INDIAN WOMEN - ESPYING A SOCIAL NICHE IN THE ANDROCENTRIC SOCIETY

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Abstract:

Indian literature refers to the literature produced on the Indian subcontinent until 1947 and the Republic of India thereafter. Indian English literature has matured from a sapling to a firmly rooted tree that blooms. Indians however did not take to writing in a day. It took umpteen historical events and illustrious and notable personalities to bring Indian writing in English to its contemporary eminence. One of the remarkable writers of Indian English literature is Rabindranath Tagore. In the short stories of Tagore, one can find the influence of man, nature and the mysteries of the supernatural. Tagore’s stories have the presence of national spirit and patriotism. Hopes and aspirations, disappointments and frustrations, joys and sorrows in human life are depicted through his stories. Portrayal of women in his short stories have always been phenomenal. His earlier short stories dealt with young girls and their transition from a girl into a lover or a caring mother. He depicts how Indian women showered their love towards their family in spite of the domination of men. The then emerging concept of ‘New Women’ in the late 19th century had a profound impact on the literature of the early 20th century. These New Women broke the boundaries set by the patriarchal society and created an identity for themselves other than being a daughter, a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law and so on. The aim of this paper is to explore the short stories of Tagore to analyse how the three different facets of women such as Family and Love, Social oppression of Women and Birth of ‘New Women’ are represented.
Introduction

Indian literature in English and its historical evolution had happened alongside the consolidation of British imperialism in India. The history of Indian English literature dates back to at least 19th century. Indian writing in English was only one of the materialisation and expressions of the new creative impulse in India often referred to as ‘literary renaissance of India’. The study of English literature had energized and perked literary creations in Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Gujarati and various Indian languages.

The Indian writings in English were heavily influenced by the western art form of the novel. It was too early for the Indian writers who wrote in English, to use English without any use of Indian words, to convey experiences that were primarily Indian. Indian English literature refers to the work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose narrative or co-narrative could be one of the numerous languages of India.

‘Stylistic influence’ from the local language appears to be an exceptional feature of much of the Indian literature in English. The local language construction and system is very much reflected in the illustrations, as mirrored in the literal translation of local idioms. Another praiseworthy feature of these Indian English writers is that they have not only ‘nativised’ the British mother tongue in terms of stylistic features but they have also acculturated English in terms of the ‘Indianised context’.

Besides the legendary and hugely venerated Indian English literary personalities like Rabindranath Tagore or R K Narayan later novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Manohar Malgaonkar and Nayantara Sehgal have ceaselessly captured the spirit of independent India struggling to break away from the British and traditional Indian cultures and establish a distinct identity. During 1980s and 90s India had emerged as a major literary nation.

More recent writers in English who are either Indian or of Indian origin and derive much inspiration from Indian themes are Vikram Seth, Amitav Gosh, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra, Mukul Kesavan, Ruskin Bond, Shasi Deshpande and Kiran Desai. In the meantime, a new crop of authors such as Chetan Bhagat, William Dalrymple, Harikunzuru, Jumpa Lahiri have arrived on the international scene and their writings are being appreciated around the globe. Indian writers gave a much-needed oxygen to English literature with their crisp, tongue-in-check and realistic fictions that were read all over the world.
The short story as a literary genre came to India through the contact with the west especially in the first phase, through the western masterpieces available in English translation. While the novel as a form emerged a century ago in the middle of the nineteenth century, in some cases later decades, the short story was sluggish in its appearance. It was only in the second or the third decade of the present century that the short story emerged as a recognisable literary form in the Indian languages.

The short story has been mainly a purveyor of entertainment, pastime, holding the attention of the not too literary reader by its interestingness.

Although stories were in vogue in Bengal before Rabindranath Tagore, it was always Tagore who gave life to short story. Before him some of the stories of Sanjibchandra Chattopadhyay and Purnachandra Chattopadhyay bore marks of short story, but no writer of Bengal was then aware of the distinctive features of the short story as a literary form. Irrespective of this status as a novelist, he will always be placed high in the all-time favourite short story writers list. Being the path finder of the modern Bengali literature, he has to his commendation – the writer to introduce common man’s language into Bengali literature.

