



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 211-213
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 25-03-2024
Accepted: 27-04-2024

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Exploring Subaltern in Rabindranath Tagore's Short Story "Streer Patra" ("The Wife's Epistle")

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1d.189>

Abstract

A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. Human civilization has differentiated women from men for centuries and considers women as inferior one. In early modern Bengal (as well as India under colonial rule) there was a wave of women's rights movement leading to women's empowerment, especially with the grant of voting rights to women. A social consciousness was generated by the intellectuals of the era led by the writers of the time who were predominantly males. Short stories became an important genre since the mid-nineteenth century. Short stories played a prominent role as the short story writers projected through their stories the culture in the colonial era. The short story writers through their micro-narratives played a crucial role by highlighting the women's situation in the world. The first Asian Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore is regarded as one of the progressive short story writers. He very successfully depicts the psychology of women in his short stories through which one can guess the level of gender suppression. The focus of this paper will be on the female protagonist of the short story titled, "Streer Patra" ("The Wife's Epistle") by Tagore and how they were dominated by the patriarchal norms. This short story also exposes how the orphaned, homeless girl Bindu has to accept servitude and all types of humiliation in order to survive and finally finds her escape only through committing suicide.

Keywords: Subaltern, women, empowerment, short story, Rabindranath Tagore, patriarchal

Introduction

The keywords in the title of the paper include "subalterns". "Subaltern" is a Latin word which means subordinate or lower-ranking, even an inferior individual. The term "subaltern" was first used by Kylas Chunder Dutt in his book titled *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* first published in the year 1835. Somdatta Mandal in her introduction to the book (2014) writes:

In fact the first occurrence of the word „subaltern“ in its colonial context happens in the narrative: The people of India and particularly those of the metropolis had been subject for the last fifty years to every species of subaltern oppression. The dagger and the bowl were dealt out with merciless hand, and neither age, sex nor condition could repress the rage of the British barbarians. (*Journal of Forty-Eight Hours*, 44)

"Subaltern", meaning "of inferior rank" is a term adapted by the famous Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in his prison notes to refer to those working class people in Soviet Union who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. A "subaltern" is someone with a low rank in a social, political or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalised or oppressed. It also indicates to those groups in society who are subject to the domination by the ruling classes. That means someone who has no political or economic power and living under a dictatorship is a "subaltern". In other words, it refers to the subordination of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. There are different synonyms of the word "Subaltern" such as common people, lower-class, underprivileged, exploited, inferiors, minors, weak and so on. Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci has used the word "subaltern" as a substitute for minor, poor, downtrodden, working and the oppressed class. Subaltern people are overlooked, neglected, disregarded, and treated with unconcern and indifference. The most influential figure in the Post-Colonial times

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Dr. Ranajit Guha was the founder of Subaltern Studies that gave a new direction to the studies. Later, the term “subaltern” was used by Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Studies Collective in the Indian context. They used it in a manner similar to that of Gramsci but in a broader sense; it was not just limited to the working class. The concept of the “subaltern” gained increased prominence and currency with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak’s article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” focuses on the women subalterns with a special emphasis on the psychology of women as an inferior human being. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak has become a well-known voice of the postcolonial period with the publication of her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She states that “In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is ever more deeply in shadow.” (*Can the Subaltern Speak*, 83) She focuses on the subalterns in this way:

Let us now move to consider the margins of the circuit marked out by this Epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribal, And the lowest strata of the urban sub proletariat. (*Can the Subaltern Speak*, 78)

The development of feminist theory from the times of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* to J.S.Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* traverses a trajectory in Western literature and culture that has noticeable impact on the upliftment of the status of women and gender studies in history.

Short story is a popular genre in literature all over the world. Rabindranath Tagore wrote nearly hundreds short stories in his unique style. Tagore wrote mostly about the rural Bengal during his early phase of writing whereas in the later phase his focus was on psychological analysis of humans with special reference to woman. He is regarded as a progressive short story writer. The norms and the scars made for the women in the so-called patriarchal society was very skilfully sketched by Tagore in his short stories. Rabindranath Tagore in his short story “Streer Patra” (The Wife’s Epistle”) showed through a letter written by the female protagonist Mrinal to her husband, her protest against the existing patriarchal norms in the contemporary social system. Tagore in this short-story highlights issues like child-marriage, condition of the orphaned, homeless girls, and marginalisation of economically dependent women and so on. The protagonist Mrinal writes a letter to her husband while leaving her in-laws” forever. Though Mrinal is an exceptional character in Tagore’s story, her entire life is dominated by the patriarchal thoughts and beliefs. She reminds her husband that she was married off at the tender age of twelve. “I was merely twelve years old.” (*Best Short Stories*, 192) Her mother-in-law had chosen her only because of her beauty.

Your mother was determined to compensate for the lack of looks of the eldest daughter-in-law by bringing in the second daughter-in-law who was a ravishing beauty. Or else why would all of you have taken so much trouble to travel to our village? (*Best Short Stories*, 192)

While entering her in-laws in a conservative family in the city of Calcutta from a native village, Mrinal is appreciated

highly only because of her beauty. Though time passes no one in her in-laws are aware of her intelligence.

It did not take all of you very long to forget about my beauty. But, you all were forced to accept and remember at every step that I was also intelligent. It came to me so naturally that even after spending all these years in your household, it still remains intact! My mother was extremely concerned because of this very factor --she considered intelligence as a bane for women. (*Best Short Stories*, 193)

The members of Mrinal’s in-laws were even unaware about her hidden talent of writing poetry.

