



Women Empowerment in Novels of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract: *Women empowerment as a philosophy of life seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep seated cause of women's oppression. They are to be found, for example, in the legal system, such as unequal labor, marriage and divorce laws. More pervasive are the wide spread attitude about women's proper and natural duties. Empowerment of women originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. Tagore is a renowned feminist of his time. Each and every novel of Tagore reveals his great concern for women. He is deeply moved to see the pathetic condition of women in the society. Tagore is a true feminist. Through his novels he projects the dishonor, shame, decline of glory and self-respect, which a man dominated society has inflicted upon women. Tagore wants a world for women where they would be considered equal to men. Women are entitled to have the same respect and honour which a man enjoys. They should be given freedom of all types- financial, social and intellectual. There should be no discrimination between men and women. In fact God has not created any discrimination, this is all man made. Tagore was far ahead of his times.*

Key Words: Women, Empowerment, Divorce, Social, God.

WHAT IS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT-

Women empowerment as a philosophy of life seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep seated cause of women's oppression. They are to be found, for example, in the legal system, such as unequal labor, marriage and divorce laws. More pervasive are the wide spread attitude about women's proper and natural duties. Feminism is a 'rising of the consciousnesses of an entire culture. From childhood on, beliefs and attitudes help perpetuate women's inferior status. Some of these are unequal pay for equal work and the traditional division of labor with in the family. Other attitudes are more subtle for example, hoping that a couple's child will be a boy, thinking of a wife's salary as meant to buy extras rather than a support the family. Even the pronoun structure of the English language suggests that women are different, that they are other not fitting the paradigm of man. Simon de Beauvoir has developed this concept of other in her book *The Second Sex*. Feminism a philosophy of reform

envisages profound changes in traditional social structures as a family in the economic role and power of women, and finally in fundamental attitudes and personal relationship, leading to a just social order.

Empowerment of women originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. It attempts to analyze the reason for the dimensions of women's oppression, and to achieve women's liberation. Charlotte Bunch has pointed out that feminism is not about adding to women's rights, but about transforming society so that feminism may be called transformational politics. Because everything affects women, every issue is women's issue and there is a feminist perspective on every issue.

Women Empowerment in Novels of Rabindranath Tagore - Tagore has given a special place to women in his novels. Most of his novels are women centralized. Pathetic story of women's life, their pains, and poignance, their place in society and their sacrifices are drawn with pen soaked in tears



by Tagore.

The heroines of Tagore's novels are not from any dreamland or unreal world. They are living creatures of this real world. His heroines are very much similar to the ladies we see around us. They are not extra ordinary women. In appearance, features, habits and nature they are just like the ladies around us. Their life is also too simple. The only difference is that Tagore has tried to bring forth their miseries and pains. He wants to present through his novels how women are exploited and crushed in this male-dominated society. Through his novels Tagore has tried to show, this man dominating society, to empower women by giving value to their educational, social, financial and individual need.

In this paper an attempt is made to make a study of female characters of Tagore's novels from the view point of 'Tagore's Concept of Women Empowerment'.

A patriarchal society is not liberal in conceding its women segment any right and so women's dignity is a glorious exception in a conservative patriarchal set-up. Any attempt at women's progress or giving equal rights to woman shakes the society to its foundation. Tagore's epoch-making short story Steer Patra (The wife's letter) invited protest letters from the conservative segment of the public. This progressive and feminist outlook of Tagore espousing women's emancipation was not only the result of his personal thinking, it imbibed also the progressive thinking of the west. Niharajan Ray comments-

"It can not be said that in our society the women had no value, as daughter, wife, sister and mother. The woman claimed a romantic outlook and hence love and respect, but outside the family relation the woman had no value as woman; not only in our country but in any country of the world. The value of woman is a comparatively recent discovery. This discovery was first made in Europe and other Western countries at the beginning of 19th century, but this discovery made its impact in the third and fourth decades of that century and its full-fledged

expression was observed after the first world war. 'Steer Patra' was the first indication of the impact of that wave on our calm unruffled shores".

