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THE IMAGES OF INDIAN WOMEN IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore's stories present before us a sensitive portrayal of Indian womanhood without ever seeming to be defensive about it. His themes and motives are based on the lives and problems of women only. His women characters conform to the role of women dictated by the society. They conform to the taboos, superstitions and the rules and accept their fate with calm resignation. They do not protest, however painful their suffering and anguish may be. Most of Tagore's short stories have been prepared by women who have been innocent victims in a man's world for mistaken religious orthodoxy, taboos, rules and prejudices created by men.

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INTRODUCTION

Tagore portrays the complexity of triangular relationship among the husband, Nibaran and his two wives in the story She who was in the middle. Nibaran and his first wife, Harisundari, was happy with their most ordinary family life without any poetry. Each played his/her traditional sold designated by the society. Then after recovering from a long illness, having been looked after by her husband, in a moment of pushing love for her husband she wanted to do a great sacrifice for her husband. She thought of this act of sacrifice herself. Since they did not have any child she cajoled her husband to have a young wife who could bear him a child.

Reluctantly Nibaran got married for the second time to Shaibabala, a young woman. Soon the middle aged man, gladly gave his all to his new wife, his love and whatever material things he could beg, borrow or steal from his company's cashbox. The family life became unbearable for the husband and Harisundari realised that someone had derived her of fulfillment in life for ever. Her life as a woman had always been impoverished. She saw a little girl had installed herself as the queen and she had become a maid, without any honour. But she suffered it all in silence, doing her duties to her husband and the co-wife as expected by the society at the time. In the end Shailabala died but her invisible presence remained as an insurmountable barrier between Harasundari and her husband.

Most of the women in Tagore's writing suffer to a greater extent, but few women stand out. They are Nirupama in Debts and Debts, Haimanti in the story with the same title, Khirad in The Judge and Bindu in The wife's letter. The sadness of girl-

wives was a shameful aspect of Bengali society. Bengali short stories are soaked with brides tears. Nirupama suffering becomes extreme in 'Debts and Dues' because of her father's ability of paying the dowry money. The insult and dignity suffered by her and his sorrow is no less. In the end Nirupama dies because of neglect and abuse by her in-laws. But she dies with dignity when she tells her father:

"It will be a disgrace if you pay. Doesn't your daughter have any honour and pride? Am I a bag that worth something only if there is money in it?

No Baba, don't shame me by paying this money".

Though dowry has been made illegal the practice continues even today, though it is not endemic. The stories of young women committing suicide by hanging or by self immolation to escape abuse and torture were common in the past and even to this day. The problem was not restricted to the illiterate or the poor. It was in all social classes as it is in this story and continues to be so.

The same theme of indignity of pain and suffering of young brides in the hands of in- laws come back in Haimanti written in 1914. Haimanti grew up far away from Bengal in one of the Himalayan foot-hill states under the care of her father who gave her all the freedom for self-expression and encouraged the development of her personality as a human being. But she was married into a conservative Bengali family. Though there was never any talk of dowry, her father-in-law had assumed that Haimanti's father was wealthy and since she was the only child she would inherit her father's wealth. Besides he had high hopes that his son would also inherit his father-in-law's plum job.

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Haimanti's pain and suffering started from the day her in-laws learnt that Haimant's father did not have wealth or the position they had taken for granted. In the end she withers away like a flower from abuse and neglect of her husband's family. One of the reasons for the pain and suffering of young brides in the hands of in-laws is the lack of backbone of the husbands. They loved their wives no doubt but they didn't have guts to protest against injustice inflicted by their parents.

Khirod in *The Judge* is a victim of exploitation of women for sex by men that has probably been going on since antiquity and continues these days in all societies through out the world. The Judge Mohitmohan, in his youth had seduced more than one young girl, taken from their families, enjoyed with them for a while and then discarded them on the wayside. These unfortunate women, out of shame, could not return to their families and were forced to survive as prostitutes. The real culprit Mohitmohan became a judge and a preacher of virtues.

Khirod's lover, a pimp, had stolen everything she had. Unable to support herself and her baby son, in utter desperation Khirod tried to commit suicide by jumping into a well. The son died but she survived. She was prosecuted for murdering her son and the judge, the real culprit, sentenced her to death by hanging. In the end Mohitmohan recognized her as one he had seduced in his youth but showed no remorse or compassion. Khirod embraced her fate clinging to the ring which Mohit had given her, proving that she left home with Mohit because of love.

