

Feminism Portrayed in Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract

Feminism is one of the principles of humanism. Tagore has imbibed the *Feminism* very well in his short stories. Through various stories he has put forth the social malpractice of feminism in a restrained but effective manner. Tagore's short stories are mirrors of his experiences with life. In stories, Tagore displayed the unequal behavior meted upon women in common household of Bengal of his times. Women were treated as inferior to men. Men were given all the opportunities, whereas women were denied even the basic ones. Tagore not only painted gory picture of women being suffered, but also, he presented women the stronger hue and deals with their inner strength. Tagore puts the light on the brighter side of the society where strong headed women emancipated themselves from the shackles of society. Author gave all the freedom to his heroine to make her decisions even though initially she seems to be insane. Only he could think of that in the time when women were allowed to do so in the common households. Tagore was deeply touched by caste discrimination in his society. Tagore has portrayed the inequality and the treatment which was meted upon the low caste people. He mirrored the happenings of Bengali household to a great extent.

1. Introduction

Feminism is one of the principles of humanism. It is about ensuring that every woman has an opportunity to make most of their lives. It gives fair chances to all irrespective of place, family and riches to which they born or what they believe. Then there is no discrimination of any kind in any field of life. Rabindranath Tagore, a writer of modern era was very influenced by this principle of humanism. The credit of such impact can be given to the atmosphere of Tagore's household in which he grew up and the values which he inculcated during the years of his upbringing. Tagore's house was always full of people who were the pioneers of social renaissance in British India. The likes of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others had a great impression on his mind and thoughts. Tagore's short stories are mirrors of his experiences with life. Tagore lived in the period of all types of inequalities. Among them caste and gender inequality were the most prominent ones. They were hindrances in the path of changes which Tagore wanted to bring. He materialized his thoughts on paper in the form of his writings which served as the best source to influence people who looked up to him. He wished to motivate more and more people, through his writings. He not only wanted to prepare them to accept the changes but also to be the part of such remodelling of the new social scenario. He wanted to put forth new ideas and break the rotten and old social

taboos. He portrayed both the sides of society distressing condition of the suppressed and on the other hand fresh air of change too was visible in his works especially short stories.

2. Analysis of His Short Stories

2.1 Unfairness Meted Out to Women

He has picturized the pitiful condition of the women in stories like ‘Haimanti’, where the wife suffers a lot at the hands of her mother -in-law. Her husband sees everything but says nothing. He loves Haimanti, his wife, very much, but does nothing because of the fear of his parents. He even calls for his father-in-law to take her away as her health deteriorated day by day. Even the doctor who accompanied his father in law opined that it was necessary for her to get a break from her family to get well. But father-in-law of Haimanti refuses to send her to her parents’ house. Here too Tagore was able to show the place of a woman in her in-law’s house. She is not allowed to go to and eventually she dies. And as far as her husband is concerned he gets a new bride, this time a girl from a rich family who bring a fat dowry. In this story, Tagore displayed the unequal behaviour meted upon women in common household of Bengal of his times.

In his story “Notebook”, Tagore has portrayed another example of inequality in the house. There were different laws for sons and daughters-in-law. Women were treated as inferior to men. Men were given all the opportunities, whereas women were denied even the basic ones. In this story, it is Uma who is denied the opportunity to have education, where on other hand her husband is not imposed with any of such restrictions. This inequality was happening in the poor sections of society, but they were very much practiced by so called affluent and educated families. Uma carries her notebook to her in-law’s house. She writes in her notebook her feelings. One day on being ‘caught’, her notebook is taken away on the pretext that her reading books would bring bad luck for her husband’s house. She herself asks in the end that why such restrictions are not put on her husband.

2.2 Tagore’s Strong Heroines

Tagore not only painted gory picture of women being suffered due to this unequal approach of society towards them, but also, he presented women the stronger hue. In his story “Punishment”, Tagore deals with the inner strength of a woman who refuses to be taken for granted by her husband. The protagonist of the story Chandra is a strong and beautiful woman. Her brother-in-law murders his wife in a fit of rage. In order to save his brother from gallows, Chandra’s husband puts all the blame on her. Later when her husband realizes his mistake and wants to make amends with her, she refuses to respond. She has become so cold hearted by her husband’s behaviour towards her that she pleads guilty and takes all the blame on her. She develops so much of hatred towards her husband whom she loves very much and wishes never to see his face again even on the eve of her death row. Tagore gave Chandra an equal opportunity to make her own decisions. A very strong story by Tagore puts the light on the brighter side of the society where strong headed women emancipated themselves from the shackles of society. They themselves raised the flag of equality and took their own decisions and stuck with them.

