

A Comparative Study of “Women selves” in Tagore’s selected Short stories



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze the women characters in Rabinranath Tagore’s three selected short stories- The Conclusion (Samapti), Exercise-Book (Khata) and The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra). Tagore strongly believed in fighting for women’s upliftment using his pen as a weapon. Focusing largely on emancipation, his writing campaigned for women’s liberation, equality, freedom, justice, power and dignity and rights. In this present paper I shall critically analyse the three different female protagonists namely Mrinmayi, Uma and Mrinal from three different short stories, and I shall try to show how their repeated individual scripting are mercilessly thwarted by social interventions. Tagore a century ago writes his ideas far ahead of his times. Mrinmayi in ‘Samapti’ refused to mould herself to femininity, even after marriage. Mrinal in ‘Streer Patra’ used the the power of a pen to fight against society’s injustices. Uma’s in ‘khata’ becomes an embodiment of her extended self. The buried-life within her finds its expression on the pages of her khata.

KEYWORDS: women characters, protagonist, short stories, femininity, liberation, equality, freedom, justice.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a “myriad-minded man” (Dutta and Robinson 1). He wrote extensively in various creative genres, e.g. poetry, drama, fiction and non-fictional prose; composed numerous songs; painted over 3,000 pictures; thought about rural reconstruction, environment and nature; took an interest in science, and established a university in West Bengal. Critics have written so much on so many aspects of Rabindranath that it is hard to discover an area to write on. And yet not much has been written on his thoughts on women,

although he wrote extensively about them. This paper proposes to explore his vision and views on women as reflected in his short stories.

This paper explores Tagore's engagement with the wave of emancipation of women in the nineteenth century Bengal. Tagore's position was not akin to that of an extremist. Rather, he opted for a mid-way while representing female voices in his works. This paper focuses on three of Tagore's female protagonists - Mrinmayi, Uma and Mrinal - from *The Conclusion* (Samapti), *Exercise-Book* (Khata) and *The Wife's Letter* (Streer Patra) to show how their repeated individual scripting are mercilessly thwarted by social interventions.

Perceiving the rare talents in the Tagore household, it becomes easy to conjecture Tagore's horizon of expectation from his own fictional constructs. Mrinmayi, Uma and Mrinal, too, imbibe the bold femininity as embodied by Jnanada Devi, Swarnakumari, Kadambari, Protiva, Indira. But their attempts in individual scripting are mercilessly throttled by patriarchal inhibitions. Thus, if Mrinmayi, with her tomboyish demeanor, tries her hand in individual scripting, the social scripting undermines her individual effort. 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 and strong." Her first meeting with Apurba provides her an ample scope to ridicule the educated Babu Apurba Krishna. 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. Even after marriage, Mrinmayi retains her strong adherence to her pre-adolescent self.

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. Her gullibility, already indicated by her name 'Mrinmayi' (a figure made of clay and therefore can easily be molded according to the creator's whim), is reinstated as she succumbs into the realm of patriarchal expectations. Thus, social inscription trespasses the individual space and influences individual scripting. The 'maturity' makes its appearance all of a sudden, Mrinmayi was unaware when the Creator's sword severed her childhood from her youth. Mrinmayi's maturity, in a way, implies a loss of freedom, a sort of self confinement. The title *The Conclusion* (Samapti) hints at the completion of the process where the girl's individuality undergoes transformation owing to repeated social interventions.

Exercise-Book (Khata) explores another forceful interruption of social norms, thereby, curbing the spirit of Uma. Though named after the warrior goddess of Hindu mythology (Durga), Uma fails to imbibe the deity's strength. However, Tagore takes Uma a step further. Unlike Mrinmayi, Uma temporarily enjoys the scope to bask in the realm of education. Her whimsical scribbles on the wall, the new almanac, her father's daily account-book, or, even on her brother's thesis amply hint at her unconscious self-assertions. However, Uma's individual scripting echoes social scripting to a great extent. If she acquires the power of writing, her writing fails to transcend the boundary of social dictates. Her exercise-book, too, houses a number of quotations from the texts she read. Uma's khata becomes an embodiment of her extended self. The buried-life within her finds its expression on the pages of her khata. With

