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A Man who Gave Birth to a ‘New Woman’: A Study of Tagore’s Select Short Stories

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ABSTRACT: Feminist activities started in 20th century in Indian but remarkably Indian feminist movement was different from the rest of the world as it was started by men for the emancipation of women. Indian literature initiated the movement to bring out the change in the attitude of society towards women in order to improve the conditions of women in Indian society so that they too will start living their life like men. Rabindranath Tagore’s literary narratives present his concerns for women and his idea of ‘new Indian woman’ who has left behind the traditional women stereotypes and rise up standing shoulder to shoulder with men. The attributes of the same are seen when his women shoulder the responsibilities, fight for rights, lead the society and bring social change. Tagore’s short stories present him as harbinger of women as and when he portrays his concerns about women and his idea of new woman against the Indian social and traditional background. His women protagonists are seen revolting against the traditional stereotypes and initiating the change in themselves as well as in society.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, New woman, Short stories

The status of woman in world changed during and after the 19th century. Particularly, Indian woman and her status was framed according to patriarchal culture. Her character and role in the family and society were glorified in the sufferings inflicted upon her. She has always been defined as centre of Indian culture but in reality her existence was neglected and swamped by male centric cultural practices. Raja Rammohan Roy, IshwarchandVidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore and many other have reflected on woman’s education, widow-remarriage, child marriage and abolition of ‘Sati’ custom to improve the conditions of woman in Indian society.

Literature can have the breadth and throb of life only when it keeps pace with changing image of the women. (Bhatt 9)

The progressing change in the society can assessed on the basis of the position of woman in the society. Literature is sensitive towards this kind of change in the society and reflects the nerve of it in the prolific manner. The Indian literary jewel, Rabindranath Tagore, has explored the metamorphosis of womanhood in Indian society as he presents Indian woman revolting against the traditional woman stereotype and rising up as a new woman of modern era, of his ideas. Actually, his household proved to be perennial source of inspiration for championing the cause of woman’s liberation from stereotypical roles in family and society in his writings. Tagore as the social reformer, educator, humanist and proponent of individual liberty has explored his ideas and philosophy in his short stories, poems, novels, dramas, and dance dramas. His concerns about the social realities of life encouraged him to explore social structure, rituals, conventions and traditions in his writing to make the people aware about. His writing is full of themes related to the complexities of human characters, mystic nature, inscrutable fate of man under the tyranny of social structure, the conditions of woman and lower strata of the society.

Tagore’s Kusum, a victim protagonist of *Ghat’s Story* (1884), falls prey to the tyrannical tradition of child marriage in Indian society. Kusum is portrayed as a child widow, a traditional wife praised in religious scriptures. Her dreams shatters when her husband of child marriage orders to forget him. Now in this situation she not in a condition to live neither as a widow nor as a wife. And then she finds solution in suicide, by drowning in the Ganga River. Tagore has pointed out the evils of child marriage and its meaninglessness as a girl and a boy are married when they are immature to take decision of their future. Tagore through his protagonist, Kusum, questions that what should a girl/ woman do in this situation.

Another inhuman tradition of considering a woman as property of men is exposed in *The Matrimonial Deal* (1891) through the heart-rending story of dowry victim protagonist Nirupama. Tagore rightly points out that woman is enemy of woman by following the exploitative traditions. He portrays how the mother of bridegroom insists for dowry and shows no mercy on another woman i.e. her daughter-in-law Nirupama. Nirupama's father had to dispose his house to collect the amount of dowry and that is why Nirupama forbids him and says, "Does your daughter have no honour? Is she only a money bag? As long as there is money in it, it is of value? Baba don't insult me by giving the money" (Chaudhuri 19). Another work called *Hemanti*(1915) also explores the problem of dowry. Marxist school of feminism claims that woman is often looked at and treated as the property of men and her position is reduced to a commodity, to be used and disposed. The portrayal of Nirupama shows that Tagore was well aware of woman's problems in Indian society even before starting feminist movement in its full strength and he voiced them in his writing.