The story “Wife’s Letter” deals with a very sensitive, intelligent and strong headed lady Mrinal, who is married into a wealthy household. She is Mejo-Bou or second daughter-in-law of the house. To Tagore, Mrinal is non-traditional woman of traditional Bengal. She is a good wife and an obedient daughter-in-law. She loses her child as he is still born. Her feelings of motherhood rise when an orphaned girl, Bindu, takes refuge in her house. Against her will, Bindu is married off to an insane old man. Unable to tolerate the pain of such marriage, she commits suicide. Mrinal is shaken to the roots. She realizes that she can no longer be a Mejo-Bou of that house any longer. She sorts freedom for herself and leaves for pilgrimage to Puri never to come back. Before leaving, she writes a letter to her husband and pours her heart out for her indifferent husband. Tagore’s Mrinal is a strong woman who leaves everything when not being heard by her husband and his family in one story. Tagore wrote about one Haimanti who was fallen in pray to atrocities of her husband and his family. In another story he pens down a strong woman Kalyani, who refuses to tolerate his father insult on the day of her wedding. He supported the idea of treating women equally and respecting the decisions made by them.

2.3 Inhuman Treatment to Women

This story “Aparachita” illustrates how Kalyani and her family get inhuman treatment by the groom’s maternal uncle. It so happens that when Kalyani’s marriage is being solicited with one Anupam, his uncle doubts the quality of gold ornaments of the bride. Her father wants to know what Anupam has to say about the whole matter. He wants to ensure his daughter’s well-being at her in-law’s house but Anupam says nothing. In Tagore’s era, the fathers usually caved under the social pressure, but here he refuses to get his daughter married off to such a household where there is no respect for her. Kalyani readily agrees with her father because as a daughter she cannot tolerate the insult meted upon her father by the groom’s family. Anupam feels inferior and small as he is unable to defend her in front of her relatives. Later when he repents and asks for her acceptance, Kalyani refuses as she has resolved to remain a spinster and dedicate her life to her motherland.

Another story by Tagore explores this principle of equality to women by unchaining her from the restrictions of being dedicated wife to an unfaithful husband. “Giribala” is a story about a woman who is a dedicated wife of Gopinath. She is married into a wealthy household and does not have any children. Initially Gopinath is very much in love with his wife. Later on, after sudden death of his father, Gopinath has to devote much of his time to his business. He gets drifted away to an actress named Lavanga so much so that he starts neglecting Giribala and even gifts his wife’s jewellery to her. Giribala has a painful desire to see the actress. In the days when it was a social taboo for women of good household to go to theatre and watch plays, Giribala disguises herself and goes to theatre to watch Lavanga’s play. She is mesmerized by the act of Radha and Krishna. Back at home she decides to leave her husband and secretly joins a same theatrical group. She is also successful in grabbing a major role in the next play. Gopinath loses his senses when he sees his lost wife on stage. Giribala takes a sweet revenge from her husband.

2.4 True Love

Tagore's story "The Conclusion" explores all the aspects of a child-bride Mrinmayee as she is given equal chances to accept Apurba as her lawfully wedded husband. Calcutta educated Apurba visits his native place in order to find a suitable girl for him. He falls in love with young Mrinmayee, a very innocent and free soul. She cannot be bound against her will. She loves her playmates so much that she refuses to part from them even after her marriage. She is not ready to leave them all for the sake of a stranger whom people call her husband. Apurba tries to win over her but all in vain. She refuses to accept any of his advances. Apurba gives up on her with a heavy heart as he does not want to force himself and his love upon her. He decides to go back to Calcutta and leave her at her parents' house. He tells her that he won't return until she wanted him to. After his departure, slowly, she starts to realize the depth of her relationship with Apurba and starts missing her. On her behest her mother-in-law takes her to Calcutta and she gets united with her husband.

The story "Tyaag" features a marriage between a Kayastha orphan girl and a Brahmin boy through a trick played by the girl's uncle that hid her true caste. However, after getting married, the girl refuses to build a relationship based on a lie and reveals her true identity. After initial apprehensions about "polluting" his caste, the boy proclaims that his love for his wife is more important to him than his religious ties. A common feature in all these characters is the pride in their identity as a woman, instead of being defined as a wife, a mother or a daughter. Their rights and wrongs were not shaped by what the society expects of them. They did not leave behind their passions and hobbies after marriage and weren't afraid to look at sources of acceptance and love apart from their marriage. They challenged the concepts of dowry, femininity, chastity of widows and honour. These characters challenge the conventions of the world as we know it even today and it was only Tagore who could create them, a century ago.

