



Subverting the Nationalist Construction of Women beyond Domesticity: Problematizing Gender during Indian Independence in Select Short Stories of Tagore

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Abstract: The nationalist ideology of India emerged as a counter to colonialism during the 19th century. It ordered Indian men to be masculine and strong in order to protect and safeguard the nation as a mother and wife. The nation soon came to stand in for the Indian women's body. Therefore, protecting the nation from the imperialism of the British translated to a hierarchy in the relationship between man and women, with men claiming public space of power and women receding to the private space of the home, where they wield no power. This allowed for the binary gender relation between men and women and patriarchal control over the body of the woman. The study analyses this correlation between nationalist imaginings during Indian independence and the advent of the gender binary in the public space of the nation. It does so through select short stories of Rabindranath Tagore, titled "Giribala" and "The Wife's Letter." The study examines the pathos of the 20th century Bengali women in terms of their bodies by drawing on the problematic blurring of the Indian nation and the female body. The female protagonists map the shift of women from the private space of domesticity and home to reclaiming their space in public and consequently their own identity and selfhood. The study finds that the bodies of women are the site of patriarchal dominance and at the same time they are also the most crucial weapon of the female liberation.

Keywords: gender, identity, nationalism, feminism, Bengal, India.



Introduction

Feminist thinking arrived with British colonialism, exposure to the western governance and education exposed a few men and women to the comparatively liberal state of women in the west. Ironically, if we walk down the lanes of Indian history, we find that India had gender equality way before the west. During the Rig-Veda period, women had equal status as men in terms of equality of labour, religious rights, freedom of movement. Women were educated and active in the public sphere. The rise of the Varna system in later Vedic age witnessed the disintegration of the said equality. The division of castes buried beneath hollow notions of purity and penance discouraged the intermingling of different castes. This pushed women to corner and barricaded within the dogmas of the *Manusmriti*, they were forced to male dependency. They were reduced to objects to maintain and assert misplaced notions of superiority. Regressive customs like child marriage, child widow and Sati prevailed only to keep women bound to glorified notions of servitude and loyalty to family. Remarriage of widows was not allowed because it threatened the patriarchal power structures.

It is at the turn of the 19th century that the winds of liberal thought began to touch upon the draught of medieval mentality in Bengal. The rise of the intellectual middle class led to an obvious interest in British lifestyle and education. This new middle class was experiencing a new kind of consciousness which was felt not only in the literary and intellectual activities, but also in the fields of socio-political movements.

Tagore's short stories show a wide array of human psyche such as the tyranny of the man who holds the power, the women whose tormented memory bears the trauma of her times and the narrow social prejudices that propel them both to a fate they cannot overcome. The complex human mind and its emotions become the subject of his storytelling. His focus on the misfortune of the modern man is brought about by the complicated familial burdened by gender hierarchy, power struggle and stereotypes. They are very touching in the characters' anguished journeys and liberating ends. His plea is to create a life for his characters that get them closer to nature—the nature within themselves but not without struggle and loss. It is through this suffering and



loss that Tagore represents the social consciousness of his time. His short stories thus speak to men and women beyond the space and time of its original writing.

