

Portrayal of Women and Children in the Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore



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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore has portrayed the characters of women and children with deep sympathy and psychological insight in his short stories. He has sharply protested against all the contemporary social evils like the dowry system, child marriage, sati system, gender injustice, etc.

Through his short stories he has eloquently championed the rights of children and advocated female education and widow remarriage. He protested against corporal punishment and humiliation of children in schools. He wanted to revolutionize the traditional system of education which was crushing the originality and vivacity of children and cramming their memory with worthless trash.

Through his stories Tagore conveyed the idea that object of education should be the freedom of mind. According to him the highest education is that which does not merely give information, but makes our life in harmony with all existence.

Keywords: Portrayal, Women, Children, Short Stories, Rabindra Nath

Humanism- Humanism is a non-religious philosophy based on liberal human values which focuses on human welfare.

Mother Nature- It is a personification of nature that focuses on the life giving and nurturing aspects of nature by embodying it in the form of a mother.

New Woman- The New Woman was a feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century and had a profound influence on feminism well into the twentieth century. The New Woman broke away the fetters created by the male dominated society.

Women's Emancipation- The process, strategy and efforts by which women have been striving to liberate themselves from the authority and control of men, as well as to secure equal rights for women and remove gender discrimination.

Women's Empowerment - It is the attempt by women to redefine gender roles, it is the attempt to gain ability for women to enjoy their right to control and benefit from the resources, assets income etc. and improve their economic status and well being.

Introduction

Rabindranath was one of the pioneers of short-story writing in India, in English and Bengali. Human life was the main subject of his stories and he has painted it in its myriad hues. He has given expression to the silent agonies of the underdogs, the exploited peasants, the suffering women and helpless children. His stories are notable for their deep humanism, warmth of human relationships, down-to-earth realism and his great psychological insight. Tagore wrote over ninety short-stories during his entire literary career.

His short-stories are notable for the robust treatment of his themes touched with the warmth of humanity. They depict the author's ability to see beyond the human condition and look into the heart of his characters - their raptures and pangs of longing, their foibles and nobility- with perception and compassion. They are mostly suggestive, impressionist and lyrical, dealing with different aspects of ordinary human life. Tagore's characters are true to life, vivid and often unforgettable. They come from different classes and walks of life.

In his short-stories Tagore has displayed his deep sympathy for the poor, the untouchable, the exploited peasants, the silently suffering women, the ill-treated children and servants. The characters in his stories come alive with the touch of his compassionate humanism and each story highlights the glory and dignity of the human soul.

Review of Literature

Numerous books, reviews and articles have been published on Tagore in English. Edward Thompson in his *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* presented a critical appraisal of Tagore's poems and plays. V.S. Naravane in his *Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore* has described the literary merits of Tagore. E.P. Thompson in his *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* has paid tributes to Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore. Jose Chunkapura in his book *The God of Rabindranath Tagore* is a study of the evolution of his understanding of God.

Suniti Kumar Chatterji has focussed on the sublime and classical qualities in the writings of Tagore in his *World Literature and Tagore*. B.C. Chakrabarty in his *Rabindranath Tagore: His mind and Art* has discussed his views on education, religion, art and aesthetics.

Foreign critics like Marjorie Sykes in *Rabindranath Tagore* and Alexander Aranson in his *Rabindranath Through Western Eyes* have discussed the merits of Tagore and reasons for his diminishing popularity in the West.

Kedar Nath Mukherjee in *Rabindranath Tagore's Concepts of State, Nation and Nationalism* has focused on his social and political ideas. Humayun Kabir in his *Towards Universal Man* has highlighted the universal appeal of his life and works. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in his *Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* has described his philosophical and religious ideas about God, man and nature.

Kathleen M.O.' Connell's *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet as Educator* is a portrayal of Rabindranath's educational ideas and their implementation.

L.K. Elmhirst's *Poet and Plowman* is a fascinating human document containing almost a day-to-day chronicle of the activities at Sriniketan. Patrick Hogan and Lalita Pandit have traced the portrayal of universality and tradition in the writings of Tagore. Kalyan Sen Gupta has focused on the philosophy of Tagore in his book with the same title. A.B.M. Shamsad Doulah has narrated the untold stories about the Nobel Prize of Literature which was awarded in 1913. Daniel Ross Chandler has traced the growth of universal religion in the writings of Tagore. Barbara Stoler Miller has discussed the poems and stories of Rabindranath Tagore in *Master Works of Asian Literature* Sheldon Pollock has highlighted on the aspect of modernity in the writings of Tagore in his book entitled '*Literary Cultures in History*'.

