



FROM SUFFERING TO SELF-DEFINITION: WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECT SHORT STORIES OF TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

It is an undeniable fact that women have been neglected throughout the ages and the so-called civilization is man-centered. The issues of women and the attitude of society regarding the place of women are reflected in the short stories of many Indian writers. Women's predicament in the face of male supremacy has been the subject of many writers. The early writers whether they were Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali or Indian English, all of them presented the suppression of women in their stories. In Hindi Premchand, in Bengali Eswara Chandra Vidya Sagar, Sarat Chandra Chatarjee, Tagore and others wrote about women and they revolted against the social oppression on women.

Keywords: *Suppression of woman, attitude of society about woman, social conditioning, archetypal woman, dependant woman, self styled woman.*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian English writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand portrayed women in their respective societies. By and large the picture that has been presented by the early writers is that of archetypal woman: the Sati, Sita or Savitri image. Though these writers seem to have

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accepted woman as a human being, they fail to come out of the bounds imposed by centuries of social conditioning. Even in the stories dealing with the awakened and enlightened women, the ideal woman is that of self-effacing and all sacrificing being, as Mary Ann Fergusson observes:

One peculiarity of the images of woman throughout the history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetype¹

Most of the writers used to eulogize the self-sacrificing characteristics in women. They advocated self-sacrifice, meekness and such other virtues of women, however by projecting women's predicament, these writers have successfully awakened the reading public..

Rabindranath Tagore is the most outstanding name in modern Bengali literature and indisputably one of the most renowned writers in Indian English Literature. Tagore does not go in line with those writers who eulogize the stereotypes by advocating self-sacrifice, meekness and other such virtues of woman in their stories. Tagore does not think woman as commodity and the value of which will be assessed in the open market. Woman, to him, is not a lump of flesh, but she carries a deep inner meaning. She is the product of rhythm and image of wholeness. She does not work, but serves. She imparts enchantment to the things she touches. She stirs up the man. She is a delight, with her tenderness, she purges off all the crudeness of the world.

According to Tagore, man's imagination finds the greatest delight in women and there is no shame in it. Woman is the picture, not of a photographer, but of an artist. It requires some imagination to understand her. Tagore thought that the society had deprived her due position of her honour. But to win that place, women must rise to that position, for true honour does not come as a gift. from outside. It has to be acquired consciously or unconsciously and also implores women to come forward to rescue the world by imparting her life rhythm to this reckless movement of power. Tagore, in this regard implores women:

At the present stage of history, civilization is almost exclusively masculine, a civilization of power in which woman has been thrust aside This one sided civilization is crashing along a series of catastrophes at a tremendous speed because of its one-sidedness and at last the time has arrived when women must step in and impart her life rhythm to this reckless movements of power.²

The plight and predicament of women was one major issue on which Tagore wrote in his novels as well as in his short stories. When one looks at the women characters in his short stories written from 1891 to 1940, one can find some transformation in their psyche i.e. from stage of suffering to self definition.



The Exercise Book is a story about the suffering of a young girl. It is a satire on the child marriages as well as the denial of education to girls. It is set against the Hindu revivalism towards the late nineteenth century. This story reflects his opposition to Hindu revivalism and to child marriages. The story concerns with three notebooks belonging to Uma, her brother Gobinda Lal and her husband Pyarimohan. The notebooks of the two young men resound with the revivalist and Hindu rhetoric, Uma by contrast reflects nothing but her own heart. Uma is very interested in education. She wants to learn reading and writing, she draws pictures and letters here and there, nothing is exceptional. Once she would spoil the book of her brother, Gobind Lal and in rage he beats her severely, later in repentance he himself presents an exercise book to his sister. From then the book becomes a best companion to Uma. After the tearful marriage at the age of nine, Uma has to leave for her in-laws' house. The kind hearted Jashi, the elderly maid servant of Uma's house, took Uma's exercise book along with her and stayed with Uma sometime and left her there. From then she secretly writes in it whatever she feels to write. But for a Hindu wife holding a pen and paper is considered to be a sure prelude to widowhood. Her sister-in law catches her once, while she is writing down the song of a beggar woman whom she has just heard. Later she is severely scolded and the book is confiscated by her husband and thrown away. The story ends, while Uma falls on floor crying helplessly. It seems as though she seeks shelter in the bosom of mother earth but unlike the epical Sita the girl is even denied of that refuge.

