

## **Recurrent Death Motif and the Female Context in Select Short Stories of Tagore**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Tagore household in the wake of the Bengal Renaissance had emerged to be one of the centres of women's emancipation. However, Tagore not only created emancipated women characters like Kalyani of "Aparichita" (The Woman Unknown) or Mrinal of "Streer Patra" (A Wife's Letter) but also depicted the stark reality of the marginalised women of those times. The act that would probably qualify as 'abuse' in today's times, was rampant. Aspects of mental and physical torture are actually still prevalent. Therefore, it becomes all the more relevant to understand the plots of select short stories of Tagore which reveal women in extreme situations in the household. They were sort of pushed towards the ultimate step of death. Death in these circumstances can also be looked at as a symbol of liberation and freedom from the shackles of turmoiled domesticity and life. In this light, the paper will discuss the short stories, "Haimanti", "Jibito o Mrito" (Living and the Dead), "Dena Paona" (Debits and Credits) and "Shashti" (Punishment).

### **KEYWORDS**

oppression; ostracised women; liberation in death.

The epithet, "myriad-minded" which Coleridge applied to Shakespeare seems to be equally applicable to Rabindranath Tagore whose long life of 80 years was marked by a ceaseless and torrential flow of creativity manifested in the richness and variety of all kinds of art and literary forms—dance, drama, music, painting, and original organizational activities. (Chatterjee 146)

Tagore, the master storyteller hails from one of the most celebrated families in Bengal, who not only ushered a renaissance in Bengal but also pioneered and championed against ill practices in the society. The women of the Tagore

household were particularly way ahead of their times. They were sent to school and college and were encouraged to form their opinions, something extraordinary in those times. Tagore's elder sisters Saudamini Devi and Swarnakumari Devi, sisters-in-law Jnanadanandini Devi and Kadambari Devi, nieces Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Hiranmoyee Devi, Sudakshina Devi, Pratibha Devi, Pragnasundari Devi and Sunayani Devi, and daughter-in-law Pratima Devi, not only wrote extensively but were also interested in arts. Some of them engaged in philanthropic work, while others were interested in the politics of the day. For instance, Swarnakumari Devi

...only participated in political sessions and meetings but also contributed to nationalistic activities. She was not only an editor, a gifted writer, and a song composer but also a social worker. Her organisation Sakhi Samiti (A Group of Friends) worked for the upliftment of widows and orphans. This was something which can be termed as an NGO in today's times, which was path-breaking work in that era. (Bhaduri 219-220)

Tagore, a visionary for his times is known for creating empowered women characters. However, he also never failed to mirror the turmoiled truths of his times. Pratima Devi his daughter-in-law was a widow before her marriage to Tagore's son Rathindranath Tagore. Widow remarriage as a step towards reformation began at his home. Long stretches of time spent in rural Bengal enabled him to understand and feel the pain of the downtrodden women. Women who were sufferers of ruthless realities often reveal the oppression that went on. The hypocrisies in the institution of marriage, the suppression of women, who were from deprived economic backgrounds and insensitive behaviour from the in-laws often lead to the recurrent motif of death. Tagore deals with the dreary lifelessness of women after they are married. Most of these characters are docile, sacrificial in nature, and are caught in the web of domesticity. Mother-in-law and in-laws in general are the perpetrators of patriarchy and are somewhat symbolic of misogyny depicted in the stories. Tagore, often mockingly raises the issue of women being the enemy of themselves and points out that this could be a deep-rooted issue in the patriarchal society which adds up to the miseries of women. The character of the mother-in-law in almost all the stories fails to act differently as they had faced the wrath of patriarchy and are somehow

conditioned to believe that it is the norm to continue this chain process of abuse and torture of the daughter-in-law.

