

Tagore's Advocacy of Women's Cause in 'Streer Patra'

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a liberal humanist who wanted a new social order where women are not bound by shackles of patriarchy. Born into a progressive family, he had observed closely the stifling condition of 19th-century Bengal. His creativity captured the multifaceted torture on women in a conservative socio-cultural milieu. This paper is an exploration of Tagore's advocacy of women's cause in 'Streer Patra', the feminist perspective reflected in Tagore's 'Streer Patra', analyze the concept of emancipation of women in 19th century Bengal and discuss the struggle of a woman to achieve emancipation from confinement. The issues of child marriage, forced arranged marriage, poor condition of childbirth room, subordination of women, and women's helplessness in a joint family are all vehemently criticized with poignancy and insight. A woman would better embrace death like Bindu in 'Streer Patra' than live a life of ignominy and disgrace. Death is here symbolic of redemption from worldly cares and suffering. He also advocates another escape route of breaking the shackles of traditional roles of a woman to emerge victorious, just as Mrinal is emancipated in the story.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, subordination, confinement, woman's cause, emancipation.*

Introduction

Rabindranath was a great visionary writer, music composer, painter above all a liberal humanist. He was the modernist who envisaged a society which would have its foundation on mutual respect, justice, peace and prosperity. He envisioned a world where there would be no social evil (Denapaona), no casteism (Chandalika) and no patriarchal shackles (Streer Patra). In Denapaona, Nirupama is a victim of dowry and she dies due to neglect and heartlessness of her in-laws. Chandalika tells the story of Chandala woman who is discriminated because of her caste and in Streer Patra, Mrinal, the protagonist lays bare the ugly face of patriarchal social

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structure. *Streer Patra*, the path-breaking short story was published in the year 1914. It is one of the most heart-rending short stories written by Tagore which captures a woman's journey from confinement to emancipation. In '*Streer Patra*' (Wife's Letter), Tagore presents Mrinal as a woman who is capable of revolting and making decision. The story reflects Tagore's humanist philosophy as well as his notions of a modern woman. Tagore seems to present through Mrinal, the liberal, modern woman who would bring positive changes in society.

This paper attempts to explore Tagore's advocacy of woman's cause in '*Streer Patra*' (Wife's Letter), the feminist perspective reflected in Tagore's '*Streer Patra*' (Wife's Letter), analyse the concept of emancipation of women in 19th century Bengal and discuss the struggle of a woman to achieve emancipation from confinement. To see how Tagore evolved his conviction of a progressive, liberal, modern woman the background of Tagore's humanist philosophy has also been discussed.

The study is purely qualitative so descriptive research methodology has been followed. Related articles have been reviewed and primary and secondary resources have been utilized to complete the study. On the basis of understanding the text, reading and re-reading of scholarly articles the paper is concluded summing up the findings.

Background of Tagore's Humanist Philosophy

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was the son of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905). He was born in Kolkata and was the youngest of fourteen children. His grandfather Prince Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) was an entrepreneur who was one of the richest persons of his time. Debendranath Tagore inherited from his father not only the rich states but the debts as well. Debendranath managed the estates but his interest moved in another direction in the unearthly world. He began to explore the spiritual world with keen interest and devotion. He became the 'Platonic philosopher-king' and one of the pillars of 'Brahmo Samaj', established by Raja Rammohun Roy. He was active in reformist movement of 19th century. The followers of 'Brahmo Samaj' did not discriminate against people of different caste, creed and religion. Later Debendranath established 'Tattwabodhini Sabha' (truth-seekers) and he also translated in Bengali 'Katha Upanishad'. The Tagore family followed the teachings of Upanishad. The prayers and assemblies arranged in Tagore's house influenced Rabindranath Tagore deeply. The inheritance of transcendental and liberal Brahmo temperament found outlet in literature created by Rabindranath Tagore.

Though born in a joint family, Rabindranath grew up as a loner daydreaming in childhood and it led him to the creative world of imagination. He embarked in the world of creativity with ‘heightened sensory and intellectual perception’. He is considered to be one of the first modernists of the Victorian era. Rabindranath Tagore received Nobel prize in 1913 for ‘Gitanjali’, a collection of translations of his poetry. He became a ‘world-poet’ with this translation.