Living or Dead? is a pathetic story of childless widow Kadambini. The plight of widowhood is most effectively depicted in this story. Kadambini stays with her brother. No one in her brother's house cares her. Her brother's son is her sole comfort. She showers all her love and affection on him, but she has no claim on him. Her affection on her nephew is a convenience for other members of the family that they can chat with each other and play cards. Under severe pressure and pain once she loses her consciousness and her heart suddenly stops functioning and then everyone thinks that she is dead. But at the cremation ground, she gains consciousness. The pallbearers mistake her for a ghost and an evil spirit that they leave her there itself and run away. Fear of disclosing the fact that her body is not cremated-they would say, the cremation has been done, when she comes back home, every one is quite shocked at her existence. Some are fainted at the very sight of Kadambini, and some pray to her (believing her to be a ghost) to leave them forever and to let them live peacefully. Shocked by this treatment, she moves to her friend. When her friend comes to know about her death from her husband, they too pray her to leave them and have pity on them. When her anguish reaches to an intolerable level, Kadambini tries to prove her existence only by committing a suicide. It is quite moving when she bursts out:

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I am not dead. How do I explain you that I have not died? "Look, here's proof that I'm alive". She picked up the bell metal blow and struck it against her forehead again and again and blood spurted from the wound: I'm alive she said finally and dies off.³

Subha is a character from the story of the same name Subha. She is a dumb girl and a neglected child. The full name of Subha is Subhashini that means 'who speaks sweetly'. It is the irony about her name. Subha is a typical Indian village girl who likes to spend her leisure out doors, on the riverside, under the trees and pastures. She has only two friends, i.e., two cows and a village lad Pratap. Though everyone speaks of her deformity in her very presence, she never blames anyone. Mother is supposed to be a source of a consolation to anyone in hard times, but her mother turns out to be an enemy in Subha's case. Her mother thinks of Subha as a stain on her womb and a lapse on her own limb. Playmates of her age never allow her to play with them for they have fear of her. Now she attains marriageable age, her marriage is a big problem for her parents. They think as if she were a curse on them. They fear of society that if she is not married, they may be blamed for it. So, without disclosing the fact that Subha is dumb, they would marry her to a boy from Calcutta. In the beginning the bridegroom mistakes her dumbness for her shyness. Later he realizes and punishes her by neglecting her altogether. She has to be alone forever, leaving her village companions she has to suffer among the unfamiliar faces for no fault of her own. She has been alone even she is with her parents or with her husband. The loneliness and sense of isolation that she is subjected to is most effectively depicted in the following line:

She was like the lonely noontide, wordless and friendless⁴.

There are two women characters from the story, Punishment. Radha is the wife of Dukshiram, elder brother and Chandara, the wife of Chiddam, the younger brother. The story may seem to be a story of petty quarrels between the wives of two brothers. But it is more than that. Radha and Chandara quarrel quite frequently. Every neighbour knows that they can never live peacefully, never come to peaceful terms. Chandara and Radha are different from each other in their temperaments as well as in their appearances. Chandara is not more than seventeen or eighteen. She is very active and attractive whereas Radha is unattractive, indolent and untidy woman. Chandara loves gossiping and she herself is a subject of gossip in the village. Often there is a quarrel between Chandara and her husband but soon they come to terms. They mutually blame each other for their misconduct. There is a sudden rift in their lives when Dukshiram, the elder brother kills his wife in anger by hitting her head with a chopper. Once Radha's husband returns from his work very hungry and asks Radha for food. Then her resentment re-doubled with the day's quarrel she has with Chandara that she shouts at her husband angrily:



Where is the rice? That I should serve you, did you bring me any rice? Am I to earn it myself?"⁵

When Radha's husband too loses his temperament and hits his wife with a chopper. As a matter of fact Radha would not say anything wrong to Chiddam and their poverty might also be a cause of their frustration. Their poverty and her ill temperament are not the only factors, which bring her disaster. She is basically a woman, she does not do any physical harm to her husband, where as Radha's husband in his self-consciousness of male dominance he kills his wife. Even one considers the crime is not his fault, but of his hunger, it is also

inadequate. For if he has fear for his life or respect for his wife he would have resisted and restrained his anger but he simply kills her. Another act of oppression is that when Chiddam asks Chandara to take the blame of killing of Radha on to her. Chiddam thinks for a while, like Adam contemplates some time before he eats fruit of knowledge that if he loses his wife, he can have another, but if his brother is punished and sentenced to death he cannot have another therefore he instructs his wife to tell before the judge that Radha hits her first and in defense she hit her and unexpectedly it happened. But when Radha comes to court her natural love for her sister comes out. She does not wish to tell false things about her sister who is no more, at the same time she does not wish to expose Chiddam's crime. When her husband asks her to tell a false tale in the court she is half dead. She says to the judge that she has killed Radha. Chandara's submission in court shows her utter despair, and dejection. Her way of taking the blame and punishment seems to be a passive resistance and protest against the male dominated society. Uma, Kadambini and Sudha and Radha and Chandara are the subjects of the male oppression. What they know is only suffering. The case Radha and Chandara may be a little different. Radha loses her life in the hands of her husband whereas Chandara loses her life in despair and utter helplessness, lack of understanding and love on the part of her husband causes her alienation. In great dejection, she accepts the wronged punishment as a silent protest. The seeds of protest, though it is of a silent one can be seen in Chandara.

