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REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN: PORTRAYED IN TAGORE'S SHORT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore, among several other issues that he addressed in his works, sought to resolve the circumstances of woman. He portrayed most of his female characters in a new and convincing style, tradition and age old conventions Tagore spoke of and felt the need for women to be seen and heard beyond the home. He was not a feminist but choose to be known as a reformist. As opposed to the feminist fight for emancipation, Tagore's approach was unique. He supported that women were best suited for domesticity but in the same breath he called on women to "extend their radiance" beyond home.

Tagore themes like women's liberation, women's rights, courtesy of women and civility towards women constitute an integral component of a number of Tagore's important works. Tagore urges women to find an identity of their own, and realize that wifehood and motherhood are but fractions of their whole being. They should not lose their individuality, independence and identity. In this article I want to narrate modern woman protagonists in Tagore short frictions who were an ideal daughters (Kalyani in "Unknown woman " and Mrinal in "The Wife's Letter").

Tagore's stories are relevant to the current society thematic reviews and readers perceptions will definitely promote idealistic views in the minds of the readers. Tagore had the unique natural genius to read women's minds and analyze their strange structure,through his stories.

Key Words: women, emancipation, identity and reformist

Introduction

It must be noticed that though Tagore's docile daughters were obedient to their father's wishes regarding their marriage and marital partners, they were also surprisingly well educated and aware. This feature was uncommon among young women of nineteenth-century Bengal who were mostly denied formal or informal education. Yet sadly, the life-experiences of Tagore's good, obedient and dutiful daughters, their sense of identity trapped within their docile bodies, replicate the lives of many passive and abject Bengali women of those times, many of whom died from illnesses at

an early age or experienced living death by having to experience the trauma of an unhappy marriage. "Unknown Woman" is also a history of a young Indian man and a woman who are caught and trapped in the hell fire of so called family pride and prejudice in the name of marriage. The arrangement and disagreement over dowry system is the thing that causes hassles in such a marriage. It is always the bride and her family who have to bear the unpleasant burden of marriage. This is all due to the culture which upholds man at a higher level than woman.

The most unusual thing happens, when the bride's father whose vision is augmented by education takes a U-turn in calling off the marriage ceremony. He does this as he sees the steam of inhumanity smolder and rise from the groom's family. It is the education and wisdom that make him see the differences between darkness and light. If education doesn't permit one to see such differences then its whole purpose is a sheer failure. If that is the case with education, then better not acquire it. But we see that is not the case with Shambunath. He does what he wants to do because he knows one should not become the victim for the sake of safe guarding culture and tradition. What he realizes is that one can comfortably give up or deny anything that embodies evil or bad nature. Foreseeing such things as pride, greed, inhumanity and brazenness in the groom's family, Shambunath gives up his daughter's marriage despite social pressures. He can't give his daughter's hands to the family who places its pride on status rather than on the principles and ethics of a good relationship.

On the other hand, 'Woman Unknown' is the portrayal of a woman who struggles to break social norm that sets a stereotypical role for her. Unlike her counterparts, she pictures herself to be strong willed and able to implement her own wish. In that case, we know that she has chosen not to marry but to devote her life time energy for the welfare of girls and women in her native land. She has seen the bleak future of women that can only be removed by education. She knows without education darkness would perpetuate in the life of most women in her society.

Kalyani also represents modern woman whose thinking horizon is widened by the power of education. Education is no doubt powerful in empowering personality with the power of logic at present but it also enables one to look ahead of life and courageously embark on the career that would help other women from falling into the trap. Kalyani herself and numerous other Indian women have fallen prey to it since India was born.

The story also presents the conflict in an Indian system of joint family, where power is consolidated in the hands of a single authoritarian male member. Apart from him no one can take the

decision. Such a system when understood properly makes Anupam realize the thing that cripples his own right to think and act logically in life. Like Kalyani, he too is a dynamic character empowered by the wisdom of education to make him see the flaws that exist in his family. Thus, he breaks all barriers of custom and culture and decides to go on his knees to confront Kalyani and seek her hand in marriage. But will she bend?

'Woman Unknown' also makes us understand the true quality of 'true love'. Anupam, after much trial realizes that his love for the Woman Unknown is far from fabrication. This is the very reason that strengthens him to give up his uncle and approach Shambunath.

Despite his true love for her, he never gets shattered when he understands that Kalyani wouldn't marry him. Instead, he too chooses to remain unmarried for the rest of his life. He takes this ultimate decision because he has found a special place for her in his heart. Therefore, he will not need a second place to live in. Thus, we can attribute his love for Kalyani as the spiritual achievement which is far superior to that of physical one.

In the Indian context the term 'a highly eligible bachelor' refers to a young and unmarried man who is good, educated, belongs to a rich family and is free from some bad habits that a young boy can have. In this story Anupam is one such young man who possesses all the above mentioned qualities and that's why he has been commended as a highly eligible bachelor.

Anupam's uncle was a very shrewd calculative and cunning in money matters. He wanted a family who was rich enough to pay him a handsome dowry but at the same time he did not want a family richer than him either in terms of wealth or social status as he felt that he would not be in position to dominate the bride's family. He believed that bride's parents and family members should be always humble in front of groom's family; they should not show any pride in their behaviour. He also felt that it was not obligatory for the groom's family head to be humble or show too much respect to bride's family members.

