

## Portrayal of Valour of Woman Protagonists in Rabindranath Tagore's *Giribala*

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### ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore has contributed immensely to the development of Indian literature as a writer. His works are emblematic of the salient features of Indian patriarchal society. He has also depicted the status of women in Indian society in the context of male domination leading to the suffering and exploitation of women in the 19th century. "Giribala" is one of the finest stories dealing with an ordinary woman demonstrating extraordinary courage to protect her dignity and identity. The protagonist challenges the traditional stereotypes of women as caretakers, wives, slaves, commodities, and mothers. As an innovative educator, Tagore often urges women to search for freedom, decision-making power, and establish their rightful identity in the fabric of society. This research paper is an attempt to investigate the valour of the female protagonist leading to a new identity.

### KEY WORDS:

Indian Society; Women; Patriarchy Identity; Exploitation; Challenges.

### Introduction

In the Indian tradition, society has assigned different roles, codes of behaviour, morality, and even different feelings and thoughts to men and women based on the biological distinction of sex (male and female), thereby leading to the construction of a binary, i.e., socially distinct roles of gender (masculine or feminine). From the 'mystic' feminine with secrets to the 'divine'; from witchy heretics to being the "second sex," the journey of women has been celebrated, contested,

debated, negated or reinstated while the battle between sexes continues. Despite this, there have been admirable instances where women have challenged male hegemony and refused to lead circumscribed lives. In this quest for autonomy, sometimes they have enjoyed support from men, but more often they have had to strive against great odds in their quest for liberty.

At the level of the family, women were groomed to be docile and subservient to the male members of the family from an

early age. Religious scriptures were quoted to persuade women to uphold tradition by conforming to patriarchal laws. In spite of the flaws a man may have, a woman was always expected to remain true to her husband, never question his authority, whether the man deserved her loyalty or not.

The Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, apart from being a great poet and philosopher was a great social reformer who had progressive thoughts when it came to women's social status in Indian society. He knew how women were subjected to unequal treatment and lead lives of quiet desperation under patriarchal domination. In this story, "Giribala" by Tagore, the husband himself is the oppressor of the wife. The milieu of the story is pertinent to understanding the story. Set in West Bengal, when society was under the zamindari system, when men from upper social classes enjoyed great freedom and privilege both inside and outside the home, while women lead very circumscribed lives confined to domesticity. Often, men went astray, but women were supposed to turn a blind eye to all their misdoings and keep playing the role of a virtuous and chaste wife.

### **Giribala's Conjugal Life**

Giribala, the eponymous protagonist of the story is a beautiful woman "overflowing with the exuberance of youth," (Tagore 5) but disappointingly she remains unnoticed and unappreciated by her husband. She comes to her husband's home as a child bride, so they grow accustomed to each other's presence.

Gopinath was oblivious of Giribala's beauty and youth. He enjoyed himself going to theatre, but never allowed his wife to accompany him because decent women of respectable families were not to be associated with the theatre. It was a place for the fallen and uncouth.

Gopinath, an epitome of patriarchy, was an unseasoned prince. He became the

Zamindar and inherited a sizeable property after his father's death. However, he lacks the maturity and wisdom to understand and value his wife, Giribala's love for him.

Giribala senses that the bond she shared with her husband was weakening, and he was gradually drifting away from her. After Gopinath succeeded to the title of Zamindar, his parasitic friends began to prey on him, to partake in his lavish lifestyle and extravagant recreational experiences like visiting the theatre, partying and drinking till late in the night. As a regular visitor to the theatre, Gopinath became enamoured by a young beautiful actress, Labanga Latika and started spending more time with her.

Initially, though Giribala felt lonely, she would patiently wait for her husband to return home. Sitting alone, she felt like a queen in her queendom bereft of any subjects. Her loneliness set her brooding on her life and she developed a strong desire to see Labanga Latika, with whom Gopinath was so besotted. Gopinath kept neglecting Giribala for the sake of Labanga, so Giribala grew more and more curious to see and meet this woman with whom her husband had become infatuated.

One evening she mustered her courage to step out of the confines of her home and took the risk of visiting the theatre. She knew that she was transgressing the social norms of her class, shattering the stereotypical 'goodness' that was expected of her. She was thrilled to see the enchanting beauty of the world of art. After witnessing the beauty and charm of the theatre and the artistic world, she was instantly drawn towards it. "The life, the unnatural shine, the magic of Music and painted Canvas" (Tagore 5) of the theatre were so alluring and a total contrast to her "joyless home."

