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Breaking the Stereotypes: A Historical Analysis of Gender 'Justice' in Tagore's Short Stories

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse the gender issues, roles and historical perspectives towards women in 'British' India as depicted in Tagore's short stories. From cultural, social, religious and 'spiritual' progress to economic and political stability, women's conditions play an integral, if not always, visible role. With the emergence of family systems and private property, gender assigning and stereotypes have largely contributed to the decline in the status of women across civilizations. The women's questions have been treated differently across varied art forms, literature being one of the most popular domains of such depictions and colonial India was no exception to this. With the introduction of Western education, in nineteenth century Bengal, a new class of Bengali, Hindu, male, Western educated middle-class was born known as the *Bhadralok*. This new class was initially, pro-British but with the growing knowledge, they became critiques of the 'un-British' colonial rule. From their embryonic sense of self-identity and nationalism, colonial Bengal became the cryogenic reservoir of belongingness and solidarity. Their protests against colonialism were expressed through literature where womanhood became a contested discourse. One of the earliest 'feminists' of his times, Rabindranath Tagore successfully analysed women psychologies and vehemently protested against gender suppression. His stories not only brought to limelight wretched conditions of women but also credited their challenges to the patriarchal society. This paper shall explore such themes in his short stories and try to situate those from a historical perspective.

Keywords: *19th Century Bengal, Women's Questions, Rabindranath Tagore, Gender Discrimination, Domestic roles of Women.*

This paper attempts to analyse the gender issues, roles, dimensions, depths and social historical perspectives of and towards women in 'British' India as depicted in Tagore's writings. But before going through that course, it's relevant to comprehend the backdrop of the theme. Since time immemorial, stories have been sources of joy, inspiration, belief, fantasy and more importantly it was to pass time. But such oral traditions later metamorphosed into manuscripts and centuries later into printed literary works. And such work, be it oral or printed, reflected the contemporary nature, environment, flora-fauna, climate, social practices, traditions, customs, rituals, living conditions of humans and societal perspectives of opposite sexes towards each other. My paper shall focus on such literary works of Tagore that explored themes of womanhood and gender. The status of women in any society is the true index of its holistic progress. From cultural, social, religious and 'spiritual' progress to economic and political stability, women and their conditions play an integral, if not always, visible role. However this notion was not always so linear or simple. From the very inception of human civilization especially with the emergence of family systems and private property, gender assigning and stereotypes have largely contributed to the decline in the status of women across borders, races, colours. Civilization have always assigned different roles, codes of behaviour, morality, and even different feelings and thoughts to men and women based on the biological distinction of sex (between male and female) thereby leading to the construction of the social distinction of gender (between masculine and feminine). From the 'mystic' feminine with secrets to create life to the 'divine'; from the witchy heretics to being the "second sex", the journey of women have been celebrated, shackled, marginalized, contested, debated, reassigned, negated and reinstated while the battle rages on. Despite all these, women have come out from the rooms of their own but the inception was not an easy one. And some men have been there by them and most against them in their journey towards liberty. The question of women's issues have been treated differently across varied art forms, literature being one of the most popular and vibrant domains of such depiction and colonial India was no exception to this. And among the literary geniuses who walked the surface, no other writer explored and experimented with the themes of gender better than Rabindranath Tagore. One of the earliest 'feminists' of his times, Tagore successfully portrayed and analysed women psychology and vehemently protested against gender

suppression. His stories not only brought to limelight contemporary conditions of women, their unspoken dreams, struggles, humiliation but also credited their contributions to the Indian nationalist movement, their triumph, their challenges to the patriarchal society and so on and so forth. His scathing yet picturesque narrative compelled the then readers, much like today's, to love, admire, cry, laugh with Tagore's 'women and their world' and also rage, contempt, hate some of those fictional women for their daring infidelity, defying attitude towards ironclad patriarchal customs. This paper shall explore such themes and try to situate those from a historical perspective.