Khirod is also a victim of the old Hindu taboo against remarriage of widows, and the injunction that all widows must live an austere life, even in their dress and food. An injunction that is contrary to the laws of nature. After the passage of the Hindu Marriage Act in 1955 both divorce and the remarriage of widows and divorced women have become acceptable to the Hindu society.

Bindu in *The Wife's Letter* is the victim of all that can be wrong with the society. After her parent's death, her male cousins drove her out of her home and she sought shelter in the house of her married elder sister who was the elder sister-in-law of Mrinal. The treatment she received from the members in the household was such if she accidentally fractured her skull on the floor people would be more concerned about the floor than about her. Mrinal was pained and ashamed at this treatment and she gave Bindu protection, support, love and affection. The men in the house gave her in marriage to a lunatic, for 'a groom may be lunatic but he is a man'. Bindu ran away from there and sought refuge in her sister's house. But her cruel mother-in-law hounded her even there. Bindu had to go back to her husband's family and commit suicide to end her humiliation, pain and suffering.

Tagore's portrayal of the characters of girls is remarkable. Ratan in *The Postmaster*, Subha and Mrinmayi in *The Conclusion* are all girls. One thing common in them is they are all daughters of Mother Nature. They grew up living and playing in the lap of Mother Nature. Ratan an illiterate, orphaned village girl, works as a maid and cook food for the postmaster in return for a little food. The postmaster was the first one in her life to show interest and affection to her. When the postmaster became sick, the young girl Ratan was no longer a girl.

She assumed the role of a mother, giving him medicines on time, remained awake all night long by his side, cooked his convalescent meals and enquired hundred times, about his health. Ratan's heart suffered in silence when the postmaster abandoned her to leave for Calcutta she beseeched him not to go but he ignored her words. He took it philosophically, saying "there are many separations and many deaths in life...who belong to whom in this world?" Rabindranath describes the instant transformation of a girl to a woman and her tragic life delicately, beautifully and with deep sympathy.

Mrinmayi in *The Conclusion* looked like a boy with cropped hair and behaviour. She could not feel her husband's love for her because such feelings were not aroused in her heart. To rouse this feeling a separation from her husband was needed to transform her from a child into a woman and arouse her love for her husband and physical attraction for him. It was only then that she could reciprocate her husband's love in full measure.

In contrast Subha was a mute girl, did not know the language of humans, except the language of silent nature and animals who did not speak in human language. She enjoyed in her familiar environment in the village, and on the lap of Mother Nature. She could feel Mother Nature's love and that of the two cows and other animals. But she died on the day when she was taken to the city though her physical death happened later.

Tagore's large number of women characters represents the different facets of Indian womanhood. At one extreme there are crooked women, representing womanhood at its worst and on the other hand there are characters who represent Tagore's conception of the ideal woman. Their multifarious characters are the products of Tagore's keen observation, insight and sympathetic understanding of women in general.

One such crooked woman is Manimalika in *The Lost Jewel*. Manimalika considered her husband as the machine for supplying expensive saris and jewellery. She thought that the machine was so well made that not even a drop of oil was needed to turn its wheels. She did not talk much and she did not mix with neighbours either. She frittered away nothing and accumulated everything she ever received with the exception of doting of her husband. She never cared for anyone, never loved anyone.

She only accumulated, even empty perfume bottles and boxes of soaps. When her husband needed to borrow her jewellery for a few days to save his business she left for her father's house by boat with a 'trusted' brother-figure, wearing all the jewellery on her body. Presumably she jumped into the river to save her jewellery from the clutch of her 'trusted brother'. She gave her life but not her jewellery.

Shailabala's character is similar to that of Manimalika. Shailabala got so much uninterrupted loving care that she had no time to love. Perhaps a river flowing into the sea and sacrificing herself could get profound satisfaction. But if the sea would flow towards the river with the pull of the high tide the river would only swell within herself. She knew everything was for her but she was for no one. Her husband even embezzled money from his office to shower her with expensive gifts and she got all the ornaments of her husband's first wife. She thought they were only for her enjoyment. So

she refused to part with the jewellery when her husband needed them to save himself from going to the prison. She could not accept the impoverished way of living and she died in the end.

Mani in the Last Night is the youngest of the three. She appears to be in her early teens. She is only interested in her own pleasure like gossiping with her friends and going to the cinema. Her husband is dying but she does not even care to come to his bedside for a moment. She is determined to go to her parent's place and would not listen to any advice from anyone. Perhaps her father convinced her to return to her husband's bedside but it is too late. Her husband dies moments later. The characters of the three husbands are similar to each other. They all dote on their wives. They believe that it is by giving that one receives. They give their all but receive nothing. They are too weak to demand anything of their wives. Rabindranath portrays these characters in such a way that we do not see them as devils. On the contrary we cannot help but feel compassion for their sad and unfulfilled lives.