Giribala gravitated towards the charm and freedom of the world of art and theatre. It had everything that she had been longing for. This was the moment that

intensified her loneliness more. She began to wonder how she could win back the love of Gopinath. She started visiting the theatre every Saturday. She studied every detail and the finer nuances of acting on stage. Giribala came back home, got dressed up and perfumed, and waited for Gopinath, and finally, he arrived. She tried to play Radha, who was angry with Krishna and wanted him to plead with her.

On the other hand, Gopinath had the plan to take money, jewellery and elope with Labanga. He demanded the keys of the family safe from Giribala, which she denied. Giribala just wanted him to acknowledge his love for her, and she would have handed everything to him. Gopinath turned furious and took the jewellery by force.

Gopinath's parting kick to Giribala was the final blow to their relationship. Sitting there all alone, with bruises all over her body and soul, Giribala felt the shame and nothingness of her life. She wanted to die, however, she realized that it would be meaningless. Nobody was going to bother. Thinking over it deeply all through the night, she arrived at a decision. That night proved to be a turning point in her life. Her mind was now set on the future course of action. Come what may, she was determined now, not to give up.

The next morning, she said that she announced that she was going to her father's house and left. She took the bold step choosing the stage, where she decided she would enjoy freedom. She began to hone her acting skills and established herself as an actress whom everyone loved, admired, and appreciated. At a time, when going to the theatre was prohibited for women, joining the theatre as an actress, that too a "Respectable woman," a Zamindar's daughter and wife, was unheard of.

### **Tagore's Progressive Ideas on Women Emancipation**

Giribala broke the traditional stigma and emerged emancipated. She not only became an actress but also earned great name, fame, and recognition. Through experimentation with Giribala's character, Tagore suggests a solution to women's oppression. "Tagore conceives of this solution on the pay-you-back-in-your-own-coin formula, for Gopinath's chief intoxication lies with theatrical performance" (Chakrabarti 4).

At a time, when questions of identity were being raised by women in the western world, especially in the early twentieth-century society, Tagore also raises the issue of a woman's identity with respect to that of man. Men enjoyed greater privilege and autonomy. They learned self-reliance and self-dependence, while women were always seen as subordinate to men, and encouraged to take the role of nurturer and carers. They were expected to thwart their natural impulses and desires and compelled to lead constrained lives. Giribala breaks the age-old tradition of ideal womanhood and wifehood. As a liberated woman, she becomes a pioneer to change the status of the wife under the oppressive patriarchal structures (Dasgupta 20).

Thus, we find that the bold step, though considered transgressive by social norms, has given her the freedom that she yearned for. The freedom of making a decision and creating a unique identity and place for herself in the world. She gracefully achieves the goal and also shatters to pieces the male ego (of Gopinath who took her for granted and thought her to be his personal chattel).

Rabindranath Tagore has presented his women characters as valiant, undaunted, strong-willed, determined, and conscious of their identity. The protagonists of Tagore's stories defied the common patriarchal norm of their time, remaining suppressed and passive, and championed the cause of women's emancipation from the clutches of

patriarchal domination. They raise their voice in a strong manner against the biased patriarchal society and, through their zeal, courage, grit, and determination, ultimately come out victorious.

He wanted to provide women with their rightful place in this world. Tagore respected the natural disposition of men and women and desired that the world also smoothly operated by ensuring harmony between the two. He desired it to be so that there remained no violation of each other's space and rights. His ideas of harmony and balance depend upon this mutual understanding of each other's potentials and their due respect. He did not hesitate to accept that women are delicate by constitution, but their delicacy did not always imply their weakness.

In the story, Giribala's physical description in detail emphasizes the delicate beautiful physical structure of women. At the same time, Rabindranath Tagore ensures that this is not just the description of physical beauty. He makes Giribala use her beauty as an asset to enter into the new world of art where she was welcomed as an artist.

It is a commonly held belief in society that women are born to serve men, and their entire life must be nothing but an exemplary journey of restraint, endurance, and sacrifice—conjoined with never-ending affection and devotion. They had no right to complain, no reason to be unhappy, sick, or sorrowful. In such an atmosphere of high, hollow ideals of women's conduct, very few had the courage to expose the affectation which lay beneath these airy-fairy morals.

