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The Awakening: Significance of Rabindranath Tagore's "Strir Patra" in the Present World

K. Tejaswani, Ph.D.



Rabindranath Tagore 1861-1941

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabindranath_Tagore

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Abstract

This paper considers the significance of the role of the family in a woman's life as depicted in the short story "Strir Patra" by Rabindranath Tagore. Probably one of the first short stories to deal with feminism in colonial India, this short story confronts the age-old perceptions of the role of women in a family. The plight of the Bengali women in the 19th century was brought out in Tagore's short stories like "Strir Patra", "Nasta Neer", "Ghare Bhaire", etc.

Mrinal, a housewife belonging to a middle class family, writes a letter to her husband from a pilgrimage. Through the contents, we understand the trying times she endured in her attempt to give shelter to a young girl. Mrinal's family makes every effort to stop her from helping the young girl, Bindu. Eventually, they get Bindu married to an insane man without considering the young girl's predicament. When the girl tries to get out of that marriage and runs away twice from home, she realizes that she is nothing but a burden to Mrinal, given the societal and their family circumstances. She sets herself on fire and dies. Her death becomes a clarion call for Mrinal to wake up to her true self. The most remarkable part is that this short story also simultaneously endeavors to bring to light the role of a family in a woman's life.

This paper would also look into whether the women in the present world have really become awakened to their true selves. The paper deals with the relevance in the present world of those issues raised by Tagore in the early 20th century.

Key words: Role of a woman, Tagore, role of a family, female sexual repression, Bengali women.

The Story

Probably one of the first short stories to deal with feminism in colonial India, this short story confronts the age-old perceptions of the role of women in a family. The plight of the

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Bengali women in the early 20th century was brought out in Rabindranath Tagore's short stories like "Strir Patra", "Nasta Neer", "Ghare Bhaire", etc. "Strir Patra" was published in 1914, which literally means "A Wife's Letter." Mrinal, the housewife in a middle class family writes a letter to her husband during a pilgrimage. Through the contents, we understand the trying times she endured in her attempt to give shelter to a young girl. Mrinal's family makes every effort to stop her from helping the young girl, Bindu. Eventually, they get Bindu married to an insane man without considering the young girl's predicament. When the girl tries to get out of that marriage and runs away twice from home, she realizes that she is nothing but a burden to Mrinal, given the societal and their family circumstances. She sets herself on fire and dies. Her death becomes a clarion call for Mrinal to wake up to her true self.

The Goal of This Paper

The present paper studies the complex ways in which the paths of progression in the role of women belonging to the developing countries are connected, as reflected in select novellas. The paper aims to draw attention to the much-neglected role of the family in a woman's life.

Some Related Stories

'Strir Patra' reminds us of two other stories with different locations and of the same time period. It is essential here to discuss these stories as they were written in the same period at different locations in the world. They are Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" (1899) and Tagore's "Nastanirh" (1901) which are unusually similar to each other. The publication of these stories strengthens the fact that despite stiff opposition from major sections of readers and critics, progressive writers and publishers employed literature as a powerful tool to reflect society, culture, traditions and emotions of their period.

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Kate Chopin



Kate Chopin 1850-1904

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate_Chopin

Kate Chopin, the author of almost a hundred short stories and two novels, was pushed into literary oblivion, because she highlighted the inner feelings of women which were felt to be too scandalous by men and also women according to the societal standards of her time. Her writings were actually appreciated in the 1970's with the resurgence of feminism. Despite all her riches, Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" is still a "poor" woman, a woman who deserves our sympathy. A rich man's wife and the mother of two children, Edna to her great consternation finds herself in love with a younger person. As she tries to understand and come to terms with her inner feelings, she drowns in the whirlpool of emotions. Unable to justify herself or her family, Edna drifts away from her family and the person she loves. The awakening of her self-realization leaves her so emotionally deprived that she ends up killing herself. In the present times, progressive readers and critics would contend

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that killing herself, or leaving the family, or marrying the young person she has suddenly fallen in love with is not a solution for the problem Edna Pontellier faces.

