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PROBING THE CHARACTER OF CHARULATA THROUGH FEMINIST LENS IN
RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S "BROKEN NEST"

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Abstract

In the almost seventy year long career of Tagore, he has dealt with variety of themes and subjects. But on an extensive reading of the short stories specifically, one finds that one of the most important concern of Tagore was the position and treatment of women in the patriarchal society, more particularly the Hindu Brahmin society. Though many contemporary writers of Tagore addressed the issues of women in their works, there were still very few who addressed the sensitive issues of women's emotional and physical needs – especially married women. Tagore's "Broken Nest" is one such narrative that addresses the emotional and physical crisis of a married woman and, interestingly and implicitly, the blame is laid on the man instead of the woman. This paper focuses to explore/probe the lead female character Charulata's character from a feminist perspective and also tries to find out who is to be blamed for the 'broken nest' of her married life.

Keywords: Hindu Brahmin society, Bengal Renaissance, colonial India.

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Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the first non-European to bag the prestigious Nobel Prize award, was a vital figure in the field of Bengali literature and also Indian English Literature. Tagore was popularly known as a poet and was awarded the Nobel Prize for his soulful collection of poems *Gitanjali* (1910). But other than being a poet, Tagore was also a novelist, dramatist, short story writer, lyricist, translator, painter, social reformer, philosopher and what not. Tagore's works mostly feature the Bengal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, in spite of this fact one may say that Tagore's works exhibit an element of universality as he raises a concern against multiple social evils that had existed and do exist in all times and spaces (though in different manifestations).

Though the characters, vocabulary, ethos and the overall paraphernalia of his compositions revolve around the Bengali culture of the colonial India, one may easily find the issues raised by Tagore everywhere in India or for that matter across the globe – casteism, racism, poverty, insensitivity and lack of compassion of human beings, gender stereotyping and discrimination, apathy towards children etc.

Tagore has an extensive literary career that began when he wrote his first poem at the tender age of eight and continued till his last breath in 1941. In such a long literary career, he touched variety of themes. However, if one specifically focuses on his novellas or short stories one may trace some common concerns that Tagore kept on revisiting

time and again. Being a philosopher and visionary humanitarian he, time and again, tried to address pertinent social evils in the Hindu society. Tagore himself being a Brahmin, closely studied the hypocrisies and the false standards of the Hindu Brahmin society. To be more specific, the reader may find that Tagore is more concerned with the representation of the Hindu Brahmin women in the traditional and chauvinist patriarchal society. Tagore's short stories draw a canvas of women characters occupying different positions in a Hindu family, but wherever they exist, they face a lot of social injustice, discrimination, deprivation, and oppression. A.D. Choudhuri in his article "Tagore's Short Stories" very clearly points out that "the suffering of the Bengali wife is a recurrent theme in the stories" and further adds that if one compares the male and female characters in his stories one may clearly note that "the characters of women are much more alive, authentic, and attractive than those of men . . . they [men] are often stupid, insensitive, and ridiculous . . ." (77). This statement makes it very clear why Tagore's stories are read with so much of zeal and engagement till date – because he attempts to subvert the conventional representation of women as weak, passive, and incapable of any action in comparison to the men, the agents of action.

Tagore had also been a popular writer because the issues raised in his works were often far ahead of its times. Though all his stories do not exhibit this spirit of challenging and questioning the contemporary ideology so vocally, yet there are many examples where the women characters, instead of being appreciated for their indomitable spirit, might have been condemned as immoral and perverse. Some such women characters are Binodini in *The Sand of the Eye*, Mrinalini in "A Wife's Letter", or Charulata in "Broken Nest". The characters Binodini and Charulata, specifically, were women who didn't shy away from articulating their physical needs as well. These two women seem to be very courageous, keeping in view the times when Tagore was writing in. Those were the times when evils like Sati, dowry, child-marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage were very prevalent in the society. Advocating the issues of women's emotional and

physical needs, or justifying the extra-marital relationship if a husband fails to empathize with the wife was a kind of blasphemy. Still Tagore dared to address these aspects of a woman's personality and tried to probe the underlying reasons for the same. Apparently, one may hold characters like Binodini and Charulata guilty, but after an in-depth study of the various layers of their personalities, or even their circumstances, one may understand the various forces working at the same time to mould these characters in the particular manner in which they act or behave. This becomes possible because of Tagore's acute understanding of the human psyche, especially that of a woman. Choudhuri points out that,

he [Tagore] went straight into the heart of the woman, and discovered for us how much they suffered, how much they sacrificed, how little were they appreciated by the husband or the family . . . (77)

