



Anticipation Of Feminism In Rabindranath Tagore's Works: An Analysis Of Selected Short Stories

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the selected short stories of Rabindranath Tagore, written at a time when feminism was not a well-developed concept. India, in the 19th and 20th centuries, when Tagore wrote, was a deeply patriarchal, oppressive and stifling society. Tagore was a philosopher, educationist, writer, artist, social reformer, and intellectual -all rolled into one- who used the medium of literature to bring about changes in society, which greatly influenced the national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. This paper examines five short stories of Tagore: "Exercise-book", "Profit and Loss", "Giribala", "Judge" and "The Skeleton". Tagore strongly advocates for the education of women, as an essential condition for their upliftment. He supports the movement of women from the stifling four walls of their homes to the forefront of society, to take up roles that were a faraway dream till then. He stands against the evil practices like dowry system which commodify women and put a price to their life, freedom and dignity. He also comments on the condition of widows of the time, who were cursed to a life time of loneliness and abuse and neglect. We can see in Tagore's works powerful anticipations of the feminist thrust which from the second half of the 20th century onwards was gaining momentum on a global level as a movement advocating equal rights and opportunities for women and for their ultimate liberation from enslavement and misery in different guises. Through his works he gives voice to the voiceless and, from a larger humane perspective as a trail blazer which was to cater to greater cultural consequences quite progressively in later decades leading to larger perspectives on women's liberation.

Index Terms - Tagore, feminism, women in India, education, gender, equality, culture, liberation.

Feminism, the belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, began in the Western world in the 19th century and slowly moved to other parts of the globe. However, the movement gained momentum and established roots in countries like India only much later. The condition of women during this time was in dire straits with no freedom, no rights and no voice. According to Maitrayee Chaudhuri, feminism in India, unlike the West, was initiated by men and later joined by women. And an important name in this development is Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali writer, philosopher and social reformer. Tagore's works dealt with issues of women of his time and he advocated for a better life for the women. Tagore was a social reformer who aimed for the progress and betterment of the women's condition socially, economically, and politically. His literary works, in addition to his essays and speeches, became a voice for the voiceless, the marginalized and the deprived. Tagore aimed for social reformation through his literary works. His poems, short stories and novels became a vehicle for social change and the upliftment of women became an important goal. In his work *The Home and the World*, Tagore mentioned, "For we women are not only the deities of the household fire, but the flame of the soul itself". These words exemplify the utmost importance given to women in Tagore's works, providing a space for their empowerment in a highly patriarchal society. Women were not merely objects to decorate homes, but beings with a voice of their own and ideas that can shape the society.

His views on women's role in society contributed to political ideologies of the time and influenced leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, who urged women to come forward in the Independence movement. This paper analyses the anticipations of feminism in Tagore's works, written during a time when women's liberation was a faraway topic in the Indian society.

Tagore's works paved the way for the society's transition from the traditional patriarchal mindset to a much liberal, modern outlook. This paper examines five short stories of Rabindranath Tagore, "Exercise-book", "Profit and Loss", "Giribala", "The Judge" and "The Skeleton". "Exercise-book" is the story of a young girl Uma who uses the power of words to cope up with the conditions of her life. "Profit and Loss" examines the strong stand taken by a woman, Nirupama against the evil practice of dowry system. "Giribala" is the protagonist's journey from a housewife, caught between the four walls of her husband's home to an actress powerful and talented enough to command admiration. "The Judge" and "The Skeleton" portrays the condition of widows during the time, denied of a place in the society, cursed to a life of loneliness and deprivation.

Feminism began in the West in the 19th century and spread to other parts of the world, aiming for equality of genders in all fronts. "The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the women's movement of the 1960s" (Barry 123). It was after 1960s that the movement gained full-fledged traction and became widely popular across the globe. In India, the 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of ruthless patriarchy that suffocated the voice of women and denied them even the very basic rights. The Indian society was rampant with evil practices such as child marriage, Sati, the Purdah system, female infanticide, dowry system and polygamy. These practices ensured the enslavement of women, trapping them inside their homes, always subservient to the males of the family. The colonial rule was not much different in the treatment of women, as they upheld the laws that glorified the patriarchal system and considered women as second class citizens. Women were denied education, property rights, any say in the matters of marriage or family issues and equal work opportunities. They were expected to reside inside homes, with no ambition, no opinions and no rights. It was with the intervention of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai and others that condition of women began to improve. The Bengal Renaissance, helmed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and supported by Rabindranath Tagore, changed the course of women's history and declared war on patriarchy. They advocated for the rights of women, especially right to education and gender equality. While Ram Mohan Roy took efforts to abolish practices like sati and child marriage and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar strived for widow remarriage, Tagore aimed for a reformation through his literature. Efforts were made to educate girls and schools were opened for this purpose, like a girls' school in Bombay in 1824. Evil social practices like sati was abolished in 1829 and reformers fought a long battle against the practice of child marriage. Even with such efforts taking centre stage, feminism was not a familiar concept for Indian society.

