



The role of woman in Rabindranath Tagore's short stories

KEYWORDS

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Tagore is unquestionably the most towering figure of modern Indian and Bangali literature, where his contribution included novels, plays, poems, short stories, essays as well as educational books and articles. His world-class literary contribution was recognized before the world through the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. During his stay in England he translated Gitanjali into English, with forewords by W.B. Yeats, an Irish poet, dramatist and prose writer, and one of the greatest English-language poets of the 20th century. Just one year after its publication (1912), he became the first Asiatic recipient of Nobel prize in literature.

Among his other notable contributions was a school he founded in 1901 near Calcutta. It was known as Shantiniketan. Later it evolved into an international university in 1921, which was to be known as Viswabharati.

This article investigates Rabindranath Tagore's perspectives on women as seen through his short stories. While his poems primarily describe beauty, nature and his search for what is beyond mundane life, his short stories deal with the lives of ordinary people. Women's struggles and sufferings are particularly highlighted. This article argues that while on one hand Tagore reveals the unequal social structure that oppresses women, on another, he creates courageous women who challenge tradition.

• Three facets of women's life:-

Rabindranath was never comfortable with strident assertions of women's rights, and was not kind to those who were known as feminists (Tagore, Chithipatra), he showed a remarkable understanding of woman's psyche, perceived the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocated for greater freedom and decision-making power for women in the family and the larger society. In addition to his remarkable stories about young girls (of which "The Postmaster" is a masterpiece), Tagore's short stories can be seen as representing three facets of women's lives: i) the romance between men and women, ii) social oppression of women (brilliantly portrayed in stories like "Haimanti") and iii) the birth of the "new woman" – that is, a woman who challenges convention and seeks to make decisions about her own life.

• About education:-

Amidst numerous social impediments, female education was given priority in the Tagore household Tagore constructs Mrinmayi in the image of a restless urchin - one who can create ripples in an otherwise unperturbed life of her locality. Unlike other maidens of her age, "her enormous black eyes held no shame or fear, and not the slightest coyness. She was tall, well-built, healthy, strong."⁶ Her first meeting with Apurba provides her an ample scope to ridicule the educated Babu Apurba Krishna. Apurba's uneasy steps on the muddy riverbank and his subsequent fall are greeted by

Mrinmayi's "melodious peel of high-pitched laughter."⁷ His conscious decision to marry this unusual Mrinmayi shatters his mother's hope for a calm and quite daughter-in-law. The third person narrator of the story hints at the existing power equation in the relationship between husband and wife. Apurba chooses to marry Mrinmayi, probably to tame her otherwise indomitable spirit: "Nevertheless whatever common sense might say, Mr. Apurba Krishna Roy was definitely unprepared to admit defeat at the hands of the flighty rustic girl."⁸ Even after marriage, Mrinmayi retains her strong adherence to her pre-adolescent self. Her efforts to restore the days of her girlhood encounter insuperable impediments. The story explores this tension as it takes us into the girl's inner realm where we find her constantly tussling with the changing situation, with her new 'self' on its way to the domain of maturity. The social scripting ultimately succeeds and therefore undermines her individual efforts.

They represent Tagore's sensitive evaluation of the condition of contemporary women. The tales reveal attempts at individual scripting that come into conflict with scripts established by society. Tagore treads a middle path often accommodating the social stricture over individual attempts at self-expression. But the pathos and the irony that he systematically uses sensitizes us to his deep sympathies on this issue. The radicalism in allowing the narrative to be taken over by Mrinal allows free access to the sensibility of the woman, an experiment that was scathingly attacked in contemporary society. The short stories acknowledge the desire and the urgency to allow contemporary women to script a space of their own.

• As a lover and a mother:-

In Rabindranath's early thinking, women had two principal roles – mother and lover (Pal, Vol. 5: 237). The loving nature of mother has been portrayed in many of his stories; Anandamoyee in Gora, Jatin's aunt in "Shesher Ratri" (The Last Night) and Rasmoni in "Rasmonir Chhele" (Rasmoni's Son) are a few examples.

The period during which a writer is born gets reflected through his writings, may be, for a purpose.... The writer's period plays a role, deliberately or otherwise, in a writer's mind. (Mukhopadhyay, Vol.2: 546)

It is just not his time that was reflected in his writings; the farsighted "prophet" gave a new shape and direction to his time. His message was:

The discriminatory treatment of women had existed, complacently in our society for ages. Men must accept the responsibility for sustaining this discriminatory practice of the past. (Rabindra Rachanaboli, Vol. 13: 24) "New Woman" in Rabindranath Tagore's Short Stories.

REFERENCE

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