Aim of the Study

This paper attempts to bring out Tagore's sympathetic and humanistic treatment of women and children in his short stories. It conveys Tagore's strong protest against the dowry system, child marriage, gender injustice, ill treatment of women and children and his eloquent appeal for female education and upholding the rights of little children. Elaborate and appropriate illustrations have been given from the

English translations of the original writings of Tagore to support the propositions.

Main Text

Tagore has portrayed women and children with infinite love, sympathy and understanding and has created unforgettable characters with deep psychological insight. In the beginning of the last century when the value of women outside family relationships was scarcely recognised, Tagore emphatically established the identity and individuality of the fair sex. With great foresight he outlined the possibilities of women's emancipation and empowerment. He voiced his strong protest against the dowry system, child-marriage, gender injustice, and the ill-treatment of women and children. He fought for the rights of the girl child and in his stories eloquently advocated female education ("*The Exercise Book*").

In his poem *Passing Time in the Rain* in his anthology *The Golden Boat* Rabindranath highlighted the themes, objectives and his style of composing his short stories:

*Following my own bent,
Write story after story-
Small lives, humble distress,
Tales of humdrum, grief and pain,
...Simple, clear straight forwardness;
No elaborate description,
Plain steady narration,
No theory or philosophy,
...Dust of fame unsung,
The love, the terror, the wrong
of thousands of lives unknown.
Passing Time in Rain;
The Golden Boat.*

Tagore's heroines are not only brave, beautiful, gentle and kindhearted but also strong, determined progressive and open minded. Tagore's dream-daughters have never submitted meekly to the dowry system. In the story *Profit and Loss* the protagonist Nirupama is subjected to inhuman treatment and humiliation by her in laws as her father was unable to pay the total amount of promised dowry. Her father was disgraced and not allowed to meet her daughter.

Unable to bear the contempt, humiliation and torture, that his daughter was facing her poor father sold off his own house and borrowed heavily at high interest to collect the promised sum of dowry. But Nirupama would not accept the money:

Father she said, 'If your give a single paisa more to my father-in-law, I swear solemnly, you will never see me again.....' 'Do you think I have no honour? Do you think I am just a money bag, the more money in it the higher my value? No father, don't shame me by paying this money'.

Selected short stories, pg. 52, 1995.

Nirupama fell seriously ill due utter neglect and starvation and finally died. Immediately after her cremation her mother in law arranged for her son's remarriage:

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This time the dowry was 20,000 rupees, cash down.

Ibid, pg. 53.

In the story *The Inscrutable Woman* the heroine Kalyani gives a befitting reply to her would be in-law's demands for dowry. She refused to marry and vowed to remain a life-long spinster when the groom's uncle humiliated her father on the wedding day.

The penny-wise maternal uncle of the groom had brought with him a gold smith to test the purity of gold ornaments on the wedding day. He had suspected that the girl's father might dupe him over gold and once the marriage had been solemnised there would no way of rectifying it. Forcing her father to take off the bride's ornaments he tested, weighed and finally made a list of them, in case one or two were eventually missing from the tally. Making a quick calculation he found that in number, weight and price, they were far in excess of his demand.

The bride's father was simple-minded but self respecting and spirited. The groom's party was served the wedding dinner and then politely asked to leave. Kalyani's father Sambhunath Babu, boldly told the groom's uncle:

I can't marry off my daughter into a family that thinks, I can filch her ornaments.

Selections from Galpaguchha, pg. 120, 2010

Kalyani herself vowed to serve her motherland and rejected all marriage proposals.

After that wedding fiasco, she had made the education of girls her mission.

Ibid, pg. 120

In the story *Skeleton* Tagore briefly outlined the plight of married women and their suffering after widowhood. The skeleton of a young woman narrates her autobiography:

When I was alive and young there was someone I feared like death, My husband. I felt like a fish caught on a hook. That is, a completely unknown animal had hauled me up on a hook, snatched me out of the cool, deep, protective waters of my home with no chance of escape. Two months after my marriage, my husband died. The grief that was expected of me was supplied in full by my in-laws. My father-in-law, pointing to numerous signs, told my mother-in-law that I was what the Shastras called a "Poison-bride".

R. Tagore, Selected Short Stories, pg. 85, 1995.

In the story entitled *The Exercise Book* Tagore focuses on the problem of child marriage and female education. He provides a glimpse of the average middle-class mentality towards female education.