The focus of this paper is to study the character of Charulata (Charu, in short) in one of the very popular short stories of Tagore, "Broken Nest". It was originally written in Bengali in 1901 with the title "NastaNirh" and later translated into English like most of his works. There have been many litterattis who have undertaken the task of translating Tagore's compositions, but the English translation which will be referred to and quoted from in this paper is Sharmishtha Mohanty's "*Broken Nest and Other Stories*". "Broken Nest", variously referred to as novella and short story, is a beautiful rendering of human emotions and their intricacies. It revolves around the life of three people with a background of the 19th century Bengal Renaissance. There's Bhupati, a rich, educated, upper class Bengali man; his young, beautiful, and equally talented wife Charulata; and Amal, the young cousin of Bhupati. Bhupati cherishes a dream of becoming a successful news editor of an English newspaper and thus immerses himself completely in actualizing his dream, thereby, completely overlooking his responsibilities as a husband. Charulata, too, represents the spirit of the Bengal renaissance and thus is a very sensible, cultured and educated lady, fond of reading and writing. Apparently, it seems that Bhupati and Charulata are leading an ideal life,

having all luxurious comforts at hand and nothing to worry about. But the reality is that all these luxuries fail to provide any emotional satisfaction to Charu. She has ample time with her and nothing to do or talk to. Her situation is no better than a person pushed into solitary confinement, only difference being the confinement zone is a place made of gold. The third important character in the story is Amal who arrives as a source of salvation to her. Charu and Amal are of the same age having common interests and thus very easily develop a bond of friendship and affection. The crisis in the story is the unconscious attraction of Charu towards Amal to an extent that she almost forgets that she has a husband. However, neither of the two was aware of Charu's obsession with Amal and so can't be blamed for disturbing the marital bond of Charu and Bhupati. Moreover, as soon as Amal comes across the true feelings of Charu, he retreats. He gets married to a girl suggested by his elder brother and leaves for England, forsaking Charu amidst a turmoil of emotions unaddressed – anger, grief, jealousy, complaints etc. Gradually, Bhupati too sees through Charu's behaviour that Amal had occupied a place in her heart that was actually meant for a husband. Thus, Bhupati too moves away from Charu leaving the woman amidst unbearable loneliness and suffering. Charu's case seems to be like King Lear, who was 'more sinned against than sinning'. Charu's attraction to Amal in spite of being a married woman was an unconscious one, but Bhupati's indifference towards Charu was motivated by personal interests. He wanted to fulfill his dream but at the same time he also wanted his wife to be unwaveringly loyal and patient towards him.

Bhupati had a belief held by many; no one had to earn a right over his wife, a wife, like the North Star, keeps her own light always lit – the wind does not blow out, it does not wait for fuel.(66-67)

Though all the three characters are given an almost equal space in the story, it is Charu who may be treated as the protagonist. When Charu's character is studied in a close comparison to other characters in the story, one finds that Charu had been wronged irrevocably by all male characters in the story – Bhupati, Amal, and Umapati (her

brother), and ironically all of them forsake her after committing the wrong. The very first comparison that is presented at the very outset of the narrative is between Charu and Bhupati. It is mentioned that though Bhupati belonged to an affluent family, "Bhupati did not need to work. He had enough money But he was born under stars that made him a man who must work", so that he didn't have to "lament the endlessness of time on his hands" (3). This quote makes it clear that because he was gifted intellectually, he could not sit ideally and relish his ancestral property. He had an urge to constructively use his time and knowledge and thereby contribute socially and culturally to the society. Just after the introduction of Bhupati, the writer introduces Charu, and informs the reader that besides being beautiful, Charu is very fond of literature. She seems to be an unconventional character who derives more pleasure in reading and writing than in the stereotypical tastes of women like dressing and adoring themselves, or chit-chatting, cooking etc. there's an implication that on intellectual grounds Charu and Bhupati are equals, the irony being that Bhupati couldn't bear free time himself but didn't think the same way for Charu. Being a man, he assumes it to be his ethical/social responsibility to use his learning for the betterment of the society, but assuming that women could also play a similar role, was a thought completely missing in Bhupati

