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Manliness and Space in Rabindranath Tagore's Short Stories

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Abstract – Tagore's novels have been studied with different perspectives viz. East-West encounter, humanism, love, and nationalism among others. He lived in the time when the forces of the Indian Renaissance had spread in all directions. Tagore's novels reflect the spirit of the age with keenness and fidelity. Tagore sensed the genuine social change through new education and the emergence of woman as a social power. Tagore was a conscious and sensitive writer who knew that the contribution of women to human evolution can never be overlooked. Though he never believed that woman was inferior to man, he sincerely believed that a woman's domain was different from that of a man. Even though she could, she did not prefer to play the same role as man, in the society. Tagore's literary works knew no geographical boundaries, and as a result, he came to be known as world-apostle. His works have been translated into English and other languages too. Tagore, himself, also translated some of his works into English.

Keywords: Tagore, English, languages, Short Stories, Woman, Novel, etc.

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INTRODUCTION

The stories of Tagore that I examine here critique the rigidified code of gendered behavior, which is implicit in both the stereotyping of the colonized subject as "effeminate" and the colonized subject reconstructing itself as "hyper masculine." Tagore reconfigures Manliness as a syncretic space that accommodates a certain fluidity of gender roles. This subversive strategy takes different trajectories in different short stories: some, like "The Editor" reflect on the loss or rupture of moral, familial and emotional ties that ensue from a rigidified concept of normative gendered behavior; others like "Housewife" and "The Divide" attempt to recuperate non-normative expressions of Manliness (androgyny, homoeroticism) and align them with pre-colonial cultural practices that had been suppressed or marginalized by the dominant discourses of colonialism and nationalism [1]. I am cautious of conflating gender and sexuality; what I suggest here is that both gender and sexuality are controlled by social discourse and modified into normative, "acceptable" patterns. I analyze the specific trajectory that this modification takes in the colonial situation. My examination of the interconnection of space and gender/sexuality in Tagore's short stories is premised on the concept of social or conceptual space [2]. Tagore, I argue, moves beyond both colonial and indigenous signification of gendered space, locating empowerment in the synthesis of masculine and feminine gender roles and the destabilization of gender-segregated spaces. I examine how Tagore, in his stories, redefines culturally configured spatiality by queering normative spaces, which accommodate reversed gender roles and non-normative constructions of Manliness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Tagore's stories capture the dilemma of the Bengali male continually trying to undermine the private self and privileging the public one in a paranoid attempt to play down his alleged effeminacy. The stories underscore the futility of reinventing the self merely to counter a false stereotype; they examine the pitfalls of thesis a hyper masculine image to redeem oneself in the perception of the colonizer [3]. "The Editor" embodies Tagore's indictment of rigidified gender roles and hyper Manliness, traits that are brought out in the middle-class Bengali male's rejection of the domestic space. Tagore's critique of this choice is encoded in terms of the disruption in a tragic plot: fragmentation of familial bonds, emotional loss and a lack of Fulfillment. The plot of "The Editor" unfolds through this pattern of disruption, recognition and restoration of order [4]. A playful, poignant closeness builds up between a widowed father and his six-year-old daughter and nurtures both of them till the father becomes aware of the need to make money, which leads him to embark on a literary career. The publication of a successful satirical farce gives him his first taste of fame. Convinced of his genius and oblivious now to both daughter and household, he continues his literary pursuits till he is hired as a salaried editor of a newspaper patronized by a village zamindar (landholder). The study, which is set up

chiefly to lampoon the landholder of the neighboring village, affords a fresh outlet for the editor's satirical talents. His fame comes to an abrupt end when the zamindar of the neighboring village sets up a rival publication, which berates our editor's fine rhetorical exercise in blunt, down-to-earth prose: an attack that provokes a cycle of humiliating sallies from friends and foes alike [5]. Professional failure and public humiliation finally brings the father back to the estranged daughter and the neglected domestic space.

1- Partha Chatterjee's binary spatial model:

That theorizes the crisis in Manliness in nineteenth century Bengal is useful in understanding the predicament of the narrator in "The Editor" and his urge to disengage with private space and all that it stands for. However, the private/public binary and its relation to Manliness need a more nuanced reading as we consider the narrator's role as a father. Regarding fatherhood as a mythic, universal category transcending historical and cultural specificities could be problematic [6]. The near-universal cultural construct of the mother as the "natural" parent (and by extension "naturally" situated in the domestic space) however, has prompted me to frame my reading of Tagore's short story through what Stuart C. Aiken terms the "awkward spaces of fathering" [100]. In his analysis, Aiken charts the transition in the role of fathering in Western society as a result of changing socio-economic conditions; with more women earning their living in the workplace, the emotionally distant "breadwinner" of the past has gradually transformed into an "equal co-parent" who has found a niche for himself in the space of parenting. The niche is not entirely comfortable, nor is the transition unproblematic; the space that now contains the father is what Aiken describes as "awkward." Aiken argues that "the geographies of man-as-father are almost exclusively subsumed under the monolithic geography of a persuasive patriarchy that includes the space of public authority and its transition over generations" [7]. Aiken's "awkward spaces" of fatherhood is not a Tran's historical category, but it could be adapted profitably to the historical context of "The Editor." In the story, the received notions of parenting are subverted primarily by the death of the "natural" parent. The narrator's assumption of the role of the primary and only parent is "awkward" from the beginning. He is clearly not comfortable in the role of the caregiver. His relationship with his daughter works on a principal of reversal; it is the daughter who playfully assumes a maternal role; in time, however, this reversed role-playing is abandoned because the narrator perceives it as futile and possibly emasculating.