"Haimanti" is about a woman who is sensitive and free-spirited for which she has to pay a hard deal by surrendering her life. Her mother died when she was still a child and her father nurtured her in his own way. She was an avid reader and spoke her mind which is quite contradictory to the women's interests in those times. She was married at the age of seventeen. Haimanti is loved by her husband as her attributes are quite feminine in nature. Her father was liberal for those times and requested the husband to bring Haimanti books and even paid the son-in-law some amount. Her in-laws mocked her for her age (she was seventeen years old, and considered to be late in marriage in those times). Her mother-in-law tried to hide her age from her relatives, but Haimanti was not ashamed to accept she was seventeen. Her mother-in-law felt offended by this defiance and complained to the father-in-law who further scolded Haimanti for this behaviour. The letters that she wrote to her father were scrutinised and read without her consent before being sent by her husband's family. They were even eyeing her father's property. She never complained about any of the ill-treatment and torture she experienced. Gradually she fell ill as she was not accustomed to the hot and humid climate of Calcutta. She spent all her life in the mountains with her father. To add to the misery, the constant air of mockery and insult in the home was not conducive to her mental health and it took a toll on her. Apu, the husband was often verbally thrashed for speaking up for his wife. The doctor who initiated this alliance was a common friend of both families and was shocked to see the fragile condition of Haimanti. Her father came running and even got another doctor for consultation. Haimanti's father was insulted for saying that he wanted to

take his daughter with him for some time and give her proper care. Haimanti's father-in-law humiliated her father and outright rejected his plea. Apu tried to convince his father and even declared that he is taking his wife for a change. To this, Apu's father insulted him as well for siding with Haimanti a little too much. She gradually succumbed to ill health and wrecking mental torture. Apu, shaken by this incident shockingly concludes by saying his mother wants him to re-marry.

"Jibito o Mrito" (Living and the Dead) is a story about Kadambini, who is a widow and probably has no one to call her own on both sides of the family. She stayed with her husband's brother's family and took good care of the child as the mother was ill right after pregnancy. One fine day, she fell unconscious and people felt she passed away. The people who were assigned to perform the funeral rites suddenly after some time found that Kadambini was not on the pyre. This situation made them feel all the more scared and they thought of lying to the villagers saying that they completed all the rituals and customs. Kadambini on the other hand quite confused woke up in a dark gloomy place and started calling for people with her faint body. For some time she felt she was dead and started walking. She felt a sense of freedom and that thought that her soul is travelling. As dawn was approaching, an elderly man came to talk to her and asked her why is she roaming like this and if she is lost and needed help. Kadambini felt after a tumultuous night that she was alive and that people could see her. She went to her childhood friend's house thinking she would give her a space to stay. Gradually the trauma from the funeral ground and the pyre took over Kadambini and she felt a sense of restlessness and fear. Somehow this transcended to her friend Jogomaya as well. Jogomaya got annoyed day by day and eventually, her husband visited Kadambini's in-laws to find out that

Kadambini passed away and probably the lady who was staying with them is not Kadambini. Kadambini then left Jogomaya's home failing to convince them that she is the real Kadambini and ultimately went to her in-laws only to find that they believe she is a ghost. She hurt herself with a vessel and blood oozed out. She tried to prove to them that she is alive and therefore is bleeding. Later on, she jumped into the pond and committed suicide to prove she was not dead before. Widowhood has a stigma attached to it. Clearly, women of those times were financially dependent and everyone thought of the women not only as outcasts but also as an extra burden on the household. These circumstances set the stage for pushing her towards the inevitable, death!

Though there is a Dowry Provision Act of 1961... This social practice has managed to sustain itself even after various Acts, certainly leaving women susceptible to various forms of domestic violence and physical abuse. (Bhaduri 83)

Dowry in India is a social adversity that the nation is still facing challenges to resolve. "Dena Paona" revolves around the life of Nirupama who faces immense humiliation as her father, Ramshundar fails to give dowry on the day of marriage. Ramshundar was happy to arrange for this matrimonial alliance with the son Ray Bahudur thinking that his daughter would lead a prosperous life. A huge issue was created during the wedding when Ramshundar's money lender did not arrive. Ray Bahadur's family even tried to call off the marriage, however, the groom, Ray Bahadur's son, as an educated man firmly stood against his family and married Nirupama. Ramshundar was under heavy debt and was struggling to meet ends with added pressure to provide the dowry promised to Ray Bahadur. Nirupama on the other hand was tortured for her economic background. She was

