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## **Bold and Beautiful; Emancipated Women in Tagore’s Short Stories**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Short story has its deep rooted origin in Biblical verse narratives, medieval sermons and romance, fables, folktales, ballads. Even one can relate it to the rise of German Gothic in the eighteenth century. The Romantic influence gave it a form, what is known today as short story. Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Anton Chekov in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Henry James, Flannery O’ Conner, Julio Cortazar and Eudora Welty, among others in the twentieth century were the critics and practitioners of this form.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In Bengali literature Rabindranath Tagore was the first to write short story. At the age of 16, in 1877, Tagore wrote his first short story titled as “Bhikharini” (The Beggar Woman). During his vast literary career Tagore wrote in his novels and stories about liberated women. If we go through his novels and short stories we find that, during 1881 to 1897, he spoke about the social injustices against women, from 1893 to 1913, he first portrayed the young, educated urban women characters who fought for human rights and equality and in the last phase of his career from 1914 to 1941 his heroines openly challenged the societal and religious oppression against women and widow re- marriage, untouchability, the rigid caste system and patriarchy at large.

In this paper I will try to explore three short stories of Rabindranath in which the protagonists have been portrayed as modern feminist characters. The parameter of my selection of my of the stories includes the

protagonists who are child brides, spinster and childless widow. I have also taken care of selecting those protagonists in the parameters of uneducated rural girl and educated modern counter part of it. In this paper I will explore the characters of “Mrinal” in “Streer Patra”, “Kalyani” in “Woman Unknown”(Aparichita) and “Sohini” in “Laboratory” as modern feminist characters which Rabindranath Tagore had created much before the term “modern feminism” came into being in the field of literary criticism. In doing so I will also use the methodology of “Deconstruction” introduced by Derrida in 1970’s.

First, I will give a brief summary of the story, and then explore the modern feminist characteristics of the protagonists, sometimes using some textual lines or quotes from the story and then deconstructing the characters I will show how Rabindranath Tagore created liberated and emancipated characters who lived their lives in their own terms and in the later phase of his life how Tagore created New or Modern Women in colonial Bengal during Renaissance forth coming in near future.

### **Streer patra (Letter from a wife,1914)**

The traditional convention and culture of In the final phase of his writing, i.e. post Gitanjali period (1914-1941) as well as Sabuj Patra period,(1914-22; 1925-27)Rabindranath Tagore writes ‘Streer Patra’( Letter from a Wife,1914) which creates much furore in the society as the societal convention and the patriarchy is shaken. This is the first story in which the woman protagonist, unlike other female protagonists of his earlier stories speak in the first person narrative while the others speak in the third person narrative. Rather, Mrinal in ‘Streer Patra’ does not speak but writes a letter to her husband after fifteen years of her marriage and leaves the house breaking the shackles of patriarchy, societal and cultural norms to live her life in her own terms in Puri. The letter is written in such a time when colonial Bengal believed that if a woman writes, her widowhood is evident in near future. The story is written in epistolary form echoing the voice, mind, experience,sighs, pangs and frustrations of Mrinal directly. In fact, ‘Streer Patra’(letter from a wife,1914) is an account of Mrinal’s journey from exploitation to emancipation.

In her letter Mrinal describes each and every type of oppression and suppression of the patriarchy what a woman has to face, i.e. dowry, degradation in human treatment of providing accommodation, denial of education, loss of identity and lower esteem. Mrinal gets shattered when orphan Bindu, the sister of her elder sister in law is married to a lunatic and even being Bindu’s elder sister Narayani admits it as Bindu’s fate. In the family, Mrinal was rated for her physical beauty and

berated for her intellect. Her sensibilities get hurt tremendously when she fails to protect Bindu from suicide. In Mrinal's empty heart, being degraded and demeaned by her husband, Bindu remains as the sole admirer of her. Referring to all these her hard hitting letter to her husband exposes the inhuman suppression of the patriarchy on the women.

While deconstructing the story, it is evident that, through the portrayal of Mrinal, Rabindranath has foreseen the emergence of new woman that time advocates writing as an option for men not for men. But in this story Mrinal writes poems and is neglected and abused by her husband. But ultimately Mrinal at the age of twenty seven finds her own identity and writes a letter and leaves the house. This courageous and rebellious course of action is an example of modern feminism (which evolved much later in 1960 's ) and we can relate it with the French feminist Helen Cixous who in her book "The Newly Born Women"(1987) says, " she must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing, which, when the moment of liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history".