this girl, her exercise-book, too, receives an intense humiliation in the sarcasm of her in-laws and nonchalance of her husband, Pyarimohan. Pyarimohan voices the prevalent social norm despising female education. For a Hindu wife, to wield paper and pen was considered a sure prelude to widowhood. Basu, Hemantakumari Devi, Manika Roy, a cursory glance at their articles consolidate society's constant interference into woman's thought process. Their articles like Narir Kartavya, Streer Kartavya, Banga Badhu only echo the social dictates regulating the ways of woman's existence. Khata endures its physical distortion at the hands of her husband. The moment she realizes her entrapped situation and begins to sense the pathos involved in her incarceration, she seeks refuge in her khata, the only space allotted to her. Thus, she finds her own tears in Durga's tearful complaint to her mother in the agamani song. "With the same soreness of heart, Uma's eyes filled with tears." This process of rediscovering her self, completely lost in the topos of her husband's realm, remains incomplete. Pyarimohan encroaches upon Uma's private space and dismantles her brain-child, the khata. But the narrator's final comment: "Pyarimohan also had an exercise-book full of various subtly barbed essays, but no one was philanthropic enough to snatch his book away and destroy it,"¹⁶ implies Tagore's critical response. The comment hints at Tagore's ruthless irony at his depiction of how the female self is curtailed by forceful interventions of patriarchy. However, while the protagonist's individual assertion encounters a defeat, the narrator, in a way, succeeds to retain a resoluteness in his protest, muted but bold in its character.

A more prominent note of protest characterizes Tagore's *The Wife's Letter* (Streer Patra). Though the title pronounces the 'wife' as its central emphasis, the story follows an unconventional path. The 'wife' in *The Wife's Letter* finds her own voice. The writer's experimentation with the form is noticed in his departure from the conventional third person mode of story telling to an incorporation of the female voice assuming a first person assertive tone. The entire tale is enveloped in an epistle written by the protagonist to her husband. The pathbreaking radicalism is voiced in the very opening: "... to this day I have never written you a letter. I have always been at hand—you have heard so many words from my lips, and I too have listened to you—but there has never been an interval in which a letter might have written." This boldness offers a prelude to the protagonist's autobiographical mode of narration. Mrinal surpasses both Uma and Mrinmayi in her ability to endure. She neither submits nor transforms herself. Rather, as her name suggests (Mrinal refers to lotus-stem), Mrinal stands erect. She crosses the confines of her married life and obscuring her parasitic identity as a wife, she declares: "It is not a letter from the second daughter-in-law of your family."¹⁸ The story encompasses Mrinal's girlhood, her state of deprivation as a daughter, a wife as well as a mother. Her yearning to taste freedom is aggravated by the presence of two suppressed female figures - her sister-in-law and Bindu. Mrinal's sister-in-law is an epitome of ideal Hindu wife. "She lacked the courage to show her love openly, from the heart, to her orphaned sister. She is an obedient wife." The possibility of an independent scripting of a tale of love between two women is interrupted by society again. Bindu is compelled to embrace the conventional life of a wife. Disenchanted with her hasty marriage, the girl returns but fails to mend the severed tie with her former love, Mrinal. However, society fails to undermine the spirit of both Bindu and Mrinal. Bindu's suicide is condemned by many but Mrinal interprets it as an act of assertion, one which enables the girl to transcend her

imprisonment. The suicide becomes a text, an individual scripting, that Bindu writes from her body. Mrinal's sarcasm directed towards the society lies in her cautionary comment: "But one should reflect why this play-acting takes its toll only of the saris of Bengali women, not of the dhotis of brave Bengali gentlemen." As for her own scripting, Mrinal opts for something more radical. She resolves astutely: "But I will never again return to your house at number , Makhan Baral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it." She never seeks solace in the deathbed. Rather, Mrinal chooses a life that would be her own. Instead of searching security within the confines of four walls, Mrinal tends to justify her position in the vast cosmos. Her self-realization is complete with the declaration: "How trivial is this daily commerce of my life, how trivial are its set rules, set habits, set phrases, set blows." The shroud of MejoBou disappears leaving Mrinal, radiant with the knowledge of self-discovery. Her scripting is complete with a re-scripting of Mirabai's song: "I too shall live. At last I live." However, the question remains - how far did Mirabai succeed in her attempt? The story concludes with Mrinal's resolution to undertake a new journey. But will that journey secure complete freedom from social inhibitions? Will her individual scripting really prosper ignoring all impediments? The first person narrator is not empowered enough to resolve this enigma. Probably, the enigma remains unresolved forever.

Thus all of the three tales *The Conclusion (Samapti)*, *Exercise-Book (Khata)*, *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra)* unfold the tormented female psyche continually hindered in their self-assertive aspirations. While the tales represent the experiences of fictional characters, it should not be forgotten that 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.

This is how we can say Rabindranath Tagore was fully aware of women's role in the society. almost all his female characters were plotted in traditional plots, but were yet very strong. His campaign for women's liberation was ahead of its time. Rabindranath gave us some very powerful women characters befitting the new age. With that he assaulted unobtrusively in his own way the established social system and notions inimical to the advancement of women. In my view, his "new woman" for the new age is depicted most deliberately in his stories. Mrinal, a woman who in her dedication, in her success, in her outspoken adherence to truth, is, indeed, a many splendored personality.

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