

## Emancipation of Women in Tagore's *The Wife's Letter*

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### ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's fictional oeuvre, especially the collection of his short stories, paints a vivid picture of the emancipation of women in the nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. His writings not only voice the pathos and sufferings of the female protagonists but also act as an interface to liberate them from the oppressive social bondage. His women characters' struggle to break the barriers of patriarchal social conventions is well represented in his short stories. His women characters are intelligent, educated, and at par equal to their male counterparts. They break the conventional set of rules laid by the society and find a way to emancipate from social restrictions. Hence, this paper attempts to explore and analyse, from a feminist perspective, Tagore's contribution to the liberation of women with reference to his women characters in his short story, *The Wife's Letter*.

### KEYWORDS

Emancipation; liberate; predicament; feminist

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was born in Calcutta and was the youngest of Debendranath Tagore and Sarada Devi's fourteen children. He was born into a wealthy Brahmin family and inherited the culture of liberated humanist ideals of Brahmo Samaj. At the age of seventeen, he was sent to England by his father to study law. While in England, Tagore was not enthused to pursue a career in law and returned to India to pursue a career of his own choice. He pursued his career as a writer and poet and was honoured with Nobel Prize for Literature in the year 1913.

In the nineteenth-century colonial Bengal, various patriarchal ideologies governing the lives of women were gradually challenged by many social reforms

volunteered by Raja Rammohan Ray and Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar. They raised their voices against widow immolation and sanctioning of widow marriage. (Zafar 2014). Moreover, "a literary revolution" pioneered by Bankimchandra and a "nationalist movement against the colonial rule" during this era impacted his writings to a large extent (Ray 2010). Tagore's contemporary scenario of nineteenth-century colonial Bengal greatly influenced his writings by evoking empathy and social consciousness not only towards uprooting social evils but especially towards women emancipation. Be it the novels/short stories he has written or the poems/plays he has created, or the artworks he has sketched, a vivid picture of the women related social

issues were put forth before the inhabitants of Young Bengal. His writings not only voice the pathos and sufferings of the female protagonists but also act as an interface to liberate them from the oppressive social bondage. His portrayal of female characters and their predicaments to break the patriarchal social conventions is well represented through his short stories. As rightly asserted, Tagore's representation of female characters in his short stories depicts three facets of women's lives, "i.) the romance between men and women, ii) social oppression of women ...iii) the birth of the – new woman- that is, a woman who challenges convention and seeks to make decisions about her own life". (Ray 69)

This paper attempts to explore and analyze Tagore's contribution to liberate his female characters in one of his selected short stories—*The Wife's Letter* from a feminist perspective. His female characters are intelligent, educated, and at par equal to their male counterparts. They break the conventional set of rules laid by the society and find a way to emancipate from social restrictions.

"The Wife's Letter" is a story written by Tagore in an epistle form. Mrinal, the protagonist, has written a letter to her husband by addressing him as "auspicious lotus-feet" (Tagore 1). She calls Husband as auspicious lotus feet as it refers a general cultural practice in Bengal that "a wife in Bengal cannot utter her husband's name as this is both impolite and unlucky" (Lal 2010). She finds the courage to write a letter to her husband and narrates a story of her journey from childhood to marriage and her sufferings first as a daughter then as a wife. She claims that she is not writing the letter as a Mejo-Bou of the family but as Mrinal herself. She says:

I am Mejo-Bou, the second bride in your joint family. Today, fifteen years later, standing at the edge of the ocean,

I understand that I also have other relationships, with the world and the World-keeper. So I find the courage to write this letter. This is not the letter from your family's Mejo-Bou. Not from the second wife. (Tagore 1)

She says that since birth she has been a victim of the patriarchal society and being oppressed by the social norms of the then prevailing patriarchal society. Referring to one such incident, she says that once during her childhood days she and her brother both had suffered from typhoid fever. Unable to cope, her brother died and her parents and neighbours said that "Mrinal is a girl, that's why she lived. If she'd been a boy, she couldn't have been saved. Jom-Raj is wise in his deadly robbery: he only takes things of value" (Tagore 1).

Narrating some of her experiences, Mrinal voices out the patriarchal oppressions she faced as a 'Mejo-Bou' in her in-law's house. She mentioned how her in-laws raised a question about her parental lineage when she used to take care of cattle in the cowshed, "they say—all cowherds" (Tagore 2). Unearthing the next episode of her life, giving birth to her daughter, she says "I had the grief of becoming a mother, but not the freedom" (Tagore 2). She felt isolated and grieved when they confined her to a small room after she gave birth to a baby girl, who dies at birth. Even the English doctor who's taking care of Mrinal was surprised by entering that dark and dingy room. Further, she questions her husband, if this is the general practice of their family then it is better to let women suffer and neglect than to show love and affection to them which in turn worsen their sufferings.

Mrinal is not only beautiful but also intelligent and loves to write poems secretly which she considers the only window to her freedom, where she can find her true self. But her husband never recognizes that Mrinal writes a poem. Expressing her mental agony

she says that in all these fifteen years no one has ever cared about her true self, no one knew that she is a poet. She tells her husband that "I had beauty, it didn't take you long to forget. But you were reminded, every step of the way, that I also had intelligence" (Tagore 2). Through this particular incident, Tagore voices his genuine concern about women's freedom of expression. He tries to portray that during that particular contemporary period it was unacceptable for a woman to freely express herself in the boundaries of patriarchal spaces. He firmly believes that women can only be emancipated if we provide education to them. They need to express themselves freely and thus think beyond the boundaries of patriarchal spaces.

Unable to cope with the mental agony resulted from the confines of patriarchal oppression, Mrinal finds peace and harmony in mentoring the hapless orphan, Bindu, her elder sister –in-law's sister. She tries to protect and preserve Bindu. Both developed a bond of eternal love and friendship. Mrinal admits that Bindu's love and affection for her reminds her true self, she says "I used to be angry at her, but through her love, I saw a side of myself that I'd never seen before. It was my true self, my free self" (Tagore 5). Mrinal's in-laws arranged for Bindu's wedding and they want Bindu to leave their household as early as possible. They have fixed the wedding in a hurry and have arranged all the rituals at groom's place. Mrinal wanted the wedding to be conducted at their own house but all opposed to her decision by saying that it was

an ancestral custom to conduct a wedding at groom's place. Mrinal's in-laws have arranged Bindu's wedding to a mentally challenged person and on the very next day of her wedding, she comes back to Mrinal for protection. However, Mrinal failed to rescue and protect Bindu. She is oppressed by the patriarchal norms being put forth by husband and in-laws. Finally, Bindu was sent to her husband's house. Unable to cope with her mentally-challenged husband, Bindu committed suicide, she sets fire to her clothes and killed herself. This particular episode of Bindu's immolation, left Mrinal devastated. She blamed herself for Bindu's death, that it was her fault that she couldn't save and protect Bindu from the clutches of patriarchal societal norms. Thus, she takes a stern step and left her husband's place to seek solace in Puri. At the end of the letter, she says, "Removed from the shelter of your feet" (Tagore 12).

### **Conclusion**

Tagore's empathetic representation of Mrinal's helplessness in Bindu's death and her stern step of determination to leave her husband's house makes us feel empathetic towards the status of contemporary women of that period. In this present short story, Tagore impersonates his voice through the character of Mrinal and raises some of the important questions by challenging the societal norms of that period. "The Wife's Letter" acknowledges personal space and voice of freedom for the contemporary women.

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