

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Postmaster*: A story of a silent sufferer

Banani Das

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, M.D.K.G. College, Dibrugarh
Dibrugarh, Assam, India.

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore is a versatile genius, whose life is filled with creative literary and artistic activities. The genius of Tagore is seen in his vast array of works that has explored the different issues of his time. The humane nature of his works has proved that literature as a medium can traverse boundaries of language and nationalities to touch upon lives across the World. Tagore plays a vital role for the emancipation of women who are trapped in the patriarchal norms of the society. Most of the short stories of him portray the real life of women who always stay back with their dumb agony and acute despair. This paper tries to focus the pathetic plight of a poor voiceless, innocent orphan girl who is abandoned by everyone in this World.

Key words: male domination, feminism, voiceless woman, suppression.

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, a man of versatile genius, is one of the renowned author of India, has brought laurels and blaze trails of glory to Indian literature. He is a man who always tries to spread the light of wisdom in amidst the storm of various hurdle. His extra-ordinary genius is visible in all fields of his creativity-like drama, novel, painting, music, dance, short stories etc. Most of his short stories are written in Bengali language and they carry the impress of his literary craftsmanship. He is appraised as the pioneer of modern Indian short story where he reveals desires and aspirations, despondency and frustrations, glees and sorrows of human life. Like an expert writer, he weaves his theme with the social reality.

Feminist movement and literary theory have exerted generative influence on novels and short stories written about women by female as well as male writers at that time. They emerge as the much desired and deserved powerful voice questioning the globally established system of civilization and culture, pioneering a change in the way of looking at women. From this gender-sensitive perspective, majority of Tagore's short stories centre around women protagonists who had shown victory as well as failure to live up to their personal and social set

standards. The ideals of women's dignity and position in the humanity and practices of women's emancipation and empowerment is his main motto. Since his childhood and young adulthood, Tagore was familiar with the revolutionary concepts of widow remarriage, abolition of Sati, women's formal education, exposition of women from the domestic household to the outside world, their active participation in the constructive and academic sphere.

Tagore himself has never been recorded to be a confirmed feminist, yet women play vital role in his writings. His women-oriented beliefs are not only confined to his novels and short stories but also visible in his essays and poems also. Tagore thinks to emancipate women's status in society and their active involvement in nation's reconstruction. He minutely observes the callous attitude faced by women and how they are exploited and trampled by the representatives of the patriarchy who believe to be the possessors of God-giver power. Taking the cue from social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Tagore tries to focus the women's problems in his literary works. He attacks the social injustice of his time by portraying the oppressed women who are still palpably visible in different corners in our society.

Tagore is wholeheartedly modern in his own ideals who wishes to present women- a new look, a new identity. In his works, he makes an interesting picture of different shades like egregious women and indifferent men, loving wives and careless husbands, surrogate mothers and over anxious fathers etc. Most of the short stories of him have feminist tilt: it is the problem- mental, physical and circumstantial. They are the warp and woof of a majority of his short stories.

His literary reputation is disproportionately influenced very much by regards of his creation of poetry, however his short stories are perhaps most highly regarded which are mostly borrowed from deceptively simple subject matter—the lives of ordinary people. Most of the stories brilliantly present the vivid images of the life of Bengal and its landscapes. Specially talking about the short stories of Tagore, one can views that his short stories start with a simple beginning and end up with a breaking new ground. In a way, the men in Tagore's short stories exhibit a general trend that strongly builds their masculinity-their vain tendency. What makes his women stand apart, is the remarkable gift of patience and self respect that gives birth to a confident and resolved self in each of them.

The Postmaster, an amazing short story was written in 1891 when Tagore was living in East Bengal, during the border of the river Padma, executing his family acreage. The two important characters- a young city-based postmaster and Ratan, an orphan girl have common ground in their loneliness. The seclusion of the anonymous

post master, who finds himself unsuitable in the village, perhaps reflected Tagore's own sense of seclusion at that time.