In "The Editor," the narrator attempts to establish his emphatically "masculine" identity by viewing his profession (writing satirical farces) as an aggressive, masculine activity. When economic necessities force the narrator into the world of material realities, the options appear limited: he is too old for government jobs and no other opening seems to be available. Tagore does not situate his protagonist historically, but judging by the fact that he had managed to subsist without a job for this long, it seems reasonable to suppose that he has an alternative, though dwindling, source of income, perhaps landholding. In the late nineteenth century, the financial situation of the landholder in Bengal was considerably straitened.

The limited financial scope and social agency of the "petty clerical job" reinforced the average Bengali man's sense of inadequacy [8]. Such labor was inherently associated with servility (the word chakri is phonetically as well as semantically close to chakar, the Bengali word for a menial worker). The inability to find even an ordinary job such as these Calls into question the protagonist's scripted "male" role as a provider.

Understandably, the community regarded this so-called literary labor as an achievement, specifically because of the narrator's chosen genre. In late nineteenth century Bengal, the satirical farce was a popular literary genre, both as a vehicle of anticolonial discourse and a medium of an internalized critique of the degenerate traits of the indigenous middle-class. In his analysis of the mindset of the nineteenth-century Bengali intelligentsia, Partha Chatterjee speaks of the effectiveness of social parody as a medium of ideological propagation in this period [9]. It is understandable how the community likewise regarded the editorship as a means of achieving social visibility, which was a primary preoccupation of the educated Bengali middle-class man. This mode of articulation sophisticated but scurrilous discursive attack— is described as being interchangeable with physical aggression; the editor views his job as a substitute for that of the landholder's lathiyals or henchmen: "The zamindar's of the two villages were bitter enemies. Previously their quarrels had led to brawls but now the magistrate had bound them over to keep peace, and the zamindar's of Jahir had engaged poor me in place of the murderous lathiyals" [10]. This equation of writing with a job that involves machismo is telling: the editor attempts to recuperate his sagging self-esteem by identifying himself with an icon of hyper Manliness. The editor's reaffirmation of his self-worth underscores the perception of satire as a predominantly masculine literary genre a perception commonly seen in Western assessments of this mode of writing. In a study of the characteristics of this genre, Gilbert Highest points out this gender bias and attempts to understand its psychodynamics:

"Many a reader has turned away in revulsion from [Juvenal's] work, asking, 'Why should he concentrate on such disgusting subjects? What pleasure is there for him, or for us, in gazing on these foul scenes?' Women in particular, with their kind hearts, are prone to make this criticism: very few of them have ever written, or even enjoyed, satire, although they have often been its victims".

Tagore's syncretic conceptualization of gender, as evident in the stories that I analyze in this chapter, looks ahead to and can be analyzed through the lens of Helene Cixous's theory of bisexuality. Cixous's concept of bisexuality opposes the heterosexual hegemony that purports to create a rigid divide between masculine and feminine behavior and desire, and challenges this binary opposition by subsuming the traits of both genders and transcending them. This ideal, she claims, is more positive and potent than the "neutering" implication of the concept of the Ovidian Hermaphrodite: "To this bisexuality that melts and effaces, wishing to avoid castration, I oppose the other bisexuality, the one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallocentric Performing Theater, sets up his or her own erotic universe". Tagore's ideal of androgyny, which he traces back to pre-colonial cultural forms in India, is similarly enabling. Tagore's political syncretism was evident in his view of nationalism as an uneasy graft onto a fluid, heterogeneous culture. Similarly, his refusal to accept a model of reified Manliness bears out his investment in the strand of traditional Indian philosophy that conceptualized human nature as a balanced and enabling synthesis of purusha (Manliness) and prakriti (femininity). In the stories, there is a discernible thrust towards resisting colonial and nationalist hegemony by revivifying modes of pre-colonial cultural forms based on a flexible understanding of gendered identities. I see this as a distinctly subversive move, a move that was re-enacted by Gandhi in his valorization of androgyny in the later stages of the nationalist movement.

CONCLUSION:

Tagore's portrayal of woman has the modernist stance. He is the harbinger and supporter of the winds of change regarding woman. Tagore, being an artist of high standards, does not play any stereotyped role of reformist or feminist. Anything that was good came to him in a natural way and so is the case with the emergence of a 'New Woman' in his novels. The present study of woman in Tagore's novels tempts us to study Tagore's short stories too in which Tagore reveals excellence of his art while depicting woman. In his novels, he has not shown the heroines from the lower classes of the society. The poverty they have to suffer from and the problems due to their being destitute have been touched upon very well in his short stories. Furthermore, Tagore's woman is delineated with modernist attitude in some of his well-known short stories. So the researcher suggests that there is a scope for the study of women in Tagore's short stories separately.

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