Rabindranath Tagore's writings during the period of the Sepoy mutiny are considered his first phase of writing (1881-97). Here Tagore as a realist writer emerges, where he presents the image of the women as a victim, a silent sufferer who is yet to realise the full extent of her potential. In his second phase called the pre-Gitanjali period (1901-1912), his heroines become aware of the social scenario around them and their subjugation within it. Still unadjusted to the new sensibilities and recognition of their own power, they are caught up in the transition from the medieval to the modern mentality. It is here that Tagore touches upon the aspect of female sexuality and individuality and attempts to break the shell of submissiveness and false purity. Through Mrinal in "The Wife's Letter", Tagore problematizes the inherent patriarchy present in the domestic space and attempts to subvert it via the female protagonist's act of writing the truth and eventually leaving her patriarchal family. It is in the final phase of the post Gitanjali period (1913-1941), we see a consequential change in his heroines. They are seen to make hard choices and own their bodies and are not afraid to express their desires. The eponymous heroines like "Giribala" transform herself from being victims to victors. They embrace their bodies and as a result form their own identities untarnished by the social symbolic order. They go on to form the New Woman of the New Age. In this stage, Tagore's heroines consciously challenge the nationalist construction of gender as ideal motherhood and ennobled chastity. They eventually emerge out of this nationalist consciousness with the harmony of the fulness of their being by denying the traditions of moral ideals that stand in the way. In 'The Wife's Letter' and 'Giribala', both the heroines achieve self-fulfilment with the realization of their public selves through the potential world of aestheticism, theatre and writing.

The Wife's Letter

"The Wife's letter" is written in an epistolary form through the perspective of the female protagonist. Therefore, at the very beginning of the story we see an empowered woman. She is empowered by the pen in her hand that allows her to be the cartographer of her own journey from 21, Makhan Badhal Lane to Puri. This is pivotal to dismantle the persistent gender



hierarchy by a conscious re-writing of the male canonical ideology. The geographical shift denotes the movement away from home, from marriage and therefore from the very origins of her oppression. The letters reveal the sheer force of her survival instinct and her resistance to internalizing a definition of self that is imposed on her. It is through language that Mrinal intervenes in the public sphere.

This act of writing as a means of empowerment and entry to the public sphere is mirrored in second wave French feminists like Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous. Helene Cixous in her seminal work “The Laugh of Medusa” states that for women, writing through a reconnection to their bodies, creates the potentiality for large scale societal change. Cixous writes “She must write her ‘self’, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history” (Cixous, 880). Therefore, the act of writing the letter imparts a sense of empowered authority, seeks to provide Mrinal with the means by which she actively and strategically intervenes in the public sphere through the medium of language which is essentially her own.

Further, Cixous and other poststructuralist critics opine that language plays an active role in creating ‘reality’. It follows that using language differently can produce different ‘realities’. Mrinal retells the reality of Bindu’s suicide which is seen as an act of weakness by her patriarchal family. It is only Mrinal who understands it as an act of resistance against her imprisonment in marriage. Her suicide becomes the text of assertion. She says, “But one should reflect why this play-acting takes its toll only of the saris of Bengali women, not of the dhotis of brave Bengali gentlemen” (Tagore, 218). Cixous invites women to writing, reimagining masculine languages into what she calls an “écriture feminine” a feminine mode of writing. Cixous opines that there is a feminine way of writing which can be accessed through a rediscovery of the lived female body and self that can lead to a breakdown of pervasive phallogocentric imprint and thus lead to new ways of thinking and living. Mrinal’s act of writing the letter, originating from her own subjective lived experiences, is an act of rediscovery of her female body.



Mrinal has a deep admiration for Bindu's courage for she was able to transcend the iron cells of patriarchy. She was thus more alive as a free-spirit in death than in life, "There she is infinite." Mrinal writes. Her courage allows Mrinal to take a much more radical step that she would not have been able to take earlier. She resolves astutely: "But I will never again return to your house at number 27, Makhan Baral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it" (Tagore, 218). She thus decentralises herself from the origin point of her oppression, her marriage and her family. Standing in front of the vast stretches of the ocean, Mrinal redefines 'home' as not the house of her husband but instead in the vast cosmos. She could finally breathe among nature which was not possible in the 'narrow domestic walls' of her husband's house. In doing this, the shroud of 'Mejo Bou' is lifted off, leaving her with endless potential of self-discovery.