Tagore suggests that women are not just abstract virtues but flesh and blood beings just like their male counterparts; therefore, they are also able to feel. Social practices and ideologies oppress women. Tagore has tried to point out many evils that prevail in society even to this date. His portrayal of Giribala's character is to kindle

the awakening of woman power in the minds of his readers.

In Giribala's case, her maid, Sudha also plays a significant role in awakening Giribala and providing her the courage to go along her self-beliefs, to revolt against her husband's oppressive psyche, evident from the beginning of their relationship. A deep bond of friendship exists between the two women. The contrast in their personalities is also highlighted.

Tagore suggests regaining individuality, freedom from the patriarchal domination of the family system, by women. He stresses on the need for women empowerment through these women characters. Tagore's creation of such emancipated women characters several decades before feminist ideologies evolved proves that Rabindranath Tagore was a harbinger of feminism far ahead of his time (Sen 20).

Female protagonists in his short stories are found to be unfazed by male domination or patriarchal societal norms. They assert their progressive thoughts, courage, and determination in defence of their rights and, in the process get emancipated. Tagore emphasises certain qualities in his women protagonists, as evident from Giribala's characters.

### **Feminist Undertones in Giribala**

Married into a rich Zamindar family, Giribala has nothing much to do and has no children. The husband Gopinath, who had been loving and caring in the early days of their marriage, has slowly drifted away from her. His father's death gave him access to unlimited power which he starts spending lavishly. The man "with no brains and character" (Tagore 5), as described by the author, turns out to be a patriarch in the worst form. Neglecting his wife, he spends time and money only on his parasitic friends and paramour.

Giribala, brimming with the wine of youth and exceptional beauty like an obedient and committed wife, pines for

him and seeks his attention. Though there was a possibility of her giving up, she decides to show her mettle.

She starts exercising autonomy over her life and doing things that she liked. Theatre and acting were, where she found freedom and joy, and she did not hesitate to pursue them. Every Saturday when she started visiting the theatre, it wasn't just for entertainment but well thought out and charted path, after much introspection.

We see that a woman in an ordinary circumstance, who is a thinking and feeling being, deserves happiness, love, and respect. When she does not receive it from her so-called husband, she creates an opportunity and paves a new path.

At the outset, readers may consider it a revenge story of a wife; however, that would hardly be the true message of such a great author like Tagore. The story definitely has a much deeper meaning and message. Readers can't help admiring the courage and the risk-taking capacity that Giribala demonstrates when faced with personal crisis leading to her decision to become an actress. She knew that her decision would be met with social disapproval. As a "decent woman" for whom even visiting the theatre as a viewer was strictly prohibited, she not only starts visiting the theatre but also starts training herself in the art of acting. She trains herself slowly by observing the mistakes made by other actors. She works hard to hone her skills, and chooses to grab the opportunity when Labanga Latika elopes with Gopinath.

When on stage, she exhibits her acting prowess and earns admiration, applause, and support from the audience. This certainly was not because she was lucky, but she had worked really hard and was committed towards her goal of creating an individual identity in the fabric of the patriarchal society.

Never do we find her compromising on her values. She evolves to be the "new woman" that Rabindranath Tagore wants every woman to be. By breaking the stereotype of a "good woman," the protagonist surely becomes an independent woman, an ideal that every woman can aspire to become even in the 21st century.

Thirdly, we see that her negative emotions; anger, disappointment, and humiliation in life are channelized into a new direction and strength. After her husband's rejection, rather than sinking into the abyss of dejection, rises above the situation and creates a life through her sheer willpower and determination. It paves a path towards creativity rather than destruction. This is what every woman of the 21st century could learn from this story narrated by Rabindranath Tagore.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, it can be said that through his short stories, like "Giribala," Tagore has developed his women protagonists in a much fuller perspective. Tagore's women-centric short stories represent the new woman phenomenon. The new woman is a significantly transformed person, who embarks on a quest for identity in a more assertive way. The woman in the story can be seen to be finally breaking out of the shackles of domesticity and exercising her agency, rather accepting meekly the injustice meted out to her by her husband. Giribala is not a passive suffering woman, but a robust self-willed woman who decides to take control of her situation and shape her own destiny. One can say that through Giribala, the "new woman" is born in the patriarchal India of 20th century. Rabindranath Tagore successfully created a role model – a woman who is liberated physically, emotionally, spiritually, and financially. A brave woman with sharp intellect, determination and values, who takes the reins of life in her hands and drives it in the direction, she wants to.

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