Though Bhupati appears to be a sensible and mature man, providing all comforts to his wife to the extent that "she lacked nothing" (4), he seems to be completely ignorant to the emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of Charu. In fact one of his relatives had to bring his attention to the presence of a 'wife' in his life and also to her loneliness. When Bhupati was reproached for his indifference towards Charu, he felt that "Charu should have a companion, the poor thing has nothing to do" (4-5).

Bhupati has been presented as a gentle and kind human being, but a critical reading of the text reveals the unintentional egoism of the husband towards his wife. Bhupati may be called an egoist because he completely ignores Charu's presence at home in order to fulfill his dream. He's so much self-engrossed in the paper that, "his child-wife

Charulata slowly stepped into her youth” and “the newspaper editor did not become fully aware of this significant piece of news” (4). Charu was perhaps married at an early age to the older and mature Bhupati. In such circumstances it was the responsibility of Bhupati to nurture the emotional and physical needs of Charu. In a very implicit yet evocative manner, the writer comments on the careless attitude of Bhupati towards Charu.

He arranged to have his brother-in-law’s wife, Mandakini, brought to the house, *and was relieved.* (italicized for emphasis)

The time when a husband and wife, in the first glow of the birth of love, appear to each other in incomparable beauty and as forever new, that time, that golden radiance of a marital dawn, passed by, unawares, unknown to both of them. Without tasting newness, both became old, familiar and habituated to each other. (5)

Bhupati may also be termed as egoist because he stereotypes Charu, in thinking that she must be bored due to the absence of any other woman in the house. Due to his self-engrossment, he failed to understand the tastes of Charu and couldn’t see that Manda was not a woman of her tastes. Thus to the utter disappointment of Charu, the situation remained the same even after the arrival of Manda. One may also argue that though Bhupati was unable to spare time for Charu, he continuously devised new ideas to dispel the loneliness of Charu. However, a critical reading will make the reader discern that these attempts on part of Bhupati were only a means to acquit himself from any kind of guilt and accusation that he didn’t take care of Charu. The reader shouldn’t be duped into misunderstanding his actions as care or sympathy with Charu. It was just a ‘compensatory move’ of Bhupati. We may reach up to this conclusion, also because, if Bhupati had any genuine concern for Charu he would have treated her an equal of him and sought to engage Charu in literary pursuits. On one instance when Amal showed confidence in Charu’s calibre and told Bhupati that a little practice and guidance could make Charu write well, Bhupati

undermined her talent and said, “That much I do not hope for . . .” (23).

What is interesting is that Bhupati not only undermines the literary calibre of Charu, but he also underrates the taste of literature. That’s why he treats the literary tastes and conversations of Charu and Amal as something non-serious and unimportant. All the three lead characters in the story – Bhupati, Charu, and Amal – have a literary bent of mind, still there’s a major difference. The intellectual calibre of Bhupati is prosaic or, to be more specific, journalistic in nature. Being a news editor he is fond of clear, crisp, and realistic expressions. On the other hand Charu and Amal inculcate a poetic sensibility and are more imaginative and less realistic in expression. They have a penchant for highly figurative and ornate language. Another important factor is that Charu and Amal are fond of writing and expressing themselves in the native language – Bengali – while Bhupati had always looked up to the colonial language – English. Bhupati seems to take pride in both these facts – His expertise over English and his lack of interest in literature. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that Bhupati didn’t treat the literary interests of Charu seriously as after all they were unrealistic in nature and in Bengali! The writer validates this thought when he informs the reader:

Bhupati was proud of not understanding literature Bhupati used to think, “There is nothing to say, yet to incessantly think up all these words, this is something I couldn’t have done even if I had beaten my head against the wall. (22)

One can very clearly discern disrespect of Bhupati against literature or literary expressions when he says that “there’s nothing to say [worthful], yet to think up all these words” was something he was incapable of, but ‘proud’ of the same. The purpose to quote these excerpts was to validate the argument that Bhupati was an egoist to some extent and his egoism was one of the causes of Charu’s emotional crisis.