Anita Desai, a great women novelist reveals that *the Postmaster* depicts one of the most poignant theme-the condition of women who are treated as servant and inferior. The denial of education cuts them off from the mainstream of life, which also reveals the loneliness of human heart. The silent suffering of young Ratan shows the agony of many adolescent village girls in late 19th century Bengal. The bond that flourish between her with the postmaster is unspecified but it presents impression of unreciprocated tenderness.

The Postmaster is one of the most inspiring and heart-wrenching story of Tagore which conveys emotions of a destitute orphan girl Ratan, who is about twelve or thirteen years of age lives in the small village, Ulapur. She is honest, simple and carrying. The newly appointed postmaster of the village is a young Calcutta fellow who never takes interest in the lives of the villagers, as he is brought up in the lap of a metropolitan city. His education and experience remains failure to understand and to solve the problems of new location and the new people. He has no company or friend to whom he can express his feelings. He compares himself like a fish out of water in this distant village. His office room and living room are not up the mark and his salary is also very less. He starts a monotonous tragic life. He feels a sense of separation from his native land and family particularly at the evening time.

The whole story revolves round with the human psychology as well as adolescent psychology of this destitute girl who does household works and odd jobs for the postmaster, in return she gets a little food. Gradually, Ratan has taken the full responsibility to serve him. Her name Ratan means 'gem'-is fervently devoted to the postmaster and she becomes his obedient helper. To eke out a solitary living, the postmaster opens his heart to the only listener, Ratan. In the presence of her, he recollects his memories about his mother and sister aloud and composes some poems. Sitting near his feet, she divulges many past vague memories about her family —about her father's coming home in the evening and her playing with her brother on a cloudy day..... In this way, affinity has grown up between them but it is not more than that. The postmaster, just to fill his spare time with some significant activities, decides to teach Ratan how to read and write, though he thinks education is not mandatory for women to sustain. Tagore very remarkably shows the psyche of patriarchal society regarding the women education. The postmaster feels that learning to read and write is not so important to her to live. He becomes ready to teach only for himself, so that it will give him something to fill his empty hours. She is taught alphabets which she learns very quickly. It, of course serve as a clear evidence to Ratan's inherent intelligent. Literally, this affectionate touch brings her closer to him. She starts to feel that he is the man who looks after her and whom she can call her own and provides perpetuity. Suddenly, the Postmaster is taken ill.

Ratan tries her level best to nurse him back to health just like an affectionate mother. After retrieve from illness, the postmaster, being tired of his boredom life, decides to leave the job and village. How soon she receives this news, she is dazed to know that her dadababu is departing the following day for Calcutta. She silently goes to cook and when the Postmaster has finished his evening meal, she asks, “Dada, will you take me home with you?”(Tagore123) This sentence reflects the truthful picture of an orphan girl who wishes to get a genuine shelter in this world, but the Postmaster laughs and says, “What an Idea?”(Tagore123) This answer makes her dumb and fuss. The whole night she is unable to sleep. Dadababu’s reply haunts her. It is a great shock to her heart. Next day, before departing, he offers some money to her and says he would ask his successor to take care of her. Clinging to his feet, Ratan cried, “Please, Dada, do not give me anything, do not ask anybody to take care of me,”(Tagore124)

Actually the postmaster uses the element of philosophy to solace her. He tells her that meeting, attachment and departing are all part of life. It will all settle with the passes of time. Hearing this, Ratan falls at his feet and prays him not to distress her more. At first, the life of her was dry, unfertile wasteland, but after getting the company of the postmaster, she has acquired vigour and a new life. She feels quite safe and her heart is croaking like a frog for more rain in the rainy season. Here, Tagore has very consciously uses the home in place of house. The word home contains a sense of security and relief, love and affection. It is often said:

“A house is made of walls and beams

A home is made of love and dreams,”

The postmaster hauls a sigh and moves out towards the Ganga for journey. Again loneliness enters in Ratan’s life. Dada is her only companion, and the one who seems to understand her, but now she is broken, as she has to stay alive without him. She stands outside the office with “tears streaming from her eyes.”A faint hope dawdles in her mind that her dada may return but it is not happened.