A heart touching story of Khiroda, a child widow in *The Judge* (1905), highlights the realistic picture of widows in Indian society who are helpless and considered as mere sexual objects to be used by men. Khiroda is exploited and discarded by Mohitmohan and then she becomes so helpless that she take up prostitution for survival. Later on extreme poverty enforces her to attempt suicide. At the end she is sentenced to death by the judge who was her lover as well as exploiter. The story conceptualizes Marxist feminist theory as it shows how economic dependency on men leads to subjugation. A radical feminist and sociology philosopher, Marlow Dixon, comments on the sexual exploitation of woman: "Women are purely defined in sexual rather than human terms. They are forced to pack and sell themselves as commodities on the sex market" (Deborah 88).

Tagore believed that education would liberate woman from age old stereotypical roles in family and society. Education would help them stand on their own and get rid of dependence on men for survival. However, woman were not allowed to get education in Indian society. Tagore in his short story *The Exercise Book* (1891) has explored the denial of right to write for woman in Indian society. The nine year old child bride named Uma is denied to learn to write even when she is interested in it since childhood. She represents the Indian woman who suffer at the cost of their identity and value as human being while being suffocated under the pretext of following age old traditions. Actually, learning to write was considered as a taboo for woman as Indians believed that learning to write would make her widow at the young age. Tagore explores how unnecessary fear also created hindrance in woman's way of liberation.

Another story entitled as *Punishment* (1893) presents the grim reality of Indian women as they are dehumanized and underestimated in the patriarchal Indian family system. The story portrays how Radha, wife of Dukhiram, and Chandra, wife of Chidam, fall victim to capitalist class relationships. Their family lives on the mercy of landlord. One day Dukhiram returns home without wages and asks Radha to serve him food but she ridicules him and in anger he kills her with chopper. Radha becomes the victim of feudal exploitation which Dukhiram carried home from his work place. On the other hand Chidam asks his wife Chandra to take the blame of murder on her so that he can save his brother. And the reason he gives is ridiculous one, he tells her that he can replace his wife by another woman but he would lose his brother if he is hanged. Chandra is outraged by his such a dehumanizing statement and prefers to go to gallows rather than living with such a husband. Tagore's portrayal of inhuman husbands who consider their wives as mere object echoes Catherine Macaulay's opinion who in her *Letters on Education* (1790) says that the women are treated as mere property of men.

Tagore's radical approach is experienced in Mrinal's letter written to her husband in *The Wife's Letter* (1914) and it is expressed in the very opening of the letter as she writes: "...to this day I have never written you a letter. I have always been at hand-you have heard so many words from my lips, and I too have listened to you-but there has never been an interval in which a letter might have written" (Dutta 81). In her letter she crosses the confines of role as a wife and obscure her dependent parasitic identity as a wife. She expresses her feelings of girlhood and her state of deprivation as a daughter, a wife and a mother.

Tagore has presented the abilities and strength of woman through his character Giribala, in a short story *Giribala*(1895). Gopichand, Giribala's husband, is attracted towards a stage actress and neglects Giribala. Then in return she protest against the injustice and avenges by joining the same theatre as an actress. In this journey her maid Sudha helps her to awaken her woman powers to fight against her husband. Tagore here wants to tell if women supports fellow woman in awakening their powers then the woman power would liberate them from any kind of exploitation. Another character full of fighting spirit portrayed by Tagore is Kalyani, in *Woman Unknown* (1917), who protests against inhuman dowry system by rejecting to marry itself and dedicates herself for the cause of making people



aware about the importance of women's education. Tagore believes that opposition to dowry system must come from the family system itself.

Tagore's women protagonists like Kusum, Khiroda, Uma and Chandra represents Indian women who have been exploited in patriarchal social system. They represent women's helpless condition caused by their dependency on male counterparts for survival. On the other hand other women protagonist like Nirupama, Mrinal, Giribala and Kalyani exhibit Tagore's concept of new women who is strong enough to fight for their rights as well as against the exploitation. His women who were subject exploitation started fighting against the patriarchal system; who were deprived of education started advocating women's education; and who were dependent on men started asserting their individuality and liberated themselves from inhuman male dominance. Through these short stories Tagore wants to bring change in the attitude of the society towards women. All these female protagonists are representative of Tagore's sensitive evaluation of the stereotypical roles enforced on Indian woman in patriarchal society and then portraying them against the same setting as the rising sun who brings light to fight against the darkness and establish his identity.

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