

In Quest of the Self: Recasting Womanhood in Tagore's *The Wife's Letter*

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Abstract

*The paper seeks to enquire upon the gender dynamics that is scripted in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Wife's Letter*. It is a considerably important text which always engage the critics' minds with various generic arguments in gender studies. Numerous adaptations, cinematic narratives have been made over this gigantic foundation of feminist studies. My contention is to visualize those nuances which can conglomerate this early Twentieth Century Indian text within some recent critical acronyms. I intend to interrogate the various categories into which women were forced to fit in; identify the subversions, transitions, transgressions and disruptions from the traditional and normative systems in Tagore's narratives and finally locate his occasional vacillations through the text.*

Key Words: Tagore, Gender, Womanhood, Public/Private Sphere

Rabindranath Tagore's fictional world comprises of a series of women, who are sensible and intelligent, abiding in their ways, provisions and relationships, a fresh cadence of the blossoming education and culture—an amalgamation was almost unprecedented in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century colonial Bengali fictions. Referring to this transition in the women of the nineteenth century who could read, write, compose poems and discuss issues of politics and philosophy, critic Partha Chatterjee identified the colonial period as a time that facilitated a new set of patriarchy and an emergence of the 'New Women'; these women could reason, interrogate, reject and reconstruct their identities by struggling against stereotypes and relentless adherence to the exploitative cultural practices. In his *Nation and Its Fragments*, Chatterjee has observed:

The new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the "new" woman was quite reverse of the "common" woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. (127)

This paper tries to configure such a woman, Mrinal, in a major novella of Rabindranath Tagore—*The Wife's Letter* (*Streer Patra*, 1914) in this light. Moreover the gender dynamics

that is scripted in her sojourn from the 'private' to the 'public' sphere, consequently rejecting the normative 'womanhood' has also been discussed in this brief column.

The story is written in the form of a letter that a wife writes to her husband while she is leaving his house after fifteen years of suppressed agony. The resistance and resilience that comes out in the form of a personal letter gives a quintessential discreetness to the entire story; also because it is the first letter that the wife writes to her husband in a marriage of fifteen years. A first-person inscription leads to a deep self-realization in the protagonist with an innate profuseness and self-critique. The writer of the letter is Mrinal, a common housewife, who sets off in an inner voyage to discover her identity which had otherwise been clouded by the beautiful-submissive "MejoBou" (the Second Daughter-in-law in the family). In a deep confessional note, she narrates an authentic depiction of the *andarmahal* (the inner chambers) of a middle-class Bengali household, which is much "like the reverse of a piece of work in wool" in all respects to the *bahirmahal* or outer quarters (Tagore 208). While her own experiences have been an objective 'within and without', the ultimate realization of her wifely idiosyncrasies is ended by the death of Bindu, a destitute girl who thrived upon them at their household. Mrinal leaves her husband and home with a deep repugnance and realization, finally declaring: "I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it" (217).

Mrinal's tangible metamorphosis from the 'wife' to an individual entity is a voyage for fifteen years, which has been inscribed in the letter itself. It opens with a potential address to her husband "*Shricharankamaleshu*" (My submission at your lotus feet) (205). The letter also bears the imprint of this gradual transformation in Mrinal's character, and the novel ends with the signature "*TomaderCharantalashraichhinnaMrinal*" (Bereft of the shelter of your lotus feet, Mrinal) (218). Ironically, the literal word 'mrinal' means a lotus-stem in Sanskrit that holds the large sized flower and helps to keep its buoyancy over the water. But it also symbolizes strength in its apparent slender feature and tenderness. Several critics have argued this naming device as the key-element of the story. The noted film-maker Rituporno Ghosh's audio version of *Streer Patra* (2012) has deliberated upon this issue with an incisive importance. Mrinal's sturdy and righteous self that is long hidden under the beautiful "second daughter-in-law", comes out to reveal itself as a confident and free soul; she does not hesitate to acknowledge that she no longer requires the 'shelter' that the world supposes women need the most.

Mrinal has been married into the household at the age of twelve, and the letter is being written by a matured woman of twenty seven. The conservative notion in Hindu custom that a woman married at an early age, is culpable to be tamed quite easily does not seem tenable in her case (Forbes 33). Her intelligence is quite rudimentary and natural that set her apart from the normative roles. She categorically emphasizes that her rational mind has always been a threat to her husband's household. Her acute observation, her perceptive

nature and her independent spirit are simultaneously scripted in each line of this letter—a feature that interrogates, destabilizes and finally rejects the oppressive and insensitive citadel of patriarchy. She comments in her letter that her innate intelligence has survived the plethora of fifteen long and laborious years of married life, but has never been conducive to her emotional or mental growth: “My mother feared for this cleverness of mine; for a woman it was an impediment. If one, who must follow the limits laid down by rule seeks to follow her intelligence, she will stumble repeatedly and come to grief” (Tagore 207). Geraldine Forbes and some other social theorists have agreed to the point, that a woman was expected to comply and bow down to many restrictions; she was bound to meet with opposition and obstacles if she ever tried to use her powers of reasoning or question the social codes and strictures. In this context, one might be reminded of Rousseau’s trenchant remarks in the Book V of *Emile* (1762): “Women . . . must be subject to all their lives, to the most constant and severe restraint, which is that of decorum; it is therefore necessary to accustom them early to such confinement that it may not afterwards cost them too early. . . . We should teach them above all things to lay a due restraint on themselves” (332).