As a literary genre, short stories developed in the nineteenth century and by the end of the twentieth century emerged as one of the major literary forms. The historical evolution of the modern short story as a literary form rose 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 skills made the short story a dominant genre in the world of literature. Majority of the earliest literature produced around the world were borrowed or influenced heavily from the prehistoric lore. In India storytelling has been an ancient tradition; the testimony to this fact is the ancient 'myths' be it the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, the fables and parables in *Panchtantra*, the *Hitopadesha*, the *Sukasaptati*, the *Dasakumaracharita* and the *Vetalpanchavimsati* in Sanskrit, the Buddhist *Jataka* Tales in *Pali* or the *Kathasaritsagara* which are considered to be the cradle and storehouse of stories and has been inspiring for the modern short story writers. Not just that Indian stories reflected the philosophies embedded in the hymns of the *Rigveda* or scattered in the *Upanishads* and the Epics.

But as a 'modern' literary genre, short stories, as we know today, emerged in India with the publication Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Lachmania* (1868) in the second half of the nineteenth century. Almost two decades later, Shoshee Chunder Dutt's *Realities of Indian Life: Stories Collected from Criminal Reports of India* (1885) was the first collection of short stories. With the passage of time, many a maestro composed such stories in multifaceted themes across varied languages. With the advent of Western education, first introduced in nineteenth century Bengal, a new class of Bengali, Hindu, male, Western educated middle-class was born known as the *Bhadralok*. This new class was pro-British, a buffer class in the initial days

but with the growing time and knowledge, they became the torch bearers of progress and critiques of the 'un-British' colonial rule. From their embryonic sense of self-respect, self-identity, consciousness of nation and subsequently nationalism, colonial Bengal became the cryogenic reservoir of belongingness and solidarity. Such protests against the British rule were expressed in and through literature. Many novels, novella, songs, poems, ballads, drama, and short stories were written in this context. However, the credit of instilling the real life force in Indian short stories with its typical Indian style goes to Rabindranath Tagore whose compositions were characterized by the concept of life blended totality consisting of imaginative romanticism and idealism.

Rabindranath Tagore, as a writer, penned his first short story titled *Bhikharini* ("The Beggar Woman"). Though his early days as a writer, he wrote mostly about the rural and rustic Bengal whereas psychological analysis of humans with special reference to woman occupied the majority of his later period of short story writing. But his first work in this genre was women-centric. Tagore's depiction of his female characters in his short stories leave a deep scar in the mind of the readers as the portrayal of the characters is done in a very realistic manner. The prevailing patriarchal set up of the society during Tagore's time angered him as he was a firm believer that the patriarchy stifled the very basic human rights of a woman. In the short stories of Tagore, patriarchy presents itself as a significant socio-cultural force that orders and demands its own discriminatory social structure. Tagore's female protagonists suffered from psychological vacuum due to the social distinction of gender primarily caused by the exploitation and the marginalization of one sex by the other based on biological distinction. But that doesn't mean that Tagore's women were all damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by their 'native', 'progressive' *Babus* in knights' armour. In spite of the societal situations and conditions which were completely unfavorable for women in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, his female protagonists through their reformist thought, self-assuredness and sheer grit and determination come out triumphant at the end.

Tagore focused on relationships which were colored by human shortcomings and idiosyncrasies. More often than other fiction of Tagore's era, confident women were the protagonists of his stories, strong in their stead while cocooned in a conservative Indian society. In a culture where adultery, rebellion, sorrow, and death were a taboo, Tagore's stories were progressive and brought a shift in the mindset of traditional

