

Tagore's Concept of Womanhood and His Deep Insight into the Heart of a Woman as Pictured in His Short Stories

Dr. C. Ramya, M.B.A., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Asst. Professor

Department of English

E.M.G. Yadava College for Women

MADURAI – 625 014

Tamil Nadu, India

rmyachelliah@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper analyses the fictional art and forte of Rabindranath Tagore with a focus on the sufferings, agonies, distractions faced by modern woman searching for self-identity, for which the young wife Kumo (from the short story *Vision*) is chosen for a brief evaluation and analysis, so as to bring home the point that the woman is projected as a frustrated wife longing for love, proper care and kind treatment from her husband who is not at all ready and prepared to give as many husbands normally do in Indian society. At a point when both husband and wife are separated, she became more aguish, the pain of separation is still worse than her sickness. Finally, Kumo lost her sight because of her foolish act. Being pioneers towards spiritual life is respectable but losing the life on behalf of it is a foolish act. Even though a woman gets a great advancement in life, she is still in the dark side of life. But Tagore is always a strong supporter of women, his concept of common hood is always something remarkable and appreciable in all respects.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Short stories *Vision*, *Wife's letter*, *Living or Dead?*, *The River Stairs*, *Personality*, Womanhood, Popularity, self-identity, agony and frustration, racial discrimination, longing for love, exploitation, depression, liberation.

In Bengali literature, the modern short story is a unique product of the nineteenth Century which witnessed many upheavals in politics as well as in social customs. With the arrival of Rabindranath Tagore, Short Story writing received the impetus it was in need of. Tagore's first story "Bhikarini" was published when he was just sixteen years old. Though the short story as a

literary genre is now very popular with Indian writers, no one has yet equaled him in this art” (Kripalani 153).

In a field where competition was stiff, Tagore occupied a unique place in the forefront. His views on patriotism, love, relationship, social relations among the young and the old find imaginative expression in his stories. Every story written by Tagore shines like a gem. His stories generally focus on how we should live in unity, eradicate racial discrimination and fight against violence and exploitation. The concept of women’s liberation and emancipation existed in India more than a half a century ago. One can see this aspect richly portrayed in the short stories of Tagore. The prominent writers Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Tagore - all believed in the liberation of women. With superb artistic power, Tagore brought before the reader’s eye numerous cases of social injustice especially meted out to women.

Tagore was a pioneer in Championing the cause of not only widows but women in general. About women, Tagore says,

“She has been an inspiration to man, guiding most often unconsciously, his restless energy into an immense variety of creation in literature, art, music, and religion. This is why, in India, women have been described as the symbol of Shakti, the creative power” (Creative Unity 157).

In “Vision”, Tagore deals vividly with the life of a woman, who has become blind and is a burden to her husband. She strives her utmost to save him from falling off the pedestal she has erected for him in her heart. It is her blindness which adds poignancy to her utter devotion to her husband. The significance of the theme in *Vision* depends on the factor of external blindness helping the inner vision of a woman. Blindness becomes a blessing in disguise for her; for all the distractions to which her mind was a prey to before are shut out from her. One can see the devotion of the young wife Kumo for her husband. She does not mind losing her eyesight just to pamper the conceited man. Having delivered a dead child, Kumo, Kama very near to death herself and her eyesight became very weak. Her husband, a medical student took pride in treating her himself. When Kumo’s elder brother brought in a doctor to see her, she refused to take the medicines as she took pride in being treated by her husband. Gradually, in spite of an operation being performed, Kumo lost the

sight in both her eyes. She comforted herself with the thought that it was at her husband's hands that she had lost her eyes.

The husband confessed to Kumo that it was he who had ruined her eyes. She had dedicated her eyes to her husband. If he saw anything that was of joy, he must describe it to her and she would accept it as a sacred gift. The beautiful description is without parallel. When Kumo suggested that her husband should marry again, the repentant man swore that he should never again take a wife but look after Kumo always. After completing his medical course, the doctor went with his wife to practice at Hursingpur, a small town. The everyday joys of the countryside filled Kumo's life with happiness. Tagore writes:

“Fortunately for us, our everyday world has the subtler and unobtrusive beauty of the common place and we have to depend upon our own sensitive minds to realize its wonders which are invisible because spiritual. If we can pierce through the exterior, we find that the world in its commonplace aspects is a miracle” (Personality 175).

