

## **Redefining and Being: An Exploration of Empowering Female Characters in Select Short Stories of Tagore**

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### **Abstract**

Tagore's works represent the nascent stage of women's emancipation movement in India during the pre-independence era. Though often hailed as the mystic poet, Tagore's short stories, are a reflection of the stark realities of the society. The paper attempts to explore select short stories to examine female protagonists who are trapped in the shackles of domesticity and societal dictates and attempt to break free. Some of the female characters carved by Tagore redefine the womanhood of the then-era. Though female opinion often did not get counted, however some of his women characters voiced themselves against societal dictates. This paper aims to look at the individual assertiveness of female characters in the short stories "A Wife's Letter" and "Giribala". Despite facing social constraints these women challenged social and cultural backgrounds. The paper highlights the resilience and inner strength of these inspiring characters, considering the conventional gender roles of Tagore's era.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, gender, Tagore studies, identity, resilience of women

### **Introduction**

Born into one of the most notable and illustrious families, Tagore grew up amidst art, culture and literature. He was aware of the social reformations going on before his birth in 1861. The Brahmo Samaj by Raja Ram Mohan Roy influenced his family's religious orientation. The introduction of women's education in 19th-century India also influenced the Tagore household. He was aware of nationalist movements that were slowly gaining momentum. It is inevitable over time, his worldview changed and that had a profound impact on the depiction of his female characters. Many of his women characters are his mature creations and works of the later periods. Dasgupta rightly points out that, Tagore's "mind and sensibilities were shaped by these influences (8-10).

Tagore is known for his short stories and in his short stories lies the beauty of his portrayal of women characters. He was a social reformer in the truest sense of the term as he created characters who being in the shackles of domesticity made their existence evident. The women characters that he created were opinionated, emotionally strong, strong-willed, and lived life on their terms. The women characters that Tagore carved out showed a shift from the usual orthodoxy, amplified self-expression, and some even moved beyond the periphery of domesticity. Some of the characters are immortalised with his depiction of women's deepest emotions. He contextualises the predominant patriarchal issues of the then times which gives us a glimpse of a larger socio-historical situation of the era. We may now take a

look at two of the empowering characters created by Tagore who take the path to create a journey of their own and not walk behind their husbands' shadows. In this light, the paper looks at "A Wife's Letter", and "Giribala". These female characters represent a new beginning that was to come in the history of Indian society. They defy the patriarchal notions and express themselves undauntedly.

### Challenging the Domestic Constraints: Asserting the Self

Mrinal in "Streer Patra" or "A Wife's Letter" breaks away from the shackles of domesticity and almost reminds us of Dora of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. Written in an epistolary form, a rather unconventional way, Tagore pragmatically delves into the psyche of a woman who is observant of social injustices and wrongs going on in and around her. So much so that it torments her psychologically and compels her to break free from the patriarchal chains of domesticity. While standing in front of the vast sea, Mrinal looks back on her life and decides to write a letter to her husband as a form of reminiscence. She recalls her days of childhood when her brother died at birth, and she survived. People wished the son to have survived. The inequality had started right from the time of her birth. Here Tagore projects the biases of how people preferred male children over female. After fifteen years of their marriage, she probably wrote the first letter to him because all her words had fallen on deaf ears all these years. She narrates that she was lectured time and again by her in-laws for having the intelligence to distinguish between right and wrong, whereas women were supposed to act dumb in front of their male counterparts to show that they were inferior to them. She loved animals and was from rural Bengal. Her husband's family cracked jokes on her comparing her to a cow. Despite repeated warnings from the doctor, Mrinal had to deliver in an extremely unhygienic corner of the house. The doctor was surprised to find that the whole house was beautifully decorated except the place of delivery probably indicates the unkept conditions and lack of medication led to the death of her girl-child. Mrinal helped a distant cousin Bindu as she had nowhere to go. The family forced Bindu into a marriage and it was revealed that the groom was mentally disabled. Despite many attempts to save Bindu, Mrinal gets to know that Bindu committed suicide. The next day she left for her journey to Puri, from where she is writing a letter back to her husband. She ends her letter beautifully by saying that God has given her an affluent home but money cannot buy everything in life. She could not be a 'Pativrata' (devoted) wife and is happy that she could not be one. She condemns herself, for not breaking the shackles of confinement earlier. She sheds the cocoon of being a daughter-in-law and somebody's wife. She wants to thank Bindu, who is dead, for giving her the courage to re-discover herself not as someone's wife or mother or daughter-in-law but solely as an individual and a woman. She says that she wants to kill her former self completely. It is as if "only after being detached from the entire relationship one finds the true relationship" (Singh 14). She is no more in need of anybody's shelter or approval and does not intend to return ever. When she begins her letter, she addresses her husband as 'To Thine Auspicious Lotus-Feet', but as she ends her letter, she ends by writing, 'Removing myself from the Shelter of Your Feet'.

