parts of India. It is essential to note that the Purdah practice is also observed in modern age. The society strongly follows the principles of patriarchal culture in the medieval period in India. In Indian cultural rituals, women have second place and on the other hand man is observed to play very vital position in performing sacred rituals. In the male dominated society like India, the husbands dominate their wives in many traditions in the conjugal life. Conventionally it is supposed that wives are corporal and emotional selves. Even the husbands do not hesitate to dishonour their wives on trivial things in marital life. The status of women in modern age is a kind of contradiction as compared to medieval age in India. The women in modern times have acquired equal rights according to Indian constitution but certainly they have to struggle for their rights in social life. Women might be labelled equal to men in terms of official nomenclature and through legislation, but they have to struggle for equal status in social and married life. The women in the modern civilization have acquired freedom in many ways such as they have trouble-free right to learn, and community is more open-minded in approach to educate women. Therefore it can be said that the position of women in modern age is improved than in the medieval age. Nevertheless some of the problems related to women remained same, e.g., even today in some families the head of family decides the marriages in India and specially a young girl is not consulted but is told to marry a boy whom her family has selected and the young girl is bound to accept it. In the conjugal life, wife has to be faithful, pay respect to the elder persons in the family and remain truthful to her husband and relatives to conserve the respect in society.

Through *The Punishment*, Tagore shows how a patriarchal society silences the voices of women and considers them sacrificial. It is a narrative of a simple, uninvolved woman who becomes the sacrificial at the altar of an unjust judicial system and a capricious social structure. The two brothers are portrayed as creatures of rationality who provide for survival as "they work in the fields", while the two women (the wives) are uncontrollable forces inclined to "quarrel and shout". The men are named in the very beginning while the women remain anonymous till the fifth paragraph. This hints at the fact that the women are

rendered invisible by Tagore as their identity and voice are eclipsed and suppressed respectively. The episode where Chandora's screams are silenced is very much symbolic of how society relegates women to an insignificant position. As the story progresses she becomes so dumb that she becomes invisible to the society and her husband and hence becomes expendable.

The Punishment is the story of two brothers, Dukhiram and Chidam, who returns home from a day's work. Dukhiram requests his wife Radha to serve him food but Radha responds in an enraged manner which incites Dukhiram and he in turn loses control over himself and in a rage of fury kills Radha using a knife as the instrument of murder. His brother Chidam and his wife Chandora become aghast with shock and bewilderment. However, Chidam tries to save his brother from trial and subsequent retribution and spreads the message that Chandora had committed the crime. Everyone believes what he says as they attribute Radha and Chandora's quarrels to be the motive behind the murder. Chandora feels insulted to the core and forsaken as she is indicted, dragged to the court and becomes the victim of a humiliating litigation. Later on Chidam has a change of heart realising his error of framing Chandora. Dukhiram also feels remorse for Chandora's plight and tells the truth that he had killed Radha. They attempt to salvage Chandora from death penalty by revealing the truth, however, Chandora resolves not to return to her husband and initially remains silent. Her silence is perceived as an acknowledgement of her crime. The judge perceives the two brother's proclamations to be an alibi for saving Chandora. Later, she aligns herself with her doomed destiny by testifying that she had murdered Radha and accepts death heroically instead of returning to a system that considers women as expendables. The story traces the miserable predicament of women who were thought to be sacrificial objects in the contemporary Bengali society of the late 1800s.

It is not only Chandora who is punished but also her husband who did not think of the consequences of bringing false allegation against Chandora. He tried to save his brother as he would get another wife but not another brother. This proves the hollowness of Chidam as a husband who can sacrifice his wife at the cost of his brother. He did not think twice to put the blame on Chandora. He did not think how much it would hurt her who is totally innocent as if she is a property to be used in whatever way he likes. Chandora punishes Chidam by permanently moving out of his life and leaving him to suffer with the guilt as long as he will live in this world. His punishment is more painful as he will have to carry the burden of guilt forever

Unfortunately, the story displays the bestial attributes of men and patriarchy as they are not ashamed of degrading an innocent woman by accusing her to be a murderer. Chidam's narrative debases Chandora to the level of an animal and implies that she should face the same fate which an animal faces when it becomes uncontrollable. The story also questions the judicial system which did not opt for an impartial investigation. Chandora is denied a legitimate trial due to her husband and brother-in-law's conspiracy. She is the victim of a patriarchal society which considers women as objects. This society dehumanizes women and categorizes them as dispensables. Women become easy targets as they have been traditionally thought to be weaker than men in any regard, whether physical, mental, financial or social. The loss of a brother would

have been great so Chandora becomes the replacement. Women are like things who could be disposed off at any time. This reduction in women's status is a reflection of how the civilised fabric of society had become loose. Society had itself changed into a dehumanized reservoir of decaying values.

Tagore addresses the issue of reduction in status of women through his writing and tries to give voice to a marginalised segment of society. The way he represents women as invisible and sacrificial gives a wide understanding of society. Chandora's renunciation of her husband and society takes away their control over her. Chandora's "such fierce, passionate pride," is symbolic of how she embraces her true self.