Sambhunath babu was a man of middle age and he was handsome enough to stand out even in a crowd. But the most remarkable fact about him is that he was a man of few words but strong conviction. He was also a man of self dignity and that's why he could not bear the insult meted by Anupam's uncle.

By nature uncle was very shrewd and cunning. He was a miser and had no trust on anybody else. He proved his shrewdness during the negotiation and finalizing the dowry. He made everything clear to the bride's father – the amount in cash, the quantity of gold and etc. Not only this, he even took his own goldsmith to confirm the purity of gold before the actual marriage ceremony took place.

Just before the marriage Anupam's uncle demanded Sambhunath babu to bring all the jewellery for checking its purity. Sambhunath said it was not required as his daughter had put on all the jewelleries. But uncle did not agree as he did not want to take any chance. Moreover he was already apprehensive observing the miserliness of Sambhunath in the arrangement made for the marriage party. Sambhunath took it as an insult and a breach of trust. He was hurt very badly and hence he decided not to give the hands of his daughter to a family who did not trust him and send the marriage party without any marriage.

Anupam's family and especially his uncle was very furious about Sambhunath's behaviour. They had not thought that a bride's parent can break off the marriage. His uncle even thought of dragging them to court for defamation. Even Anupam was very angry and he thought that one day the bride's father would come begging for their forgiveness and would request them once again to marry his daughter.

The girl's boldness and frankness, according to mother's point of view, was out of accepted proportion according to Indian culture. Moreover her buying chana and eating without any hesitation in front of them all was unexpected from a girl. Owing to these facts the mother felt quite uneasy about the girl.

'The story 'Woman Unknown' depicts the status of woman in the Indian society and their

struggle to rise and assert their presence in a more dominating way'. The whole story categorically reveals the different facets of Indian culture and tradition. It basically deals with the culture of traditional marriage in the Indian society. It clearly reveals how the arrange marriage in India materialise and what are the problems that may arise in the process. It also highlights the vice of dowry and its consequences in the Indian society.

Traditionally the women's position used to be non-significant in the whole process of marriage. In this story too Kalyani, the main protagonist, does not have any say in her marriage. But once the marriage is broken she shows her independence by taking her own decision to devote her life for the service of motherland and educate young women. Women's independence and resurrection has been asserted more emphatically when she refuses Anupam's proposal of marriage at the end of the story despite her father's willingness. By rejecting Anupam's marriage proposal she is symbolically asserting that Indian women would no more be ruled by the male and they would no more submit themselves to the whims and dominance of male dominated society.

In the story "A Wife's Letter", Mrinal writes to her husband that her daughter was born and died. If she had lived, she would have brought all that was wonderful, all that was large, into her life; she would have become mother. And a mother; even confined to one narrow world is of the universe. She had the grief of becoming a mother; but not the freedom.

Mirinal's daughter died all most immediately after she was born. She suffered only the pain of motherhood but never experienced its freedom. The English doctor who treated her was astonished at the sight of the women's quarters in her husband's house. They lived in full the, unhygienic surroundings. "When self-respect dwindles, neglect does not seem and just: for this reason, it causes no suffering. That is also why women are ashamed to feel pain" (Chaudary208).

The story "The Wife's Letter," as the title suggests is in the form of a letter. The epistolary short story narrates the hardships the wives face in

their husbands' houses-not only from the husbands but from in-laws as well.

The narrator, Mrinal writes this letter from Puri to her husband at Calcutta. Names of Tagore's characters have meanings and they reveal their character. 'Mrinal' in Bengali means the stem of a lotus. The letter starts with the phrase "My submission at your lotus feet." Mrinal has been married to his husband for fifteen years. This is her first letter to him, for she had not been away from him before. She had come to Puri on a pilgrimage to the seat of lord Jagannath. Through the letter she reminds her husband their fifteen years of life together. She is the second daughter-in-law of his father's house. She has taken courage to write this letter. She writes this letter not as a daughter-in-law of his family.

Mrinal came on pilgrimage to Puri. She decided that she would never return to her house at number 27, Makhan Baral lane in Calcutta. Mrinal's letter wound up with the following paragraph:

Do you think I am going up to kill myself?
Have no fear. I shan't indulge in such a state
just with you. Mirabai too was a woman like
me. Her fetters were not light either, but
she did not need to die in order to live... I
too shall live, at least, I live.

Bereft of the shelter of your family's feet,
Mrinal .(chaudhuri 218)

Miseries of two wives are pictured in this story side by side. Since Bindu was weak, she ended her life, whereas Mrinal is a brave, intelligent woman and so she could challenge the fate and survive. It is necessary that she should live and fight against the injustice shown towards wives. She performed it well and proves to the world that a woman can live without the support of husband and his family. Mrinal is an embodiment of an ideal woman, not just surrendering to the male domination. Through Mrinal, Tagore exhorts the woman of his country to resist discrimination, injustice and cruelty shown against them.

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