constantly insulted as her father could not provide the remaining amount of dowry. She was time and again reminded that her place is with that of the domestic helpers. Shocking enough as it is, the domestic helpers also humiliate her. Ramshundar's visit to her daughter made it evident that Nirupama was under immense mental torture in that household. He decided to mortgage his house without the knowledge of his other children. On the other hand, Nirupama suffered in silence. Tagore, in this story, depicts the sacrificial silent nature of women. In the course of time, Nirupama succumbs to the ostracism and dies. Ray Bahadur, whose valour and finances were dwindling, did not miss a chance to sort of celebrate this death. He spends a hefty amount on her funeral rites despite his fading wealth. Towards the fag end of the story, the husband sends a letter to his family to send his wife as he has arranged for their abode in the city, not knowing that his wife has passed away. They respond that they have found another girl for him and this time they have kept the dowry as twenty thousand. The response reveals the insensitivity of the in-laws again, and can be summarised with eminent sociologist Ram Ahuja's words,

The most important sociological factor in the causation of dowry death is the offender's environmental stress or social tensions caused by factors endogenous and exogenous to his (husband) family, and the important psychological factor is the killer's authoritarian personality, dominant nature, and his personality maladjustment. (249)

"Shashti" (Punishment) describes the oppression of women in the lower strata of society. The story revolves around the two brothers- Dukhiram and Chidam, and their wives of the Rui family. The two brothers are farmers. One day

when both the brothers come back after a day of hard work in the fields, Dukhiram gets angry with his wife since the food is not ready. He gets so infuriated that he kills his wife straight away for this petty issue. Chidam in order to save his brother told the police that his wife, Chandara had killed Dukhiram's wife. Chidam tells his brother that if he loses a wife then he can get another one, but if he loses a brother he won't get another one. Therefore, it is better to sacrifice his wife instead of his brother. Tagore ridicules and attacks virulently the position of women here. Chandara, a beautiful, upright woman takes all the blame on her without a word, completely torn within. During the story, we see that both brothers gradually feel guilty. Staying within the confines of the prison, Chandra looks back at her life, the ups and downs, the ill-treatment of her husband towards her, the frequent fights, and the dominance of her husband in every sphere of their lives. After some days, her husband, remorseful and guilty of his deed, tries to make up stories to save her. She decides that she will not allow anyone to take her for granted. She will no longer be a toy in the hands of her husband. He cannot just address her as the murderer when he wants it, and make up different stories realising his mistakes and setting her free from the accusations. It is her life and she will decide on it. The court gives capital punishment and orders Chandara's execution for a crime she did not commit. She accepts it and finds it better than going back to the shackles of the household. Just the moment before being hanged she is asked by the jailor that her husband wants to meet her for the one last time. To this, she feels disgusted and exclaims "Aa moron" (tagoreweb) and rejects her husband's plea. The disgust captured in the rustic Bengal phrase 'Aa moron' is beyond translation. In this last line, all the pain and agony that she feels come out vividly. In this story, Tagore portrays a woman

with a different kind of rebelliousness. The way of her protest is indeed different. She challenges the male-oriented society and her victory (through death) lies in the fact that she does not yield to her husband and makes the decisions of her life on her terms. She proves her worth and dignity by accepting death which indeed has brought liberation and freedom to her in the true sense.

### Conclusion

Though Tagore cannot be classified as an ardent feminist, however, he delves deep into picturing the patriarchal social structure and that women are trapped in domesticity compromising their self-respect and dignity. Quite strikingly, in all the stories we see that the in-laws or the husband's family extend a hostile vibe. There is a constant state of turmoil, unhappiness and helplessness that hovers around the aura of these women characters. Dowry and widowhood are the other vices that lead to drastic circumstances of death. Tagore vividly depicts the ways in which masculinity works in the power structure through the

power of decision-making and strangulating women's voices. Women who exhibit strength of character or intellectual abilities may typically face a little extra wrath from the societal structure of the family. The plots revolve around complications in the household, which in turn, further leads to suffering. Indecisiveness and lack of acting in various circumstances are characteristic of the male characters. Moreover, the institution of marriage which is supposed to strive for the values of equality and companionship, traps the woman chaining her individuality. Economic dependency is another significant factor that ultimately pushes women to take their lives. There is a sense of stark satire in these stories that harp on the issue of whether death is the only way of liberation for an ostracised woman! A rather uncomfortable Tagore, on the harrowing female context, writes in his *Rabindra Rachanabali*, "...true power of our society can be unleashed only when we seek woman's blessings in all forms without any false assumption of power to rule her" (Tagore 209).

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