Actually, the Postmaster is not heartless. He is quite kind and generous towards her and has a feeling of contriteness at leaving her behind. He becomes helpless. Ratan’s dumb suffering, when her request to accompany him is lightly turned down, moves us to tears and in tears we say, “What a dear child!” This simple unembellished story of two ordinary persons, in a remote village with its green slimy pond and flow of seasons, is one of the Tagore’s exquisite creations. It shows what a real creator can achieve with a bare minimum. In suggestive stories like this, where a mood is conjured, Tagore is at his best. In it, we find a mood of sadness and awe that pertain a sense of the great in the small. On the screen, the story has come out very successful. The root source of this famous story is found in the letter of Tagore from Shazadpur in February, 1891 where he writes, “Some evenings the Postmaster comes up to have a chat with me. I enjoy listening to his yams.”(Tagore,Letter22) Again, Tagore talks about him in another letter, “there is a kind of bond between this

Postmaster and me... I wrote my story of 'Postmaster'... and when the story was out in the Hitabadi he came to me with a succession of bashful smiles, as he deprecatingly touched on the subject.”(TagoreLetter22)

Actually, the story reveals that Ratan is put in the tragic end from the very beginning of her life. She is just a victim of destiny which plays a havoc with her life, by making her an orphan. Once, she has her parents and brother with whom she passes her days with joy, but now no one is with her. She has abandoned all hopes to get some joys in her life, but suddenly, a life fate brings the postmaster in her life who ushers a slight hope to live happily. She starts to enjoy her life, her dadababu becomes her only companion, with whom she can share everything, but after a few days again tragedy lurks to her life as the postmaster leaves the village. She wants to go with him, but when it becomes impossible, she never utters the second word. This is the pinnacle of her silent maturity, the mystery of her distinctly feminine desire and her extreme simplicity in not being able to understand the gap between the urban and rural people. Tagore emphasises that literacy for women is of little importance in the society where they play the role only as care-taker, wife or mother. As an innovative educator and path finder for social reform, Tagore often addresses in his works about the oppression. Throughout the story, Tagore shows that Ratan's feelings and needs are neglected and overshadowed by the needs of the postmaster and at last Ratan has learnt to survive independently despite living a life of poverty and void of friends and family.

Through the story, Tagore brings out the essence of human behaviour and how heavily society influences that behaviour. Ratan is represented, one of the most pitiful character who precipitate kindness for girls who are abandoned in this world. Every meeting ends with departure. Departure is a destined part of every meeting. Everyone should come and go. Innumerable people meet and separate in day to day life. Such ideology may soften an adult up to some extent but the simple girl, Ratan, living in an isolated village is not familiar with this kind of philosophy.

Tagore's world of short fiction shows a rich gallery of characters of different range. Ratan occupies a unique place among them. This innocent, adolescent yet responsible, capable to handle households, simple rustic orphan girl is an excellent specimen of Tagore's literary art. She is one of orphan adolescent characters like Rusty, Tom, Kim, David Copperfield who struggles herself in life. She stays back with her dumb agony and acute despair. This story reveals the confrontation between love and philosophy, poetry and knowledge. The postmaster who is the representative of cold philosophy and materialistic wants to measure the love of Ratan by offering some money to her but Ratan a voiceless, suppressive, pathetic girl is above this material gains and achievements. She actually has kept on showing her true love and service to him without any wish for granting in return. After the departing of the postmaster, still she has hidden longing in some corner of her heart that dadababu may come back one day and that is why she cannot shed tear. In another side, the

postmaster has controlled his emotion and consoles his heart immediately and easily forgets all the memories of the village along with Ratan. The end of the story is tinged with desolation and definitely compels the readers to shed tears which come naturally from their eyes. Tagore, once says that the most important concern for him to write short stories is to give pleasure to his readers, but this story is not following the traditional way of representing a situation. Perhaps this is the reason, why Tagore says that he renders happiness to a few readers.

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