

Subaltern Consciousness in English Literature



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SHARP MIND Publisher & Distributors
Meerut, Uttar Pradesh-250001 (INDIA)

Published by:

SHARP MIND Publisher & Distributors

25, Ganga Puram, Rajpura Road, Near Yashoda Kunj,
Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India-250001

Mobile: +91-8630997785

Email: sharpmindpub.20@gmail.com

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First Edition- 2021

ISBN: 978-81-947735-3-5

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Price: Rs. 1150/-

Printed by:

Metro Printing Press

B.K. Market, Budhana Gate

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

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Chapter-7

**Writing is Resistance: A Reading of Rabindranath
Tagore's *The Wife's Letter* from the Feminist
Perspective**

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Abstract:

One of the basic assumptions of the feminist literary criticism is that it considers a literary work as a socio-cultural product embodying the gender politics and gender bias of the dominant patriarchal society. Feminist critics are therefore primarily concerned with the excavations of the latent socio-cultural forms that contain and perpetuate the forms of discrimination against women and propose the methods by which this can be resisted and countered. Feminist literary criticism is therefore not simply a

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theoretical approach to the analysis of literary texts, it has an explicit political purpose. Feminist criticism developed from the women's movement for socio-cultural rights in Europe and North America in the 1960s. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the most prominent figure during the Indian Renaissance, was a strong advocate of gender equality and rights for women in the Indian society. He was conscious about the multiple forms of discriminations against women prevalent in the patriarchal Indian society.

*Tagore's *The Wife's Letter*, written in an epistolary form, brilliantly captures the diverse forms of discriminations against women and the deep-rooted gender bias in the Hindu patriarchal society. Protagonist of the story, Mrinal, however is not a conventional woman character with her meekness and submissiveness; she is depicted as an exceptional woman with her strong sense of individualism, self-esteem, and dignity. She defies all the restrictions imposed on women by the male-dominated society and breaks the barriers imposed on women by the conservative patriarchal society in her quest for freedom. Writing, particularly composition of poetry, is usually supposed to be a male activity, but Mrinal exploits her creative potentials as a writer to challenge the androcentric norms, suggesting that writing is a form of resistance and a method to establish a social norm based on equality, justice, freedom and dignity.*

Keywords: *Feminism, Gender, Equality, Protest, Writing, Humanism.*

Literary texts, argue feminists, constitute an important mechanism by which the unequal power relations in society are naturalized. By taking recourse to stereotype of the virtuous woman, the seductress and the sacrificing mother, literary texts

ensure that these roles become acceptable and even desirable for the girl children to acquire when they grow up. Literary cultures, therefore, play an important role in the socialization of girls and the naturalization of the power structures because women consent to accept these roles. Literature, in other words, is ideological. (Nayar 94)

Literature, as an important cultural component, plays a vital role in the dissemination and perpetuation of the ideology of the dominant class in a particular society. Feminist critics therefore argue that a close reading of a literary text will inevitably reveal the mechanism of the power-structures and gender-relations in that specific society. Feminist criticism, argues Lois Tyson, “examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (83). Literature is thus an important tool of analysis of the ideological viewpoints of the dominant class. Feminist criticism, developed mainly from the socio-cultural movements by the women in Europe and North America in the 1960s, focused on the excavations of the diverse cultural forms that marginalized women in a patriarchal society.

Despite the fact that *The Wife's Letter* is neither written by a female writer nor does it belong to the feminist literary tradition, insights from the feminist theory may be employed in the evolution of literary merit of the text. Although the paper proposes to employ the feminist theoretical perspective in general, it specifically focuses on the analysis of how writing, particularly composition of poem, is considered by the female

writers as a significant method to articulate female subjectivity and resist the male domination.

In literary texts, women are largely represented as negative and stereotyped; they are treated as inferior to their male counterparts. Even the very notion of 'femininity', the feminists argue, is a patriarchal social construct. The patriarchal society does not acknowledge the creative power of the women. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argued in their influential essay "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1979) that "the women writers of the nineteenth century had a set of fears and anxieties about their identities as creators since, at that time, childbearing was considered the only natural form of female creativity.