Tagore’s Perception of Death

Rabindranath Tagore’s family was a constellation of stars in different fields like painting, singing, poetry and administration. The women of the family were also progressive and contributed in ‘Swadeshi Movement’ of India. His brother Abanindranath Tagore was a reputed painter. Another brother Satyendranath was an Indian civil servant during British regime. While Jyotirindranath Tagore was a playwright, painter and musician. He had major influence on younger brother Rabindranath. Jyotirindranath’s wife was Kadambari Devi with whom Rabindranath was very close. When Tagore was 23, his sister-in-law Kadambari Devi committed suicide. This loss haunted him all through his life. Later he lost his two daughters, a son and finally his wife Mrinalini. The personal loss made him view death as reliever of worldly pain and suffering. Bindu dies and her death is viewed as great redeemer from earthly concerns. Tagore in a letter written on 17th May 1941 wrote that “It’s in my short story ‘Streer Patra’ that I supported the women’s cause for the first time....” (Das Gupta 122). Tagore had a large family where he had witnessed women’s lives very closely. He had the ability to understand the need of emancipation for women. So, in ‘Streer Patra’, Tagore advocates the cause of women through the mouthpiece of Mrinal. This story is “a gendered documentation of women’s education, companionate marriage, gender rivalry”. (Das Gupta 119)

Tagore’s Concept of Modern Woman

Tagore’s short stories throng with women characters. The socio-cultural milieu of Tagore’s time demanded appearance of new woman. The 19th century reformation movement led by Raja Rammohun and Vidyasagar abolished many social evils like ‘Sati’ and child marriage. Establishment of girls’ school spread women education. Tagore’s visit to the Western world also shaped his thought process. He had the opportunity to see the western women which also contributed in shaping his concept of modern woman. The multitude women characters captured in his writings promulgate the different socio-cultural ugly truths that subjugated

women. His women are bold, courageous, and ready to defy to establish a new social order. Liberty, spirituality and creativity get entangled in character like Mrinal to reach her true self. The life force from within tears apart all hesitation and the characters embark victorious either through death or by breaking free themselves from bondage. His women are in favour of truth, justice and impartiality. They are not stereotypes who cling to the patriarchal machinery but unconventional who do not want to remain passive. His women have self-respect, inner worth, confidence, clarity of thought and voice of protest.

Analysis of ‘Streer Patra’ (Wife’s Letter)

Tagore’s ‘Streer Patra’ (Wife’s Letter) is the story of a woman’s self-realisation, accumulation of courage to break earthly bondage and realise the self through complete submission to the will of God. The story’s protagonist is Mrinal who introduces herself as the ‘Mejo-bou’ (the second bride). She has been married for fifteen years and has lived with this identity. She is a homemaker who is completely confined in home having no outlet to the outside world as her husband who is always busy with office work as a professional. She was only twelve when she got married. She was selected as a bride as she was extremely beautiful. Her mother-in-law wanted to compensate for the ordinary look of her first son’s wife. Even though Mrinal’s house was in a far-off village where jackals howled during the day time and transportation was difficult, she was selected as a bride for her look. But her beauty was forgotten very soon when the family realized that she had intelligence too. Everyday she faced rebuke as they called her a precious impertinent girl.

After marriage, Mrinal primarily did the work of house-keeping. She did all the domestic duties and responsibilities. Besides these, her heart cried for the unfed cows in the cowshed. As she was a village girl, she felt for the cows whom the servants did not feed in the morning for engagement with other duties. As a child bride she used to give them her own food. Later as she grew older, she understood the bantering remarks of her in-laws who even doubted her lineage as cowherds.

A daughter was born to Mrinal but unfortunately, she did not survive. This created a vacuum in Mrinal’s heart. She did not get the opportunity to enjoy motherhood even after giving birth to her daughter. As a result, she lost the scope to transcend to be a mother from ‘mejo-bou’. She felt that a mother even if she remained in the confined narrow world, she is of the universe. But unfortunately, that transformation did not happen in her life. Though the child brought all

the beauty and happiness in her life, that was not to be permanent. She received the grief of a mother but could not be blessed with freedom of motherhood. During her confinement she was in a dingy room where there was no grace and adornment unlike the outer apartment of the house. The English doctor who treated her rebuked them on seeing the unhygienic condition of the room. The neglect that she met during her child-birth might have caused some damage resulting the loss of her child. Though she too was critically ill but ultimately, she did not die. She came back to life from the mouth of death as if she denied the easy option of death. Just like the evening star, her daughter slipped off. The ephemeral happiness only caused a deep scar in her soul. She slowly returned to her daily household works.

Amid all these, a tiny speck of life settled in her life and caused the crack just like a peepul seed settled on a wall causes crack as it grows. Bindu, the first bride's sister came to live in the house for being maltreated by her cousins after the death of her mother. Though Mrinal's co-sister was affectionate towards her own sister, she feared to express it if she displeased her husband and in-laws. She made rude arrangements for her stay and even made her work for the house. Mrinal understood the pain in her co-sister and thought to relieve her by embracing Bindu in her care.

