

# Women in Rabindranath Tagore's Selected Short Stories from Sabuj Patra

## Abstract

The short stories of Rabindranath published in *Sabuj Patra* marks an important phase in his understanding of the social position of women as well as his views on exploitation of women, women rights, women independence and deprivation of women. In an interview published in the *Forward Magazine*, the author had divided his short stories into two categories naming them as 'Earlier stories' and 'Later stories'. The short stories like 'Streer Patro', 'Haimanti', 'Bostomi' and 'Dena Pawna' delved deep within the two- sided aspect of women, positioning on one hand the family orientation and on the other hand as a free spirited seeker of truth. In doing so, we can see the victimised figure of the woman rise in her silence as in the case of Anila. It is however not only in silence that Tagore's characterisation of women is exemplified the women characters rise above traditional values despite their loneliness and reach out for self-evaluation. From a literary perspective these stories have much psychological value as they reflect women's self-announcement in a major way.

**Keywords:** *Sabuj Patra*, Forward Magazine, Earlier Stories, Later Stories, Women Rights, Women Independence, Self-Announcement, Two- Sided Aspect of Women, Streer patra, Haimanti, Dena Pawna, Bostomi, Psychological Value, Social Position of Women, Exploitation, Loneliness, Seeker of Truth, Family Orientation, Victimised, Silence, Self-Evaluation, Values, Deprivation.



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## Introduction

Rabindranath himself had the realisation that much of his stories as published in *Sabuj Patra*, were much more independent in their nature. In his older days Rabindranath felt a special affection for the stories from the Silaidaha Padma yapan parva. Rabindranath had himself often critically compared the stories of the first and second series of short stories published in *Sabuj Patra*. In his interview<sup>1</sup> published in the *Forward* magazine Tagore had said:

"They (the early stories) have the freshness of youth...my later stories haven't got that freshness..."<sup>2</sup>

His view regarding the next series of stories as expressed in that same interview is as follows:

" they have greater psychological value and they deal with problems...my stories of a later period have got the necessary technique...but I wish I could go back once more to my former life."<sup>3</sup>

This interview was published on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1936, and this clearly indicates that Rabindranath was mentioning about the later stories published in *Sabuj Patra*. The psychological value of the stories published in the *Sadhana* magazine in the Bengali year of 1301 was of no less significance, for example stories like 'Megh o Roudra' or 'Nishithe'. Despite this we show a special affection for his stories published in *Sabuj Patra* because it was written during a transitional phase in Rabindranath's literary oeuvre. This phase of writing not only revealed his understanding of human psychology but also remarkably exposed a novel viewpoint. These stories also reveal a unique understanding of male female relationship and mutual behaviour. In his old age Rabindranath reshaped his old story in to a much modern context and created the story of *Tin Sangee*, which was often criticised by many and some even revolted against this experimentation.

## Review of Literature

The concept of 'women' in Tagore is a much discussed issue. However, such discourses have not been considered from multiple vantage points. For a long time much of the literary criticism centered on character and story analysis. However since we are focussing on the issue of women in Tagore's *Sabuj Patra* short stories, it can be said that it is of immense

significance from certain perspectives. I have tried to provide the reasons for such significance in the aforementioned sections.

Tagore had divided his short stories into two categories (Earlier Stories and Later Stories). 'Later Stories' would inevitably refer to the stories published in *Sabuj Patra*. In these later stories ('Haimanti', 'Dena Pawna', 'Bostomi',) the character of women seem to have more depth in terms of 'psychological value' and 'necessary technique'. In the first few stories, the revelation of rural life, rural milieu, freshness of youth, expressions of a young heart have gradually receded, this has been appropriately analysed by the critic Atanu Sasmal in many of his essays. Most notable of these essays are 'Agroborti oporoborti Rabindragolpoebong Haimanti', 'EARLIER STORIES AND LATER STORIES', etc. Two of his research books are significant, they are *Rabindranthke Niye* (2013), *Rabindranath Narivabna oonnayno* (2015). Gopikanath Roychoudhury has analysed the refusal, self-announcement of women, as well as has shown that how two stories from same period differentiates character (Uttampurush or prothompurush storytelling technique), this is shown in his book *Rabindranath: chotogolperprokoronsilpo* (1997). In light of feminist understanding, critic Sutapa Bhattacharya has analysed the issue of women in her book *Shey Nohi Nohi* (2008). Professor Tapobrata Ghosh's book *Rabindra chotogolper silporup* (1990) elaborates in this context in a unique manner. On regarding Tagore's thought of the women the article '2016-te Galposaptak' by critic Professor Atanu Sasmal and example of inquisitive research work. The article was excerpted in this special edition 'Rabindra-Grantha- Saptak Satabarsha Sankhya' in Subal Samanta edited magazine 'Ebang Mushayera' in July-September of 2016. The recent-most research work in the form of article is the 'Emanicipated women in Rabindranath Tagore's selected short stories' by Saikat Banerjee. It was published in the magazine 'The criterion' (volume-VIII, Issue-I) in February of 2017 under the adept editorial surveillance of Dr. Vishwanath Bite. This present study locates the issue of position of women in Tagore's stories within the gamut of modern context.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The stories of *Sabuj Patra* marked a transitional phase in Rabindranath's life-before he was writer who delved in the imagination of life, during the *Sabuj Patra* stories he became a more self-critical writer and this reflected in his stories as well. Rabindranath could not totally reconcile with the traditional views regarding women and this is amply reflected in his stories of *Sabuj Patra*. He was much concerned with women's position as well as their self-respect, as this is reflected in these stories. During his conversation with Rani Chanda on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1941, he said "Prothomamimeyederpokhoniye 'Streer Patro' golpoboli". It could be seen that he is dedicated to this purpose in these stories. During his speech at Rama Bai's Sabha, the Rabindranath that we see is one who is completely synched with the traditional views<sup>4</sup> on women and their position in society. However we see a changed Rabindranth in his stories of *Sabuj Patra*,