One quality of mine about which all of you remained unaware was my ability to compose poetry. I would do so in secret. Good, bad, indifferent, no matter what, it did not have a barricade put up all around. That was my freedom and that was where I was I. Whatever quality of mine did not fit your concept of the second daughter-in-law you all neither liked, nor recognised. That I am a poet, you all did not even come to know in the course of these fifteen years. (*Best Short Stories*, 193)

Rabindranath Tagore through Mrinal’s letter analyses the probable reason of her humiliation in her in-laws household and these were the cause of suffering for most of the women in the 19th century Bengal. When one sibling of her elder daughter-in-law, Bindu, who is an orphan, appears in their house penniless and ugly in her appearance, Mrinal accepts her with all her sweetness. Rest of the family members are very worried about Bindu’s appearance. Without any hesitation all of them except Mrinal humiliate helpless, unmarried Bindu. Her own elder sister engages her as the maid-servant of the family. Mrinal stands as the saviour for Bindu but fails to stop her marriage. Afterwards truth reveals before Mrinal that Bindu is getting married to a lunatic man and Mrinal tried hard to escape from her in-laws along with Bindu. But all her efforts remain unsuccessful as Bindu leaves the mundane world by committing suicide. Tagore depicts how a helpless, orphan girl is brutally tormented in the hands of the so-called patriarchal society. Mrinal strongly protests against this pathetic incident of Bindu’s death in her letter to her husband and decides to leave her husband forever. Taking the example from Bindu’s premature death and as a reply to this insult and dishonour of feminism, she leaves her fifteen years’ conjugal life as a protest against this offence. Tagore was probably the first writer in Indian literature to create such a rebel marginalised character and through Mrinal’s powerful letter he attacked the patriarchal exploitation of women. A woman was expected to bow down in front of the restrictions of the society or if she tried to use her power of reasoning and questioned about the existing rules, had to face obstacles. Women were under the control of their fathers before their marriage and after marriage they were completely under the control of their husbands. They were totally deprived of education and were kept under the veil of ignorance. In this short story Mrinal’s talents are cornered and she remains merely a housewife, an inferior being, in the orthodox, middle-class Bengali family at “Number 27, Makhani Boral Lane”. It was the man-made social law that made a woman marginal in her husband’s home in the then

society. Mrinal's life as an inferior housewife would have been as usual if Mrinal's eldest sister-in-law's sibling, Bindu not comes to stay at their house. Bindu becomes homeless as her widowed mother died and her cousin brothers are treating her very rudely. At this point of the story, everyone from the family considers Bindu as an unexpected burden except Mrinal. She accepts that orphaned girl with all her sweetness and gives her shelter in spite of strong opposition in the household. The entire household is getting angry with Mrinal for doing this. Even Mrinal's sister-in-law is supporting her husband and treats Bindu badly. Mrinal criticises her elder sister-in-law who is incapable of showing her love for her sister as she fears her husband's reluctance. Rather she always tries to humiliate Bindu only to appease her husband and in-laws. Bindu has to do all the household duties for her survival. Her sister explains before her husband and the other members of her in-laws' family that Bindu is a very profitable maid-servant. Thus Bindu is overlooked, neglected, exploited, disregarded and treated with unconcern and indifference in her elder sister's in-laws house. Being a girl-child Bindu is deprived of her own house while her cousin brothers easily enjoy its ownership. On the other hand, such is the miserable condition of Bindu in the house of her sister's in-laws that if anything wrong happens or if anything is missing, the members of the family put the blame on Bindu in no time. Finally, the members of the household find a way to get rid of this unwanted burden from their household by marrying her as Bindu is of marriageable age. Surprisingly enough, no one from the groom's family comes to see Bindu and the marriage is arranged. Mrinal is very concerned about her future although Mrinal knows that there is no escape for Bindu from getting married. As Mrinal is very close to Bindu and as Bindu dearly loves her, it is like a death for Bindu to go away from Mrinal's love and affection. No matter whatever will be the situation Mrinal promises to stay by Bindu's side for the rest of her life. But after three days after her marriage she comes to know that her husband is a lunatic and somehow manages to escape from there. After the truth is revealed, Mrinal is in rage with her in-laws, But, Mrinal's in-laws accuse Bindu of escaping her lunatic husband. They insist her to go back to her mad husband. But Mrinal knows very well that it would be equivalent to death for Bindu. Mrinal remembers her promise to stay by Bindu's side forever. She seeks help from her younger brother Sarat and decides to go to Puri along with Bindu. But circumstances prove Mrinal a failure as Bindu commits suicide by burning herself in order to get rid of her tragic life. Bindu's act of killing herself is described as a new trend by everyone in the society. Apart from Mrinal, Bindu's sister shed tears secretly for Bindu. Mrinal writes in her letter to her husband that through Bindu's tragedy she realises the pathetic condition of women in the male-dominated society. As an insignificant housewife she is totally helpless in doing any good to save Bindu's life. So, Bindu's premature, tragic death is like a clarion call to Mrinal's soul from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light. Maratha poet Hira Bansode rightly says in her poem, "The Slave",

“...The woman is still a slave where Sita had to pass the ordeal by fire to prove she was a pativrata, and Draupadi was divided up among five men,

the woman of that country still remains a slave.....”

Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Streer Patra" ("The Wife's Epistle") though written more than a hundred of years ago, has its relevance even today.

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