Tagore portrayed the tragic life of the many rural chotolok families in Bengal with the story Punishment. This story starts with the tragic life of the two Rui brothers, Dukhrim and Chidam and their respective wives, Radha and Chandra. They are 'little people', forgotten, illiterate, inarticulate, anonymous and at the mercy of economic and political forces of the time. The two brothers are subjected to forced labour by the rich and powerful Zamindar and are paid in insults and abuses far in excess of what was due to them.

Returning home they find that no need had been cooked, because there was nothing in the house. After a day of exhaustion and abuse, aflame in hunger, the elder brother, Dukhram, can not take his wife, Radha's harsh words and sarcasm. In a fit of anger he kills his wife with the machine in his hand. Ramlochan, the foremost counsellor of the village discovers the tragic event when he comes to collect the rent from Dukhram. The younger brother Chidam's first reaction is to protect his brother and he puts the blame on his wife, Chandra, with whom he was having a lover's quarrel at the time. His logic was, 'if I lose my wife I can get another but if my brother is hanged I wont get another'.

Chandra was so wounded by this outrageous suggestion that she could only stare at him, stunned. 'her two dark eyes burnt the husband silently like black fire. It was as if her body and soul cringed to escape from the grasp of her devilish husband. Her entire being turned away in extreme revulsion'. Chandra was not a submissive woman with a blind faith and obedience to her husband. She was no butter doll but a fire ball of a young woman. She had a mind of her own and she had defied her husband's injunctions before. She could have fought and saved her life simply by telling the truth to the investigators and the judge. But she decided that her life was not worth living when she was betrayed by her husband who was more keen to save his brother and did not care for the consequence of his grotesque proposal.

Chandra decided death would be better than living with such husband. So she calmly admitted to the lie, knowing fully that she could be hanged for admitting it. Her sadness, hurt feeling, resentment and anger ran so deep that she preferred the hanging

rope around her neck than her husband's hands twining around it.

Rabindranath portrays women who represent the mother in all women. This instinct of motherhood is so natural, even in girls that it comes out in an instant in times of need as in Ratan in The Postmaster. Shashi, a wife with traditional values, was quite devoted to her husband was sure in her mind that her husband would protect her under all circumstances. She plays a role of mother to her little brother after her mother's death and gave him preferential treatment like her own children, because the little boy was an orphan and he was the youngest. When her husband conspired to appropriate her brothers properties and wanted to see him dead she fought like a tigress and gave her life in the end. She remained a mother to her brother until her last breath.

Tagore portrays the life of women in a male dominated family in the story The wife's Letter. The time of the story was the period of rapid urbanization and social and political change. The country was in transition. Bengal had been ruled Muslim powers for a very long period and adopted many of the Muslim conventions. It is the story of a wife. Mrinal, whose sensibilities are nourished by poetry and only the hint of the beautiful wolf outside seen by her from the confines of the inner quarter. Her sensibilities are awakened by the orphaned, helpless young girl, Bindu. After fifteen years of experience as a wife, suffering endless anguish and indignity as a human being, Mrinal realises that her fulfillment in life can not be as a wife but as a woman. She leaves home for good, goes to Puri, a holy place by the ocean and is writing to her husband saying that it is not a letter from a wife to her husband. It is a letter from a woman to man. The title for the story could have been 'The Woman's Letter'.

Life as a wife is only one aspect of womanhood and not the whole or its fulfillment. Mrinal realises that striving for this fulfillment is the goal of her life. Her strong personality made her to come out of her stunted life as a housewife in a family with vain pride of aristocracy and stand under the wife-open sky of womanhood. Tagore never fails to notice the delicate charm and sweetness of the young women. With his poetic imagination and psychological insight he delineates the inner workings and criss-cross movements of their thoughts.

It is true, as Krishna Kripalani states that Tagore has:

...inexhaustible sympathy and admiration for Bengali women but little for the males of his race. This is true in his novels and his short stories...

Because of his interest, sympathy, concern and love for them, Tagore's women come off much better, much more clearly and colourfully than his male characters. Tagore, whose sympathies, as already noted, are with women, takes up the cause of the newly emancipated section of women. Therefore, while delineating the characters of modern educated women, he highlights their trials and tribulations at home and the dangers to which they are exposed outside. All his women surpass the men in intelligence, clear thinking and courage. They are so vivacious that beside them, the heroes look dull, drab and dry. No doubt Tagore skill is excelled in portrayed the full-blooded and lively women characters.

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