Indian values. Unconventionally, Tagore portrayed his women as chance-takers who defiantly resisted social

and familial norms in a conservative Indian society. Tagore's women were progressive and provided a fresh perspective to the minds already filled with traditional Indian values. *Chokher Bali*, 1903 (A Grain of Sand); *Atithi*, 1895 (The Guest); *Maanbhanjan*, 1895 (Fury Appeased); *Detective*, 1898; *Kabuliwala*, 1892; *Shasti*, 1893 (Punishment); *Nastanirh*, 1901 (The Broken Nest); *Khokababur Pratyabartan*, 1891 (The Return of Khokababu); *Samapti*, 1893 (The Conclusion); *Chhuti*, 1892 (The Homecoming); *Tyaag*, 1892 (The Renunciation); *Sampatti Samarpan*, 1891 (The Trust Property); *Dui Bon*, 1933 (Two Sisters); *Strir Patra*, 1914 (Wife's letter); *Aparichita*, 1916 (The Unknown Woman); *Kankal*, 1892 (The Skeleton); *Musalmaneer Golpo*, 1941 (The Story of a Muslim Woman); *Shesh Rokkha*, 1926-1929 (Saved at Last); *Monihara*, 1989 (The Lost Jewels); *Daliya*, 1892 (Dalia) are some the stories that attest to Tagore's confident womenfolk.

Take for example *Binodini* in *Chokher Bali* who rejected the strict rules widowed women in Bengal needed to adhere to. *Binodini's* character, despite its shades of grey, is refreshing as she does not accept her fate, and attempts to seek what she feels she deserves. *Binodini* is reluctant to fit into the role of a lonely widow and is unwilling to forego her sexual and emotional desires. She is smart and educated and strives to be more than just an inauspicious widow.

On the other hand, *Charulata*, of *Nostonirh*, a lonely housewife, fell in love with his brother-in-law. Her interest in learning music and subsequent encouragement from her brother-in-law instilled in her an 'innocent' attraction for him. Through *Charulata* and the turmoil in her mind, Tagore explored the concept of women taking the reins of their desires and ambitions out of their own volition.

Giribala of *Maanbhanjan* depicted that women need not depend on the men in their lives and that they can achieve their own success. On the other hand, in the same story, *Lavanga* depicted women either having to choose between family or career and that patriarchy operated strangely through stranger quarters. Women were expected to remain true to their husbands, whether they deserved it or not. In the marital life of women both society and individuals hold importance. In this story, the husband himself was the

biggest oppressor of the wife. Men were always free to entertain themselves both inside and outside the home, as they wish to, but women were supposed to turn a blind face to all their doings, and keep playing the role of a virtuous and chaste wife. In the story "Giribala", the eponymous character is a woman "overflowing with the exuberance of youth", but disappointingly she remained unnoticed by her husband. She came as a child bride at her husband's home, so they grew so accustomed to each other's presence that Gopinath hardly ever noticed her growing into a youth. It is one of the many shortcomings of child-marriage, that being brought up together since childhood, the husband and wife were incapable of garnering romantic and sexual feelings for each other. Gopinath also did not notice Giribala's beauty and youth, rather engaged himself with a theatre actress named Lavanga. While Gopinath himself enjoyed going to the theatre, he never allowed his wife to accompany him because decent women of respectable families were not to be associated with theatre. It was a place for the fallen and uncouth. Gopinath kept neglecting Giribala for the sake of Lavanga, so Giribala grew curious to see the woman whom her husband so very admired. She went to the

theatre stealthily one day, and was awestruck to see the enchanting beauty of the world of art. Giribala left her home, when Gopinath eloped with Lavanga, and became a theatre actress herself. Gopinath came to see the "new actress" who became quickly famous for her beauty and acting skills, and found Giribala on the stage. Gopinath was furious because Giribala destroyed the honor of his family. Although Gopinath himself kept doing all the immoral deeds, it did not spoil his honor because the responsibility of preserving dignity only lay on the shoulders of women. This is one of the many ways of keeping women inside the house by citing the reason that they may get defiled easily. This very idea of patriarchy has crystallised with the emergence of private property, as mentioned earlier in this paper. And this theme was vividly explored by Tagore in his short story.