On the other hand, Mrinal from *The Wife's Letter* is possibly one of the most powerful character portrayals of a 19th century colonial Bengali woman unveiling the evils of heterosexism that exists in this society. *The Wife's Letter* is a story of a young woman who ultimately showed the courage to break the shackles that confined¹ her to the house for fifteen years since her marriage in the household as the "mejo bou". She leaves her household after she discovered that her in-laws have forced her sister-in-law's younger sister, Bindu into an abusive marriage which ultimately leads to the latter immolating herself to escape the violence which was perpetuated on her in the name of marriage. She silently died experiencing the hypocritical treatment meted out by her in-laws to those who belong to the lower class or caste; like any other household of the contemporary time, her in-laws family too pressurized her to become the perfect mother and wife, that is, to be the ideal *sugrihini*², and finally at the end their hypocritical nature came to the fore front when they arranged Bindu's marriage with a mentally challenged man as they considered Bindu to be a burden on their family as she was an 'orphaned girl' with no financial asset. Bindu's plight gave Mrinal the courage to raise voice against her husband and his family. Thus she breaks the cocoon of being the "mejo bou" and ultimately she went on a search for her own identity.

She sends a letter to her husband which is of critical importance to practitioners of gender studies as she addressed this letter to her husband and starts her letter with "Sricharankamaleshu" which literally translates to 'lotus feet' which shows that the ideal place for a wife is at the feet of her husband. In this letter she traces her journey of twenty seven years in this world. She wrote how he (her husband) too attempted to kill her innate nature, her passion, her talents. She pointed out that how being a husband he never stood against the wrong doings of his family to his wife. The end of the letter is interesting to note because this showed the liberated spirit of Mrinal. She ends it with "Tomader charantalasryochinno" translates to 'freed from the shelter beneath your feet' and she signed her letter as "Mrinal" embracing her true self/ identity not as "mejo bou". Mrinal became Tagore's mouthpiece just like Nora for Ibsen that one should always choose her innate self above anything because this hetero-hegemonic normative society will

¹. Here confinement is used in a metaphorical sense, symbolizing a restriction on her natural abilities and lack of support that would help her explore such abilities.

². *Sugrihini* refers to the exemplary caregiver who prioritise the family before self in a self-destructive way reminding us of legendary prototypes such as *Sita*, *Savitri*.

always try to subjugate/oppress a woman by enforcing all forms of *vidhinishedha* on her which will make her a perfect bonsai of this phallus dominated society.

Streer Patra (The Wife's Letter) was written in an epistolary form by Tagore, about a woman's plight and her evolution to a 'liberated individual self'. The story however covers much more important issues than what it presents at face value. The text reflects the difficulty of an orphan girl and how society oppressed them during the 19th century. The plot centres on Mrinal, a girl from a remote village who is married to an upper-class conservative patriarchal household when she was only twelve years old. After her marriage, she was teased at every step for not being the urbanized "*mejo bou*" of the house 'Number 27, Makhan Boral Lane' of then Calcutta. Her in-laws were well aware of her intelligence and considered it as a threat. She had a monotonous life devoid of any companionship, not even from her husband. When Bindu, the orphaned sister of Mrinal's sister-in-law came in the household she became Mrinal's silver lining. When her affinal family was harassing Bindu for staying at their place Mrinal took Bindu under her shelter. Both these women complemented each other, as they fulfill the void in each other's life.

However, Mrinal's affinal family made a plan to get rid of an orphaned girl as she is double burden for them so they soon arranged her marriage to a mentally-challenged man. Frightened by her exploitative in-laws, Bindu takes to her heels and abandon the house of her in-laws within three days of marriage only to return to Mrinal. However, Bindu was sent back to her in-laws place. Finally, Mrinal decides to go to any length to rescue Bindu from this abusive matrimony and she called her brother, Sarat to help Bindu to escape her affinal house and bring her to Mrinal; instead Sarat brought the news that Bindu immolated herself. That very moment she realized that she was living a life of someone ("*mejo bou*") which she was not. In order to find her true self and some solace she went on a pilgrimage. Tagore was inspired to write the character of Bindu in *The Wife's Letter* when a reader of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (1914) asked him to write on the widely reported incident that was the death of a girl named, *Snehlata*, a young Bengali woman like Bindu had no fortune that Snehalata's parents can offer as dowry to the groom's family, thus she took the step of immolating herself in order to save her parents from the extreme pressure of the society to arrange dowry for her marriage. The character portrayal of Bindu was not only a tribute to one Snehlata but to countless Snehalata(s) of any phallogocentric hegemonic societal structure where 'women with no fortune' cannot give voice to their torturous experiences. The fate that Bindu experienced was not something exclusive to the 19th century only, it is very much prevalent in 2020 too.