Rabindranath Tagore is "[n]ot a man only but an age has made its way at last into history. ... He has summed up in himself a whole age, in which India had moved into the modern world" (qtd. in Sen). Tagore's works oversaw a transition from tradition to modernity and spearheaded women's liberation in the Indian society. "Very early in life, Tagore learnt the boundaries that could be imposed by unimaginative individuals as an impediment to freedom, which he strove all his life to challenge" (Sen). His works were dedicated to uproot the societal forces that curtailed an individual's freedom, particularly that of a woman. He witnessed the evils of his society and practices that were in place to marginalize women and take away their right to better life. "Tagore aligned his affections with the intellectual group 'BrahmoSamaj', ... with the advancement of the society, ... was in support of those revolutionary changes in the society which aimed at casting away superstitions, ill-practices, and obsolete customs, ... was supportive of social and cultural changes which could make people more enlightened and free" (Tiwari 71). Tagore was visionary, who advocated for equality and liberation of women and drew out many aspects of women's rights which are part of the feminist theory now. At a time when feminism was not even a well-developed concept in India, Tagore wrote about the urgency of women's emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy and inequality. His works dealt with the themes of women's equality, freedom, dignity, rights and education. He understood the importance of education in realizing woman's liberation, supported the women's protests against domestic and familial abuse, stood against evil practices like dowry system and spoke up for the rights and dignity of widows. Tagore has authored many works celebrated by feminists, "The Home and the World", "Chokher Bali", "The Broken Nest", "Noukadubi", "Gora", "Chaturanga" and "The Last Poem". These works deal with the injustice done to women, the educated women who spoke up for their rights and freedom and the slow emergence of the 'new women' who demanded boldly their right to education and professional careers and fought against social evils like caste system, untouchability and religious hypocrisy. Tagore's western education shaped his thoughts on

a liberal and understanding society, which in turn was expressed through his literary works. He wanted to bring about social change by infusing progressive ideas in matters of human relationship, family, marriage, gender roles and thus the very functioning of society. His works had profound impact not only on Bengali literature and culture but also on India's national cultural perspective during his own time as well as in generations to come.

"Exercise-book" is the story of a young girl Uma, who becomes a victim of child marriage and struggles to find a footing in an unfamiliar, alien household. Her education, her writing becomes her only solace. Uma has basic education and knows how to write and read. That itself was considered a trouble by the patriarchal society. "As soon as she learnt to write, Uma caused tremendous trouble" (Tagore 111). Uma was forbidden to write for some time by her elder brother Gobindlal when she accidentally scribbled on his essays. The punishment she received exceeded the mistake she made. Gobindlal gifted an exercise book to Uma as a compensation later. This book became her most valued possession and an outlet of her thoughts and imaginations. However as she was married off to her brother's friend, Pyarimohan at the tender age of nine, she was prohibited from writing anymore. Her mother's advice to her was "... don't spend your time reading and writing" (Tagore 114). She was expected to devote all her time to house work and caring of her in-laws and husband. Pyarimohan was a hypocrite, who was educated but was averse to modern ideas. He strongly believed in the age old patriarchal notions and put them to effect in his household. Uma, at such a young age was thrust into marriage like many at the time and was expected to follow the rules and regulations of the society. However, she could not accept this changes and understood the problems that awaited her. She was perceptive enough to understand that "... there would be no mercy in the house where she was going" (Tagore 113). It was the old servant Yashi who was kind enough to take Uma's exercise-book to her new house, giving her "a taste of the cherished freedom that is a young girl's due" (Tagore 113). The exercise-book became a source of comfort for Uma and writing helped her deal with her new life. However, soon Uma was made to give up her exercise-book too by her husband, who was furious that woman in his household dared to write something. She never got her book back while no one made Pyarimohan give up his exercise-book. With this ending Tagore shows the very evident gender biases of the society. A man was given freedom to write as he please even with very little talent while a woman daring to write was considered a crime. Uma's brother and husband are representatives of the patriarchal society that forbade a woman from expressing herself and curtailed her basic right to education. Tagore stands firmly by his belief that education is a very important means for a woman to achieve independence and interrogate her circumstances. This is why the patriarchal society feared educating the young women and instead burdened them with domestic duties.