When we analyse his short stories, it is perceptible that he has developed his own method of storytelling. Unlike other writers, Tagore presents not the entire lives of the characters but a slice of their lives. His stories do not necessarily begin with the birth of a character and ended in its death. Tagore just takes a fragment of their lives and places it so artistically in his stories, leaves the readers with a gasp by finishing the tale with a twist. Presenting not the entire lives but a speck of them, made Tagore to represent the way of life and the readers to see themselves in the stories and they understood that the story did not end there.

He had to his credit, the first writer to introduce colloquial speech into Bengali literature. He succeeded in doing so not by shaping artificial characters but by pulling people out of his life and placing them in his works. With real life people as his characters, his stories had deeper insight and plethora of emotions which were all relatable to the readers. In the canvas of Bengal literature which only had a certain sect of people, Tagore painted people from almost all the strata such as peasants, Brahmins, common villagers, lords, Zamindhars, officials and so on. It is the imperfection of these characters that made the stories absolutely perfect not only for the 19th century but also for today.
Tagore’s short stories make it obvious that he is astute in representing his women characters. A lot of his stories have female protagonists. Tagore boldly presented the pathetic position of women in a household as a mother, daughter, sister and wife. It is not only the characters that have the spirit but also the trees, houses, the atmosphere- everything has a story to tell.

Pathos was the essence in almost all his characters. It is this feeling of pathos that made the readers to relate and see themselves in the characters of Tagore. One cannot irrationally single out Tagore as a pessimist because the pathos was not a result of his way of looking at life. He was rich and a part of the affluent community in Calcutta. It hit him hard when he met people at the village of Shelidah, for all led a life with profuse pathos. This disparity made him understand the real world. He empathised with the lives of the common people and decided to bring it to limelight. He represented India as it is with its rich culture and tradition but also did not fail to represent and to reprimand the malicious society.

**Indian Women - Espying A Social Niche in The Androcentric Society:**

Astonishing traits of Indian women such as boldness, obedience, affection and love are the themes of many of Tagore’s short stories. Tagore was profoundly concerned about the plight of women and their status in the androcentric society. To quote Iyengar: Being a sensitive man and the supreme romantic poet of Bengal, he understood women in all their joy and sorrow, hope and despair, their yearnings and their dreams. Tagore found in the women of his country an immense wealth, their courage against all odds, their power of survival under the worst possible conditions and oppression, the forbearance, their self-sacrifice and gentleness. (Indian Writing in English 102)[1].

Through his stories he has brought out a critical view of the position of women in the then prevailing Bengal society. These stories act as a mirror in which men could see themselves. These stories made men understand that revisioning of the lives of not only women but also their own life is necessary.

Tagore had the eccentric genius to understand and to express the thought process of a woman’s mind. Even in the cruel acts Tagore brings out noble feelings. Sati was seen by everyone as a ruthless act, but many failed to understand the reason behind the willingness women had towards Sati. They had passion and felt proud in engaging in such a chivalrous
act. Tagore’s heroines expressed this gallant passion and made the readers experience a speck of it.

When we analyse the Bengali women’s fate as depicted in Tagore’s stories, we can find that the Bengal society comprises of two sects of people. The first section had no concern for anything other than their gains. So, they tried their best to preserve all the feudal customs which acted as an agent to exploit the needy. Some of them also held important positions in the society. The second category did not involve directly in the exploitation of women, but they didn’t care about the violence against women and thereby played their part in making women’s life miserable.

According to many critics his short stories can be divided into two periods: pre-Gitanjali and post-Gitanjali period. The short stories of pre-Gitanjali period deal with nature and superstition. The short stories of this period centre on individual lives especially of girls and women. But the stories of post-Gitanjali period reveal that Tagore is not merely a romantic short story writer, but also a realist who deals with the problems of contemporary life. These stories have a different setting. They mostly deal with the middle-class life and its problems specially tragedy of women in Hindu household.

Tagore’s short stories represent the facets of women’s lives:

- Family and love
- Social oppression of women
- Birth of ‘New Woman’

This paper aims at considering Tagore’s two short stories ‘The Postmaster’ and ‘The Wife’s Letter’ and analyse how these three types of women are represented in his works.