Bindu was around fourteen with plain looks. Bindu was taken into Mrinal's attention and protection. Mrinal brought her into her room and tried to make her understand that there would always remain a space for Bindu in her room. When Bindu stayed as unwanted clutter in her cousin's house, the allotment of space in Mrinal's room was God's grace for her. Soon Mrinal and Bindu shared a relationship based on pure love and affection where there was no selfish cause. But destiny had some other plan for her. She suffered from red rashes and everyone declared that she had been afflicted with pox. Mrinal announced that she would not send her to hospital instead she would take her to the confinement of her own room. Everyone was very much agitated and amidst these the rashes vanished and that also agitated everyone all the more. On the contrary Bindu and Mrinal's relationship became stronger. Bindu was fascinated by Mrinal's beauty and gradually became besotted by her. Through Bindu's love Mrinal could see her own free self which is her true self. In order to meet the expenses on Bindu, Mrinal reduced her own expenses and started doing her work herself.

In the meantime, Bindu grew older and everyone became over active to marry her off. Bindu was scared and feared to leave Mrinal. For some uncanny reason the groom's party did not arrive to see Bindu in person and for this Mrinal's co-sister was greatly relieved. And the

marriage was fixed. Five days before marriage Bindu expressed her desire to die and not to marry. Mrinal too wanted for her smooth death instead of marriage. The marriage was arranged in bridegroom's house for some uncanny reason. When Bindu was leaving Mrinal had assured her that no matter in what condition was Bindu, she would never abandon her. Within three days of her marriage Bindu was found by Mrinal in the coal shed huddled in a corner. Bindu informed that her husband was insane. Mrinal once again provides shelter to Bindu understanding her destitute condition. Mrinal in 'Streer Patra' is a messenger of liberation and she tried to liberate Bindu from the earthly bondage with the insane husband. But her in-laws forced Bindu to go back to the mentally unstable husband she had been married off to. When Mrinal was planning to lock herself with Bindu in her room, she could not find Bindu. Understanding the trouble that she brought with her, Bindu gave herself up to her brother-in-law to return back to her in-laws. Mrinal's co-sister consoled herself by saying that Bindu had ill-fated forehead, so even if the husband is mad, she should accept him as he is her husband. In her letter Mrinal reminds her husband about the devout woman carrying her leper husband to the prostitute's house. She indignantly reminds him of the vilest cowardice that they had shown to Bindu. Bindu also recaps her husband about Shorot, her brother who had gone to visit her. On seeing him, Mrinal's husband had grown suspicious and asked her what mess they were at. Mrinal had actually planned to rescue Bindu with Shorot's aid. She had been preparing to visit 'Srikhetro' on a pilgrimage with her husband's aunt. Underneath this plan was her secret to take Bindu with her forever. Shorot was assigned to bring Bindu in the train to Puri. But unfortunately, Shorot brings the news of Bindu's committing suicide by setting herself on fire. On listening to this Mrinal's reaction was 'Oh. Peace at last'. But her death also angered people as they considered her death as dramatics and fashionable to die in pretext of torture. Mrinal strongly questions the patriarchal structure as she opines: 'But shouldn't we ask why the dramatics take place only with Bengali women's sarees and not with the so-brave Bengali men's dhutis?' (Gupta). Mrinal felt that the girl was now beyond any mortal suffering. Mrinal finally leaves for her pilgrimage but Bindu didn't require to for this pilgrimage. From there she declares through her letter that she would never return to 'Number Twenty-Seven Makhon Boral Lane.' She has no grudges and complaint against her husband. But she says: 'I've seen the worth of a woman in this world.' Her assertion that through Bindu she has understood the worth of a woman. To her Bindu has crossed the limits of life, she is without end. Her final realisation is expressed through her expression: 'How trivial this daily life's journey; how trivial all its fixed rules, its fixed ways, its fixed phrases of rote, all its fixed defeats. In the end,

must the victory go to this wretched world, to its snakes of habit that bind and coil and squeeze?’ (Gupta). But she is not going to embrace death like Bindu. Rather like Meera-bai, she is going to persevere and saved by the Almighty.