Mrinal is a very interesting character from the story The Wife's Letter. One would know about her through her self-revealing letter that she writes to her husband after she has left him. She is an educated woman, she is individualistic in her thought and her action, and she is an assertive lady right from the beginning. Even her mother worries about her expressive nature. Her self-assertive nature is reflected from her own words when she remarks:

It is impossible for me so to limit myself in every point, when I decide that something is right it is not my nature to be persuaded for someone else sake that it is wrong⁶

Mrinal is married for her beauty. After her marriage even her husband soon ignores her beauty, but now and then her husband is forced to remember that she too has some brains and

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she is blamed for it. Bindu, the younger sister of Mrinal's co-daughter-in-law after the death of her widowed mother and being refused by her cousins for a shelter she comes to stay with her elder sister. Bindu's sister is too much submissive in her nature that she is always anxious to prove to everyone, especially to her husband and her in-laws that she has secured Bindu at bargain for the least price, she tries to prove Bindu yields much labour but it costs little. Bindu's sister has no courage to show her affection to her sister openly. She feels insecure of her position. She is dependent wife without individuality. After the arrival of Bindu into their family, she always pretends that the whole matter of Bindu as a great nuisance and that she would do anything to get rid of this burden. She tries to demonstrate it through the coarseness of clothes and food, she provides for Bindu. Bindu is also put to work at the most menial household duties. Mrinal thinks the treatment of Bindu is quite inhuman. Bindu's sister i.e., the elder co-daughter-in-law of Mrinal plays a dual role with regard to her sister, Bindu. When Mrinal invites Bindu to stay with her, she feels so relieved inside for two reasons, one, the burden of the blame would be shifted on to Mrinal, the other is her sister gets love from Mrinal which she herself cannot show or share with her. Much against the will of her husband and other members, Mrinal gives shelter to Bindu. Mrinal has to curtail her expenditure to meet the expenses of Bindu.

When Bindu develops some rash on her skin, everyone rejects her, Mrinal stays with Bindu and serves her. Bindu's sister does not leave her pretensions even at the critical moments in the life of her sister. She tries to show extreme irritation at this, even she proposes to send the poor girl to hospital. The people are so cruel that when the rash disappears completely, they said that it is undoubtedly small-pox, and it has settled deep into her for she is Bindu. Unable to get rid of Bindu by their own means, they arrange a match for Bindu. The groom is a mad man and everyone knows it. When the match is settled Bindu cries incessantly. She even asks to provide her some little corner in the cattle shed, but it was refused. Soon after marriage, Bindu escapes from her in-laws and comes back to her sister's house. She hides in the coal shed. When she describes the fact that her husband is a mad man and her in-laws torture her, others blame her that she is liar, only Mrinal takes sympathy on Bindu. Again, by force she is sent to her in-laws. Mrinal plans out to save Bindu with the help of her cousin, Sarat. She asks Sarat somehow to put Bindu on the train while she is going to Poori. Sarat assures that he would put Bindu on the train. When Sarat arrives at the appointed time he informs Mrinal that Bindu has set her clothes on fire and has killed herself, and also he informs about the poor response of the members of Mrinal's in-law's family when the killing is reported. Bindu's death does not evoke any sympathy in their hearts. Moreover her husband's inconsiderate and cold remarks that she hears from Sarat make Mrinal determined that she should never go back to her in-laws she breaks up her bond with her husband and his family altogether. She sends a letter in which she assures her husband thus:



Do you think I'm going to kill myself? Have no fear; I shall not indulge in such a stale jest with you. Mira Bai too was a woman like me. Her fetters were not light either, but she did not need to die in order to live⁷

I too shall live. At last I live. She realizes finally what life means, she resolves to lead her life in the service of god and the suffering. Depth of thinking, understanding and sympathy towards the fellow suffering make Mrinal an ever-memorable character.

