

Exploring Gender in the Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
St. Theresa International College, Nakhon Nayok, Thailand.

Email: saikatenglish2013@gmail.com

Received: 03/10/2018, Revised: 08/12/2018, Accepted: 09/12/2018

Abstract

Human societies, since the time immemorial, have always tended to assign different roles, codes of behavior and morality, and even different feelings and thoughts to men and women based on the biological distinction of sex (between male and female) thereby leading to the construction of the social distinction of gender (between masculine and feminine). As a literary genre, short story developed in the 19th century and by the end of 20th century occupied the role as one of the major literary forms. In the field of academia and literary circles, Rabindranath Tagore is mainly known as a bard, thinker, philosopher, painter and social activist but few know the first Asian Nobel laureate Tagore as a feminist, with gender issues forming the underlying theme in many of his works. Rabindranath Tagore is one of those pioneer short story writers whose writings reflect maturity. He is regarded as one of the progressive modern Indian short story writers. Tagore has been very successful in depicting woman psychology in his short stories and has made very scathing comments against gender suppression. The focus of this paper will be on the female protagonist of the short stories titled, “A Wife’s letter” and “Musolmanir Galpo” or “The story of a Muslim Woman,” by Tagore that how they remained unperturbed although the society in which they lived were dominated by male patriarchal norms and in what ways they have been successful in protecting their rights thereby becoming the champions for women mainly through their progressive thought, courage, and determination.

Keywords: short story; woman; explore; gender; emancipated woman; Rabindranath Tagore

1. Introduction

Humans have been a born storyteller since the prehistoric time. Through stories humans have cherished the memories, dreams and also have satisfied the desire

for adventure and sermons thereby proving to be a source of joy. The short story has been a part of human civilization ever since its dawn and hence can be said to be “One of the oldest forms of literature ... which has existed through the ages in various forms like myths, fairy, tales, ballads and parables to name a few” (Banerjee, 2017).

As H.E. Bates observes:

The history of the short story, through its phases of myth and legend, fable and parable, anecdote and pictorial essay, sketch, and even down to what the crudest provincial reporter calls “a good story,” cannot be measured. The account in Genesis of the conflict between Cain and Abel is a short story: the parable of the prodigal son is a short story and in itself a masterpiece of compression for all time; the stories of Salome, Ruth, Judith, and Susannah are all examples of art that were already old, civilized and highly developed some thousands of years before the vogue of Pamela. (Bates, 1988, p.13)

In the ‘Prefatory Note’ of Brander Matthews’ *The Philosophy of the Short-Story* (1901) one can find the term short story used for the first time as a literary genre with his doubt about its nomenclature:

Although the short-story still lacks a satisfactory name, it is now seen to be clearly differentiated from the longer novel and also from the tale which merely chances to be not prolonged. From both of these, it separates itself sharply—from the novel by its brevity and from the more brief tale by its unity, its totality, its concentration upon a single effect or a single sequence of effects (Mathews, 1901, p.3).

However with the passage of time, the hyphen in the name was removed as Ian Reid notes, ‘short story’ as a term appeared for the first time in the supplement of Oxford English Dictionary in 1933. “The OED supplement of 1933 defined the term ‘short story’ as designating a particular kind of literary product; then it gained formal admittance into the English vocabulary” (Reid, 1977, p.1).

If we look into the historical evolvement of the modern short story we will find that:

The modern short story as a literary form came to prominence during the nineteenth century with writers such as Poe and Hawthorne in the United

States; Maupassant and Balzac in France; Pushkin, Gogol and Chekov in Russia and Sir Walter Scott in England. These writers with their great writing skill made the short story a dominant genre in the nineteenth-century world of literature (Banerjee, 2016).

Majority of the earliest literature produced around the world were borrowed or influenced heavily from the pre-historic lore. India without any doubt can be considered to be the storehouse of short stories because:

In India storytelling is an ancient tradition; the testimony to this fact is the ancient myths be it *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, the fables and parables in *Panchtantra*, the *Jataka Tales* or the *Kathasaritsagara* which are considered to be storehouse of stories and has inspired and continue to inspire the modern short story writers (Banerjee, 2016).

