

The Essence of Womanhood and the Beauty of Bengali Women as Depicted in Tagore's Fiction

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: July 05, 2019
Accepted: August 27, 2019
Published: September 30, 2019
Volume: 2
Issue: 5
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.5.8

KEYWORDS

*womanhood, social reformer,
social injustice, liberation,
gender equality*

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explore the beauty of Bengali women which is a recurring feature in Tagore's fiction. She has been portrayed realistically and beautifully in his fiction. Tagore glorifies the beauty of Bengali women and idealized womanhood in some of his short stories as well as in his novels. Tagore portrays them as an ordinary domestic being that possess moral attitudes and have their own identity in the society. Therefore, he gave priority to women in society and played an important role as a social reformer through his literary works. Some of the women protagonists in his fiction are not only beautiful but linger longest in the memory like the character of Sucharita in the novel Gora, a young woman, in the short story Skeleton, Urmimala in Two sisters, Chandra in the short story, Punishment, Giribala in Fury Appeased, or a young widow in My Fair Neighbour. His main focus was on women emancipation, his writings aimed for women's liberation, equality, freedom, and their rights. The central theme of his writings was the social injustice against women. He wanted women's active participation in the society. Through his literary work Tagore encouraged and advocated gender equality and women rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tagore is regarded as the pioneer of the modern Indian short story writings. Short story as a literary genre developed during the 19th century and has become one of the major literary forms of the 21st century. In India, Rabindranath Tagore was considered one of the foremost leaders of Indian Renaissance in art, music, dance and literature. Tagore is the most outstanding name in modern Bengali literature and was the one writer who first gained for modern India a place on the world literary scene. The depiction of women characters in the fiction of Tagore comprise a picture-gallery of a variety of Bengali women. Some of the women protagonists in his fiction are tragic, some pathetic, some conventional some nagging, some vivacious and several intensely patriotic. Thus, Tagore has been very successful in depicting woman psychology in his short stories as well novels.

The plot of some of the short stories and novels revolves around the basic desires of a woman such as

the joy of her freedom and her individuality and identity, or when she tries to break shackles of the patriarchal society and so on. Tagore protested against the contemporary social system in his fiction. He was against the oppressive attitude of the male-dominated society towards women and rejected the injustice and tyranny of his society and advocated women's education for their emancipation. (Saha, 2013).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Tagore's writings, women are portrayed in varied ways. Though most of the female characters in his work lived a traditional life, they were not at all passive. Rather, they were outspoken. The women characters were portrayed in different roles such as a lover, mother, wife or a daughter in his fiction. As Kaur states (2014), Tagore recommended women to find their own identity, as wifehood and motherhood are just part of their entire self.

According to Saha (2013), the main theme of his writings was the social injustice against women. He wanted women's active role in the society.

According to IANS (2017), Tagore was a progressive thinker, his writings often were based on bold subjects that were far ahead of the time.

He strongly believed in fighting for women's upliftment using his pen as a weapon. Focusing mainly on women emancipation, his writing campaigned for women's liberation, equality, freedom, justice, power and dignity and their rights.

According to Hari Krishnan (2017), immense variety and different types of women characters are presented in the fiction of Tagore. Each of the character is unique by itself. The brief analyses of women characters in Tagore's fiction would provide sufficient evidence to say the women characters in the short stories and novels of Tagore are more realistic and more charming and more sparkling. Women protagonists in the novels, as well as women characters in the short stories are full of variety and full of life. They are real and vivacious.

Some of the female characters are portrayed either as a lover or a wife, such as in Sucharita in *Gora*, Giribala in *Fury Appeased* and many more.

Tagore's portrayal of these women character seems realistic and vivid. He dwells on her beauty in poetic language. In the novel *Gora*, Binoy idealises the beauty of the woman he loves, in the following lines he describes the beauty of Sucharita:

Sucharita had risen on the horizon of Binoy's life like the evening star, radiant with the pure sweetness of womanhood, he had realised how his nature had expanded into completeness with the joy of this wonderful manifestation.

(*Gora* p.153)

In *Gora*, Tagore focuses on the character of Sucharita, the young woman who shows courage and strength in difficult situations and tries to break down restrictions of her society. Tagore presents Sucharita as an image of Liberal woman.