Women’s Cause in ‘Streer Patra’

Mrinal is the mouthpiece of Tagore’s emancipated woman who dares to cross the threshold of bondage in search of her true self in the outside world. For Mrinal it is transcending the role of mejo-bou to a woman with insight and will force. This dynamic transition comes from her realization that she has other responsibilities in this world. Standing by the vast ocean, she realizes that she is not born to toil within the four walls of her in-laws. Rather she can make the most of her life by breaking the bondage of servitude and enslavement. She like most of the women of her age suffered from self-doubt which is hard to be dispelled. But over the time she has matured to overcome doubt and confusion. Though she had finest beauty and most perfect intrinsic worth or virtues, she suffered neglect. It was really difficult to disperse off the affliction of self-doubt. Though she possessed the highest beauty, the in-law’s family did not love her as she had intelligence too. Mrinal’s mother, a traditional Bengali woman knew that her daughter’s intelligence would not be welcomed by her in-laws. She was certain that her daughter would face trouble due to her sharpness. She had the insight to see the truth, reasoning to argue, courage to protest and ability to take decision. In the then society woman’s role in a family demanded a submissive nature without the voice of protest.

Mrinal wrote poetry secretly. The wings of poesy needed imagination and her ‘self’ as a poet did not know any bondage. This gave her confidence to be on her own. The poetic self of Mrinal remained undiscovered by her in-laws all through her stay there for fifteen years. Mrinal’s creativity is her own space for exercising her identity. Any other ordinary contemporary woman would have been happy to have husband and in-laws like Mrinal’s. But Mrinal is not just any other woman but she is progressive in mind and spirit. She needs a space for herself to live in her own accord.

She has deep realisation of her inner self grown with firm belief in spirituality. She is not willing to surrender to death which to her is an easy way out. Mrinal questions a woman’s self-respect and states that if such was God’s design that women would suffer then it is better to keep them in neglect as with attention and love, women’s suffering only grows. But suffering only made Mrinal stronger and led her to find a niche for herself. She had no room of her own in her in-

law's house. She neither had the rightful space there. Devoid of mutual respect, understanding and love, she felt like a caged bird. 'Amar ghar to ar amar nay' when Bindu was kept by Mrinal in her room Bindu had rashes on her body, everyone opposed the idea as everyone thought she was suffering from 'small pox' and should be sent to hospital immediately. But Mrinal objected to it and fortunately all rashes vanished immediately. Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own' appeared in 1929 and Rabindranath makes Mrinal talk about the reality of women's life in 1914. The shackles of traditions, social norms and customs stifled her so much so that she leaves behind the life of bondage and heads for an emancipated life in Puri, the place of divinity. Her pilgrimage by the vast sea opened her eyes and she searches for her true identity. She gathers courage to write for the first time a letter to her husband, a documentation of her liberated self. The epistolary way of sending her strong message to her husband lends her the scope to be straightforward in stating many things which for years she had concealed in herself. With confidence and clarity, she states her feelings as a woman with a voice of resistance. Now she has no doubt, no fear, no apprehension about what people will think and how they would view her. She has found the path to salvation which came through defy and protest. She needs no shelter under the feet of her husband but she wants herself to be removed from there to take shelter in God's abode. She would not return to the Makhan Baral lane to live a life of bondage and servitude. Her liberated and emancipated soul does not need the mortal support and shelter anymore. The vastness of life can no more be confined in the inner apartment of her husband's house.

Conclusion

Tagore's 'wife's Letter' is relevant even in this 21st century when patriarchal rules still operate to subvert the voices of protest against oppression and repression of women. Bindu represents thousands of young women who are put to death through physical and psychological assault. Tagore's 'Wife's Letter' upholds various social issues related with women. The issues of child marriage, forced arranged marriage, poor condition of child-birth room, subordination of women, women's helplessness in a joint family- are all touched upon with poignancy and deep insight. At the same time, he has pointed out the escape routes from bondage and deprivation. A woman would better embrace death like Nirupama in 'Denapaona' and Bindu in 'Streer Patra' than live a life of ignominy and disgrace. Death is here symbolic of redemption from worldly cares and suffering. He also advocates another escape route of i.e., breaking the shackles of traditional roles of a woman to emerge victorious as an individual. Mrinal is

emancipated as she claims to be removed from her husband's lotus feet. Her visit to the holy pilgrimage of 'Jagannath Dham' (Puri) enkindles in her a kind of awakening that reckons only her true self. Her identity as an individual is also fortified by the vastness of the ocean. The immensity of the ocean propels in her the urge to make her life meaningful in her own terms and not remaining under the feet of the man in her life. Tagore strongly believed in the need for upliftment of women's condition in contemporary society. Using his pen as a weapon, he portrayed the dismal condition of women in society. Focusing largely on emancipation, his writing campaigned for women's liberation, equality, freedom, justice, power, dignity and rights. Creation of a strong character like Mrinal by Tagore paves the way for later feminist interventions.

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