Kumo's husband became so involved with his practice that he developed a thirst for money and lost his human qualities. As a result, both husband and wife drifted apart. The separation caused by blindness is the merest physical trifle But Oh! It suffocates me to find that he is no longer with me, where he stood with me in that hour when we both knew that I was blind. That is a separation indeed” (Vision 86). Kumo has passed a few months happily with her husband, “--- when I come back to the country all my earlier hopes and faiths, all that I held true in life during childhood, became fresh and bright one more. God came to me and filled my heart and my world” (P85). But money caused mischief and brought about a change in her husband's life. “I, with my love fresh and my faith unbroken, have kept to the shelter of my heart's inner shrine. But my husband has left the cool shade of those things that are ageless and unfading. He is fast disappearing into the barren, waterless waste in his mad thirst for gold” (P86). Serious problems started when an aunt of the doctor brought her cousin's daughter, Hemangini to their house. She wanted Abinash to marry Hemangini. Kumo prayed that God should save her husband from breaking his oath. About this time, Kumo's brother who came on a visit assessed the situation. Soon after that Hemangini returned home.

One night in early May, Abinash made preparations to leave for Mathuryani in order to marry Hemangini. In spite of Kumo's protests, he left. Prayer was her only solace. That evening when Hemangini arrived, Kumo felt certain that her prayers were not answered. In a few minutes, she heard her brother's voice. Indeed, it was he who had saved Abinash came to Kumo, holding her hand, he told her that it was with great joy and shame that he had heard the truth. He realized his wife's devotion and love for him. In *Vision*, Kumo suffered because of her utter devotion to her husband, but her faith in God and sincerity paid her rich dividends because they brought her husband back to her. The blind woman's keen perceptions got keener by constant meditation in darkness to save her husband. This story reveals the intensity of love which can change the will of man. The unheeding husband leaves the wife weeping in her loneliness and tries to reach the place for marrying the girl of his choice. The devotion of the wife to her husband is a familiar theme which is delineated here in the story "vision" in a remarkable way. Tagore's words prove very true in Abinash's case,

"In human nature, there is that which is desirable and the other which is desired. The wise man keeps the two separate ... He who accepts the good is pure, he who accepts evil falls short of his true worth" (Man 27-28).

The story *Vision* reveals how Kumo's foolish act resulted in her loss of sight and her physical blindness is contrasted with the spiritually alive whereas her husband is not so, quite unable to see this. Abinash, Kumo's husband realizes his wife's devotion to him only when he fails in his attempt to go in for another marriage. Kumo's brother has been intelligent enough to prevent this disastrous happening.

Indian society with all its stance of progressive thinking still lacks in certain areas. One is the problem of widows and widow remarriage. In "Living or Dead?", the author has vividly brought out the plight of a widow, Kadambini who had no relations except her brother-in-law, Saradasankar, whose child she fostered, its mother being ill. One night, Kadambini suddenly died and fearing the police, Saradasankar sent the body without any ceremony to be burnt by four Brahmins. The man left the body in a hut beside the burning ghat and went in search of wood. Now Kadambini's heart had stopped beating for some

reason. So, when consciousness returned, seeing darkness all around her, she at first thought that she was in the house of Yama. But a flash of lightning revealed to her the bank, the banyan tree and the pan near the burning ground. At first, she thought of returning home, but then she was dead, “Surely she was no member of earthly society! Surely, she was a creature of horror, of ill-omen, her own ghost!” (Living or Dead”? 114). Thinking that all her ties with the world were broken, she rushed out of the hut. She walked an fearlessly till it was morning. She was filled with dread on being accosted by a traveler. She then remembered a childhood friend, Jagmaya and wished to be escorted to her house. Of course, at first, her friend was happy to see her, but as Kadambini brooded, Jagmaya grew impatient. When Jagmaya’s husband Sripati went to Ranihat, he understood that Kadambini was dead. He felt that this was someone else. Kadambini assured him that she was indeed Jagmaya’s friend. Feeling that this was a ghost, Jagmaya fainted and Kadambini rushed out. Reaching Ranihat, she took shelter in a temple till noon when a storm broke out. She then entered her father-in-law’s house and on seeing the sick child Satis, she realized that she was not dead. A maid servant and the child’s mother-fainted on seeing her.

Saradashankar begged the “ghost” to go away and not to haunt his only son. Then Kadambini, saying that she was not dead lifted a brass pot and dashed it again her forehead which began to bleed. She went down the steps to the zanana well and plunged in. “By dying, Kadambini had given proof that she was not dead” (Living or Dead 122). In this story, Tagore brings out the conflict between an individual and society. The conflict creates a pathetic situation in the life of Kadambini. Society did not allow widows like Kadambini to survive. Superstition made her believe that she was her own ghost; yet she was filled with immense warmth and love for the boy, Satis and for her friend Jagmaya. The blind belief of Saradasankar forced her to commit suicide. Tagore’s humanism is evidently brought out in this story “Living or Dead?”. Humayun Kabir evidently asserts:

“Tagore’s humanism is clearly revealed in his universality and sense of identity with all men, in his revolt against all types of tyranny and injustice, in his repudiation of asceticism and in his acceptance of life in its fullness, in his exaltation of human and above all in his respect for the human personality” (P 29).