Mrinal, of *Strir Patra*, an educated and progressive woman, left the house of her regressive husband and in-laws. The story is told in epistolary form where Mrinal wrote a letter to her husband expressing the many ways in which she felt suffocatingly subordinated. Unlike Mrinal's elder sister-in-law who unquestionably accepted the patriarchal system, and the poor orphaned Bindu who committed suicide,

Mrinal's education does not allow her to do the same. This story by Tagore highlighted the various social evils of the caste system, patriarchy, lack of equal opportunity and child marriage which was prevalent during his time. Tagore through the character of Mrinal very vividly presented before his readers those various social evils and depicted Mrinal's sufferings primarily because she asserts herself by being creative, intelligent and expressive in her views. Through her poetry, Mrinal gave vent to her pent-up feelings and voiced her views on equality of sexes and freedom from the clutches of patriarchal bonds. In a time when it was believed that a Hindu woman who took up writing was a prelude to becoming a widow very soon. In this piece, Tagore addressed such problems of female oppression by patriarchy and advocated women's upliftment not through the third person narration, but in the first person narration. In Mrinal's narrative of her own experience, Tagore foresaw a new age of emancipated women that was to emerge in the next few decades. Mrinal's attempt at writing her own letter is in agreement with the views of feminists like Virginia Woolf and Helen Cixous who advised women that she must write herself for herself if she wanted freedom.

Mrignoyonee's narration in *Kankal* was narcissistic and satirical, though underlying the very serious reality that many widows faced at the time. Tagore criticised the restrictions imposed on and also the way many would take to suicide to fulfil a romantic of the afterlife. Through characterising *Mrignoyonee* as a ghost, Tagore asserts that it would be better to live through the experiences and seek to make changes through human interaction and engagement.

Kamala, of *Musalmaneer Golpo*, was saved from the hands of the dacoits by Habir Khan resulting in her being disowned by her own family who believed that Kamala had 'lost her caste' by seeking shelter in a Muslim's house. Habir Khan, on the other hand, 'allowed' Kamala to continue living in his house where she could practice Hinduism freely. All throughout her stay, she was never persuaded to convert to Islam. Kamala realized that humanity is above any caste and religion. She was treated with utmost care and attention and no male member was allowed near the house where Kamala was living. Khan's son visited Kamala secretly, resulting in the development of an emotional bond between them. Neither lineage nor the obligatory marriage models prove adequate to characterize kinship for this Tagorean character.

Tagore through Kamala presented a woman who was revolutionary in nature and renounced her faith in Hindu religion and found spiritual and mental satisfaction in being a Muslim. The last lines of the story embodied not just a strong 'feminist' but a humane message.

Rabindranath Tagore has presented his female characters as valiant, undaunted, strong-willed, determined and conscious of their identity. The protagonists of Tagore's stories defied the common patriarchal norm of their time, to remain suppressed and passive and championed the cause of women emancipation from the clutches of patriarchal domination. They raise their voice in a strong manner against the biased patriarchal society and through their zeal, courage, grit and determination ultimately come out victorious.

Tagore has definitely been a proto-feminist writer; perhaps the first among Indian writers of repute to produce narratives of women's actual condition in the world, and of their various desires, which were disregarded in the contemporary society. Calling Tagore a proto-feminist is necessary in this place, because his idea of women's equal place on this earth was largely based on the specific attributes with which we define a particular gender. He did not intend to break the customs of the society altogether, as it is evident in many of his letters, speeches and essays- rather, he wanted to provide women with their rightful place in this world. Tagore respected the natural disposition of men and women, and desired that the world also smoothly operated by ensuring harmony between the two. He desired it to be so that there remained no violation of each other's space and rights. His ideas of harmony and balance depend upon this mutual understanding of each other's potentials and their due respect. He did not hesitate to accept that women are delicate by constitution. But, their delicacy did not always imply their weakness. In the context of Gender discussion, his narratives naturally turn in the favor of women, who were lacking weight on their side. Rabindranath Tagore's short stories are fine specimens of contemporary trends. Especially when it comes to the domestic world, not much is revealed about it in the open, except for a few instances of writings by social workers or women. He not just wrote about bold women against the patriarchal world but also weaved stories of women who suffered at the hands of in-laws but had mutually respectable and admirable conjugal lives. *Haimanti* and *Profit and Loss* are instances of such themes.