Tagore is a renowned feminist of his time. Each and every novel of Tagore reveals his great concern for women. He is deeply moved to see the pathetic condition of women in the society. In fact it is wrong to call Tagore only a great or renowned feminist, he is indeed a daring feminist of his time. Because the injustice, the agony, the sarcastic tone of society over women's misfortune and the mental and physical torture which women have been subjected to in this man governed society and many other complexities of women's life are boldly executed by Tagore in his novels. In the times of Tagore it was considered almost a crime to talk about the emotional desires, sexual requirement, social and educational freedom of women. In such an orthodox span of time Tagore dared not only to write publicly about this inhumanistic attitude towards women but he also gave the best possible solution to them.

Tagore's feminism takes different shapes in his different novels. His famous novel Home and the World is remarkable in the context of his feminist outlook. In this novel through the character of Bimala he has shown the changes that could occur in the persona of a custom tied traditional woman, when she breaks the invisible shackles of traditions and crosses the threshold of the house to breathe independently in the open air.

Through the modern and educative ideas of Nikhil. Tagore has presented his own perception about glorifying the destiny of women through imparting them education and independence.

Bimala is a traditional Indian woman of a middle class family. She gets married into a Raja's house at a very tender age. The traditional Indianess of her mother casts an invanishable impact on her personality. Just like her mother she also takes the dust of her husband's feet on her forehead-

"I would cautiously and silently get up and take the dust of my husband's feet without waking him".



The ill-custom of child-marriage as being depicted in the novel shows the injustice towards women. At the age in which a girl is supposed to devote her time to studies and games, they are thrown into the cage in the name of marriage. And their innocent childhood is crushed under the heavy load of household responsibilities. This concern for women is highlighted by Tagore through child-marriage of Bimala. Being deprived of education, women start to follow silly meaningless customs blindly without thinking that they are losing their self-dependence. Through the instructive and educative modern outlook of Nikhil, Tagore tries to break this women exploiting monopoly and presents a new nourishing approach for women. In fact Nikhil becomes the mouthpiece of Tagore's own ideology. Bimala herself realizes the equalism in the ideas of her husband-

"My husband used to say that man and wife are equal in love because of their equal claim on each other".

Through the words of Bimala Tagore has tried to portray the conservative thinking of the people of his time. Woman then was regarded a mere housekeeper. She could not be envisioned anything more than a wife, mother or daughter. Her work field is limited to the four walls of the house. In the name of respectability and honor, men considered indecent on her part to cross that 'Lakshmanrekha'. Tagore an intellectual thinker as he was, couldn't agree to this idea. His mind rebelled against this that was nothing but slavery.

Tagore is a true feminist. Through his novels he projects the dishonor, shame, decline of glory and self-respect, which a man dominated society has inflicted upon women. Bimala's child-marriage, her negligence of education, interest in self confinement within the four-walls of the house and the meaningless and burdensome life being driven by Nikhil's widow sister, shows that Tagore has very minutely observed the hidden pains of women and being deeply moved by them, he has given his voice to the mute sufferings of these unhappy women.

Bimala herself confirms-

"I have read in books that we are called 'caged birds'. I can not speak for others, but I had so much in this cage of mine that there was not room for it in the universe at least that is what I then felt".

Tagore wants a world for women where they would be considered equal to men. Women are entitled to have the same respect and honour which a man enjoys. They should be given freedom of all types- financial, social and intellectual. There should be no discrimination between men and women. In fact God has not created any discrimination, this is all man made. Tagore was far ahead of his times. He raised his voice in most audible tone against the injustice to help out women. The best example of it can be found in the novel where Nikhil advocates for independence of women. Devotion and surrender- the womanly virtues highly proclaimed by society were discarded by Tagore. He asked for equal status for women. He imagined a state where women should be capable of thinking on her own. She is a living creature not a drawing room doll. As Nikhil confesses-

"They are coward who claim absolute devotion from their wives as their right, that is humiliation for both".