In the short story *Skeleton*, the skeleton is that of a young woman who died when she was only twenty-six. The skeleton was hung on the wall of a room where the narrator studied anatomy. One night, because of storage of space in the house, the narrator had to sleep in that room. Recently, there had been a couple of deaths in the house, and the extinction of the lamp in the narrator's room aroused morbid thoughts. The narrator imagined the life of the

person whose skeleton it was. He suddenly felt the presence of an apparition breathing audibly. The narrator starts a conversation with the apparition. The spirit that talked to the narrator is endowed with a rich imagination, but her imagination is focussed on self-elevation which includes exaggeration and, as such, does not carry conviction. She imagines:

I used to sit under a tree in the garden and imagine that the whole of nature was in love with me, that all the stars were eyeing me.

I supposed that all the world's young men were silently assembled round my feet like a clump of grass.

("Skeleton p. 86)

In the short story *Punishment*, the author describes the beauty of Chandra, a married Bengali girl of rural background:

Chandra was not more than seventeen or eighteen. She was buxom well-rounded, compact and sturdy - so trim in her movements that, in walking, turning, bending or squatting there was no awkwardness at all. She was like a brand-new boat: neat and shapely, gliding with ease, not a loose joint anywhere.

(*Punishment* p. 128)

In *Fury Appeased*, Giribala is the wife of Gopinath Shil, a wealthy householder. Tagore dwells on her beauty in poetic language.

Giribala's beauty was like a sudden ray of light a surprise, an awakening, a shock. It could be overwhelming.

And she herself was thrilled by her own beauty. Her body seemed brim-full of youth, like foaming wine in a beaker - overflowing in her dress and ornaments, movements, gestures, the tilt of her neck, the dance of her steps, the jingle of a bracelets and anklets.

(*Fury Appeased* p. 181-182)

In his novel *The Wreck*, Tagore beautifully describes the character of Hem Nalini. She is a simple but good-looking college girl. Ramesh finds her standing at the window, silently gazing at the street outside.

He paused on the threshold with his eyes on her motionless figure. Framed in the mellow autumn sunshine of the open window Every detail - the soft curve of her cheek, the elaborated braiding of her hair, and the glint of the golden bracelet, the graceful sweep of her garment off the left shoulder made a lasting impression.

{*The Wreck* p. 64)

In the short novel, *Two Sisters*, Urmimala is an extrovert. She is interested in science, literature, football, the cinema, and giving lectures of European physicists at the Presidency College. She is fond of radio-listening, and watching a passing wedding party gilt theatre to see Gilbert & Sullivan's Mikado. As for her physical appearance, we are told:

Good looking as Urmimala was, she seemed even better looking than she was. The luminous intensity of her mind scintillated in the lively movements of her body.... Slender and delicate as a frail creeper, she swayed with every breath of the mind. She dressed simply and elegantly..... She had an inexhaustible talent for creating company out of dullness and filling emptiness with her mere presence.

(Two Sisters p. 34-35)

In the story, *My Fair Neighbor*, Tagore describes the beauty of a young widow, who lives in the house next to the narrator's. The author tells us neither the narrator's nor the young widow's name and age. He dwells on the young widow's beauty and her desire to love someone and be loved by him. Tagore advocates widow remarriage in his story~ *Fair Neighbour*. He shows his readers what the social reformers had preached. The young issueless widow has two lovers, but both of them are too timid to propose marriage.

To the narrator: *She was like a dew-soaked flower which has fallen to earth too soon. I felt that she was too beautiful and holy for the flowery, marriage-bed. She was more like a 'goddess' from Heaven.*

The narrator sometimes turned his eyes towards the window of the house next door.

My secret glances were occasionally rewarded by the sight of the pure and lovely face of My Fair Neighbour. But one day I had a shock. Could I believe what I saw? My Fair Neighbour stood looking out into empty space. And what a world of a sad loneliness I saw in her lovely eye, was there, then, still some living volcano within the calm beauty of that moon of mine?... I was deeply moved by the flame of love which burned in that unhappy face.

(Tales from Tagore p. 83)

3. CONCLUSION

Most of the female characters presented in traditional plots are young, beautiful and yet very strong. Tagore campaigned for women's liberation, equality and their rights. Therefore, the portrayal of women in his work can be regarded as one of his most important

contributions to the society. A common feature in all these female characters is the pride in their identity as a woman, instead of being defined as a wife, a mother or a daughter. They defied the concepts of dowry, feminism, chastity of widows and honor. Tagore's depiction of women and her beauty in his fiction seems realistic and vivid. His fiction represents different types of female characters from many classes and walks of life. They are remarkable for their fine blend of keen observation and lively imagination, of nature and life and bear witness to the author's extraordinary gift for seizing on essentials, his wide humanity and his matchless sense of form. Consequently, through his writings Tagore tries to pay tribute and idealizes womanhood.

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