M. Rama Rao while assessing the role and importance of short story in modern Indian literature observes:

We have had in Indian stories which lie embedded in the hymns of the *Rigveda*, or scattered in the *Upanishads* and the epics, the stories which constitute the *Panchatantra*, the *Hitopadesha*, the *Sukasaptati*, the *Dasakumaracharita* and the *Vetalapanchavimsati* in Sanskrit, the *Buddhist Jataka Stories* in Pali and a host of similar stories in modern Indian languages (Rao, 1967 p.216).

1.1 Evolution of Indian English Short story as a Literary Genre

As a literary genre, short story emerged in India with the publication of 'Lachmania' (1868) in the second half of the nineteenth century by Fakir Mohan Senapati thereby gaining the tag of becoming the first complete modern Indian short story and on the other hand the publication of *Realities of Indian Life: Stories Collected from Criminal Reports of India* (1885) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt making it as the first collection of short stories.

The pioneers of Indian short story writing are writers such as K. S. Venkataramani, K. Nagarajan, Cornelia Sorabji, S. M. Nateshaa Sastri, Dwijendra Nath Neogi and Sunity Devee. However, the credit of instilling the real life force in

Indian short stories with its typical Indian style goes to Rabindranath Tagore whose short stories were characterized with the concept of life blended totality comprising of imaginative romanticism and idealism.

1.2. Rabindranath Tagore as a writer

In the art of short story writing Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate had no predecessors whom he followed nor did he imitate the style of any western short story writer as the content, style and presentation of his short stories was entirely his own. At the age of sixteen, he penned his first short story titled “Bhikharini” (“The Beggar woman”). The analysis of Tagore’s journey as a short story writer will put across the fact that during his early phase of writing, he wrote mostly about the rural and rustic Bengal whereas psychological analysis of humans with special reference to woman occupied the majority of his later period of short story writing;

Banerjee (2017) mentioned that, Tagore is credited to have written nearly hundred short stories out of which during the 1890s, he wrote fifty nine short stories majority of which are readily available in English in collections like *Glimpses of Bengal life* (1913), *Hungry Stones* (1916) *Mashi* (1918) *Broken Ties* (1925) *The Parrots Training* (1944) and *The Runaway* (1959).

Tagore’s depiction of his women characters in his short stories leave a deep scar in the mind of the readers as the portrayal of the characters are done in a very realistic manner. The prevailing patriarchal set up of the society during Tagore’s time angered him as he was a firm believer that the patriarchy stifled the very basic human rights of woman. In the short stories of Tagore, patriarchy presents itself as a significant socio-cultural force that orders and demands its own discriminatory social structure.

2. Objective of the study

This paper seeks to explore the social distinction of gender primarily caused by the exploitation and the marginalization of one sex by the other due to biological distinction leading to a psychological vacuum as faced by the woman protagonist of “A Wife’s Letter” and “Musolmanir Galpo” or “The story of a Muslim Woman”. This paper will also try to bring to light the fact that in spite of the societal situations and conditions which were completely unfavorable for women in the 19th and early part of

the 20th century, these female protagonists through their reformist thought, self-assuredness and sheer grit and determination come out triumphant at the end.

3. Analysis of the short story “A Wife’s Letter”

“*A Wife’s Letter* is the first attempt by Tagore to create a pro-woman piece of writing” (Ray, 2004, p.181). The story is about the protagonist Mrinal who after being married for fifteen years, leaves her husband’s house and moves to Puri forever and from there writes a letter to her husband. She got married in her childhood and came into the joint family of her husband as the second bride. During Tagore’s time in marriage, looks constituted the most important part of would be bride whereas intelligence was an omen as is testified from Mrinal’s statement; “That I had beauty, it did not take you long to forget. But you were reminded, every step of the way, that I also had intelligence” (Tagore, 2000, p.190). Mrinal’s mother also worried about the fact that she is intelligent. Her only friends were the cows in the stable with whom she often ended up narrating her self-composed poems. Mrinal was forced to stay in unhygienic conditions during her childbirth which resulted in the delivery of a still-born daughter. Bindu’s arrival in Mrinal’s life made her outspoken and rebellious. Mrinal’s sister-in-law was Bindu who due to her family was unwillingly forced to bear all the atrocities after being married to a mentally ill person. Mrinal decides to leave her household and wish to secretly take Bindu to pilgrimage to get rid of the suffocating environment of her house. Whereas Bindu on the other hand was unable to bear the emotional abuse from her near and dear ones and committed suicide before Mrinal could take her for pilgrimage. However, even after death, Bindu was blamed for her own miseries. Mrinal vividly described her thoughts about her husband and the society in her letter. She addressed her husband with sarcasm in the letter and at the end of the letter, she feels liberated from all her inhibitions.