Being empathized by Mrinal, Bindu falls in love with Mrinal which Mrinal registers in her letter. This romantic love between two women is projected here in this story that is binary and contradictory to the patriarchal society and this is an anticipation of the lesbian feminism that evolved in 1970, though Tagore has not used the term lesbianism.

When Bindu's suicide has been criticized : "It has become a fashion with women to die by setting their saris on fire", Mrinal questions in her letter why it is happening to the Bengali women's sari only and not with the dhotis of Bengali men and thus hinted at the patriarchal oppression of society and challenged their superiority. When Mrinal writes "I will not return to your Makhan Baral lane..... I have known the value women are given in your world. I have had enough". She actually denies the relation, denies to accept her inlaw's house as 'her' house or 'our' house. In fact, this denial only by mentioning the address of the house Mrinal asserts that her inlaw's house is a house only not with a home inside what every woman dreams of.

Mrinal concludes the letter as " Breaking free from the shelter beneath your feet, Mrinal". The last line is a harsh threat and open challenge to the patriarchal society that women can now assert themselves and make themselves free from the suppression and they are not so inferior as to remain under someone's feet, whether her husband or any other representative of male egoistic counterpart.

Finally, Mrinal finds her own identity and the concluding word of the letter is her name "Mrinal", who has been known as 'Mejo Bau' and Mrinal refuses to be known as Mejo Bau and finds her identity as an assertive, liberated, and emancipated woman.

### **Aparachita(The Woman Unknown 1916)**

It was the convention of the colonial Bengal that in a marriage, the family of the bride will give a dowry to the bridegroom. But on the day of wedding when the bridegroom's maternal uncle humiliated the bride's father questioning about his honesty and purity of the gold, the bride's father denies to get her daughter married to Anupam. Anupam's maternal uncle becomes furious and threatens Doctor Sambhunath, the bride's father, that he would look after how Sambhunath does manage to get her daughter married and even Anupam, an educated youth also dreams that after a few days the bride's father will come their house begging before him to marry his daughter. When nothing happens like that and Anupam is informed that the girl has been turning down many marriage proposals he starts to fantasize about the moment when Sambhunath will be seen at their doorstep. But time passes by deserting Anupam. After one year berak when Kalyani, the rejected bride and Anupam along with his mother become co-passengers in a train, by chance, (though unknown to one another) in the station, the station master asks all the passengers to vacate the compartment for some English men saying that those Englishmen have reserved their berths and when Anupam gets ready to vacate the seat and is about to get down from the train, Kalyani argued with the station master in English and deny to vacate the compartment referring to the rules of the Railway and the station master arranges an another coach for the English men. Towards the end of the journey when Anupam's mother asks her name and both Anupam and his mother come to know that she is none but Kalyani Sen, daughter of Sambhunath Sen they get startled as Kalyani is the girl who rejected Anupam for his gluttony. Anupam goes to Kanpur, without the consent of his mother and maternal uncle and submissively confesses his repentance for the humiliation they have caused to them and asks for the hand of kalyani. Though Sambhunath does not object, Kalyani turns down the proposal and says that she desires to remain as a spinster and dedicate her life for the education of women. Anupam who is in love with Kalyani, also decides to remain as a bachelor.

While deconstructing this story one can hear the refrain of the radical feminists(though radical feminism evolved much later) that marriage is the major cause of women's oppression and they agree with the notion of celibacy. Subverting the traditionally accepted convention that women are inferior to

men Tagore portrays Kalyani as bold and beautiful with individual thought process and set pride who can turn down the marriage proposals for her dedication for the women education, unnatural and uncharacteristic to the time when Tagore portrays this character. Here one can easily remember the refrain from Corinthians 11:11-12, King James (version KJV) which says “ never the less, neither the man, without the woman, nor the woman without the man for as the woman is of the man, even so man also by the woman.....”

Tagore deconstructs the conventional culture of the society which holds the view point that the bride and bride’s father will remain submissive and surrendering to the bridegroom and his family when Kalyani and her father rejects the marriage on the day of wedding for the gluttony of the bridegroom’s family. Again, in a patriarchal society where it is accepted that superior male counter part will be courageous and bold and will come to the rescue of the females in a hazardous situation, Kalyani plays a dominant role while Anupam remains as a submissive and surrendering man in train before the station master.

Subverting the conventional approach that women are more emotional than men and they are always dedicated to the male ego and superiority and hankers after before the male for the attainment of love from men, Rabindranath , in this story portrays a picture where Anupam is more emotional, submissive and surrendering to attain the love of Kalyani.