Anila in House Number One is another interesting character in the stories of Tagore who deserves best appreciation. Her husband is boastful about his intellectual accomplishments. He takes pleasure in having around him all the time some aspirants for debates and discussions. He thinks women do not deserve to take part in intellectual discussions and an intellect does not have to prove his worth before a woman. Anila's place in her house is only to cook and serve the intellectual companions of her husband. He speaks little to her. One may think that she is a passive, traditional sort of woman therefore she does everything silently but ones true admiration comes from the fact that her conformity to her bond of marriage though she receives an irresistible temptation from the man, Raja Sitangshu Mouli from the house number one in the form of letters. He is a man more talented and multi-talented than her husband and handsome in appearance. Those letters may not effect a happy wife but a neglected wife, who has been constantly looked down upon by her own husband, does not have to wait for being tempted, they themselves are in a position to tempt others. But when the other man's admiration becomes intolerable for her what all she says to her husband is:

The people next door are becoming a nuisance; let's move to some other house.⁸

She could indeed enjoy receiving letters of admiration. At least she could secretly cherish the thoughts of her being with the other man, if she has no courage to violate openly. But, in thought, in word, in action she is pure. So, she suggests her husband to move away from the house. When her husband orders her to prepare dinner on the very day, she returns from her father's house, when her brother commits suicide due to his failure in his examination. He does not even enquire about the reason of her sudden visit to her father's house. One can understand how alienated she must have been! She prepares an elaborate dinner, and she leaves that very night, leaving her husband a small note and the charge of the house. Her husband finds the note that reads as:

I'm leaving don't try to find me. You won't succeed even if you try." Expression is brief only between strangers. The expression in her small note.⁹

denotes her estrangement and her sense of alienation from her husband. Her husband finds a tin box containing all the jewels of Anila, even the bangles she always wear, everything

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expect conch shell bracelets and iron bangle indicating her married state, in one compartment there is a bunch of keys, in other various coins in paper packets. Whatever money remains from the monthly household expenses is accounted to the last paisa, a notebook contained a list of utensils and other household goods, as well as of the clothes sent to the washer man, the milk man's and grocer's accounts are also there except her address. This shows how responsible she is, in her household duties and how self-respected she is. Finally she determines to lead a life of her own. She does not degrade herself by being attracted to another man in spite of all the attraction she receives from the house number one. At the same time she does not lose her individuality till the end through her false devotion and worship to her husband. She realizes in the middle and she chooses her own way. Therefore, she stands above most of the women characters in the short stories of Tagore in her dignity and decorum.

Sohini is the most memorable character of Tagore. She is the central character in the story The Laboratory. She is a fine blend of tradition and modernity. She is traditional in her love for her husband and in her commitment and dedication to carry out the mission of her husband she is modern. The means that she employs to achieve it makes her appear most modern. She is very bold and expressive. She is the wife of Nanda Kishore. Nanda Kishore has a goal in his life that he wants to establish a laboratory for the young researchers and scientists of India and that it should be a gate way for scientific research and experiment. He establishes a laboratory, but soon he dies before his dreams come true. Then Sohini takes up the task and she tries to carry out her husband's mission. She is not a weak and fragile woman. Many people try to grab the properties belonging to laboratory. There are people to dampen and discourage her spirit. She faces a lot. She fights legal battles and saves the property. With courage, with singleness of mind, with love she carries out her mission, she does not even count her daughter when she becomes an obstacle in her mission, finally she succeeds in her effort. She is free and frank in her expression. She gives a free expression of her private and passionate feelings. She makes a bold statement about weakness of entire women kind. And she also says she is not an exceptional one. She tells it is very difficult to maintain inner weakness of a woman and make oneself look genuine. She cannot wear the mask of purity and it is reflected in her own words when she says to Chaudhuri:

Don't you know the heart is greedy? It hides its fire under flesh and blood, but it flares up with a little prodding. We, women are not lifelong ascetics. We have tough time to keep up pretence. Draupadis and Kuntis have to be pretended to Sitas and Savitris.¹⁰

One might think that she speaks with a freedom of a prostitute. But Sohini never seems to have committed any adultery after she enters the life of Nanda Kishore. And she also gave an open expression before her husband that she charmed many men. And her relation with



Chaudhuri is not for convenience. Their relation is built up on mutual trust and understanding and it is an emotional kind, not physical. The strength of the character of Sohini lies in her transformation from the stage of a weak-minded lady with a taste and desire for physical pleasures to the strong and bold lady who would face the harsh realities life alone without commitment to anything low or mean. Her widow- hood has never made her weak but it strengthens her personality. Her self- confession may be useful to prove this point. Once she confesses to Chaudhuri thus:

I have been smirched in my body, but in mind, nothing could take hold on me. Anyway my desires have been cast on flames of his funeral pyre. My heaped up sins are being burnt away one by one. The sacrificial fire is burning right in the laboratory.¹¹

Sohini's love is not extinguished with the death of her husband but it increases. It is the sign of true love. She worships her husband in her heart and she worships laboratory as a temple, in thought or action she is not even slightly deviated from her husband or her mission. In that sense she is most traditional and she is most loyal. She never claims any credit from others for herself if anyone compliments her for her greatness in carrying out the mission. She always acknowledges that it is the credit of her husband, which really makes her strong. She admires her husband always. Her great regard for her husband is known when she remarks:

Other men make fools of women to entrap them: he entrapped me by imparting knowledge day and night. You know, a husband's faults can never be hidden from his wife. But I tell you, I have never detected the least dross in his makeup. When I saw close at hand, I thought he was a great man, now from a distance, he seems even greater.¹²

She does not like the unusual freedom of woman. One can understand this point in her treatment of her daughter. She believes in mutual dependency of man and woman on each other. Therefore she wants someone who can take charge of the laboratory. She selects Rebati for the execution of her mission. To entice Rebati she does not hesitate to employ her own daughter Nila. She also takes the help of Chaudhuri, Rebati's teacher in bringing Rebati into laboratory. When Sohini finds Nila is an obstacle for Rebati to get on with his research in the lab, she threatens her. When Rebati himself falls into the clutches of Nila, she protects him from his fall. She never avoids her obligations to anyone. Though it is a crucial time for her to streamline the affairs of laboratory, shielding Rebati from all kinds of diversions, mainly from the attacks of Nila, when she receives a telegram from Ambala from her grandmother that she is ill she immediately goes there. Nila takes advantage of the absence of her mother to tempt Rebati at her best. When Sohini wants Rebati to get on with his research and conduct experiment in the laboratory seriously, Nila spoils him with spreading of charms before him. When he deeply engrossed in research on magnetism, Nila goes into the lab disturbs and



provokes him with her beauty and her talks. During the absence of Sohini, Rehati falls into the trap of Nila. He is also pleased to be made himself the president of awakener's club, his attraction for Nila is growing more and more. For Nila, Rehati is a matter of convenience. When the laboratory comes into Rehati's hold, somehow she could tackle him and get hold on the property. It is the intention of Nila and also she hopes that she can enjoy freedom of moving with any man she desires. For Nila, sex is a matter of enjoyment but to her mother it is functional. As she can assess the true nature of her daughter, she never allows her into the affairs of the laboratory. Nila represents a large body of women at the present age, who scream themselves hoarsely to prove that they are not women. They feel their pride is hurt when they are taken as mere mothers of the race. They never realize what are their basic functions of being women. Sohini never neglects her duties and obligations as wife, as mother, as an individual member of society. Her involvement with Chaudhuri is not a physical involvement. It is a part of fulfilling her obligations and promises that she has made with her husband and society.

The brief study of women characters from the short stories of Tagore shows that there had been a gradual progress and development in the psyche of the women characters. They have changed from the oppressed and unexpressive individuals to revolting and self-expressive and self reliant individuals. Changing conditions in society would certainly bring about a change in the living conditions of an individual. The influence of English education and Western culture was felt first in Bengal society because, Bengal was the first province to come under the rule of the East India Company in 1757. English Education and Western Culture brought about a progressive outlook, liberal thinking, and rationality in Bengal society in different spheres of life. It also paved the way for social and religious reforms. The influence of Brahma Samaj and the influence of certain reformers and the national movement also gave a scope for new outlook in women.

After examining the above women characters from the stories of Tagore, from 1891-1940, one can see a considerable change in the thought and outlook of women. Oppression of women was the dominant feature of the stories that were written during 1891 to 1893, for instance Uma from The Exercise Book (1891). Kadambini from Living or Dead? (1891). Subha from the story Subha (1893) Radha and Chandara from the story of Punishment (1893). Chandara is representative of the class of woman who show a silent protest against oppression. Anila from The Wife's Letter (1914) and Mrinal from The House Number One (1917) are the women, who belong to the class of educated women, with some potential for thinking and decision-making. Whereas Sohini, from The Laboratory (1940). In whom, the spirit of modern woman can be witnessed at best. She does not fight a battle with man for the rights of women. But her freedom of thinking and self expression without inhibition, facing challenges from others, their and her dedication and commitment to the task she undertakes, will prove every way she is much above the so-called modern women. Thus, one can find a

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gradual change and transformation in the thought and the lives of women characters of Tagore that they raised from suppressed individuals to self-expressive individuals.

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