Uma the protagonist of the story had a fancy of scribbling and writing everywhere. She was gifted a beautiful exercise book by her brother in which she scribbled small poems and short sentences. She was married off at the tender age of nine. She felt home

sick and was yearning to see her parents but was not allowed to go home. Little Uma was deeply hurt and innocently wrote in her exercise-book.

If only Dada could take me home again, I would never spoil his writings again.

T. Tagore, Selected Short Stories, pg. 141, 1995.

The matter was duly reported to her husband Pyarimohan by her spying sister-in-laws.

When Pyarimohan got this report he was extremely worried. He feared that once women got the liberty of reading, novels and dramas would begin to be smuggled in and eventually imperil the domestic sanctity.

Selections from Galpaguchha, pg. 51, 2010
That evening Pyarimohan came to Uma's room and gave her a thorough scolding and ridiculed her too, saying, "So the wife wants to go to an office with a pen behind her ear? We'll have to get her a turban!"

Ibid, pg. 52.

Uma could not understand what he meant, But she was deeply humiliated, and wished that the earth would swallow her up.

Ibid, pg. 53.

For a long time she wrote nothing. One autumn morning a beggar-woman was singing a song about Parvati-Uma the daughter of the Himalaya who returns from Kailash. Uma felt nostalgic as the song brought back so many memories of her childhood. With a sore heart and tear filled eyes she copied the lines where Uma-Parvati chides her mother:

Why did you not send for me?

Ibid, pg. 53.

Her sister-in-laws teased her and slighted her. Pyarimohan sharply thundered "Give me that book." Uma clasped it tightly to her breast.

The girl held the exercise book to her breast and looked at her husband entreating him with her gaze.

Ibid, pg. 54.

But it was snatched away and he loudly read out from her childish writings. As she listened, Uma tried to clutch the nether most depths of the earth. The other girls collapsed into peals of laughter and Uma never got the exercise-book back again.

In *The Ending* Tagore attacks the problem of child marriage. The marriage of little Mrinmayi, the village tomboy was finally settled:

Thereafter, Mrinmayi's mother together with all the elderly women of the village began to advice her day in and day out about her future do's and don'ts. With injunctions on love of play, brisk strides, loud laugh, boy's company and eating whenever hungry, they completely succeed in projecting marriage as a horrifying proposition. With a heart

full of anxiety and apprehension, Mrinmayi thought she had been sentenced to life imprisonment to be followed by hanging. Stiffening her neck and retracting a step like a recalcitrant pony, she declared : I shan't marry:

Selections from Galpaguchha, Vol-I, pg.-281

No one paid any attention to her wishes and soon after her marriage her training began.

Her mother-in-law got down to the task of reformation.... With a stern face she said, look, dear, you're no small child any more. In our house none of that brazenness is allowed.

Ibid, pg. 182.

In *The Wife's Letter* Marinal is the voice of the New Woman. She had been married for fifteen years and had adjusted herself to the loveless relationship and indifferent apathy of her husband and in-laws. Once on the sea-shore of Puri she realized that she had an independent existence of her own. In her letter Marinal's husband does not bear any name. It is not addressed to any person in particular but to the male society in general:

I am the second daughter-in-law in your joint family. Today standing on the seashore, I feel for the first time in fifteen years that I have another relation as well with my world and the Lord of the World this is no letter from the second daughter in law of your family.

Selections from Galpaguchha-II, pg. 146.

I had one thing outside the pale of domesticity, which none of you ever knew. I used to write poems secretly. Trash or ash, whatever it was, the walls of women's quarters had not encompassed it. There I found my freedom; there I was myself. That I was a poet you could not discover even in fifteen years.

Ibid, pg. 149.

Mrinal had given shelter to a homeless orphan girl Bindu, who was a distant relative, much to the dislike of her husband. Mrinal showered her profuse love on Bindu and cared for her as her own daughter. To get rid of Bindu her marriage was quickly settled with a village lunatic by her in-laws and she was packed off hurriedly.

Bindu thrice ran away from her husband as he frequently became stark mad and finally she committed suicide by setting fire to her clothes. Bindu's death was an eye-opener for Mrinal and she decided to live freely and independently with honour and dignity:

I will never go back to No.- 27, Makhan Boral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have seen what really the status of a woman is in a male-dominated world. I have had enough..... Now at last the second daughter-in-law is dead.

Ibid, pg. 152.

