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Women's Autonomy And Self-Affirmation In Rabindranath Tagore's *Streer Patra*

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's *Streer patra* (the Wife's Letter, 1914) foregrounds women's voices against patriarchal oppression. This paper examines how the protagonist, Mrinal, asserts her autonomy and self affirmation by challenging and renouncing the boundaries of her marital home. The narration is made through the act of letter writing. Mrinal's voice declares the freedom of women from the bondages and shackles of patriarchal society depicted by the norms and customs of marriage.

Key words: women's autonomy, self- affirmation, Bengal renaissance, patriarchy

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Streer Patra* (The Wife's Letter, 1914) is widely regarded as one of the earliest feminist texts in Indian literature. It is one of the most striking feminist texts in early twentieth-century Bengali literature. Told through an epistolary monologue, the story narrates about Mrinal, a wife who writes a powerful letter to her husband after leaving her marital home. Unlike many women of her time, Mrinal refuses to remain a passive sufferer in a patriarchal household. It is through , Tagore voices gender inequality, oppressive marriage customs, and the silencing of women. This paper examines how Tagore constructs female agency and self-assertion through the voice of Mrinal.

Historical and Literary Backdrop

To appreciate the story's force, it is important to see it within the social and cultural dynamics of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal. Tagore was writing amid the Bengal Renaissance and a growing public conversation about women's education, widow remarriage, and the reform of oppressive customs. Despite several reformist discourses, patriarchal norms remained deeply rooted: women's position and duties were defined primarily in the context of familial roles—daughter, wife, mother—rather than individual moral agents. Tagore's protagonist confronts these norms by refusing the identity handed to her. This narrative centres around self introspection and moral jurisdiction: the woman's recognition of her own inner life, and her insistence that moral worth does not depend on social validation, comprise the core of her independence and identity. This was a subtle but powerful critique of both patriarchal control and any reformist tendency that equates liberation with public imitation of male entitlement.

Discursive Strategies and the Relational ethics

The choice of the epistolary form is central to the story's core. By allowing the woman to speak directly to her husband, through the letter, to an implied public—Tagore shifts the axis of authority. The narrator's voice is striking for its calmness and controlled irony. She does not indulge in melodramatic condemnation; rather, she recounts events with a measured tone that gradually reveals the depth of her resolve. This rhetorical strategy accomplishes two things: it undermines the husband's moral pretensions by juxtaposing his hypocrisy with the narrator's clear-sightedness, and it constructs the woman's authority as rational and ethical rather than merely emotional.

Language, Tone, and the strategies of self assertion

The narrator repeatedly refuses the labels that would define her life on others' terms. Through a sequence of careful negations—she denies seeking revenge, refuses to call herself a martyr, and rejects traditional consolations—she redefines what it means to be a woman in her context. This rhetorical pattern performs two crucial functions. First, by stipulating what she is *not*, she clears conceptual space to assert what she is: a moral agent with autonomous desires and ethical standards. Second, the denials disarm possible accusations from conservative readers: by shaping herself against extreme tropes, she models a responsible, self-governing subjectivity that demands respect.

The narrator's tone is at once ironic and dignified, which is important because it allows Tagore to manipulate reader sympathy while keeping the protagonist's critique centered. Rather than portraying her as a victim to be rescued, Tagore presents her as a moral actor who chooses renunciation over complicity. This insistence on dignity is a form of agency: it is an assertion that moral self-respect is itself a legitimate, even sovereign, claim.

Exposure of Patriarchal Domestic Oppression

Tagore uses Mrinal's perspective to criticize the patriarchal nature of the Bengali household. Although Mrinal enjoys material comfort in her husband's wealthy family, she emphasizes the lack of respect and recognition she receives. She compares her situation to that of a decorative object: "*I was taken into your house as one would bring home a piece of jewelry, to be admired and to adorn, not to be heard*" (Tagore 217). This metaphor highlights how women were valued for their beauty and utility rather than a human being.

The treatment of other women in the household, especially her sister-in-law Bindu, who is constantly belittled for her plain looks and dependent status, is also depicted through the narrative of Mrinal. Mrinal's empathy for Bindu exposes how patriarchal structures degrade women differently depending on class, appearance, and marital prospects. According to Tanika Sarkar, "Tagore's women characters frequently unveil the cruelty of domestic hierarchies, which cannot be softened by wealth or education" (Sarkar 102). Through Mrinal's reflections, Tagore reveals the home not as a sanctuary but as a site of systemic oppression.

Camaraderie with Other Women

Mrinal's feminism is not limited to her own suffering; she also identifies with other women's struggles. Her narration of Bindu's tragedy—married off to a man who treats her with cruelty—becomes pivotal to her awakening. Reflecting on Bindu's fate, Mrinal writes: "*What crime had Bindu committed, except that she was born a woman?*" (Tagore 220). Bindu's suffering is linked here to broader gender inequality; Mrinal becomes a mouthpiece for collective feminist consciousness.

By emphasizing solidarity, Tagore draws attention to women's collective experiences of oppression. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, "Tagore's women, while deeply individual, often bear witness to the shared vulnerabilities of their sex in a society structured by patriarchy" (Spivak 142). In *Streer Patra*, Bindu's story becomes an encouragement for Mrinal's own liberation, suggesting that feminist awakening emerges through recognizing other women's pain.

Tagore's Feminist Vision

Although Tagore wrote from a male, upper-class perspective, his engagement with women's issues reveals a progressive vision for his time. He saw women not merely as symbols of tradition or spirituality, but as individuals capable of choice, intellect, and resistance. In *Streer Patra*, Tagore stages a confrontation between patriarchy and women's autonomy, siding decisively with the latter.

This does not mean that Tagore can be labelled a feminist in the modern sense—his works often retain traces of gender essentialism. However, as Amrit Sen argues, "Tagore's feminism is a humanist feminism: rooted in empathy, critique, and the desire to envision a freer world for women" (Sen 34). *Streer Patra* thus represents a crucial moment in the evolution of feminist thought in Indian literature.

Conclusion

Through Mrinal's voice, Tagore's *Streer Patra* articulates a powerful criticism of patriarchy and an early feminist assertion of female autonomy. By centering women's voice, exposing domestic oppression, showing solidarity with other women, and affirming the radical possibility of leaving marriage, Tagore constructs a narrative that is both personal and political. In Mrinal's refusal to return to her "cage," Tagore gives Indian literature one of its first feminist heroines. *Streer Patra* remains a timeless reminder that women's freedom lies not in silent endurance but in the courage to speak, resist, and choose.

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