All other forms of creativity were considered as harmful to women's physical and mental health—leading to infertility, on the one hand, and madness, on the other" (Goodman 62). The patriarchal society, Gilbert and Gubar maintained, was unwilling to accept the notion of woman-as-writer. Women's creativity was interpreted as an aberrant form of self-expression, harmful for a woman's physical and mental health. Androcentric socio-cultural conventions worked as an unsurpassable barrier to female creativity. Rabindranath Tagore's *The Wife's Letter*, for this very reason, attains a special significance because it challenges this androcentric notion of female creativity. Tagore portrays Mrinal, the central female character of the story, as an independent-minded personality capable of self-expression with dignity and honour. Tagore has invested Mrinal with the ability of poetic composition, which is usually believed to be a male activity. In the story, Mrinal writes:

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 quarrel had not grown round them. In them lay my freedom— I was myself in them. You and your family never liked, never even recognized, whatever in me exceeded the "second daughter-in-law" of your household. In fifteen years, you never discovered that I am a poet. (Tagore 569)

This capacity for self-expression in a patriarchal social order makes Mrinal an exceptional woman with her subjective autonomy and freedom. She is not the type of woman to be cowed down by the oppressive practices of the male-dominated society. Like all other creative persons, Mrinal exploits her creative potentials through the composition of poems. Poetry gives her a sense of liberation, emotional relief, spiritual consolation and a freedom from the claustrophobic experience of domesticity. Composition of poems happens to be the most pleasurable activity of Mrinal, although none of the family members liked it or recognized during her long tenure as the wife in the house of her husband. For Mrinal, poetry is not only a medium of self-expression and identity; it is an inevitable and powerful weapon to counter the challenges posed by the patriarchal society.

Her identity as a self-expressive woman destabilizes the prevalent androcentric norms based on binaristic stereotypes. Instead, what the story affirms is that that this notion of binarism between man and woman is essentially arbitrary and an unreliable tool to explain human character which is beyond easy categorization. Mrinal proves that it is absurd to presume that

women are incapable of articulating themselves through conventional literary forms.

Tagore's *The Wife's Letter* is a robust critique of oppressive patriarchal conventions in the nineteenth century Bengal. Popular perceptions about women was prejudicial, derogatory and gender-biased. Irrational bias against the female gender is exposed when Mrinal recounts about the death of her brother by typhoid. Although both Mrinal and her brother were affected by the disease, her brother died, which prompted her neighbors to conclude that "Mrinal lived because she's a girl; if she'd been a boy would she have been spared?" (568). This kind of understanding of the effects of disease on human body is a gross denial of the scientific truth and is reflective of the deeply rooted gender bias in the society. Patriarchal socio-cultural conventions invariably prioritize males over the females, and when Mrinal's brother died what was popularly perceived was that the "god of death is skilled in the art of theft; he covets what is precious" (568). So what is significant is that the bias against women exists even in the popular myths about gods.

Although heaven is supposed to be the abode of human souls, the god of death in Hindu mythology, Yamaraj, is believed to be more prone to accept male soul than the female soul, as male soul is more 'precious' than the female soul. Through this utterances of Mrinal, Tagore interrogates the objectivity of the myth. Tagore, like the feminist critics, came to acknowledge that the patriarchal society perpetuates the process of oppression against women through diverse cultural and literary forms.

Tagore's *The Wife's Letter* foregrounds the conflict between town and village, and an understanding of this conflict is central to the understanding of the gender discrimination. Mrinal's husband represents the affluence and grandeur of the city life, whereas Mrinal is the representative of the humble rustic life. If town is represented as a masculine, village is supposed to be feminine, and in the conflict between the town and the village the former always gets the upper hand. Although born and brought up in the city of Calcutta, Mrinal's husband and his relatives, show their willingness to select a bride from the village. What is the secret behind this paradox? Is it because the village girls are supposed to be submissive and meek by nature which will help the town people to continue their domination over women in the domestic sphere?

A bride is without exception expected to be a paragon of beauty and virtues. As Mrinal entered into her husband's house as a new bride, "the crowd of housewives acknowledged that on the whole I was indeed beautiful" (568-69). But Tagore's Mrinal is not the traditional woman character embodying the stereotypical feminine qualities; he invests her with an unconventional attribute. Mrinal is intelligent, and intelligence is traditionally thought to be a male attribute. Mrinal is an exceptional female character created by Tagore. Unlike her mother who thought the cleverness of a woman was an 'impediment', Mrinal is proud of her intelligence: "this intelligence is so much a part of my nature that it had survived even fifteen years in your household" (569). Mrinal embodies Tagore's idea of a new woman: intelligent, courageous, forward and progressive. This conception of the character of Mrinal destabilizes the traditional dichotomy between the town and the

village, and brings out the internal raptures within the patriarchal socio-cultural belief systems and value systems.