where he becomes much more modern in his thinking of women. The plays of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw were a reaction to the suffragist movement of England. These created ripples in forwarding women rights and position in the society. In the context Narayan Gangopadhyay comments:

"Palatakar Manjulika beriache paribarik sashoner badh venge (ebong) Rabindra nather golpeyo nari sakti udbuddh a hoyeche."<sup>5</sup>

After receiving international fame as a Nobel laureate, Rabindranath steadily expressed his views on women through his poems, plays, speeches and everywhere else. For example Mrinal from 'Steer Patro' is an independent character in that she grows herself, in this line the next such character would be Anila from 'Poila Number'. However both Mrinal and Anila are completely different in their subversive tendencies. In this context Gopikanath Roychoudhury critically compared these two stories and said:

"'Steer Patro' o 'Poila Number' golper mul theme a sadrisho ache. Purusher kache narir mullo, bakti hisabe tar satontro koto akinchitkor, eta upolobdhi koreche duti golperi nayika, ebong ses porjonto duti golper nayikai swami griho tyag kore geche. Kintu dristikon prithok howar fole golpo dutir abedon alada hoye geche anektai- jodio duti golpoi uttam purusher jabanite bibrito. Eder akti te narir (steer) onnotite purusher (swamir) nirikhon bindu projukto. Er fole 'Poila Number' golper seshe swami Adaittocharaneri manasik protokriya bises vabe byakto hoyeche... onnodike 'Steer Patro' golpe Mrinal asohai, utpirito, Bindur jibon porinam er modho diye songsarer majh khane meye manusher porichoy ta ki ta morme morme upolobdhi koreche. Byakti satontrer prappo adhikar theke banchito nari satta ke alorito kore purush sashito samajer birudhe tar nidarun khob, antorjala tatha pratibadi manobhaber sutibra prokash ghteche golpoti te. 'Poila Number' golpe stree Anil ar dristikon beb ohrhito nahowai tar moner khob o jontrona temon sacchar prokasher bhas a paini."<sup>6</sup>

Gopikanath Roy choudhury believes that Anila is mild and not family oriented. Maybe this where Anila's rebellion is located, that is within her mildness and disaffection towards family. It is within Anila's meekness that we can find the story's artistic mystery. Mrinal is more dominant in her own righteousness unlike Anila. It is Anila's silence that could often give a sarcastic blow.

Anila's silence to the atrocious behaviour of her husband Adaittocharan is a remarkable feature of the short story 'Poila Number'. On one side there is Adaittocharan's luxurious engagement and on the

other side we have Anila's self-righteous silence. This results in the tension between silence and noisy engagement. Despite being garrulous in nature it is ironical that Adaittyo himself is a man who never budges to criticism. Whatever we think of the two characters, Anila's last letter is a testament to the similarity between Adaittyo and Sitangshu. It seems that Sitangshu's criticism and Adaittyo's self-criticism are seamlessly intertwined. Externally these two characters may seem different but Anila's letter exposes the fact that they are internally the same type of persons with identical thinking. Anila therefore bridges the gap between two distinct lines. This seems to be strategy employed by Rabindranath to reflect his own self-criticism or rather self-denial. Anila disillusionment with her conjugal life is testament to this. Unlike Mrinal she did not express herself in a detailed fashion, rather she writes a few lines to get the point through: "ami chollum, amake khujte chesta korona. Korleo khoj pabena."<sup>7</sup>

Anila reconciled nor with her slave like treatment in the hands of Adaittyo, neither with the benevolent Devi liketreatment as offered by Sitangshu. Although despite tearing off the letter from Sitangshu she had temporarily thought of reconciling with his view, it was only a momentary fleeting instance. Venturing from MakhnBaral Lane, Mrinal went to the sea for her redemption. Anila's letter also had no address mentioned in it. But still the silence of Anila and her few words leave an indelible mark in the mind and hearts of the readers.