### **Laboratory (1940)**

In the short story “Laboratory”(1940) Sohini, out and out a modern emancipated twenty years Punjabi girl, lived her life in her own terms and conditions and Nandakishore, the wealthy and established engineer had to marry her in her terms, by repaying her aunt’s loan of rupees seven thousand only to save their residential house. Nandakishore was attracted to Sohini not only due to her straight forwardness and the inner beauty of her soul and magic personality she always carries a knife in her waist under her saree. Knowing too well that Sohini is an unchaste woman in the conventional terms Nandakishore ties the bond with Sohini in an unconventional bond of marriage.

Nandakishore establishes a laboratory in Kolkata, in which he faces his unfortunate demise in an accidental chemical reaction and Sohini has to fight a long process to establish her legal rights on both the laboratory and his wealth. Unlike other widows of the then society, instead of spending money on

“Shraddha” and different temples to save the soul. She decides to spend the money on scientific research in the laboratory, established by her deceased husband Nandakishore.

Sohini has also her love and sympathy for animals when animals are sacrificed in the altar of devotion in different temples. Even she nurtures a dream of building a hospital for the lame, blind and disabled dogs and rabbits. She is so compassionate and affectionate that she goes to see her ailing grandmother leaving behind the laboratory for some time.

Returning back she finds that the scientist Rebati to whom she has given the charge of the laboratory is carried away by Nila, a wayward and wanton young daughter of Sohini. But Sohini is not that woman to succumb to that being driven by the mere sentiments and affection on her daughter. She discloses Nila’s birth identity and informs her that she has no right on the property of Nandakishore by breaking the marriage of Rebati and Nila, once again proves that she is not an ordinary, conventional woman..

Now, deconstructing the story what one can find that, Sohini is the first female character in Bengali literature to select her husband while it is the custom and convention of the society that the bridegroom or his seniors in the male family members will select the bride. It was a tradition and culture that the father of the bride has to give a dowry to the bridegroom for the marriage. But in this story Nandakishore has to pay a dowry to Sohini to save her grandmother’s residential house.

As a widow of Nandakishore, Sohini has to fight against the patriarchal society and the conventional and traditional rules of the heir to be the male members of the deceased and has confirmed her legal rights on the properties of Nandakishore. Rabindranath once again breaks the traditional convention in their marriage. Theirs (Nandakishore and Sohini) is an unconventional marriage and defying the existing norms of the society where male members will work outside and the women, rather the wives are destined to cook and do the household works. Both Nandakishore and Sohini shares a common faith and both are involved in the scientific research. Even going one step further Sohini confesses her as an unchaste woman and Nandakishore is well aware of that. This is a punching blow to the then patriarchal societal tradition and culture.

Sohini’s bold determination and taking good care of the laboratory and continuation of the research work is her love for education what Rabindranath always believed as a fiery tool for the emancipation of the women. Sohini is a strong woman who breaks the existing norms and tradition of

patriarchal society but deep in her heart she is an affectionate and compassionate woman who nurtures love for the animals and shows her affection to her grandmother when the situation demands which is always a natural law of the woman inside their heart. Sohini is bold and beautiful, a strong woman of new era what Rabindranath foresaw- a modern day liberated, emancipated woman would be like this. At the same time, even being very affectionate and compassionate inside, Sohoni does not care a fig to disclose Nila's birth identity to disinherit her and breaks her marriage with Rebati, to save the laboratory which is not an easy task in colonial Bengal during Renaissance.

## Conclusion

Analysing all the four short stories discussed in this paper and deconstructing the content of the stories, it appears that Tagore tries to find solutions to some existing problems like dowry system, sexual oppression, arranged marriage and need of women education to regain individuality for the need of women empowerment and freedom, both in and from the patriarchal set of the family system.

Deconstruction of the women characters in the stories discussed above shows that the characters long for the pride in their identity as women instead of their identities as wife, mother or daughter. They defy the patriarchal, societal and conventional rights and wrongs what the society and patriarchy expect from them. They deny to curb their passions and hobbies post marriage and are not at all hesitant to establish their pride and identity as women of acceptance and love apart from their marriage. In doing so, they pose a challenge and threat to the archetypal concepts of dowry system, femininity, chastity of the widows and assert the importance of women education and their pride and honour.

These characters have challenged the patriarchal conventions of the colonial Bengal even in the period of Renaissance and Tagore has created them as assertive, liberated and emancipated women almost a century ago (from today), much before the literary critical theory of 'Modern Feminism'(1960's) and 'Deconstruction'(1967) evolved in the literary fraternity.

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