2.5 Caste Discrimination

In "Broken Nest", the story revolves around three people-Bhupati the husband; Charu the wife and Amal, Bhupati's cousin. Each one of them is being given equal chance to do whatever they want to do with their lives. Bhupati is a caring husband; he caters to all the needs of his loving wife. He also gives space to her in order to pursue her own interests. As he remains engrossed in his work Charu spends most of her time with Amal as they share common interests and dreams. Meanwhile after suffering losses in business Bhupati needed to share his feelings with his wife. But Charu has no inclination to hear about her husband's woes. She longs for Amal, who stops coming to their house on learning about Charu's interest in him. As things move on, Amal goes out of city forever and Bhupati too decides to leave to go to a distant place in search of job. He leaves up to Charu whether to stay back or accompany him. She chooses to stay back. Tagore was deeply touched by caste discrimination in his society. Being a high caste himself, he never had to experience humiliation of such sort, but he felt uneasy to see such things around him. He raised his voice on many such occasions.

In one of his stories "The Patriot", Tagore has shown on full scale such hypocrisy of people. They called themselves patriots by wearing Swedish clothes, but their hearts were still deep rooted in the traditions of medieval period. In the story Kalika is deeply interested in taking active part in

the Swedish movement by shunning foreign made goods. She also forces her husband Girindra to join her in the show off her newly acquired patriotism. She even mocks him for not donning khadi and often labels him unpatriotic. On their way to one such patriotic meeting they see a poor old man being beaten brutally by some high-class peoples mistakenly he might have touched one of them. Girindra wants to help the man in distress but Kalika sternly refuses to do so. Tagore has portrayed the inequality and the treatment which was meted upon the low caste people in this gloomy story.

Another issue related to social equality was of being outcaste. In the days of Tagore, if a person belonging to any high clan did something against the norms of the society; his family was announced from the clan and many a times debarred and boycotted from the village. There prevailed a rigid caste inequality and it was not tolerated by the society when such violations were made. In those days such a treatment was the highest most punishment to the social offenders. Such decisions were taken by the elders of the clan and were regarded as final and all were required to follow the decision. The defaulters may also get the same treatment from the society. The story “Renunciation” is about such social taboo. Hemanta gets married off to a girl called Kusum who is projected to be of high caste. After their marriage it is revealed that the girl belongs to a lower caste. Whole household is against keeping the newly wedded girl, but the groom refuses to do so. He also comes to know that if he leaves the girl, she would probably die of shame and heartbreak. In a strange turn of the story, he comes between his wife and his family and asks his father to renounce him too if he wishes to throw his wife out of the household. For Tagore to write such a thing was considered a bold step as such incidents were unheard of. The refusal of the son defying his father to give equal status to his wife could ruin the whole world for him.

2.6 Dowry

In the story “Profit and Loss” Nirupama is the only daughter and she is pleasant and comfortable with her parents. She was married to Zamindhar’s family for the price of Rupees 10,000 as dowry. But, her father owed Rupees 6000 to 7000 only. Unable to pay the total amount the Zamindhar refused to celebrate their marriage. But his son who was Western educated raised his voice “I came here to marry and marry I shall”. Later she was ill-treated in her laws house, her father also ill-treated too. Zamindhar demanded the owing dowry to her father. Ultimately her father gets to pay the dowry by selling his house. But Nirupama advices her father against paying the money. She was farming a fixed belief that she was herself a servant in the household. Finally, she died of hunger and torture. Then the Zamindhar family performs the Funeral Rights of Nirupama in, Grand manner. The expenses of the rights crossed the amount that was due to the Zamindhar family by Nirupama’s family.

3. Conclusion

According to the principle of feminism, women in the society should be treated equally irrespective of caste, colour, creed and gender. Tagore’s India was awakening to such social changes. In order to inspire his people to bring positive changes in their lives and to put forth such few examples from the people around him, Tagore wove his short stories about the topics which were close to his heart. He had art of weaving human emotions around social issues like equality

very intricately, delicately and effectively. Tagore gave all the freedom to his heroine to make her decisions even though initially she seems to be insane. Only he could think of that in the time when women were allowed to do so in the common households. Equality in relations especially husband wife relations was one of the main aspects of Tagore's short stories. Most of the times he wrote what he saw in the contemporary society but at times, in order to convey his message to the people and also to bring about changes in the society through his writings, Tagore projected what he wanted to see in his society.

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