In his novel *Dui Bon* (1933) Rabindranath had categorised women into two divisions - the mother and the other is lover. Although Tagore himself was quite aware of the limitations of these two categories, despite arguing that the value system have emerged centring on these categories. In this context the short story "Haimanti" is mentionable:

"amader deshe je manushak bar bibaho koriyache bibaho sambhondhe tahar mone ar kono udbeg thakena. Noro mangser sadh paile manusher sambhondhe bagher je dosha hoi streer sambhondhe tahar vab ta sei rup hoyao the"<sup>8</sup>

The metaphor of man eating tiger is indicative of the fact that Rabindranath could well decipher the falsity of the institution of marriage. Exploitation of the female sex is revealed in the story *Haimanti* when Haimanti's mother in law clearly specifies her to not to reveal her original age and say that she is much younger. However, Haimanti could not comprehend the meaning for such a falsity and divulged her original age to be seventeen. It is then that her mother in law screams at her that: "tui amake mithebadi bolite chas?"<sup>9</sup>, to which Haimanti replies "amar baba toh kokhono mitha bolen na"(10). Haimanti could have well evaded such a fiasco if she could have sacrificed her stubborn attitude. From her very childhood she had learned that true dharma lies in truth. In such an adverse atmosphere in her in laws house, the only consolation for her was her husband's love, although not his whole hearted love. This could not however bridge the differences between

Haimanti's personal ideology and the traditional stubbornness of her in laws. Her in laws remained strangers to her. In this context:

"koli katar goli te oi gorader faak diya nirbaak akasher sange tahar nirbaak moner kotha hoi"<sup>11</sup>

Haimanti's loneliness as compared to the same aged girls of her age is a standout mark of her independence as a character.

Anandi in 'Bostomi' as a character fails not only as a mother but also as a lover and wife. As bereaved mother, despite receiving consolation from Guruthakur, she had felt that somewhere something is wrong. One spring morning when Guruthakur says "tomardehokhanisundor"<sup>12</sup>, it completely arouses the lover in Anandi. But Anandi had lost her previous world. It is then that with utter frustration she absconds from her husband's home, to find truth, which she finds in uttering the word 'Gour'. Rabindranath depiction of Anandi reflects that Anandi was by means a failed character, rather it her quest for eternal truth that stands out as a characteristic in her.

Rabindranath's understanding of the position of women does not end with his novel *Dui Bon* (1933). A different perspective of Tagore's understanding of women could be seen where the discriminations against women do not exist. It is here that Tagore reflects of a new type of woman, who is not bound any patriarchal limitations. This could be seen in the story 'Teen Sangee' r 'Laboratory', where Sohini displays remarkable luminousness as a character. She is quite unique in that.

### Conclusion

Many critics earmark the period 1914-15 as an exceptional phase in Tagore's literature. It is not only for the reason that this period saw a remarkable surge in creativity of the author, but also because during this time Tagore's literary work repeatedly engages with the question of exploitation and deprivation of women. The story 'Dena Pawna' shows how the inability to pay dowry results in the exploitation on Nirupama. 'Haimanti' is different in this regard, in the story during marriage ceremony the hero comes to the realisation that:

"daner montre stree ke jetuku pawa jai tahate songsar chole, kintu ponero anna baki theke jai".<sup>13</sup>

In this same story the hero is not empowered enough to force his wife to go to her father's house revolting against his own family. It is apparent that traditional values seemed much more important than chivalry of a protesting husband. This is where women had to suffer more owing to the inability of their husbands to protest.

### References

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- stories. This discussion was documented in 'Bisal Bharat', edited by Banarasi Das (march 1936). For further information, the reader can refer to the following reference:
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  4. Ibid. pg- 853.
  5. vide- 'Rama BaierBaktritaUpolokhepotro', Bharati o Balak, Shrabon 1296 (Bengali year).
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  9. ibid- Haimanti, pg -548
  10. ibid pg -552
  11. ibid
  12. ibid pg-555
  13. ibid Bostomi, pg 565
  14. ibid, Haimantipg- 551
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