

RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S "A WIFE'S LETTER": JOURNEY FROM PATRIARCHAL
FORTIFICATION TO FREEDOM

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Abstract: Women owing to feminist movement have got some human rights but practically they could not exercise their rights. Similarly, through literature they expressed their views but could not speak vociferously. And, the question of their freedom from physical, psychological and economical fortification in patriarchal society is beyond imagination. In such a situation, how do they express themselves? How do they free themselves? Which conditions force them to break away all the patriarchal shackles? To see answers to these questions, this paper attempts to investigate the pressing conditions which let them question the patriarchy and break away all the shackles. Further, it also tries to explore the world which is egalitarian and free from all oppressive institution. For this, Rabindranath Tagore's short story "A Wife's Letter" is under scrutiny from the feminist and spiritual lenses.

Key Words: Women, Patriarchy, Society, Freedom, True self, Free self, Spirituality

Introduction

The patriarchal society treats women as margin, other and second sex. They are suppressed, oppressed and exploited psychologically, emotionally, economically and physically. As they are treated as mere property, they lead a life of non-entity and silent beings without any right. Since women remain closest to the oppressors i.e. husband, lovers, father, brothers and sons they are still not free. All other structures/evils have been debated and eradicated for the reason that the oppressor is visibly an enemy. But the same is not in the case with women. Therefore, it is toughest for women to assert and revolt. In Response to their assertion in the past, they got some rights too. But, those rights i.e. equality, right to property, education, right to reproduce, right over their body etc. could not turn into reality. Somehow women have expressed their plight through literature and have attempted to break the shackles but they could not do it radically.

The woman protagonist in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* chooses only mid path and self-realization. All other writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sehgal etc. depict their pathetic conditions and hardly their characters revolt against the patriarchal system. Later, the characters such as of Gita Hariharan's *Thousand Faces of Night* cross patriarchal boundaries. But, women portrayed in the 21st century by writers like Urmila Pawar transgress the old-age shackles. But, ideally speaking no system changes but assumes a new form. Therefore, the predicament of women remains the same whether they are single or married; single or spinster; mothers or issueless. Therefore, this study aims to explore the way a woman not only breaks the shackles but gets herself absolutely free; rejects home, husband and world without dying.

Objective

Thus the main objective of the study is to investigate how and when the women can get her free from all the patriarchal shackles. Various studies have been done by researchers scrutinizing Rabindranath Tagore's story "A Wife's Letter" but these all are either Mrinal's letter writing or her journey from 'doll house' to another world. The study undertaken by the researcher still has scope and relevance.

Material and Methodology

Since it is qualitative study, Rabindranath Tagore's short story "A Wife's Letter" has been taken up as the main source of study, however, other sources would also be part of the study. The study has been divided into two parts respectively: Feelings of Women in Fortification; Freeing the Self. To analyse the material the feminist lens is used.

Discussion

The inhumane conditions of people owing to the exploitative structures press the victims and intellectuals to debate and eradicate the inhuman system. So, the inhuman conditions compel the victims to wage a war against evil. However, the expression of these situations is a precondition for true freedom.

The feminists whereas express themselves through fictional writings or through political movement for public attention, the character Mrinal writes conspicuously the wrong doing of her oppressor to him directly. Thus, she dares to de-frame the everlasting patriarchal structures.

Feelings of Women in Fortification

The major issue of fortification of women that Tagore highlights in the story is the perception of society towards girls as a futile being. Mrinal reminds this by mentioning how she had survived. Since she was “a girl, that’s why she lived. If she’d been a boy, she couldn’t have been saved.” Jom-Raj is wise in his deadly robbery: he only takes things of value [boys].” [Tagore, 1914] Girls are generally neglected beings. “There’s one thing to be said for growing up neglected and uncared for: it makes the body ageless, immortal. Disease doesn’t want to linger, so the easy roads to death are shut off.” [Tagore, 1914] Contrary to this fact, the worthlessness of girls’ life also manifests in their life immunity. All those who survive in odds grow stronger than those who are pampered. But women have never been pampered as the sons are in human history. The notion of neglect of girls had seeped into her mind so deep that she sarcastically reveals that “In Bengal no one has to search for jaundice, dysentery, or a bride.” [Tagore, 1914] So women of marriageable age are equated to diseases like jaundice and dysentery.

The conception of undesired being turns them incapable of assertion at any level and for anything. Further, they were/are married at young age as Mrinal too was married off at age of twelve even though the in-laws family was reputed-one. Tagore raises the issue of child marriage in second decade of 20th century. The Child Marriage Restrain Act, 1929 is a testimony of the same. But the practice continued for decades and still continues in some parts and communities of India. The Child Marriage Restrain (Amendment) Act, 1949 strengthens the argument. In addition to women’s worthlessness in the phallocentric world which resulted in child marriage, bride selling had been also a major problem. The story of Tagore verifies this as Mrinal discloses “whatever price they offered for her, that would be her price.” [Tagore, 1914]

Besides, the notion of identity is very crucial in one’s life. But women, already othered, are renamed in Hindu society which completely obliterates their identity which one had lived with till date. Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and Bapsi Sidhwa point out the same in their writings. Women were and are still addressed differently than their names. Either they would be called the mother of (names their son or daughter) or the wife of (husband’s name). [Pawar, 2003: 196] [Pawar This address obliterates their identity completely. In the Bengali family, Mrinal is addressed as “Mejo-Bou (second wife)” [Tagore, 1914] it continued till the last quarter of the 20th century as Urmila Pawar highlights in her autobiography.

Besides, girls are married off in order to unburden their load. It is visible in the case of Bindu’s marriage to an insane person. Here Tagore questions the institution of marriage as marriages are fixed on falsities and lies as Bindu’s marriage was fixed. In this regard, Mrinal argues, “A marriage based on such a deception is not a marriage at all” [Tagore, 1914]. And escape to such marriage by Bindu further proves that women have no home. At in-laws’ place they own nothing and at parents’ home they are not desired even if they are destitute. Baby Kamble raises this issue vehemently and writes that “Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious” [Kamble, 2008: 98].

Lastly, such helpless women like Bindu resort to suicide as Bindu commits by “setting fire to her clothes and killed herself” [Tagore, 1914]. In all the inhuman conditions of women, other women remain uncompassionate. Women: mothers, grandmothers, sisters-in-law and mother-in-law all remain silent and support patriarchy as the real sister of Bindu does. Bindu’s sister says “She said, “You must realize, Bindi dear, a husband is a woman’s shelter, her protector, her salvation, her everything. If suffering is written on your forehead, no one can avert it” [Tagore, 1914]. This is same as the old woman in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* proselytizing young women to treat her husband as “sheltering tree” [Deshpande, 1989: 32]. All this manifests that “Woman has no compassion for woman.” [Tagore, 1914] Overall, Mrinal seeing the life of Bindu comes to understand and says that “I’ve seen the worth of a woman in this world. I don’t need any more” [Tagore, 1914].

Freeing the Self

Freedom is the greatest desire of human beings and for it one has to pay a high price. Some people just by paying a price enjoy this world throughout life. But the same is not the case with women. They cannot enjoy freedom just by paying a price in patriarchal society. There is hardly the freedom available for women below the cost of their life. Therefore, Bindu attempts to get free from this inhumane world. In this regard, Mrinal sarcastically states that You thought that, by your turn of whim and your custom graven in stone, you could keep her life crushed under your feet forever, but your feet weren’t

powerful enough. Death was stronger.” Thus in her death Bindu became great and discarded all the identities—Bengali girl, a female cousin, a lunatic stranger’s deceived wife.

In a way, death frees and makes one courageous but on the other hand Mrinal understands that death is not the solution to the problems. For her there is no courage in death like any ordinary Bengali girl. Mrinal asks “What is our life that we must fear death? Those whose life-bonds have been knotted tight with love and care, they flinch before death.” [Tagore, 1914] But for Mrinal herself it is a shameful act. Therefore, she cannot take this course. She knows very well that nothing confers freedom to a woman—neither motherhood nor death.

In no relation—daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend, grandmother—there is freedom for women and none of the relation is purer and truer one except the relationship with one’s own self. Therefore, she ties knot of only one relationship which frees oneself and that is with the world as well as world-keeper (God). Same as Meera does with Lord Krishna. Only after being detached from the entire relationship one finds the true relationship. That is why just after divorcing the patriarchal world when she proceeds on a spiritual journey to Puri she realizes that “It was my true self, my free self.” [Tagore, 1914]

Conclusion

The above discussion shows that women’s life is actually hell-like in the patriarchal world. Since human beings are social beings, it is impossible for them to live without society but society is inhumane for certain sections of society and women particularly. The only escape for ordinary women in unbearable circumstances is death. But, none of the two extremes—life and death—is the solution. Therefore, Tagore seems to suggest that the only solution is discarding all the worldly relations only one relation to one’s own self (atma) be maintained. And in Hindu philosophy atma is pramatama (God). Therefore, the relationship to the world and world-keeper (God) only can offer freedom. That means being indifferent to the world yet being in the world one must lead the life which means spirituality offers freedom.

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СИМВОЛИЗМ ЧЕЛКИ В ЛИРИКЕ АННЫ АХМАТОВОЙ

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Предлагаемый краткий критический анализ основан на исследовании акмеистских стихов Ахматовой, которые в разное время были включены ей в *Подорожник* и в *Стихи последних лет*, мемуаров, посвященных описанию внешнего облика поэта, а также портретов, которые были выполнены в традициях авангардной живописи, графики и фотографии в первой половине двадцатого века [Etkind, 1984; Пунин, 2000; Черных, 2008; Петров-Водкин, 2010].

Образ женской челки, представленный во всех этих перечисленных источниках, с одной стороны, отобразил уникальный характер, цвет и форму лица, движения глаз и тела поэта акмеиста, а с другой стороны, личную ответственность Ахматовой в создании *хороших* или *плохих*, *правильных* или *неправильных* стихов в русском модернизме. Из поэтов, читавших стихи в Башне, ярче всего запомнилась Анна Ахматова. Пленительная сила струилась от нее, как и от ее стихов. Тонкая, высокая, стройная, с гордым поворотом маленькой головки, закутанная в цветистую шаль, Ахматова походила на гитану. Нос с горбинкой, темные волосы, на лбу подстрижены короткой челкой, на затылке подхвачены высоким испанским гребнем [Тыркова – Вильямс, 1989: 28-32].

Впервые Ахматова представила свою незамысловатую челку в стихе *На шее четок мелких ряд* [Ахматова, 1990:141].

И кажется лицо бледней
От лиловеющего шёлка,
Почти доходит до бровей
Моя незавитая челка.