"Profit and Loss" is the story of a young girl Nirupama and the struggles faced by her father to pay the heavy dowry. The father and daughter are caught in the evil ways of society, unable to stand up against the bullying of the in-laws. The groom's family demand a heavy sum of 10,000 rupees (a huge amount in those days) and many other additional gifts. Nirupama's father, Ramsundar struggles to collect the money and when he fails to do so, they are subjected to anger and ridicule. The groom intervenes to complete the marriage but Nirupama's condition at her husband's place is miserable and pathetic. Her husband is a man with good education, who stands up against the traditional customs that put a price on a woman's life and dignity. While Nirupama has little say in the matter of her marriage, the groom rebels against the stifling and degrading customs and his action is termed as "the poisonous fruits of modern education" (Tagore 18). However, this does not stop the husband's family from harassing both the girl and her father continuously. Nirupama leads a miserable life in her husband's house in his absence and her father struggles to collect the remaining money. She is even denied the right to see her father or visit her maternal home. As Ramsundar gathers the money, by selling his home and earning the wrath of his sons, Nirupama finally stands up for her dignity. She refuses to be treated like a mere object that can be sold and bought with a price. She questions her father "Do you think I have no honour? Do you think I am just a money-bag...?" (Tagore 21). Her open rebellion don't sit well with her deeply patriarchal in-laws, who puts more restrictions on her. She suffers for challenging the deep rooted evil practices, finally succumbing to death. However her death does not change anything and her in-laws start looking for a new bride, this time with a dowry of 20,000 rupees. This is a cycle that was so prevalent in the society of Tagore's time and he understood the struggles of uprooting such centuries-old practices. He lighted up a path of revolt, a struggle that continues to this day.

While Uma and Nirupama succumb to the pressures of society, Giribala takes the reign of her life in her hands and move towards a better life. Giribala was left to suffer inside the four walls of her house while her husband spends his time drinking, merry-making and in the company of other women. He also spend his time at the theatre, creating a ruckus while the women in the household was prohibited to go there. Gopinath, her husband believed that “the theatre was a place not fit for any decent woman to visit” (Tagore 554). This is an indicator of the hypocrisy of the society that put restrictions on women, while the men enjoyed themselves. It was the women who were supposed to honour the family’s dignity and the men can choose to do whatever they wished to do. It was against this hypocrisy that Giribala revolts, attending the theatre, flouting the rules of the society. There she experiences the magic of art and the freedom of creativity. She is captivated by the stage, the settings and finally feels free from “her walled up terrace and joyless home” (Tagore 556). As her husband beats her up to take away her jewellery, Giribala finally takes a stand and walks away from her house. She joins a theatre group and becomes the lead actress in their play. “Giribala breaks the age old tradition of obliged wifehood. As a liberated woman, she becomes a pioneer to change the status of the wife in the social scenario” (Banerjee 275). Gopinath is shocked to see his wife on stage but fails to act against her. Her ultimate revenge against her husband and the society is to take up the profession of an actor that was always seen as dishonourable. Giribala’s protest was against the double standards of the patriarchal society that dictated the rights and wrongs in a woman’s life quite arbitrarily. Tagore was in fact channelling the power of art, literature and creativity to rebel against the conventions of society. Later the feminists took up art and literature as a tool to fight the injustices of the traditional society.

Tagore’s “The Judge” and “The Skeleton” tell the story of two widows who are caught in the oppressive laws of the period, denied of a dignified life or second chances. These women are child brides, married off and widowed at young age. They are then forced to follow austere life devoid of any joy or happiness. Khiroda of “The Judge” is a woman driven by poverty, hunger and helplessness and tries to commit suicide with her three year old son. The child dies while Khiroda is saved and convicted for murder. The judge Mohitmohan Dutta who gives the verdict is a representative of the society that felt the need to punish women who were “yearning to sever their familial ties” (Tagore 669). Helpless women who struggled to fill their stomach and took up dishonourable profession had to pay the price of defying the social norms. The same men who take advantage of these women convict them mercilessly without considering their dire situation. The judge who punished Khiroda was the one who was responsible for condition. As a young widow, she was enticed by that very man, who lured her away from her home and later abandoned her. She was a young girl of fourteen or fifteen years of age, who was prohibited from enjoying the joys of life. Her lonely life as a widow aided Mohit to lure her into his trap. Separated from the reality of life, she fell for his charm and started worshipping him. It was the restrictions put on her by the society that ultimately led to her doom. “The Skeleton” is the story of Mrignoyonee, a ghost who is recalling her life and the circumstances of her death. She was widowed at a young age and returned to her father’s home with great hope, not knowing the dreary life that awaited her. She was girl confident of herself and didn’t shy away from expressing herself. However, the society of Tagore’s time was hostile to women who could stand up for herself. Widow re-marriage was forbidden at that time, despite the efforts of the reformers. This doomed the young girl’s affection for her brother’s friend, Shekhar. Unable to accept the ways of society she poisons the man and herself. Two young lives met a tragic end because of the rigid laws of the patriarchal society. By showing two consequences for the strict norms of the society, Tagore calls attention to the numerous lives spoiled because of it, and urges for a change.

Rabindranath Tagore’s fiction was a mirror of the society he lived in and a call for transformation from the strict, rigid traditional ways. He advocated for the rights of women through his writing much before the influence of feminism was felt in Indian society. His education and exposure to the ways of the world helped shape a much liberal view of the women’s role in society. His works became a vehicle for change that influenced other reformers and national leaders and aided in the betterment of women’s condition. These works served to bring a change in the culture of the period, subverting the traditional practices and sparking new customs that were progressive and inclusive. His works are not limited to his age but echoes through time for their progressive ideas and anticipations of many facets of feminism. The feminist thrust in Tagore’s writing was very much part of his reformist zeal, as one of the pioneers of Indian renaissance.

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