Tagore was free from the colonial ideas of prototypes of Victorian gentle-ladies inline most of his contemporaries. One of the most famous contemporaries of Tagore, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, like many others was influenced by the Victorian morals of chastity and virtue and produced such virtuous heroines in his fictional narratives that the Indian society came to recognize women through those models. These everenduring and self-sacrificing heroines set the standard for female behavior in the contemporary times. It was an universally accepted truth in the society that women are born to serve (wo)men and their entire life must be nothing but an exemplary journey of restraint, endurance and sacrifice- that again conjoined with never ending affection and devotion. They had no right to complain, no reason to be unhappy, sick or sorrowful. In such an atmosphere of high, hollow ideals of female conduct, very few had the courage to expose the affectation which lay beneath these airy-fairy morals. Tagore tried to reveal it seriously that women were not just abstract virtues but flesh and blood just like their male counterparts, therefore they were also able to feel. Social practices and ideologies affected women. Tagore has tried to point out many evils which prevail in the society even to this date. Such evils also prevail in the most crucial part of women's lives- i.e. marriage. In *Haimanti* and *Profit and Loss*, Tagore pointed out the evils of the dowry system; and the condition of women in their in-laws' houses. Owing to the critical question of dowry, the father of every girl found it a great distress to marry his daughter off. In order to get his daughter married in a respectable family, a father needed to arrange a good amount of money. Many fathers were compelled to borrow huge amounts of money as debt, for whose repayment they struggled throughout their lives. In "Profit and Loss", Nirupama's father took huge amount of debt from many people, but still he could not arrange the complete amount of money demanded by the father of the groom. The marriage rituals were stopped in the middle, but because of the insistence of the groom, the marriage was somehow completed. But, owing to the failure of her father to produce money, both Nirupama and her father had to suffer immense humiliation at the hands of her in-laws.

In another short story *Haimanti*, Tagore showed how women suffered at their in-laws' home. Nobody wanted to understand the feelings and temperament of the bride. Rather, she was expected to assume all the traditional roles as soon as she entered the household. Haimanti was selected by her in-laws for their son, despite her above normal age for marriage in those times because there was some economic profit involved. But when it became clear that Haimanti's father had neither money, her life at her in-laws home became difficult. She also suffered humiliation because she was not brought up in traditional ways, so her manners were different. She was educated, she was 'not religious', in all, she was not a typical coy Bengali housewife.

However, in both of these stories, the grooms were not oppressive. They were, in a way supportive to their wives. While the husband of Nirupama spoke against his father when the latter was intent on cancelling the marriage, and planned to take her long with him; the husband of Haimanti secretly admired her and wanted to support her, but did not have courage to speak against his parents. Since, various roles of women in the household were more overpowering than her role as a wife, the relationship between husband and wife remained largely unkept.

In conclusion it can be said that in his short stories, Tagore has developed his female characters in a much fuller perspective. Tagore's women-centric short stories represented the New Woman as a significantly transformed identity in a more assertive format than in his novels. The women, in the stories, came forward and acted, in spite of staying passive towards the changes that took place in their lives and outside. Mrinal, Giribala, Mahamaya and Kamla are such characters who reacted in their own ways against the notions of "gendered body, body images, body politics, commodification of the female body and its concomitant stereotypes, and sexual desire". In the process of creating some space for women, Tagore explored many genres- including poems, plays, novels, essays and short stories. His thoughts on gender are also diverse. Ranging from conventional to complex, there are varied sorts of women in his literary oeuvre, who represented a heterogeneous society. Tagore envisioned a society where everyone had their own share and the classification should only be on the basis of congenital capabilities. And such visions were best expressed in his short stories.

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