The short story "Giribala" asserts the idea of a woman claiming her autonomy and releasing herself from the constraints of social norms. Tagore challenges social standards and promotes a space to discuss issues of domestic violence. The protagonist Giribala, speaks up against her heartless husband and takes revenge on him. Giribala is the young, attractive, childless wife of Gopinath, a wealthy man. Gopinath, the son of Zamindar, becomes interested in a dazzling theatre actress named Lavanga Latika after attending a performance

at the local theatre. Though her spouse is blind to Giribala's beauty, Giribala is well aware of her beauty. When Giribala and Gopinath were married, their relationship was passionate and affectionate. However, over time, Sudha, Giribala's devoted maid, became her only company. To assuage her suspicions, Sudha takes her to the theatre. There were enchanting tunes and shimmering lights throughout the performance of the theatrical, *Maan Bhanjan*. The performance showed an enraged 'Radha' and 'Krishna' attempting to reason with her by submitting to her feet. She sees her husband's infatuation with the theatrical performer. She finds his inappropriate behaviour in the theatre repulsive. She musters the confidence to chastise her spouse. When she visualized the play, Gopinath was Krishna and she was Radha. She resolves that one day she will bring Gopinath to her knees. One evening, Gopinath knocked on the door and asked to see the vault key because he was short on cash. Giribala was offended and furious that Gopinath had completely neglected her even though he had arrived after a considerable amount of time. She decided to not part with the key as that is her asset which might help in uncertain times. Gopinath, who is infuriated and upset by Giribala's rejection, thrashes and physically abuses her, takes all of her ornaments, and flees the house. Gopinath eventually elopes with the alluring actress Latika. A few months later, Gopinath learns that Latika has been replaced in the theatre community by a stunning young actress. The theatre's owners replaced her with a new actress and successfully performed the production. Gopinath, intrigued by the enigmatic beauty, attends the premiere of another theatrical, *'Manorama.'* As the curtains rise, Gopinath is left speechless to see his wife Giribala, the stunning 'Radha,' illuminating the stage in front of him. Throughout the 20th century, theatre was not seen as an acceptable career choice for married women, but Giribala defied the stereotypes and became an independent woman. She gets even with her spouse by becoming an actress at the same theatre and becoming well-known. By experimenting with Giribala's persona, Tagore has proposed an alternative to the subdued picturization of women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Giribala's character stands contrary to the constant crisis about the subjugation of women. Chakrabarti writes, "Tagore bases this solution on the pay-you-back-in-your-own-coin formula, since theatrical performances are Gopinath's primary source of intoxication" (85-86). Women's identities were subordinated to men's in twentieth-century culture, particularly in terms of identity shadowing. Women were constantly taught to take care of others and to thwart themselves, whereas men acquired self-reliance and self-dependence.

Giribala defies the long-standing custom of obligatory married life. As a free woman, she leads the charge to alter the role of the wife in this social context. Giribala regains her pride after seeing the play and realizing her strength as a woman. The way that Tagore portrayed Giribala's persona is to inspire women to recognize their own power. In this sense, Giribala's maid Sudha was crucial to her self-realisation and to giving her the confidence and bravery to challenge her husband's oppressive masculine psyche, which was obvious from the start of their relationship. In theatre, she finds an expression of freedom and joy and does not hesitate to pursue it. (Yeole 7015) He creates a character that becomes an embodiment of independence and demonstrates the tenacity and inner strength of a woman through this story. Tagore gives a complex depiction of female characters in "Giribala," who struggle with patriarchy and tradition while pursuing liberty and self-actualization. Tagore examines the intricacies of female identity and agency in a society constrained by inflexible gender norms and expectations via their interactions and relationships. The two stories have a binding thread that they break free from the chains of domesticity and take action about their self-healing.

## Conclusion

“With that he assaulted unobtrusively in his own way the established social system and notions inimical to the advancement of women.” (Ray 80)

During the 19th century, the education of women in India marked a significant milestone towards women's emancipation. It was a time when women were not considered equal to men and were confined to traditional gender roles in households. However, Rabindranath Tagore, a renowned writer from a progressive household, challenged these norms through his works featuring strong female characters. Tagore's literary masterpieces, including *Gora* (1910) and *The Home and the World* (1916), showcased traditional storylines with a unique twist. His portrayal of women was far from the submissive, domesticated beings that were common in literature at the time. Instead, Tagore envisioned a new kind of woman - bold, independent, and unafraid to challenge societal norms. As a result, Tagore's works not only inspired women to break free from the shackles of domesticity but also encouraged society to reconsider the role of women in public life. It was a turning point in the history of women's rights in India, and Tagore's legacy of empowering women through literature continues to inspire generations.

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