Mrinal, in her letter, charts fifteen years of being married in a privileged aristocratic family and the despotisms she had to endure there in the name of oppressive traditions. Mrinal possesses both extraordinary beauty and intelligence. But while she is praised by her in laws for her beauty, her intelligence is neither encouraged nor appreciated. Mrinal cannot let go of her creative fire and thus writes poetry in secret. She loses her child in childbirth because she is confined to an unsanitary small room during her pregnancy because it was the custom to not let pregnant women enter the household. We witness here how women of high caste and rich families were treated with the same disrespect as that of low caste women. While the men's quarters were rich in sufficiency, women's rooms were near the cattle sheds and exteriors which attracted more germs and dirt. No one shares her pain and loneliness until Bindu comes along. Bindu is the total antithesis of Mrinal. She is ugly, orphaned sister of Mrinal's elder sister-in-law. Bindu clings to Mrinal with deep affection admiring her beauty as that is what she lacks. Her constant obsession with Mrinal's hair stems from societal indoctrination to rely on her body's beauty than the self; she sees in Mrinal everything she lacks and hence wants to possess. This shows how patriarchy stresses on physical beauty of women's bodies and suppresses their mental and emotional faculties. Incidentally, Bindu is married off to a man who is unstable and violent. Bindu is forced to return to her abusive marriage after she attempts to run away. When Mrinal



also fails to protect her even after her many protests, Bindu sets herself on fire because she cannot see any other escape. The tragedy of the situation is that the entire family is indifferent to her death.

Women are thus looked at only through their body and the 'roles' that it can perform. This is the folly of a state that relies on functionalism. Functionalism looks at the society as parts of the anatomy where each section is like an organ and the simultaneous functioning of all the social organs lead to its progress. It ignores the individual aspects of a human being. Thus, women are reduced to subservient roles of a 'wife' or a 'mother'. Betty Freidan criticised the concept the functionalism in her famous book *The Feminine Mystique*. She argues how women's anatomy becomes her only destiny and her identity rests on her biology.

Mrinal is not allowed to act neither as a wife nor as a mother. She loses her child due to enforced patriarchal rituals. The tragedy of the loss of the child is compounded by her inability to save her baby by protesting against the unhygienic conditions. Her pain is profound, "A mother even within the confines of her own family belongs to the family of the world. I suffered only the pain of motherhood; I never experienced its freedom" (Tagore, 215). She finally understands that the aristocratic customs of patriarchy will never allow her to be free. She will always be draped like a doll that is admired from a distance but never acknowledged or respected as a human being. Her intellectual beauty will have no space in the face of her sexual beauty. As Mrinal overtly states to her husband, "It did not take long for you to forget that I had beauty—but you were forced to remember at each step that I had brains. This intelligence is so much a part of my nature that it has survived even fifteen years in your household" (Tagore, 217).

The dichotomy between this 'I' and 'Other' in terms of husband wife relation raises gender hostilities that are unfounded on reason fact or truth. All the roles that Mrinal tries to incorporate, that of a nurturing sisterhood, motherhood, creative women writer, all are trampled like a dead flower under the weight of her role as the 'Mejo Bou'. In the end, it is this very status that she pledges to escape from. She asserts that she is going to a pilgrimage in Puri and decides to never go back. Indeed, the empowered embodiment of "The Wife's Letter" showcases the transcendence from Mejo Bou to Mrinal. She attains selfhood through a rediscovery of her body,



its rights, its abilities and its wholesomeness beyond the functionality that patriarchy expects of a women's body. The letter, its act of re-writing shapes Mrinal's subjectivity.

From Mrinal's soft timid respect to her husband in the start of the letter beginning with the words, "My submission at your lotus feet," it transforms to an assured boldness as the letter approaches its end, "I too shall live. At last, I live. Bereft of the shelter of your family's feet" (Tagore, 226). She refuses to kill herself like Bindu, she declares with confidence that she shall live. Thus, Mrinal surpasses Bindu in her ability to endure and abstain. She neither submits nor transforms herself. Instead, much like her name, Mrinal stands erect like a lotus stem.