But the drudgery, ignominy and neglect in the family cannot take away the innate freedom and intelligence in Mrinal. She is a poet at her heart, and can perceive things objectively despite of the taunts of her relatives. The subtle, but sure thrust of the irony in Mrinal’s letter is unmistakable.

I had one possession beyond your household, which none of you knew about. I used to write poems in secret. Whatever rubbish they were, the walls of your women’s quarters had not grown round them. In them lay my freedom—I was myself in them. You and your family never liked, never even recognised, whatever in me exceeded the ‘second daughter-in-law’ of your household. In fifteen years, you never discovered that I am a poet. (Tagore 208)

Tagore’s beautiful and vivid language not only gives the readers immense pleasure of reading, but it also grabs the readers’ curiosity to peep into the *antahpur*(inner houses) and gather insights upon the lives of the dwellers of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali middle-classes. The proud declaration by Mrinal that she has a niche of her own even in that hopeless surveillance, and that she derives pleasure through her creativity among endless number of compromises, lead us to the numerous narratives of the nineteenth century Bengali women, namely Rasasundari Devi (1809-1899), Kailashbhabini Gupta (b. 1837), Binodini Dasi (1863-1942). These handful numbers of literate women had found relief and release from the rigours of patriarchy through their creativity. ‘Writing’ had been a process of discovering their own ‘selves’, thereby establishing the ‘self’ through a potent medium.

Critics have noted that the nineteenth century Bengal saw the emergence of a large ‘body of conduct’ literature for women, which gave the ideological construction of the ideal

wife a strong footing. These conduct books extolled shame-facedness, timidity, meekness, self-sacrifice, benevolence, piety, purity and spirituality, as essential feminine virtues. God had assigned the duties of subservience and devotion to women, and those who confirmed to it, were the 'good' women (Sengupta 589). In an article, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" (1966) historian Barbara Welter examines the gender roles and concludes that the man, busy with social-material adventures, could but neglect the religious values of his forbearing and therefore 'left behind a hostage' at the home. Concentrating over the antebellum decades of the nineteenth century, Welter describes that period as an important stage in the expression of sexual stereotypes. Though Welter's thesis concentrates particularly over America, I find it quite relevant to bring forth in this context. Because, a popular argument that had been accentuated among the intelligentsia of the nineteenth century India was, even if men should embrace the British culture for the sake of a decent living, women should act as the custodians of native culture and religion (Dasgupta19). A. S Altekar has accentuated this idea while discussing the 'public life' of the early nineteenth century women in India (191). Barbara Welter's idea of 'the cult of true womanhood', or 'the cult of domesticity', seeks to assert that womanly virtue used to reside in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Considering why these characteristics were seen as crucial to promote a woman's 'proper role', and how such assertions about the roles of women might have served as a response to the growth of industrial capitalism, Welter goes on analyzing:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbours, and her society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and the spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (153)

In *The Wife's Letter*, Mrinal's life goes on usual terms of neglect for a certain period of time, which is "like the ashes which cover a fire: perhaps keeping it alive, but preventing its heat from being outwardly felt" (Tagore 208). She makes terms with the constant denial of self-respect, till something comes into her life and shreds apart the underpinning in her long-wedded life. Mrinal's elder sister-in-law's sister Bindu comes to stay in their house, after losing both of her parents. While the entire family is annoyed with this unwanted burden in the form of an ugly and unmarried girl, Mrinal receives her affectionately and provides her a refuge in spite of everyone's reluctance and antagonism. The name Bindu signifies 'a drop' or any ephemeral particle, and suggestive to 'triviality'. She grows overwhelmed by Mrinal's love that she immensely dotes over her. One may construe their relationship as maternal affection, and as Mrinal's need for a surrogate daughter. Similarly, the affection-hungry Bindu may be considered to look up for a maternal image in Mrinal. This conjecture implies that the relationship between the two is a bonding by a 'sense of lack' through which they

have reconstructed and complemented their 'selves' (Gupta 129). But the modern Queer discourses may employ an altogether different stance in articulating Mrinal-Bindu relationship. It emphasizes that in *The Wife's Letter* Tagore, very subtly, have experimented with the theme of erotic attraction and love between women. Critics have also found a significant focus on this same-sex attraction, which is suggestive to the development and arousal of desire. It has been discovered that unlike the previous texts of Tagore, Mrinal's sexuality has been abundantly hinted in the text. Critics go on exploring this theme as a unique motif:

. . . instance of romantic love between two women is a significant sequence with primacy given to the attractions of the female body. Romantic love between siblings, cousins and friends is a recurrent sub-theme of many Bangla novels of the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, erotic love or lesbian relationship, or the possibility of such relationship between two women have been systematically and conspicuously elided or omitted as a subject in women's fiction or fiction representing women. . . . Rabindranath does not explore this sub-text any further in "Streer Patra". (Dasgupta130)

The silences and absences have found perusal in Tapobrata Ghosh's analytical book *Gora ar Binoy* (Gora and Binoy, 2002), where he interrogates Tagore's novel *Gora* (1910) in a homo-erotic light or gay relationship between the central protagonists Gora with his bosom friend, Binoy. In this book, he has quoted a few lines from Jeremy Seabrook's article named "Love in a Different Climate": "Our people live very crowded lives, but the family crowds the heart as much as the house where we live. There is little feeling left over. But if you have a relationship with another man, he is a brother, friend, father, lover" (133). Looking at *The Wife's Letter* in this light I find the trajectories of homo-eroticism at Tagore's flamboyant description of the season 'spring' at the narrow corridors of *antahpur* and in Bindu's heart. Spring being the most cherished season of love with its 'flush-red' colour, affects even the most infertile and restricted territories—both in the 'inner' and 'outer' worlds. When Mrinal finds that young Bindu is infatuated with her, she experiences a sense of awakening of her own 'self', which otherwise does not transpire in her. She writes in a deep confessional tone:

When Bindu lost her fear of me, she tied herself in yet another knot. She developed so great a love for me that it made me afraid. I had never seen such an image of love in my household. I had read of such love in books, but that was between men and women. . . . The girl was infatuated with me. . . . The unbearable force of Bindu's love made me restless and uneasy. I confess that sometimes I felt angry with her. Yet that love made me glimpse a true image of myself, one that I had never seen before. This was the image of my free self. (Tagore211)

Bindu has to be married off, since she transcends a decent age of marriage. Being a dowerless orphan, she has neither beauty nor the money to compensate it. So her marriage is arranged with a maniac-depressive without her prior knowledge. She runs away from her marital home, being terrified of her husband only to be sent back. Everyone in the family, including her own sister, insist upon her returning, and reminding her of the fact that a woman should never leave the custody of her husband no matter what. Mrinal tries to save Bindu from the evil clutches of the societal norms and soar away to Puri; it is as much to rescue Bindu from her deplorable situation, as for Mrinal's own sake. But before any of these can be done Bindu commits suicide by setting herself in fire. Mrinal set off alone in her quest, never to return: "But I will never return to your house at 27, Makhan Baral Lane. . . . I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it." (217).

While Mrinal finds an 'ultimate liberator' in Death in Bindu's life, suicide has gained a wide acclamation as an act of resistance among the deriding power relationships by several notable social scientists. Michel Foucault delivers a laconic remark:

There cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. If one or the other were completely at the disposition of the other and become his thing, an object on which he can exercise and infinite and unlimited violence, there would not be relations of power. . . . Even though the relations of power may be completely unbalanced or when one can truly say that he has 'all power' over the other, a power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter is able to commit suicide, of jumping out of the window or killing the other. That means that in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance. (McNay 173)

As to the context of 'living' by 'leaving', Mrinal leaves the hearth at "house number 27, Makhan Baral Lane" and liberates herself; while Bindu leaves the world that inflicts only pain and suffering to its womankind. Ceasing to live, that is committing suicide, is her silent protest and resistance against an inappropriate normative society. Gayatri Spivak's notable essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"(1999) refers to a woman named Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri whose suicide had stirred the contemporary Bengali society. People kept on discussing and wondering over the reasons for such a trenchant action, finally coming out with plausible scandalous stories. However, it seemed that she chose to kill herself while she was menstruating to evade the indignity (103-4).

Critics often argue that Mrinal's metamorphosis is worth comparable with Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* (1879); Nora's slamming the door behind her, leaving behind her husband and children, accentuates in Mrinal's final decree "*Charantalashraichhinna*" (Bereft of you Lotus Feet). "She is the Tagore's Nora flinging her manifesto of independence in her husband's face," comments Tagore's biographer Krishna Kripalani (273). Although Tagore

had a strong dislike for Ibsen in his youth, many critics ascribe Nora to be a befitting predecessor of Mrinal in her crusade for individual freedom. Tagore had an almost equal humanist approach while writing about women's causes. His concern with the state of the human soul converges across the prerogatives of class and gender. Both the texts can be compared in the same vein of ideas and structural similarities. In both the cases, the protagonist's 'right to discard' has been shown – where they discard their household willfully. But the writers fail to indicate any of their 'right to choose' or 'manipulate' the situations. In *The Wife's Letter* Mrinal cannot choose to slander her husband and her surrounding efficacies. Rather, Tagore's morality leads her by a safer repose of spirituality. She crosses the constraining boundaries drawn by the hegemonic patriarchy and segregates the 'outer world' (*bāhir*) from 'home' (*andar*) much like the mendicant Meera Bai. As Meera Bai had forsaken the shackles of society in a quest for salvation and her devotion towards Lord Krishna, Mrinal leaves the confines of family as a celebration of Life.

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