Through Mrinal's narration of her own experiences as a woman in the world for twenty seven years we can see how flexible patriarchy is as it adapts to any different conditions to keep the patriarchal structure of the society intact. She recalled how both her parents waited 'anxiously' for the approval of the groom's uncle when groom's family came to see her. She even said why a well affluent urban family chose a girl of a remote village to be their daughter-in-law because she possessed the beauty which their elder daughter-in-law lacked; Thus a woman's pride possession is her 'beauty' as this is the only criteria for a woman which can make her the wife of a wealthy family. A woman with beauty is always ranked top in the marriage

market but even this criteria Bindu lacked. Mrinal's husband once enquires her *what profit will she gain from her literary pursuits; will this learning be able to fetch her honor like 'Raichand' and 'Premchand'?* Mrinal shared how she has always been appreciated for her beauty and never for her intelligence as 'intelligent women' are always considered as the 'trouble maker' for a family, ultimately for society. She liked to think and behave in an unorthodox manner that transgressed all defined conventions of a married life. Tagore manifest these notions through Mrinal's mother's apprehensions about her daughter's inquisitive nature and its consequences on her future.

At one place Mrinal narrates that how her *mother always* used to get afraid of her intelligence *as she considered it a curse for her daughter's perfect matrimonial life*. This sums up how women were viewed as mere objects of beauty and society always believed that a woman cannot be controlled if she possess a 'mind of her own', as it will enable her to question the existing dichotomies of the society which sees women always as the 'second sex'. Mrinal *knew that if she follows her brain then she will be challenging the age old doctrines prescribed by the Hindu Shastras for a woman. Even she will face resistance from her own family*. The thought that women too possess the same rationality as their male counterparts and they like the men of their contemporary times can participate in activities of the *bahir* (public sphere) was not prevalent in the 19th century Colonial India rather it was a celebrated notion that women must remain in the *andarmahal* (private sphere) to deal with household chores and child rearing. Hence, the preservers of the patriarchal society always fear 'women with a brain' as their brain will always call for resistance against the unjust treatment of any living soul.

Both Chandora and Mrinal protest against patriarchy but in different ways. Chandora embraces death silently while Mrinal is bold enough to leave her husband and lead her life independently. The story's final episode shows Mrinal's determination and her resolution to break the shackles of married life governed by patriarchy and start a new life where self-esteem would not be affected. One may question whether this new journey of Mrinal will give her the absolute freedom that she hoped for. *A Wife's Letter*, traces a woman's journey in the hegemonic normative society from the moment she attains a marriageable age; she was treated like a showpiece when her would-be in-laws came to 'see' her before marriage like the way we buy vegetables by scrutinizing it before purchase; her assigned role as a subordinate to her husband who never praised her passion or talents; her experiences as a mother and also losing the child within short span of time; the treatment she received from her in-laws and finally her realization of her 'own' free self. If Bindu represents the ordinary lot of women who had to succumb to the male domination and embrace death silently rather than live their life independently, Mrinal represents the stronger women who can ignore the male dominance and define their own life.

Tagore's treatment of the two themes in these stories unveils the hollowness of the sugar coated 'reform movement' that took place in Colonial India during the 19th century. It is true that the social reform movement that took place gave women a light of hope such as the abolition of the suttee in 1829, widow remarriage act in 1856, the age of consent act in 1891. Yet all these reforms could not do much to lift the

position of their women folk at that point of time as these reforms remained only in the pages, it was hardly applied to the masses household. Many critics of the Colonial India are of the opinion that the social reformers were Western-educated Indian men who in order to uplift Indian society and its culture felt that their women's position need to be uplifted as their colonial masters had labeled native Indian culture as 'brutish' and 'barbaric'. Two things need to be pointed out here that the reforms that were done for women were initiated by male members of the society³ and there was hardly any female voice in the arena. No woman was asked about their opinion regarding these reforms. Secondly, the reformers supported these reforms by referring to the *Shastras*. Women were allowed to study so that they can become the *bhadramahila*⁴ who were considered ideal companion for a Western educated Bengali man. Again women were forced to adapt themselves to this new *bhadramahila* ideal for becoming the perfect wives to their husbands. Women were always considered as the barometer of respectability for the family (microscopic symbol for society), that is why they are always under moral policing and any transgression from the prescribed doctrines are always punished. They carry the burden of the family honor; one may find it ironical because these are the same women who were not considered for carrying the lineage of the family neither in their parental household nor in their matrimonial home. They are considered the "angel of the house" but in reality they have no house of their own. They are the transferable 'property' first to her father then to her husband and finally to her son. Though many reforms took place for the welfare of women but there was hardly any change in the condition of women in the 19th century. The fact whether literature can eradicate social evils is questionable. It may not be able to reform honour killings and domestic violence and many more, but it ends at raising awareness. Literature tends to mould us into an emphatic world view. It is with the sense of empathy and greater sense of realization of the underlying causes of social issues that will enable us to salvage women and their position which they deserve and are demanding for centuries.

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3. These male reformers again assumed the role of the protector, the guardian who need to uplift the downtroddens of the society.

4. A hypocritical construct where the Indian woman would receive a western education and behave like an European consort for her husband while at the same time harbouring Indian values of 'good wife' and 'motherhood'