Another novel of Tagore Chaturanga again portrays Tagore's protest and disagreement for unfair rules and traditions of society for women. In this novel Tagore has projected the ill effects of the tradition of not allowing the widows for re-marriage so that they can make a new beginning of their deserted and desolate life.

In Tagore's time remarriage of widows was considered a crime or better to say a sin. Moreover widows were forcefully convinced to lead a particular inhumanistic life style which was no better than death itself. Widows were not allowed to put on colourful and fancy dresses, celebrating festivals, enjoying delicious food, sleeping on bed or mattresses and mixing with society or community. They were held responsible for the misfortune which befalls on their husband. Their dignity, self-respect



and happiness were crushed mercilessly under the cruel feet of meaningless customs and traditions.

The heroine of the novel 'Damini' is a rebel. She is a young widow extremely beautiful and full of life and love. She wants to have a full fun of her married life. Her liveliness is expressed thus-

"Damini means lightning and Damini was like the lightning in thunderous monsoon clouds. Her outward form brimmed with youthful vitality; and in her soul danced a restless flame".

But unfortunately her desire for love and happy conjugal life remains unfulfilled because very soon she becomes a widow and after this the customs and traditions she is forced to follow turned her into a rebel. She becomes victim of the tyranny of devotion.

After the death of her husband she is sent to the Lilanandaswami's ashram. There she is forced to lead a devotional life. But she openly rejects all the hollow traditions which are forcefully imposed on her just because she is widow. Neither she dresses herself as a widow nor there is any sign in her of the enlightened state of mind and body.

"Damini didn't dress like a widow; then, she would pointedly ignore the guru's instructions; and finally she showed no hint of the radiance of ascetic purity that lights up body and soul through being close to such a great man. Everybody voiced the same opinion, 'some creature indeed! We have seen a lot, but such a woman never!'"

This shows Damini's absolute revolt against the tyranny of this man dominated society. Through Damini Tagore presents his own objection against these rotten traditions and customs which snatches away the freedom of a woman.

Through this novel Tagore harshly bolted on the age long tradition of objecting re-marriage of widows by bringing marriage between Sribilas and Damini. Besides this the novel also inspires women to raise their voices against the wrong done to them. Thus Chaturanga is a landmark in feminist thinking of Tagore.

Ela is the heroine and central character of

Tagore's novel, Four Chapters. She is an ordinary young girl, with good looking face and features. As the story develops in the background of revolutionary movement of Bengal, Ela's life is also coloured with the violent colour of this movement.

She is braver than her age. At the shrine of motherland she has sacrificed her everything, but even than Indranath desires more from her. Bewildered out in a fit of emotional outburst, she cries out -

"It's with these big words that you keep us delude. You claim for more than we have in us to give."

Ela is both emotional and firm. At one hand being a freedom fighter she is very strict and resolve. She takes her decisions firmly.

She has declared it many a times that her life owes to her country only. Just for her country, she has left everything. Atin tries a lot to win her love but every time she is firm and determined in her decision and says -

"I had no choice Ontu. I had already sworn to devote myself to my country, not to keep any thing for myself alone, my betrothal was to my country."

The attitude with which she has embraced her death is unique. It is this boldness and firmness that makes her stand apart from the other heroines of Tagore.

When she comes to know that Atindra, her lover, is assigned to kill her she, instead of being nervous or sad, becomes happier than ever. In fact this death, granted by her own lover's hand is no less than a reward and resolution of the complexities of her life. That is why she asks Atin to kill her without giving her any kind of intoxication. This bold and brave outlay of death makes Ela stand among the bravest heroines of Tagore. This bold and daring out-look of death differentiates Ela from the rest of Tagore's heroines. She is unparalleled and unbeatable at last.

"Let the last bit of my consciousness be for you. It is chloroform that you have? Throw it away. I am not a coward let me die, awake, in your arms."



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