This story by Tagore highlights the various social evils of the caste system, patriarchy, lack of equal opportunity and child marriage which was prevalent during his time. Tagore through the character of Mrinal has very vividly presented before his readers these various social evils and depicts Mrinal’s sufferings primarily because she asserts herself by being creative, intelligent and expressive in her views. Through her poetry, Mrinal gave vent to her pent-up feelings and voiced her views on equality of sexes and freedom from the clutches of patriarchal bonds. The letter which Mrinal wrote metaphorically resembles the back of embroidery in which “there is no hiding the starkness, no grace, no adornment” (Tagore, 2008 p.194).

In those days, it was believed that according to Hindu religion a woman who took up writing was a prelude to becoming a widow very soon. Generally, Tagore addressed problems of female oppression by patriarchy in his short stories and advocated women's upliftment through the third person narration, but here he chooses the first person narration. In allowing Mrinal, the protagonist, to narrate her own experience in writing, Tagore has foreseen the new age of emancipated women that was to emerge in the next few decades. Mrinal's attempt in writing this letter is in agreement with the view of Helen Cixous, the French Feminist, who, in *The Newly Born Women* (Cixous, 1987), advises women that "she must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing, which, when the moment of liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history" (Cixous, 1987 p.18).

Mrinal is probably the first woman character in Indian literature to rebel against the patriarchal exploitation of women through her powerful writing. Mrinal writes this letter from Puri, where she has gone forever at the age of twenty-seven after fifteen years of married life. B.R. Agarwal rightly observes, "A woman's story, inevitably silenced by androcentric culture, narrated from a woman's point of view by women writers in itself is a challenge to the male power" (Tandon, 2008 p. 96).

Bindu's cruel death awakened Mrinal's sensibilities. It strengthens Mrinal's resolve to assert her identity and transforms her into a liberated woman. After fifteen years of life as a wife suffering endless anguish and indignity as a human being, Mrinal realizes that her fulfilment cannot be attained as a wife but as a woman. She declares that she will live like Meerabai, and concludes her letter with the words, "Breaking free from the shelter beneath your feet, Mrinal" (Tagore, 2000, p.207).

It is to be noted here that she signs the letter in her own name as 'Mrinal' and not in the nomenclature attributed to her - "Mejo Bou," the second daughter-in-law. The acquisition of name is symbolic of a person's individuality, and by this signature, Mrinal announces that she has permanently discarded her identity as the second daughter-in-law of the family and has chosen to espouse her own self.

Tagore's writings had a serious impact on the traditional socio-cultural order of his times and on account of his liberal ideas, he had to face considerable criticism from the orthodox Bengali intelligentsia.

4. Analysis of the short story “Musolmanir Galpo” or “The story of a Muslim Woman”

Tagore’s last short story which he penned just before two months before his death is “Musolmanir Galpo” or “The story of a Muslim Woman” which was published in 1955 in *Ritupatra* (Tagore, n.d.). The story is about Kamala, who was saved from the hands of the dacoits by Habir Khan resulting in her being disowned by her own family who believed that Kamala had lost her caste by seeking shelter in a Muslim’s house. Habir Khan, on the other hand, allows Kamala to continue living in his house where she can practice Hindu religion freely. All throughout her stay, she was never persuaded to convert to Islam. Kamala realized that humanity is above any caste and religion. Habir Khan, despite being a Muslim, saved her and sheltered her when she was homeless. She was treated with outmost care and attention and no male member was allowed near the house where Kamala was living. Khan’s son visited Kamala secretly resulting in the development of an emotional bond between them. Then one day she told Habir Khan:

Father, I have no religion of my own. The man I love is my religion. I could not find the grace of God in the religion which deprived me of all love and dumped me to the garbage heap of neglect. The deity there humiliated me every day. I can't forget such insults. Father, I discovered love for the first time in your house. I realized that the life of a destitute like me has some value. I worship the deity which has sheltered me through the respect of such love. He's my God—he's neither Hindu nor Muslim. I've accepted your second son Karim; my life and my religion have mingled with him. You can convert me to Islam, I've no objection—may be, I belong to two faiths (Tagore, n.d.)

