

Women In the Short Stories of Rabindra Nath Tagore : A Social Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Article Info

Volume 8, Issue 4

Page Number : 440-444

Publication Issue

July-August-2021

Article History

Accepted : 20 July 2021

Published : 30 July 2021

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) who was the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for his volume of poems Gitanjali (Song Offerings). Rabindranath Tagore is also known for his short stories; the themes of his stories are direct and clear moral that portray the social issues of society. This research paper is an attempt to examine the female protagonists in Rabindranath Tagore's short stories from a social viewpoint, focusing on gender and time-based kinship relations. Here, kinship is defined as an extension of familial relationships to the community (common ethnic-social life, locality and religion) in such a way as to achieve progressively higher levels of social integration and extensive social networks through marriage alliances and lines of descent.

Keywords : Moral, Gender, Social Issues, Community, Kinship, Female

Rabindranath Tagore, a versatile genius and a poet par excellence is 'not of an age but for all times'. Tagore's representation of women is very complex and detailed, he did not simply describe them as a damsel in distress, the soul of the house or as an evil temptress. His women were layered with various shades of personality. 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.

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. 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 sociocultural force that orders and demands its own discriminatory social structure.

As depicted in the final line of "Punishment", it is a bitter one, with Chandara accused wife of chindam refusing to see the man who betrayed her the moment before she hangs for a crime she did not commit. Chandara is so repulsed by her husband's actions that she chooses to take the responsibility for the murder, believing that the death penalty will be preferable to continuing to live with a man who betrayed her. She would rather be hanged than stay with a man who would betray her in order to protect a murderer. Her vicious will and strong sense of independence make her a unique character who will only live and die on her own terms. Chandara decision to stick with the false story and take the blame for the murder, depict both a stubborn pride and a thoughtful unwillingness to admit that she's still in love with her husband but more importantly it is her independence to live or die with pride and own terms brings her character strong.

In "Kabuliwallah", shocking line is spoken to Mini. "Kabuliwallah" is a play on the joke they had where he would ask the child if she was going to her *śvaśur-bāri* (the house of one's father-in-law, in other words, a woman's marital home), and she would ask the same in return. The Kabuliwallah showing Mini the handcuffs around his wrist during his arrest for stabbing a man, and the joke come up one more time in the story on Mini's wedding day, when indeed she

is going to her *śvaśur-bāri*, Rabindranath Tagore symbolizing the hand cuffs and the wedding of mini depict the true condition of women after marriage a way to predict end of independence of women. The irony is that Tagore's thought of the time is still relevant today.

"It is better not to tell the story of the indignity, shame and hurt that Ramsundar had to endure in order to raise the 3,000 rupees that he needed for an approach to his daughter's father-in-law." Narrator ("Profit and Loss"). The ironic quote is the wholeness of the story, Ramsundar a man who constantly suffering, ruining his own life to raise money for his daughter's dowry. A man who wants his daughter to be married in a higher class. On other he is constantly trying to scrounge together money to pay off his debt that he has given in dowry. The daughter is embarrassed that she has bought her family into poverty, she suddenly falls ill and dies, and her mother-in-law quickly arranges a new marriage for her widower son with an even higher dowry price. The issue of dowry and the issue if women condition in society is rightly traced by Tagore in the short story. The irony is that the situation is same and the condition of society has not change in many places till time.

An ironic confirmation, of self-existence that kadambini proves in the story, to convince her loved ones that she is alive had to die, the only way she can convince them that she wasn't dead is to throw

herself into a well, killing herself for good. Her family convinced with her first death, beg her to leave as she was ghost. The bond of affection turn into scared senseless feeling. Tagore rightly portrayed the struggle for self-existence in the story, He succeeded in describing the struggle of women to prove her presence in her own family and tragedy to be separated without doubting her existence.

The most catastrophic line in all of "Taraprasanna's Fame" is when dakshayani admits her failure in giving birth to son after having four daughter, and that she believed that she has ruined the possibility of enjoying the modest family life. Tagore has so rightly presented the inferior mentality of society and the pressure to judge the people and their happiness by the birth of child. Gender discrimination was the issue so relatedly highlighted in the story.

All of these women have one thing in common which is their rejection of the subordinate status of women in Bengali society or any society where her existence is. Tagore's stories depict an older time, which is still relevant today. 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. 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). The creative works of Tagore reflects the essential demand of social reform. The reading of his novels assumes a greater significance today as they provide a mixture of different aspects of ideologies and movements that go into the making of a society culminating into nation building. The literature of Tagore focused on daily life, the circumstance of dally lives of everyday Bengali people. His stories had clear moral and direct message to the society his character depicted a strong concern to bring change in society through the depiction of women protagonists.

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Cite This Article :

Sushila Sahu, Dr. Shilpi Bhattacharya, Dr. Harsha Patil, " Women In the Short Stories of Rabindra Nath Tagore : A Social Perspective", International Journal of Scientific Research in Science and Technology(IJSRST), Print ISSN : 2395-6011, Online ISSN : 2395-602X, Volume 8, Issue 4, pp.440-444, July-August-2021.
Journal URL : <https://ijsrst.com/IJSRST2183178>