The story “The Postmaster” is considered as Tagore’s first significant short story. This story is based on human psychology in two different individuals. The story deals with the indescribable grief of a village orphan girl Ratan whom she can call as her own. The postmaster, a young man from Calcutta, came to the village of Ulapur for his first appointment. He felt like a fish out of water among the employees of the indigo factory there. The postmaster had a poetic mind and so he spent his leisure time in writing poetry. He had a meagre salary, so he cooked his own meals and shared it with Ratan, an orphaned girl of twelve or thirteen, who in turn did housework for him. The postmaster was the only one who showed some concern for her. He also taught her the alphabet. He spent his time teaching her
the alphabet and talking to her about his family. Rattan naturally took him as her refuge. The rainy season came and due to the humid climate many people got fever. The postmaster became bed-ridden with fever. Ratan, took care of him day and night and made him healthy. The young girl Ratan was no longer a young girl. In a moment she assumed the role of a mother. She called a doctor, gave him his medicine on time, remained awake all night long by his side, cooked his convalescent meals and asked a hundred times, “Dadababu, are you feeling a little better now?” (Galpaguchha 48)[2]

The post master takes all this devotion for granted and as soon as he is able to leave the bed, resigned his post and made preparations to leave Calcutta. When Ratan begs him to take her with him, he laughs. But Ratan felt a great pain in her heart. When he was about to leave, he offered some money to her but she refused to get it. Tears welled in her eyes and she ran away from the station. The post master took it philosophically. “There are many separation and many deaths in life. …..Who belongs to whom in this world?”(The Postmaster -Selections from Galpaguchha 50)[2]. Ratan wandered around the post office, hoping that he might come back.

Rabindranath Tagore has described the instant transition of a girl into a woman and her tragic life beautifully with deep sympathy. Tagore’s young girl characters are all daughters of Mother Nature. All their lives like Ratan in The Postmaster, Subha in Subha and Mrinmayi in The Conclusion, are all similar. They all begin and end with sadness; the plot unfolds the depiction of sadness which makes the reader feel pathos for those characters. Readers feel pity for Ratan when the post master leaves her behind. Readers feel pity for her because they understand that what Ratan wants is not money but love. The picture of sobbing and Ratan is powerful that it moves the reader because it leaves some permanent marks on our mind.

Both physical and psychological violence, against women in Bengali society was found everywhere. This violence against women was sometimes obvious in the society and sometimes insidious and invisible. But the worst part was that, in due course of time the society as a whole, even the women, seemed to have got used to this slow poisoning without realising the effect it had on them. There was very little protest against it and so the poison had gradually settled in the society. Tagore through his stories tells the world that Indian women are highly sacrificing, loving, obedient, religious and kind. They worship their husbands and live for their children.
The story “The Wife’s Letter,” as the title suggests is in the form of a letter. The epistolary short story narrates the hardships the wives face in their husbands’ houses—not only from the husbands but from in-laws as well. In this story the protagonist Mrinal represents the ‘New Woman’ who challenges the feudal society and seeks to make decisions about her own life. Another character Mrinal’s sister-in-law represents the set of women who were socially oppressed and had got used to it. They never tried to liberate.

The narrator, Mrinal writes this letter from Puri to her husband at Calcutta. Names of Tagore’s characters have meanings and they reveal their character. ‘Mrinal’ in Bengali means the stem of a lotus. The letter starts with the phrase “My submission at your lotus feet.” “Mrinal has been married to her husband and it has been fifteen years. This is her first letter to him, because she had not been away from him before. She had come to Puri on a pilgrimage to the seat of Lord Jagannath. Through the letter she reminds her husband of their fifteen years of life together. She is the second daughter-in-law of his father’s house. She has taken courage to write this letter. She writes this letter not as a daughter-in-law of his family but as an individual. Mrinal reached Puri. She decided that she would never return to her house at number 27, Makhan Baral Lane in Calcutta. Pouring anger against a system that allowed women to be neglected, abused and abandoned, Mrinal decided that she will not return to a home that denied her dignity and intellectual space.

The first thing that would strike everyone about the story is that it is one of those rare ones where a male writer writes in a female voice and gets it so absolutely right. Mrinal’s sister-in-law is described by Tagore as an epitome of an ideal Hindu wife. To quote Tagore’s lines: “She lacked the courage to show her love openly, from the heart, to her orphaned sister. She is an obedient wife (The Wife’s letter - Selections From Galpaguchchha)[3].” These socially oppressed women never protest against the society. They did their work however painful their suffering maybe. All these types of women are innocent victims.