Giribala

Giribala's journey is not a sudden eureka of freedom but a slow and eventual apprehension. Giribala's husband Gopinath is the spoilt son of a Zamindar who is infatuated with the theatre actress Lavanga Latika. Even though Giribala and Gopinath were friends and close when they got married, eventually there develops a rift in their conjugal relationship. He does not pay attention to the emotional or physical needs of his wife. When Giribala suspects that her husband is having an affair with Lavanga Latika, she follows him to the theatre and witnesses his attraction for the sensuous performer Latika. The play *Maan Bhanjanis* being enacted onstage with glimmering lights and the crowd is intoxicated with Latika's portrayal of Radha. 'Radha' is in an angry mood and 'Krishna' is trying to convince her by surrendering himself to her feet. Ironically Giribala is attracted to the glamour of the theatre performance. Even after her tragic discovery of her husband's attraction to Latika, she is amazed at the latter's acting skills and the performance of the love story onstage.

Giribala visualises herself as Radha and the next morning she adorns herself in sari and with jewellery. She does so because she feels empowered in viewing herself as Radha in her beauty and grace that had the power to make Krishna fall at her feet. She hides the keys of her husband's vault and runs from him refusing to give him the key. She futilely hopes that like Krishna, her husband will try to convince her and fall at her feet.

Theatre was an important medium of representation of dominant ideologies of the state and counter-hegemonic struggle during colonial rule. All power equations of class, gender and



caste were faithfully performed as a mirror to the society and sometimes it also had the creative power of subtly subverting them. Radha's portrayal of the feminine power made Giribala embrace her beauty and use it as a weapon against her husband's perceived ignorance. But things work out differently for Giribala. Her husband loses his temper and snatches at the jewellery she was wearing. He leaves her heartbroken and hurt with the gold. Eventually he deserts his wife using the money to elope with Latika. This act of abuse leads Giribala to the ultimate realisation that her beauty and sexuality are not to be caged with passivity, rather her sexuality can be an empowered medium. Theatre is an expression of culture through the medium of art. Antonio Gramsci said culture is the key site where struggle for hegemony takes place. Therefore, culture constitutes and maintains gender binaries and the superiority of one gender over another and theatre as a discourse universalises that ideology as interests of the society as a whole (Gramsci 8). This particular fact operates on various levels in the text.

Hindu society's caste discrimination led to a stringent moulding of women's behaviour dressing and language in order to make the distinction more apparent. Religious repressiveness ensured for women passive non-existent gender roles. Theatre was not regarded as a place for upper caste women as the sexual activeness in performance was unmatched with the code of conduct of the wives of the respectable gentlemen. The women who did perform in the theatre were disrespected as low caste fallen women. This dichotomy of the angel of the house and devil in flesh was result of the Hindu Revivalism of the 19th century in Bengal and Maharashtra which voiced an aggressive Hinduism in rituals and traditions in order to invoke feelings of nationalism. These conservative tendencies of revivalism are reflected in the servile passivity of Giribala and in contrast the voyeuristic lust invoked by Latika. When Gopinath hears a more beautiful actress has replaced Latika, his corrupting lust brings him back to the theatre company. As the curtains draw, he discovers that it is none other than his wife, Giribala, dazzling as the gorgeous Radha in the play *Manorama*. He runs to her like a madman screaming "I will kill her" (Tagore, 267). The patriarchal double standard is evident here where Gopinath cannot accept the more emancipated position of her wife as a theatre actress as he associates the identity of public actress with disgraced woman. He lusts after Latika for her physical beauty and steals her away

but when he sees his wife in the same role, his high-class ego is hurt. It is unbecoming for a respectable woman to enjoy pleasure or perform in public space as it is a prerogative for a man.