The other important character in the story is Amal who shares the tastes and enthusiasm of Charu. The first and foremost reason for Charu’s

attraction and attachment to Amal was that he made her feel indispensable to him. In a wealthy house where Charu had completely nothing to do, Amal kept her busy in fulfilling his childish whims like demanding various cuisines, asking for hand-made slippers, embroidery on his mosquito-net etc. This sense of being able to do something for someone made Charu feel important and lively. Amal unintentionally provided Charu a means of identifying her worth, a means of asserting her identity, and her presence in the house. Moreover, the literary side of Charu too found a refuge in Amal's companionship. In all these circumstances, Charu's attachment and reliance on Amal was natural, inevitable, and also unaccusable.

The problems rose between Charu and Amal when Charu also started writing. On an in-depth analysis of the reasons functional in the weakening friendship of Charu and Amal, the reader will again find the patriarchal ideology to be the culprit. When Charu's composition was published, a critic compared the writing style of Charu and Amal and praised Charu's style as simple and realistic, while Amal's highly ambiguous and unrealistic. This offended Amal as he couldn't bear Charu overtaking him with her very first composition. This was the beginning of misunderstanding and bitterness between the two. In this case too, we find that a male's ego spoils the bliss and harmony of Charu's life. However, the actual reason for the severed relationship of Charu and Amal was the latter's realization that Charu had unknowingly replaced Bhupati with Amal. This realization made Amal check his growing closeness to Charu and all of a sudden he completely forsook Charu. Though Amal took this decision to save the 'nest' of Bhupati and Charu, still he may be held guilty by the reader because he considers himself to be more accountable to his elder brother Bhupati than his sister-in-law and friend Charu. Just because Bhupati took care of his economical needs doesn't mean that he is unanswerable to Charu. Forsaking her amidst a stream of emotions – misunderstandings, anger, jealousy, grief, love, insecurity – was a kind of inhumane decision of Amal. Tagore addresses such emotional crises of women in a patriarchal set-up. Both Amal and Bhupati may be accused for making

Charu an emotionally weaker/unstable person. Time and again they keep on pushing Charu towards the other as per their convenience. It is not only Bhupati and Amal who wrong Charu, her brother Umapati too contributed to the turmoils of Charu, though indirectly. Umapati used to take care of Bhupati's accounts but swindled the same when got an opportunity, and then left the place without informing anyone. This was one of the reasons because of which Bhupati gave up his newspaper business and came close to Charu, thereby indirectly affecting Charu and Amal's friendship.

An interesting observation in context to the male and female characters in Tagore's stories has also been made by the translator of Tagore's stories, Sharmishtha Mohanty in her compilation, *Broken Nest and Other Stories*. She observes that most of the male characters in these stories may be associated with 'water' and 'movement', and the female characters may be associated with 'earth' and 'stasis'. In the preface to this compilation she writes:

It is always the men who move, over rivers, across seas, and . . . the women must always be in stasis, because they can never leave or return to their parents' home or go with the one they love . . . (xii)

This is truly the case with Charu as all the three men in the story leave Charu in the house where all these bitter memories engulf and haunt her. For once Charu mustered some courage and requested Bhupati to take her along with him to Mysore, but when he showed reluctance she courageously decided to stay back and suffer, while the people who wronged her will slowly and gradually forget the memories and thereby save themselves.

"Broken Nest" is a heart-rending story by Tagore where the reader also comes across his subtle art of story-telling. Though one of the central themes of the story was to articulate the dissatisfaction of married women in Hindu society, Tagore deals with the content in a very subtle and graceful manner. Nowhere in the narrative does the reader find any direct connotations of unrequited physical/sexual love, but everywhere there are hints

of the same. Due to the mature handling of the theme, Charulata is still praised as a beautiful and evocative composition by one and all.

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