In the quest for her real identity Mrinal boldly throws off the mantle of the second daughter-in-law and declares the loveless, meaningless, formal bond of the so called *sacred* marriage as null and void: She does not think of suicide or yearn for an early death but she decides to live independently without the fetters of marriage and family. It was a revolutionary step in her time and Tagore was bitterly criticised for his radical thinking and candid presentation.

Children have been sketched very lovingly and realistically by Tagore. He had personally revolted against the prevailing system of education which cramped the personality of children and made them slaves of text-books. Most of his child heroes are vivacious issues of Mother Nature. They are innocent, intelligent, carefree and freedom loving. Tagore championed the rights of little children. He emphasized that they have an independent personality and they ought to be respected and sympathetically treated. About a hundred and twenty years ago he out rightly rejected all types corporal punishment and humiliation of children in schools.

Tagore has created a galaxy of child heroes. He presents a vivid picture of the motherless Balai who had a deep attachment with mother earth in his story *The Nature's Child*. He could hear the message of universal life in his veins:

The plant as the foster mother of life on earth has been drawing from the heavens since time immemorial the sap, the vigor and the flavor of life from the nectar-bowl of earth and flooding the skies with the message of beleaguered life, I want to live.

Selections from pg. 252.

Balai was so sensitive that he could talk, hear, understand and empathize with nature.

That any one should pluck flowers from trees hurt him most. He also realized that this sentiment meant nothing to others. Boys of his age brought down fruits by repeatedly stoning the branches. He could not protest, and turning away his tearful eyes he went away from there.

Ibid, pg. 252.

Balai had a deep kinship with plants, animals, rivers and stars. He pleaded with his uncle to spare his beloved cotton tree from being felled down. He was taken away from the lap of Mother Nature and sent to a boarding school in England for his education and his favourite cotton tree was felled down.

In his story *The Silent Girl* Tagore brings out the silent agony and pathos in the life of a physically handicapped child Subhashini, who was lovingly called Subha:

Not everyone appreciates that one who cannot speak can feel. Therefore even in her presence, people expressed their worries about her future. That she had been born as a bane of God to her parents had been

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ingrained in her ever since her childhood.

Selections.....pg. 152.

Subha was destitute of speech, but endowed with two large dark eyes with long lashes; her lips quivered like budding leaves at the faintest suggestion of emotion..... there was in her some detached nobility like that of the vast nature. That is why ordinary children were somewhat afraid of her; they did not like to play with her. Like the deserted moon, she was soundless and companionless.

Ibid, pg. 153.

Subha grew up in the lap of Mother Nature with ducks, birds, cows, rivers and fields as her mute companions. While her parents felt very worried being burdened with a speechless daughter as people had begun talking and there were rumours that they might be ostracized. They rented a house in the city and Subha's marriage was solemnised concealing her identity and the fact that she could not speak:

It took them less than a week to realise that the bride was dumb. What they did not realize was that it was none of her fault; she had deceived no one. Her two tearful eyes had said it all, but nobody could understand it. She looked around, but found no language..... An endless muted cry continued to wail in the girl's ever-silent heart, which no one but the Almighty could hear. This time, her husband after examining with his visual and hearing organs brought home a talking bride.

Ibid, pg. 159.

Tagore protested strongly against the physical and mental torture of children. He satirized the teachers who ill-treated their students in the story *Housewife* and vividly described how little children had to suffer in their hands.

Our teacher was Shibnath. He was clean-shaven, with closely cropped hair except for a short pigtail. The very sight of him scared boys out of their wits. In the animal world, creatures that sting do not bite. Our teacher did both. His blows and slaps were like hailstones pounding saplings, and his sarcasm, too, burnt us to the core.

R. Tagore, Selected Short Stories. pg. 54.

Their teacher complained that the relationship between pupils and teacher was not what it was in times past; that pupils no longer revered their teacher like a god. But no one confused him with Indra, Chandra, Varuna or Kartik.

There was only one god like him: Yama, god of death, and after all these years there is no harm in

admitting that we often wished he would go, there and then, to Yama's home.

Ibid, pg. 54.

Little Ashu was an obedient, gentle, studious student and considered to be the good boy in Shibnath's class. He was very shy and he never complained to anyone. Shibnath had a weapon for torturing boys that sounds trivial but which was actually terribly cruel. He would give them nicknames that were absolutely unbearable. His victims were intensely distressed and had to sit quietly and suffer silently.