Latika, unlike Giribala, is not bound by marriage or code of conduct of the upper caste due to her job as an actress. She enjoys her profession and the company and attention of men. At the surface level Latika seems to enjoy more liberty than Giribala can hope to be, yet Latika is also trapped within the patriarchal discourse. She is at the 'other' end of the male gaze, being a 'disgraced' public woman and as a result she loses power in controlling the narrative.

Tagore depicts Giribala as intelligent, educated and proud of her womanhood. She breaks the monotonous routine of waiting for her husband to notice her presence and appreciate her role as a wife. Giribala had always been aware of her beauty and grace. It is Gopinath who remained unaware of it. As soon as Giribala realises this she cannot be held back, Tagore questions through her the repression of sexual feelings, passion and other bodily emotions that women are not allowed to express. Gopinath satisfies his sexual urges with Latika whereas Giribala is trapped in the garb of a docile wife.

If Latika through her choice becomes the master of her own agency, then Giribala too transcends from what is expected of her to what she wants to do in the conflict between social morality and the need for emotional freedom. Her journey is of self-discovery like all of Tagore's heroines. She joins the theatre company as the new lead actress where she can display and express her sexuality and talents with a vigour that wifehood does not allow. It would be limiting to say that Giribala joins the theatre company to merely avenge her husband. Giribala's decision has a more nuanced perspective. She has entered the public sphere not as a lower caste woman of stigmatised identity, but as a wife of a respectable family. By choosing a career as public actress, she dismantles and reconstructs gender and a class hierarchy in many ways. She does not view theatre as a disrespectable profession. She views dance as an art through which she can express herself that marriage did not allow her. She controls the narrative onstage. Therefore, she is no more a part of the male gaze; on the contrary, she enters the discourse of patriarchy only to subvert its power position. Her sexual identity and more importantly her body



are emancipated from any signified moral structures. The narrator's description of Giribala onstage is a testimony to that,

“...when with a majestic pride of her overwhelming beauty she turned her face towards the audience and, slightly bending her neck, shot a fiery glance of exultation at Gopinath, applause broke out in wave after wave and the enthusiasm of the spectators became unbounded.” (Tagore, 267)

True freedom relies not in bending her husband to her will but letting go of the urge to please him to make herself feel fulfilled. Her self-confidence and belief is like the sun's radiance finally emerging out of the eclipse, described as “queenly in her beauty and splendour of ornaments” (Tagore, 266).

The Indian novel as it was emerging in the 20th century was primarily of two kinds, first of social realism that presented the trends and problems of society as it was witnessed by the common man and the romantic novel that scrutinizes the psychological ambiguities and divided sensibilities due to the prevalent touchstones of society. Tagore challenges the socio-cultural customs as he counters love with desire and sexuality that is driven by an urge as intoxicating as the shimmering lights of the theatre company. Tagore replaces the imaginative idealistic love within structures that Giribala deems as ashen and death-like as if they are dried up flowers without water. Sexual desire is found in self-assertion in the text. Tagore links the body and its need with the emotions and personality of the character and in doing so, he raises Giribala's love to a spiritual level. But spirituality is not found in institutions of religion that force heteronormativity and relation of dependence of female upon male supremacy. For Tagore, spirituality is not a part of set dogmas but resides in self-realisation. Giribala's love for the female body is not limited by physical urge like Gopinath, but it becomes an emotional and passionate fulfilment of the soul itself. To her, love is a harmonious amalgamation of aesthetics and consciousness. She remains untainted by patriarchy till the very end.

Conclusion

Tagore wrote decades before the emergence of the second wave of feminism in the 1960, yet we find strains of French feminist's approach to what is termed as the feminine writing.