Mrinal is a contrary to her sister-in-law’s character. Through this story she emerges as the ‘New Woman’ of the society. Tagore has artistically used the epistolary form to enter the mind, voice and experience of Mrinal, who places her critical comments at the ‘lotus feet’ of her husband. Though the title pronounces the ‘wife’ as its central emphasis, the story follows a different narration. The ‘wife’ in the story finds her own voice. Mrinal speaks about the difficulties that she has undergone. She tries to transcend from the sufferings by crossing the limits that patriarchy set before women. Her thirst for freedom is intensified by the presence
of two suppressed female figures: her sister-in-law and Bindu. Mrinal’s sister-in-law character acts as a contrast to Mrinal. This character also aggravates Mrinal’s quest for freedom. But the initial spark in Mrinal’s heart is caused by Bindu, the helpless orphan, whom she endeavours to protect and preserve.

Though as readers we condemn Bindu’s suicide, Mrinal interprets it as an act of protest against the feudal society, one which enables the girl to transcend from her imprisonment. Mrinal’s sarcasm towards the society is seen in her comment about Bindu’s self-immolation: “But one should reflect why this play-acting takes its toll only of the saris of Bengali women, not of the dhotis of brave Bengali gentlemen (Portraits of Women: Selected Short Stories 15).” In the short story ‘Punishment’ the protagonist Chandora decides that death would be better than living with such a husband. Through death she got liberated from the feudal society. Bindu and Chandora found their freedom through death whereas Mrinal found her freedom by walking out of the house and understanding her importance as an individual in the universe. Finally, Mrinal justifies her position in the society other than being a wife and daughter-in-law. The story concludes with Mrinal’s resolution to take a new journey.

The ‘New Woman’ concept emerged in the late nineteenth century and had a profound influence on feminism in twentieth century. Women of early twentieth century not only led their lives as housewives but they began to take part in various other fields. The New Woman pushed the limits set by the male dominated society. Henrik Ibsen’s play A Doll’s House protagonist Nora is a New Woman. She leaves her home; leaving her husband and her children behind she went to discover herself. Many critics say that Tagore got influenced by the concept of ‘New Woman’ in Europe and attempted to introduce it in Indian literature. However Ibsen’s Nora and Tagore’s Mrinal represent the New Woman. Following Tagore many Indian writers followed him and created many New Women through their works.

Conclusion

A common tendency among mankind is that either they raise woman to a divine status or they treat them as a subject to neglect. The Indian woman has experienced both the states. As Mahadevi Varma says, she has been treated as a temple deity and also made a prisoner in the darkest corner of her home. Many centuries back during vedic ages, women had a voice of their own. If we review women from great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharatha, they all had independent personalities and a strong sense of duty. Though Rama told Sita not to
come with him to the forest exile Sita did not blindly followed his words. Instead she took her own decision to join Rama throughout his journey.

Women of that age were all companions to men not a mere shadow. It is difficult to trace when this concept of being a mere shadow to men came into existence. This idea of being a shadow to men got deeply rooted in the society in such a way that Indian women totally forgot the fact that other than being a wife, a mother, a daughter they also have a role to play as a part of the society, as a part of the universe.

Tagore was fully aware of the role of women in society. Almost all his female characters are in plotted in traditional family surroundings, but they are all very strong in their own way. His idea about women’s liberation is far ahead of his time. So, many consider his portrayal of women as an important contribution to the society. His stories instilled fire in the minds of the readers. Plots depicted in fictional writings are inspired from reality. Though most of Tagore’s stories were tragic, it does not mean that he is a pessimistic person. He was highly optimistic.

Tagore got inspired by the ‘new woman’ of Ibsen and introduced it to Indian society through literature. He made the then dormant women society to realise their role as women in the universe. Following Tagore many writers created their own ‘new woman’ like R K Narayan’s Savitri in ‘The Dark Room, Ambai’s Chenthiru in ‘The Forest’.

Literature plays an important role in the establishment and growth of the society. It acts as the mirror to the society. Tagore has clearly portrayed the plight of women that prevailed in the Bengali society. Though he is a male writer he has written his works in such a way that when men read they understood how they have to change their behaviour and their ideas about women. His stories also make women realise their true power and their importance as an individual. Through his portrayal of women with regard to family and love he shows the sacrificing nature of Indian women and how they are bound to family. He condemns the social injustices in his portrayal of the oppressed women and also gives a vivid picture of the mentality of the men. Through his ‘new woman’ he shows how women become aware of their role in the society, their talents and their individual personality. Through Tagore’s short stories one can see the evolution of the woman, who emancipates from the evils of the society.
WORK CITED:


