



UNREQUITED SELFHOOD: A SEARCH OF IDENTITY IN THE PLAY THE KING AND THE QUEEN AND THE STORY A WIFE'S LETTER BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Seema Banta

Department of ASH University Institute of Technology- Shimla Himachal Pradesh University,
Summer Hill Shimla-05

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 14th July, 2021

Received in revised form 29th

August, 2021

Accepted 05th September, 2021

Published online 28th October, 2021

Key words:

Selfhood, Identity, Individuality, Patriarchy,
Freedom.

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore has been quite ahead of his times in vocalizing women as defiant and assertive beings. He was a rebel and a radical all his life. Tagore provided a voice to women through his stories, novels and plays. Tagore pioneered in advocating women's liberty and has left behind the legacy of his leading heroines, who were bold, talented, empowered and challenged the embedded patriarchal notions of 19th century India. The present paper is an attempt to study the search of selfhood and identity through two female characters the Queen Sumitra and Mrinal. The play *The King and the Queen* and the short story *The Wife's Letter* reveal how a cultural artifact can articulate the struggle and implication of conflict in the mind of a woman in the contradictions of a society and culture in transition. Tagore's women were progressive and provided a fresh perspective to the minds already filled with traditional Indian values. Queen Sumitra and Mrinal both are the embodiment of Independent, courageous and unapologetic women.

Copyright©2021 Seema Banta. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore has been quite ahead of his times in vocalizing women as defiant and assertive beings. He has been a rebel and a radical all his life. Tagore provided a voice to women through his stories, novels and plays. Tagore has been a pioneer in advocating women's liberty and has left behind the legacy of his leading heroines, who were bold, talented, empowered and challenged the embedded patriarchal notions of 19th century India.

Tagore has written a lot on women, although that is not much talked-about part of his work. In the short stories and plays of Tagore, struggles and sufferings of women are emphasized empathetically. Unconventionally, Tagore represents his women as courageous beings who defy social and domestic norms in a conservative and patriarchal Indian setup.

During late nineteenth century he started to portray the educated and urban Indian woman who fought for human rights and equality. The play *The King and the Queen* (1889) falls into this category of his writings. 1913 onwards Tagore's heroines were openly challenging social evils like widow-remarriage, untouchability, the rigid caste-system, and patriarchy at large. The short story *A Wife's Letter* (1913) belongs to this stage of Tagore's writings.

Fascinatingly enough Tagore's portrayal of the woman is that of an empowered being. Interesting fact yet again is that he always places her narrative in a traditional background. This is the creative skillfulness of Tagore, for when he makes

them eventually break out of the submissive roles they are expected to play; the impact of the breaking of shackles becomes more powerful for the readers. We can definitely say that on the basis of his characterization of strong women in his works, Tagore strived to be a feminist in the truest sense.

Queen Sumitra in the Play The King and the Queen

The King and the Queen, (*Raja O Rani*, 1889), the first of his series of tragedies is notable for its success in delineating woman as beautiful and gentle yet strong beings. Queen Sumitra has been portrayed by Tagore as a wise and inherently strong person. King Vikram, on the other hand, infatuated by her love neglects the state and all his obligations towards it. Consequently people suffer at the hands of corrupt functionaries. Devdatta, the King's Brahmin friend, apprises him of the situation. There is bitter sarcasm in many of his statements: "The King's poor subjects have been practicing long to live upon half a meal a day, but they have not yet become experts in complete starvation" (*Collected Poems and Plays* 537).

In Sumitra, Tagore presents a conscientious and sagacious queen responsive towards the call of love and demands of her duty as a queen. She presents Tagore's ideal of modern and dynamic woman. She protests against King Vikram's excessive preoccupation with her as a desirable woman to the exclusion of affairs of state. She requests the King: Hate me, King, hate me. Forget me. I shall bear it bravely, - but do not wreck your

*Corresponding author: **Seema Banta**

Department of ASH University Institute of Technology- Shimla
Himachal Pradesh University, Summer Hill Shimla-05

manhood against a woman's charms...I feel shamed to share alone your heart which is for all men. (541) Exasperated, she leaves him at last to seek her brother's help to save the state from impending doom. King Vikram, in his recklessness, sees her action as both betrayal of their love and insult to his manhood. "Woman you mock me....you dare not leave me." (542)

Possessiveness and infatuation now changes to blind hatred, and the thirst for revenge: "Revenge is stronger than the thin wine of love. Revenge is freedom,-freedom from the coils of cloying sweetness" (547). 'Revenge is a pyrrhic victory too, and King Vikram's 'enemies' (Sumitra and her brother) elude his grasp, and he gloomily notes that love and death are not too careful in their choice of victims. They are impartial' (Iyengar 46). The King thinks that the queen Sumitra has betrayed him and says that this "cruel pain pierces my heart." But his friend Devdatta tells him "you shall have no time for pain, or for love, now,-your life will become one stream of purpose, and carry your kingly heart to its great conquest" (547).

But the King is still not able to understand his duty as a King and takes it as an insult when informed that queen Sumitra has gone to her brother in Kashmir for the help repress the rebellion in his Kingdom. The King sets out to bring her back, crushing all opposition. The Queen begs him to stop devastating the country, but the King is in no mood to listen to her and says: "...When once a war is started, rightly or wrongly, it is our man's pride that must carry it on to the end" (549). He makes clear his purpose of battle: "To rob was not my purpose, but to restore my honour. The head that bears the crown cannot bear insult" (550).

The Queen's brother, instead of surrendering, sends his severed head through his own sister to ensure peace in the kingdom. It is only when the King meets Ilia, the girl engaged to be married to Kumarsen, the queen's brother that he gives a slight inkling of being human, made of flesh and blood, and not a maniac. But this change of heart comes very late, and in the meantime the precious life of Kumarsen is lost. Queen Sumitra sympathizing with her people offers to bear the responsibilities of the kingdom. She considers herself responsible for the pitiable plight of her subjects. She requests Vikram, "Sire, I beg of you, attend to your work" (536). She, being the guardian of the realm, is the mother of all her subjects. Therefore, it is impossible for her to see them in pain and suffering without feeling. She says, "What shame is this! I must remove this refuse from my father's land and save my people. I am the mother of my people. I cannot bear their cry. Save them King" (538). King neglecting the general good and ignoring the Queen's entreaties has no effect on King and he says to her: "No more vain words, Queen. The birds' nests are silent with love. Let lips keep guard upon lips, and allow not words to clamour" (536).

Tagore invests the character of the queen with a rare moral courage. The play reverses the traditional idea of womanhood that is associated with an inherent meekness and submissiveness. Tagore's queen is not of a dumb woman, who would never question the status quo.

King Vikram renounces his kingly responsibilities to receive love from his wife Queen Sumitra. To him, "Respite from duty is a part of duty" (536). He neglects his duties and responsibilities to satisfy his own love and lust for physical beauty of the Queen. The 'King' is spiritually and morally blind

in the former play, the 'Queen' in the latter; and the blindness in either case is the result of their self-centeredness, their inability to make love a wholesome force instead of contracting to mere self-love... Vikram given to self-indulgence and sloth, he has made himself the monarch of a sensual heaven. (125)

In his series of lectures delivered in America in 1917 Tagore urged the world to consider the woman her life with due regard which she deserves. This ideal of stability is deeply cherished in woman's nature. She is never in love with merely going on, shooting wanton arrows of curiosity into the heart of darkness. All her forces instinctively work to bring things to some shape of fullness-for that is the law of life. (*Personality* 156)

Tagore firmly believed in the strengthening of women condition and he believed that women themselves need to do that for themselves. "God has sent woman to love the world, which is a world of ordinary things and events. She is not in the world of the fairy tale where the fair woman sleeps for ages till she is touched by the magic wand." (163) He further says: "Woman should use her power to break through the surface and go to the centre of the things, where in the mystery of life dwells an eternal source of interest" (162). The character of the queen Sumitra resonates with these ideas of Tagore about the role of a woman in this world. "But woman cannot be pushed back for good into the mere region of the decorative by man's aggressiveness of power. For she is not less necessary in civilization than man but possibly more so." (165)

Tagore is of the idea that "in the present state of history man is asserting his masculine supremacy and building his civilization with stone blocks, ignoring the living principle of growth, he cannot altogether crush woman's nature into dust or into his dead building materials. Woman's home may have been shattered, but woman is not, and cannot, herself be killed. It is not that woman is merely seeking her freedom of livelihood, struggling against man's monopoly of business, but against man's monopoly of civilization where he is breaking her heart every day and desolating her life" (165).

In his characterization of women we "...see her emergence as an individual in the middle of the oppression that surrounds her. Tagore as a true feminist "explores with a cruel scrapple gender relations in Hindu society, in particular, in conjugal life" (Bhattacharya 164). In one of his essays on '*The Indian Ideal of Marriage*', Tagore he said that "In every country marriage is still more or less of a prison house for the confinement of woman.-with all its gaurds wearing the badge of the dominant male...[Man] by dint of his efforts to bind woman, has made her the strongest of fetters of his own bondage" and "the married state is still one of the most fruitful sources of the unhappiness and downfall of man'. This Tagore believed was because of the lack of man to appreciate woman as an Individual full of life force and failure to acknowledge her as an equal. "...man's tendency to use it for the purpose of his individual enjoyment, corrupting it, confining it, like his property within jealously guarded limits." (Bhattacharya 165)

Mrinal in the Short Story A Wife's Letter

A Wife's Letter is one of the most powerful portrayals of a woman calling out the evils of patriarchy. "Streer Patra" (*A Wife's Letter*) written in 1913 is his first short story written in colloquial Bangla. In a letter written on 17 May 1941, Tagore confirmed that "It's in my short story Streer Patra

that I supported the women's cause for the first time" (Das Gupta 122).

A Wife's Letter is the narrative of Mrinal, the protagonist concerning her viewpoint on her personal and family life.

It's the story of a young woman who leaves her husband after his family forces her sister-in-law's younger sister Bindu into an abusive marriage. To escape the forceful marriage Bindu immolates herself. Mrinal keeps watching the hypocritical treatment meted out by her in-laws towards Bindu, the pressure they inflicted on her to be a perfect mother and wife, and finally their love for the superficial at the cost of human emotions and relationships. Disgusted, Mrinal finally decides to leave her husband and takes refuge in an island.

Mrinal writes a letter to her husband informing him about her decision of not coming back again. In her letter she pours out her anguish on his ill treatment of her. She explains in detail how her husband's neglect killed her passion and talents. He treated her as an accessory, and never stood up for the wrongs his family did to her. Through Mrinal, Tagore described a woman who wasn't afraid to choose herself before her husband and his family. Finally she took the courage to break free of the shackles of the society and follow her passion. She chooses her independent path to become a poet. It takes her fifteen years to let go of the unrequited married life and assert herself. She finally has found courage to voice her struggle for self-identification. Through Mrinal, Tagore reflects on how a woman's life is not meant to be restricted within the inner walls of a home. There is a whole world out there even for her to be explored and experienced.

Being a progressive thinker, his writings often were based on bold subjects that were far ahead of the time. Tagore writes about Women's struggles and the social injustices inflicted on them. Tagore advocates about women to find an identity of their own. Tagore in short stories shows many facets of womanhood showing men-women relationship, woman's relationship with herself as well as awakening of the new woman.

In order to understand Tagore's writing one has to get an overview about the social upheaval taking place in nineteenth century Bengal and Tagore's personal life from where he got inspiration for creating the image of "new woman". During the nineteenth century in Bengal there were many intellectuals who showed their concern about female education. Female education was always a priority of enlightened Tagore family since the time of Dwarkanath Tagore (Tagore's grandfather). Tagore carried forward the same tradition and was inspired to write strong women characters like Mrinal and Queen Sumitra. *Streer Patra* or *The Wife's Letter* is an epistolary short story penned by Rabindranath Tagore. In this story Tagore expresses a woman's resentment with the way her life unravels. The plot revolves around the protagonist Mrinal, who is married to an upper class patriarchal household. She is a beautiful and intelligent girl from village who got married at the tender age of twelve years. While praised for her beauty she is expected not to show her intelligence.

We come to know about Mrinal's relationship with her husband, and other females of the family. Through the letter she wrote to her husband, Mrinal presents a glimpse of her fifteen years long married life. At the same time we also come

to know about the position of her elder sister-in-law and her young sister Bindu. There is a stark opposition in the way she starts her letter and how she addresses her husband at the end of her letter.

She starts her letter by addressing her husband in a traditional manner of regard, "To the Auspicious Lotus Feet". It's her first letter to her husband in their fifteen years of married life. In the beginning she addresses herself as "Mejo-Bou" meaning the second bride of the joint family. She says "Today fifteen years later, standing at the edge of the ocean, I understand that I also have other relationships, with the world and the World-Keeper. So I find the courage to write this letter. This is not a letter from your family's Mejo-Bou" (*Indian Literature* 110). "Mrinal is a New Woman imagined by Tagore who challenges the male centric persecution and gets freed from the equivalent" (Charulatha 78).

Mrinal through her letter successfully portrays the sufferings of women in the world of men and highlights the injustice and absurdity all the more. Mrinal being culturally conditioned enters into her husband's home at the young age of twelve years. She tries her best to be the traditional woman sufficing herself to the chores of family life. The indifference of her husband towards her makes her surreal with time. Loss of her infant daughter aggravates her feeling of void in her life. "How trivial this daily life's journey; how trivial all its fixed rules, its fixed ways, its fixed phrases of rote, all its fixed defeats." (*Indian Literature* 122)

To free herself from the suffocation she takes solace in writing poetry. She says: "Secretly I wrote poems. No matter if it was all rubbish, at least there boundary wall of the inner compound could not stop me. There lay my freedom, there I could be myself. Whatever it was in me that kept your Mejo-Bou detached from your family, you didn't like it, didn't even recognize it; in all these fifteen years none of you ever found out that I was a poet" (112).

Mrinal gave birth to a girl child but she died soon. The loss of a child made her grave and more disconcerted about her surroundings. She took refuge in cows and calves of house. But when Bindu came to stay at their house her motherly emotions were once again rekindled. It saddened and distressed her how her sister-in-law in order to please her husband and the rest of family tries to disown her own younger sister. "Didi was anxious to prove to everyone that our household had been fortunate in obtaining Bindu's services at bargain rates. The girl would work tirelessly, and the cost was minimal." (113)

Mrinal understood the dilemma of her sister-in-law in proving herself a devoted wife but she herself refuses to follow the example. Mrinal says: "I could not humble myself in all ways as she had done. If I find something worthy, it's not my inclination to disparage it just to please someone else" (114). At the news of Bindu committing suicide, Mrinal says-"Oh. Peace at last...You all said, such dramatics! Maybe. But shouldn't we ask why dramatics takes place only with Bengali women's sarees and not with the so-brave Bengali men's dhotis?" (122). These words of Mrinal are a scathing attack on the hypocrisy of Bengali upper class to which her husband's family belonged.

Tagore in his essay *Personality* puts forward the idea: "In its inordinate lust for power and wealth it has robbed woman of the most part of her world, and the home is everyday being crowded out by the office. It is taking the whole world for itself, leaving hardly any room for woman. It is not merely inflicting injury but insult upon her." (165) Mrinal's husband is also the slave of his office life and was not ready to leave Calcutta. Mrinal says: "The dark veil of your custom had cloaked me completely, but for an instant Bindu came and touched me through a gap in the veil; and by her own death she tore that awful veil to shreds" (*Indian Literature* 122). She ends her letter with supreme faith in her individuality and liberates herself from the nomenclature of "Mejo Bou" and exclaims in a self-assured way, "Removed from the shelter of your feet, Mrinal" (123). She left home for a pilgrimage in Puri after Bindu's death and in this get away she got a chance to enjoy freedom once again. She says in her letter: "Oh Mejo-Bou, you have nothing to fear! It doesn't take a moment to slough off a Mejo-Bou's shell. I am not scared of your street any longer. In front of me, today is the blue ocean, over my head a mass of monsoon cumulus" (122).

Mrinal refuses to go back to her husband's house. She says; "I don't want to raise my head in complaint about you—this letter is not for that. But I will not go back to your Number Twenty-Seven Makhon Boral Lane. I've seen Bindu. I've seen the worth of a woman in this world. I don't need any more" (122). She is finally liberated and no more scared of asserting her right of equality, being happy and to pursue her dream of becoming a poet. She feels being saved. The letter written by Mrinal is the proof of her acute observation of her surrounding, her intelligence and awareness of the patriarchal suppression where either woman have no say at all and they even are conditioned to become the wheel of oppression as well.

CONCLUSION

Tagore's women are definitely defiant and assertive beings. The queen Sumitra breaks out of the traditional image of a woman craving for her husband's attention only. She is a progressive woman who understands her duty as a Queen. Unfortunately her husband a typical patriarch looks at her as a mere prized possession. He calls her proud for leaving him and goes on to any extent in taking revenge. All her entreaties to make him understand his duty towards his kingdom goes unheard. But to avenge his hurt pride he raises havoc

throughout the kingdom. In the letter penned by Mrinal to her husband, we find a glimpse of the unpleasant story of patriarchy that shackled both her mind and soul. It's amazing how Tagore makes us empathize with Mrinal, her suffering, along with two other women in the story. It's unfortunate that the story is relatable and yet relevant. Written more than a century ago, *A Wife's Letter* manages to expressively capture the female experience of the patriarchy. Tagore brings all his talents alive in this story, composed of Mrinal's heartfelt letter to her husband- his feminism, vivid imagery, and nuanced understanding of life.

The play *The King and the Queen* and the short story *The Wife's Letter* reveal how a cultural artifact can articulate the struggle and implication of conflict in the mind of a woman in the contradictions of a society and culture in transition. Tagore's women were progressive and provided a fresh perspective to the minds already filled with traditional Indian values. Queen Sumitra and Mrinal both are the embodiment of Independent, courageous and unapologetic women.

References

- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore*. Rupa & Co. New Delhi, 2008.
- . *Personality*, "Woman". Rupa & Co. New Delhi, 2007.
- . *A Wife's Letter* on JSTOR. *Indian Literature*, "A Wife's Letter." Vol. 45, No. 2 (202) (March-April, 2001), pp. 110-123 (14 pages). Trans. by Prasenjit Ranjan Gupta. Sahitya Akademi, 2001. Accessed on 19 Sept 2021.
- Ahmed, Mohammad Kaosar. *Mrinal's Journey from "A Doll's House" to the World of Emancipation in Rabindranath Tagore's "Streer Patra" (The Wife's Letter)*. www.journalofresearch.us. American Journal of Research, No 5-6, May-June 2019. Accessed on 22 Sept. 2021.
- Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. *Rabindranath Tagore: An Interpretation*. Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2011.
- Chakraborty, Shekhar. *Rabindranath Tagore's The Wife's Letter: A Story reveals Patriarchal Domination*. www.jetir.org. June 2018, Volume 5, Issue 6. Accessed on 21 Sept 2021.
- Charulatha, H. *From Exploitation to emancipation: The Metamorphosis of Womanhood in Rabindranath Tagore's Fiction*. Diss. Annamalai University, 2014.
- Das, Gupta, Sanjukta., Sudeshna Chakravarti., & Mary Matthew. *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2013.
- Suma, Salma Parvin. *Searching Individuality: Ibsen's Nora and Tagore's Mrinal Both are Equal*. www.tjprc.org. International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL) Vol. 8, Issue 4, Aug 2018, 33-38.

How to cite this article:

Seema Banta et al (2021) 'Unrequited Selfhood: A Search Of Identity In The Play The King And The Queen And The Story A Wife's Letter By Rabindranath Tagore', *International Journal of Current Advanced Research*, 10(10), pp. 25347-25350. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijcar.2021.25350.5061>