Tagore tries to unite the cultural with the psychological in deconstructing the poignancy of the 20th century women. If gender is a performance, as Butler states, then both Giribala and Mrinal subvert traditional heteronormative roles and play their performance of gender. It is through the lived body that a women's sense of identity is constructed. Meenakshi Thapan in her *Embodiment: Essays in Gender and Equality* talks about this centrality of the female body:

It is the site of violence, exclusion and abuse; it also has its celebratory aspects which are revealed in imagery through artistic and aesthetic modes, or in the consciousness of women; it is the site also for agency which allows for the possibilities of negotiation, intervention, contestation and transformation.(Thapan 3)

Tagore fights for gender equality beyond the surface level of legal rights and property rights. He discusses in depth about the power equation of the genders and the subsequent inequality within the institution of marriage. "The Wife's Letter" and "Giribala" all deal with patriarchy within the realms of (yet not limited to) marriage. Therefore, within this relationship, the tragic state of women is more cathartic. Like the psychological trauma of soldiers having returned from war, Tagore traces how the political and historical disturbances create ripples in the psyche of the woman and her existence. Tagore advocates modernism as the need of the hour, negating the narrow confinements of aggressive and jingoistic nationalism. He opines in 'Nationalism in the West' (1916-1917):

We have felt its iron grip at the root of our life, and for the sake of humanity we must stand up and give warning to all, that nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, and eating into its moral vitality. (Tagore 59)

He feels modernism could become an important tool not only in freeing India of colonial rule but also in freeing the minds of the Indians from narrow walls to ensure equality within free India in terms of gender, caste and class. For Tagore, Swadeshi was a renewal of Indian values and traditions with innovation and creativity on its side. Tagore thus felt the New India should be a fusion of modernism and tradition. Therefore, Tagore's heroines are strong spokeswomen for education and employment rights as most of his heroines have nurtured creativity and talent in



them to enter in the public domain. Mrinal loves to write poetry, Giribala has the immense capacity to sing and dance in a frenzied manner and this wild spirit of her own gives her a prominent place as a leading actress in public theatre.

His oeuvre is thus a careful cause and effect relation of the societal changes within the larger dynamics of gender politics. Therefore, female protagonist finds herself torn between passive compliance and active resistance as the most effective means of survival. This leads to unhappy marriages, rupture between husband and wife, suppressed creativity, incessant insecurities about physical beauty and an emptiness that is wide and wavering as the stars. Revelation of the female psyche is a strong element in his stories. The plot is secondary to the bildungsroman of the characters. In charting the resistance against the oppressive forces, the female characters are first analysed in their socio-cultural settings and the trials and tribulations they have to face as a result of it. Their growth lies in the acute sense of understanding of the restrictive spaces they inhabit and only a full realisation of this can pave the way for a strong subversion.

The eventual subversion arises out of a re-discovery of one's identity by accepting their bodies and all the physical, emotional and intellectual agencies that come with it. This stresses on equality beyond legal rights, on the independence of body and gender which aligns him to the second wave of Feminism even though Tagore is writing much before the upsurge of the movement in the 1960's. Tagore's idea of 'humanism' infused with the aesthetics of modernism gives way to his nuanced understanding of pluralities that feminism sought to acknowledge. Tagore writes in 'Nationalism in India' (1917):

The thing we in India have to think of is this – to remove those social customs and ideals which have generated a want of self-respect and a complete dependence on those above us – a state of affairs which has been brought about entirely by the domination in India of the caste system, and the blind and lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions that are incongruous anachronisms in the present age. (Tagore 102)



Tagore felt peace and progress can only occur when the personal identity is uncoupled from society as both are in a flux and constantly changing. The place for a detached personal identity is the quest of his heroines. These identities have a re-conciliation with the body against the patriarchal paradigm for the full realisation of the self. The woman protagonists resist against heterogeneous gender definitions of sexual behaviours, Mrinal channels her bodily suffering to write back to patriarchy and Giribala transgresses sexual norms to enter the public sphere of theatre where no aristocratic woman has ever been. Thus, the idea of gender construction propagated by the nation in 19th and 20th century India, is violently disregarded by the author's subversive heroines. They deracinate themselves from their signified centres and find freedom in chaos.

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