Mrinal's story is the saga of liberation of a woman from the thralldom of patriarchy: "Today, after fifteen years, standing by the ocean's shore, I have learnt that I have a different relation as well with the world and the Lord of the world. That is why I have taken courage to write this letter; it is not a letter from the second daughter-in-law of your family" (568). This shows that Mrinal has achieved her much-coveted liberation through the rejection of the conventional structures of the patriarchal society. The patriarchal stereotypes and social conventions, Tagore suggests, pose an insurmountable obstacle to the full realization of a woman's individual potentials. A woman's sacrosanct duty is not simply to serve the family as a domesticated wife, as an individual she has a much greater function to serve the larger society, to the universe. The liberation of Mrinal from the clutches of restrictive domestic life finally gives her a freedom from the identity as the "daughter-in-law" as she says: "The second daughter-in-law is dead at last" (580). This newly-discovered liberation has its wider implication for Mrinal, as she asks the God:

In this universe you have created, with this life I have been given, why must I die inch by inch in this petty shelter of brick and wood? How trivial is this daily commerce of my life, how trivial are its set rules, set habits, set phrases, set blows—yet in the end, must the stranglehold of this pettiness triumph, and your creation, this universe of joy, be defeated? (580)

Tagore believed in the idea of *Jeevan Debata* or the Lord of Life, who leads an individual to fulfil the higher goals in life.

The Lord of Life of Mrinal places her into the larger world in her quest for liberation from the conservative patriarchal social structures. This defiance of Mrinal against the nineteenth century Bengali patriarchal society makes her one of the memorable female characters in Tagore's literary canon. She is protest personified and her protest against the prevalent patriarchal social systems is symbolic of the resurgence of women in the wake of the twentieth century. In the early part of the twentieth century, the Indian women, because of their exposure to the Western education and culture, were seen to be increasingly taking part in nationalistic movements and other cultural activities.

As an inevitable result of their exposure to the Western education, the nineteenth century Indian women were seen to be growing conscious about their rights, dignity, respect and other values which were denied to them by the patriarchy. Breaking away from the restrictions of the male social order, the Indian women, particularly the Bengali women, came to increasingly participate in the external activities in the social sphere which were supposed to be the male provinces. Tagore's conception of the character of Mrinal must be located in this larger context of emancipatory movement of the women in the Indian society.

Apart from depicting the diverse forms of negative stereotyping of women, Tagore's story also captures the sufferings of the women in the inner chamber of a household, popularly known as *Andarmahal*. There was a clear difference between the two forms of living conditions in a house: while the outer rooms which were allotted for the male members of the family were well-ventilated and spacious, but the inner

chambers allotted mainly for the female members of the family were dingy and unhealthy:

I remember that the English doctor was astonished at the sight of our women's quarters, and scolded us angrily about the state of the lying-in room. There is a garden to the front of your house; your outer rooms lack nothing by way of furniture and ornaments. The inner rooms are like the reverse of a piece of work in wool; they have neither decorum, nor grace, nor ornament. There lights burn dimly; the air enters by stealth, like a thief; the courtyard is immovably choked with rubbish; the stains on the walls and floors reign undisturbed. (570)

Such a description of the unhealthy living condition of Mrinal in the house of her husband speaks a lot about the deplorable condition in which the women had to pass their days in nineteenth century Bengali society.

One of the common allegations of the feminist critics is that literary canon has been mainly constituted of the male authors. The woman's experience is not articulated by the women writers themselves; instead, it is commonly found that the male authors function as the commentators on the women's condition. In fact, the androcentric literary canon hardly gives any importance to the literary writings by women. The women's writings are usually dismissed as possessing very little or no literary value. In a typical patriarchal social structure, the creative potentials of a woman writer are not recognized.

But, the eminent feminist critics like Elaine Showalter and Dale Spender have convincingly demonstrated how the female writers have created an alternative literary canon, with an alternative world views, values and aesthetics, although not

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recognized by the male authors. A woman's condition, experience, and worldviews are essentially different from that of a man, and it is impossible for male author to articulate the authentic experience of a woman. Tagore's *The Wife's Letter*, written in an epistolary form, employs the perspective of a woman. The epistolary form gives Mrinala scope to express her personal experiences in the manner of an interior monologue, without the intervention of authorial voice, which gives Mrinal's narrative an authenticity and reliability. So the story is not only about the representation of women's perspective in a patriarchal society, it is also brilliant for its stylistic experimentation, a unique creation in Tagore's literary canon as well as in the Bengali literature.

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