Despite being abandoned by her family, she saved her sister Sarala from the dacoits who attacked her bridal palanquin. The last lines of the story embody a strong human message:

Uncle, my pranam to you. Don't be afraid, I won't touch your feet. Now take your daughter back home. Nothing has made her untouchable. Tell my aunt I had to take her grudging food and clothes for long, and never thought I could repay your debt like this. I've also brought for Sarala a red silk sari and this

brocade sitting mat. If my sister is ever in trouble, let her remember that she has a Muslim elder sister to protect her (Tagore, n.d.).

Thus, “neither lineage nor the obligatory marriage models prove adequate to characterize kinship for this Tagorean character” (Sen, 2016, p. 106).

Tagore through the protagonist of this story, Kamala presents a woman who is revolutionary in nature and has renounced her faith in Hindu religion and finds spiritual and mental satisfaction in being a Muslim. Meherjan is given her due respect, dignity and above all love in Habir Khan’s household.

5. Conclusion

The stories titled “Wife’s letter” and “Musolmanir Galpo” or “The story of a Muslim Woman” depict how Rabindranath Tagore has presented his female characters as valiant, undaunted, strong-willed, determined “and conscious of their identity” (Banerjee, 2017). The protagonist of these stories defied the common patriarchal norm of their time, i.e. to remain suppressed and passive and championed the cause of women emancipation from the clutches of patriarchal domination. They raise their voice in a strong manner against the biased patriarchal society and through their zeal, courage, grit and determination ultimately come out victorious.

In terms of the physical length, these stories are very short, but they have a lasting effect on the minds of the readers thereby appealing to humanity as a whole. The revolutionary and significant change in the traditional social thought process which Mrinal and Kamala brings gets transplanted in the minds and hearts of the readers. This is the beauty and craftsmanship which extraordinary creative people like Tagore can create. As has been rightly said “Rabindranath’s success as a master short story writer was actually ensured by his essentially lyrical temperament since ... there is a close affinity between a short story and lyric” (Bandyopadhyay, 2004, p. 62).

References

- Bandyopadhyay, A. (2004). Rabindranath Tagore: Novelist, Short story writer and Essayist. Mohit. K. Ray (Eds.) *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore*. Vol.1. (pp. 47-70). New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Banerjee, S. (2016). Inter-caste and Class Conflicts in Kartar Singh Duggal's Selected Short Stories. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 7(2), 109-113. Retrieved from: <http://www.the-criterion.com/V7/n2/018.pdf>
- Banerjee, S. (2017). Emancipated Women in Rabindranath Tagore's Selected Short Stories. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 8(1), 271-279. Retrieved from: <http://www.the-criterion.com/V8/n1/039.pdf>
- Bates, H.E. (1988). *The Modern Short Story From 1809 to 1953*, London: Robert Hale.
- Cixous, H. (1987). *The Newly Born Women*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Matthews, B. (1901). *The Philosophy of the Short Story*. New York and London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Rao, M. R. (1967). The Short Story in Modern Indian Literature. *Fiction and the Reading Public in India*. Mysore: Mysore University Press.
- Ray, M. K. (2004). *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Reid, I. (1977). *The Critical Idioms: The short story*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd.
- Sen, N. (2016). Women and Gender in Short Stories by Rabindranath Tagore An Anthropological Introspection on Kinship and Family. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 25(2), 94-115.
- Tagore, R. (2000). *Rabindranath Tagore The Postmaster: Selected Stories*. Trans. William Radice. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Tagore, R. (2008). *Galpaguccha (Collected Short Stories)*. Kolkata: Visva-Bharati.
- Tagore, R. (n.d.) The Story of a Muslim Woman. *Ritupatra*, Barsha issue, 1955. Trans. Swapan Kumar Banerjee. Retrieved from: https://www.parabaas.com/rabindranath/articles/gSwapan_musolmani.html
- Tandon, N. (2008). *Feminism A Paradigm Shift*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.