

TOWERING PERSONALITIES OF WOMENHOOD

A READING OF TAGORE'S HEROINE IN SHORT STORY

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Abstract:

For Rabindranath Tagore the treatment of women and their position in society was of serious concern. He understood women in all their joy and sorrow, hope and despair, their yearnings and their dreams. He tells the world that Indian women are highly sacrificing, loving, obedient, meek, religious and kind. They adore their husbands, love their children deeply, and give due reverence and consideration to their in-laws. Women in Tagore's days were highly exploited by the feudal society. . There is irony in the name 'Subha'. Subha, shortened form of Subhashini means one who speaks well. But Subha of the story is destined by fate to be a mute speaker.

Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore, the only Indian to get Nobel Prize for Literature, is mainly acclaimed as a poet. But his short stories are world renowned and they are as brilliant and competent as his poetry. He is compared by critics to Chekhov. Tagore has written nearly one hundred short stories.

The treatment of women and their position in society was of serious concern to Rabindranath Tagore. 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, their forbearance, their self-sacrifice and gentleness. It pained him to see such colossal waste of so much human treasure. Indian woman's rare quality of courage, piety, obedience, love and devotion are the themes of many of Tagore's stories. Tagore had the unique natural genius to read women's minds and he analysed their strange structure, through his stories. Even in cruel actions and base thoughts, Tagore brings out noble feelings. He tells the world that Indian women are highly sacrificing, loving, obedient, meek, religious and kind. They adore their husbands, love their children deeply, and give due reverence and consideration to their in-laws.

Women in Tagore's days were highly exploited by the feudal society. The out-dated, cruel, feudal customs enhanced the miseries and tortures of women. Through his stories Tagore pointed out those injustices. Tagore was never influenced by patriarchal views. That is why he depicted his heroines as more powerful and brighter than the spineless men. Tagore not only reveals the spirituality of his heroines but also shows their keen practical sense and determination. Tagore's stories confirm the fact that he believed in the progress of women and in their emancipation from feudal bondage. He also believed that, given equal rights and opportunities, they might occupy their rightful place in society side by side with men. Taking these views into consideration one can call Tagore a feminist writer.

When one analyses the Bengali women's fate, as depicted in Tagore's stories, he/she can find two kinds of intellectuals in Bengal society who played central roles in the stories. The first category of intelligentsia wanted to preserve feudal customs for their personal gains. They amassed wealth by exploiting the helpless poor. Some of them even held important positions like judge. The second category did not involve directly in the exploitation of women, but their passive attitude did not lessen the burden of Bengali women.

Tagore brought out the pathos of woman caused by various situations in the house. Women had to face several problems in their houses. Nirmalkumar Sidhanta opines: In a few stories we have seen the problems of the wife in a joint family, the conflict of loyalties between what is due to her husband and what she must do for her parent's family. But the conflict becomes more acute when her husband is perhaps a subordinate person, where she may see jealousy or ill will on all sides. Numerous new relationships grow up and she has to adjust herself to these without forgetting her old ties: the relations between the wife and her "husband's younger brother (who is an object of affection while the elder brother has to be treated with respect); those between the husband's and the wife's sisters, between the wives of two brothers, between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. If she is unfortunate she may have a co-wife; if she loses her husband she may become a little better than a maid servant tolerated by her 'in-laws'. If she has some responsibility to a brother she may find it difficult to reconcile that with what she owes to her husband's family. Tagore treated these problems and created examples of womanhood who remained immortal in the minds of the readers.

Story of Subhashini:

The close affinity between man and Nature is the theme of the story "Subha" or "The Dumb Girl." Subha was the youngest of the three daughters of Banikantha. Her elder sisters had been married. Subha [Subhashini] was a dumb girl. She was a silent weight upon the heart of her parents. She, with her parents, lived in a small village called Chandipur. The little girl, when her work was done, crept quietly to the banks of the nearby river. She had realised from her earliest childhood that God had sent her like a curse to her father's house, so she kept away from ordinary people and tried to live in the company of nature. The sounds of nature

joined with the trembling of her heart. “They became one great wave of sound which beat upon her restless soul. They were her real language, in which she talked with Nature” .Her only companions in the household were the two cows whom she loved, fondled and cared very much. Whenever she heard any words that hurt her, she would come to these dumb friends for consolation. Subha had also a comrade among the higher animals. He was the youngest boy of the Gosains, Pratap by name. He was a lazy fellow. His main ambition was to catch fish.

Subha was growing. The thought of her marriage filled her parents with anxious care. Her father decided that they should shift to Calcutta. It was heart-rending for her to leave the stream, the cows, the Nature and her friend, Pratap. Subha went out of her room and threw herself down on the grass beside the river. And throwing her arms about the Earth, her strong, silent mother, she requested her not to let her leave her.

Subha’s marriage was fixed by her parents. Her defect was not disclosed, to the bridegroom’s party. Her displeasure and tears made no negative effect on the proposer or her parents. The marriage took place on a day, which promised to bring good luck. The husband’s work lay in the West, and shortly after the marriage he took her there. In less than ten days everyone in the locality knew that the girl was dumb. How her heart started to sob, only the Searcher of Hearts could hear. That marriage supplied Subha with everlasting miseries. She lost Nature but did not gain man. The tragedy of her life is made clear in a few short sentences and the reader is left to think over human suffering which cannot be explained or understood. One can guess what happened to Subha when her dumbness was disclosed. In the words of Srinivasalyengar, she was soon abandoned by her husband for another, as casually as one exchanges one pencil for another; but has not the dumb girl – even she – feelings of her own? Just as the great Spanish painters’ poured love and understanding into their pictures of the dwarfs maintained by royalty and aristocracy for their amusement, Rabindranath too clothes the nakedness of his castaways and runaways with his limitless compassion and love.

There is something really pathetic in this dumb agony of the human heart that is denied all possibility of self-expression. It is a pity that a sweet and lovable nature [Subha] is denied the

comfort and solace of pouring out its sorrows into sympathetic ears and receiving words of love, consolation and encouragement from loving lips. Tagore has expressed this pathetic situation with a poetic insight that is peculiarly his own. Sisirkumar Ghose is of view that “Subha has a rare Lucy-like rapport with Nature”. The close affinity between man and nature is wonderfully depicted in this story. The Nature, the stream, the cows are major characters here. A dumb girl sharing her joys, sorrows and other emotions with the dumb beasts is a touching sight. Here a human being becomes one with the nature and one with the animals. One does not find any difference between the dumb cows and dumb Subha and dumb Nature. The pity is that the physical deformities cast one out of the society. Isolated, one then makes company with Nature and animals. How heart-rending it is to Subha to leave her cows, the stream and the Nature! Stronger is her relation to animals and Nature than to human beings. The reason is obvious. Nature is her mother. She was plucked away from her mother when the family shifted to Calcutta. Her tragedy started there. One is simply wonder-struck at Tagore’s insight into human minds. There is irony in the name ‘Subha’. Subha, shortened form of Subhashini means one who speaks well. But Subha of the story is destined by fate to be a mute speaker.

Conclusion:

Through this story Rabindranath Tagore wanted to say that in the ancient time women did not have a say in their lives and all their decisions were taken by their parents. After marriage generally women

Bibliography:

“Towering Personalities of Womenhood; A reading of Tagore’s heroine in short stories” by Rabindranath Tagore, published in 1892.

Bio:

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