In the words of Kripalani, “Tagore seems to have had inexhaustible sympathy and admiration for Bengali women but little for the males of his race” (P156). *Wife’s Letter* is a story about a woman’s brave attempt to break the shackles of tradition and stand up for her own rights. Mukherjee remarks:

“It touched off a prolonged controversy, perhaps more among the reactionary social thinkers than among the literary man. The story plainly points to the cracking of the walls of outmoded convention; it stresses the individual rights of women, rights neglected almost throughout our history” (P 120).

Mrinal, the lady writing the letter is the wife of the second son of a family. She writes the letter to him when she is away from her husband for the first time on a pilgrimage after fifteen years of married life. She is a beautiful girl with more than average intelligence. Being of an independent nature, she has neither been afraid of speaking out her mind to her in-laws nor of standing by her conviction.

Tagore in this story expresses the hidden and suppressed feelings and emotions of a daughter-in-law of an Indian family in the past. She was recognized only as a maid servant of the household and as a medium of procreation for the maintenance of the progeny. It does carry a summary of the fifteen long years of her colourless married life. The only part of it which gives it the hue of a short story is the happenings in the life of the destitute young girl Bindu, a distant cousin of the elder daughter-in-law, who after the demise of her widowed mother has no other refuge than her cousin’s. The story is focused upon the tragedy and pathos of the fondness of the younger daughter-in-law for Bindu, her inability to keep her under her ways and to save her from the fate of getting married to a mad man and from the ultimate destiny of committing suicide. Tagore brings out in the words of the wife the futility of all the finer attributes of a married woman – the physical and mental beauty and charm, the intelligence, the gift of literary creation, the feeling of individualism. These attributes did not make a woman any more precious than one who had none of these attributes. Marriage seemed to stifle their creative talents. A woman lost her individuality as she was forced to be a slave to the rules followed in her husband’s house.

The adolescent Bindu was not welcomed in her cousin's house after the death of her mother; yet she had to be accepted there as otherwise the family's name would be stained. So, she was treated like a servant. She did hard tasks and was looked down upon even by the servants of the house. The destitute young girl Biindu was treated very badly even by her own cousin, the wife of the elder brother of the house. The second daughter-in-law alone took pity on her, for she was very compassionate and kind. The family wanted to get rid of the grown-up young girl by getting her married to some unknown person totally against her will. Even Mrinal could not prevent it. Biindu was shocked to discover that the man she was married to was mad. She escaped from her new house and sought the help of the one who had shown concern for her. Bindu did not succeed in escaping from the stranglehold of marriage. She finally committed suicide.

The plight of destitute women has been a deplorable one. Though we have made a great deal of advancement in the field of education, science, technology, agriculture and what not, the Bindus of our society have always remained victims of narrow-minded traditionalism. Our progress has only been a delusion, a mirage. Tagore had full sympathy for women. Viswanath Naravane observes:

“His protest is against all injustice and oppression, whether the perpetrator is the foreign ruler, the village money lender, the city bureaucrat, or the mother-in-law. And yet, although he depicts misery and iniquity as aspects of human life as a whole, his concern is not with humanity in the abstract but with concrete human beings, real persons” (Naravane 115).

Tagore was always a staunch supporter of the fair sex. Woman to Tagore was the personification of charm, a being to be loved and cherished and not to be exposed to torture and suffering. He says in *Personality* as:

“And because woman has this power, she exercises such charm over our minds; her exuberance of vital interest is so attractive that it makes her speech, her laughter, her movement, everything graceful, for the note of gracefulness is in this harmony with all our surrounding” (P175)

Stories like *Vision* and *Wife's letter* reveal Tagore's understanding of the women's heart which is filled with subtle and deep feelings.

In *The River Stairs*, Tagore depicts a seven year old girl called Kusum. one day Kusum's playmates were lamenting at the ghat as Kusum had gone away to her husband's home in a far away village. A year passed. One evening, the ghat felt the tread of familiar feet but without its old music. Kusum had returned, a widow at eight. She had hardly met her husband who worked somewhere far away and a letter brought the news of his death. Most of Kusum's friends were married and gone. Tagore in this story *The River Stairs* has beautifully brought out the secret longings and frustrated love of Kusum. Tagore's concept of ideal womanhood though not very new, is perfectly in tune with those of the modern times. He was able to hit upon the right conception of womanhood for the future society. The devoted wife Kumo, loses her eyesight to pamper a conceited husband; Kadambini who the ill-luck to revive on her funeral pyre only had to wander like a ghost. No one accepted her as she was considered to be dead. Ironically, she had to prove that she was alive by dying. Tagore's skill in delineating women characters is something remarkable. He has a keen insight into the heart of a woman. According to Tagore, a woman has potential, but certain coercive factors suppress this. Hence, she is at once an embodiment of strength and weakness.

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