His teacher had seen him playing with his younger sister and gave him the nickname *housewife*.

..... Ashu's smile gave way to a deep red blush around his face and ears. The veins in his aching forehead began to throb; he could no longer hold back the flood of tears in his eyes. During the Tiffin break the boys danced round Ashu, boisterously chanting 'Housewife! housewife!' He realized that to play with one's little sister on a holiday was the most shameful thing in the world, and he could not believe that people would ever forget what he had done.

Ibid, pg. 57.

Holiday is one of the most touching stories of Rabindranath in which he portrays the evils of the traditional system of education and the agony of a motherless child in an alien environment which brings about his tragic and premature death.

Phatik, the leader of the village boys was always full of new ideas, enthusiasm and brimming with energy. His joy knew no bounds when his uncle proposed to take him to Kolkata for proper schooling. Unfortunately he was not welcomed in his aunt's family.

It hurt him most to realize that his loveless aunt looked down upon him as a jinx to her family..... Such inordinate care for his intellectual upliftment seemed to him extremely cruel and unfair.

Selected.....Stories, pg. 22.

Little Phatik realized that he just does not fit in anywhere in the world. He was always so diffident and apologetic for his existence and began to look and behave like a waif. Tagore remarked with deep psychological insight:

Except for his mother's home, any other place which is unfamiliar is a hell to the boy.

Ibid, pg. 22.

His free spirit was cribbed, cabined and confined within the four walls in the city.

He yearned for the vast open fields where he flew his huge kite. The green riverside where he sang his self-composed songs and the rivulet into which he frequently jumped and

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swam; his gang of followers; the mischief they would get up to; the freedom; above all his harsh, impetuous mother; all this tugged continually at his helpless heart.

Ibid, pg. 22.

At school there was no one more stupid and inattentive than he. If asked a question he would just stare back vacantly. If the teacher cuffed him, he would silently bear it like a laden, exhausted ass.

Ibid, pg. 23.

He longed to see his mother and yearned for the holidays to come. One day he lost his school books and there was no way to prepare his lessons.

The teacher began to beat and humiliate him every day. His standing in school sank so low that his cousins were ashamed to admit their connection with him.

Ibid, pg. 23.

His aunt refused to buy him any books and his sense of guilt and inferiority for having wasted her money dragged him down to the very earth. That night he had severe headache and shivering. He knew that he was getting a fever and also that his aunt would not take kindly to his being ill. He had a clear sense of what an unnecessary, unjustifiable nuisance it would be to her.

Phatik left for his home and was badly drenched in the torrential rain. He was retrieved after a prolonged search in a state of high fever and delirium. When his mother arrived the next day his end was near, Phatik said softly:

*Mother, my holiday has come now.
I'm going home.*

Ibid, pg. 25.

Conclusion

The writings of Tagore and specially his short-stories have helped in establishing the dignity and individuality of women as human beings. Characters like Mrinal, Sohini and Vibha have served as milestones in the quest for her identity.

Tagore's concern for the education and holistic development of children led to the establishment of Shanti Niketan which he described as his '*tangible poem*', as '*the boat that carried the best cargo of his life*'. He brought into education the principles of play and joyous experience. He believed that the growth of the child is best in the lap of Mother Nature. Through his short stories Tagore gives us the message that each child is unique and education is not mere mechanical transfer of facts and information. He emphasizes that teachers should be kind and understanding and teaching should always be student-centric and not teacher centric as it is at present.

The stories of Tagore successfully express his deep sympathy and strong sense of justice particularly for those who were suffering under the yoke of feudalism and exploitation. He criticized the dark oppressive system, which crushed the personality of women, such as dowry, child marriage, sati-system, humiliation of widows and female-ill-literacy. His candid and sympathetic presentation led to their eradication in Bengal and later in other parts of India.

In his short stories, Tagore champions the rights of children and the workers. He believed that a harmonious relationship with nature was essential for the all-round development of human personality. He propagated the idea that education should not be burdensome but should be playful, joyful and permeated by a holiday spirit. He has given expression to his ideas through his stories.

Thus Rabindranath has portrayed 'small lives, humble distress, tales of humdrum grief and pain' with deep empathy. Tagore is a champion of the universal human rights. In his stories Tagore upholds the dignity of man. He establishes the glory of human soul and sings the glory of human life. He transcends the barriers of caste, race, sex, language and religion and treats all human beings as the members of a single family.

Thus Tagore's stories have contributed significantly in bringing about changes in the society's, attitude towards women and children.

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