The Novella *Nastanirh* by Tagore

The feeling of utter helplessness in a woman who is at the crossroads of emotional upheaval is again reflected in Tagore's "Nastanirh." Critics consider 'Nastanirh' as a novella based on the relationship between Tagore and his elder brother Jyothindranath's wife, Kadambari Devi who tragically committed suicide soon after Tagore's marriage. This novella received adverse criticism from the Bengali critics and readers as it confronted the sacred relationship between the elder brother's wife and the younger brother. In many Indian communities, the elder brother's wife is looked upon as the mother. Moreover, this novella also deals with the repressed sexuality of a married woman, which is a taboo subject in many countries even now. Tagore's bold and frank portrayal of the characters in 'Nastanirh' proves the fact that though we, as a society, are in denial regarding these sensitive issues, it is a fact that female sexual repression in marital context exists in our society in spite of prudists' attempts at brushing these issues under the carpet.

Wife's Role

Both in the East and the West, a wife's role in her home is perceived as an epitome of chastity, patience, and selflessness; and as a person she forever has to look after her husband's and family's needs without any complaints. A wife should quietly accept her situation without complaints when she is neglected by her husband. This is evidenced in Tagore's 'Nastanirh' where Tagore narrates the non-existing relationship between the couple, Bhupathi and Charulatha.

Many a night he spent at his press, by which time his child-wife Charulata had slowly blossomed into youth. The editor of a newspaper did not get this vital

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news. The moment at which a young couple discover themselves in matchless splendour in the first flush of their love, that golden moment came and faded into the past without discovering each other. [13]

Travails of a Woman

In 'Strir Patra' Tagore describes the travails of a woman who is endowed with intelligence at her mother's place and in-law's place as follows:

My mother was always very troubled by my intelligence; for a woman it's an affliction. If she whose life is guided by boundaries seeks a life guided by intelligence, she'll run into so many walls that she'll shatter her forehead and her future. But what could I do? The intellect that the other wives in the house lacked, the Lord in a careless moment had bestowed upon me; now whom could I return the excess to? Every day you all rebuked me: precocious, impertinent girl! A bitter remark is the consolation of the inept; I forgive all your remarks. [Gupta 2]

Mrinal understands the fact that though she is intelligent and capable enough of writing poetry, she should consider that gift as bothersome, because this gift would finally lead her to an awareness of her existence. In a family system a woman's knowledge of herself is a cataclysmic point which should be avoided at any cost.

Women in Society

These are certain aspects of a woman a society is not yet ready to accept as they are, since these are clearly deviating from the image the society has regarding a woman and a wife. Mrinal's elder brother-in-law's wife, Didi, lectures her younger sister, Bindu, before Bindu's marriage, regarding the place of a woman in her husband's home. Didi probably knew that Bindu's prospective bridegroom was an insane person. Yet, she accepted the marriage because

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they were not financially independent; and as her parents had expired, there was no one else to either take care of Bindu or ask questions if anything untoward happened in Bindu's life. Didi hid her sorrow and allowed her sister, Bindu to be sacrificed at the altar of marriage to an insane person. Instead she tried to put sense, as she understood it, and based on their circumstances, into Bindu's head as:

For some time now, I had seen Didi wipe her eyes in quiet moments; now, too, her tears ran. But the heart could not be everything; there were rules to live by. She said, "You must realize, Bindu 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." [Gupta 2]

Women, in those days attributed their marital happiness to punya, the holy deeds they performed in this and their previous birth. Literature, irrespective of location, reflects the fact that according to many individuals, fate ultimately functions according to previously ordained intentions of God in one's life and especially in a woman's life. So society teaches a woman that it is always better to accept whatever is in store for her and prove her worth as a sacrificing and worshipping wife to the family, and society.

In *Srimath Bhagavatham*, the role of a woman is mentioned as follows:

Karyeshu dasi; Karaneshu mantri;
Rupecha lakshmi; kshamaya dharitri;
Bhojyeshu mata; sayaneshu vesya;
Shat dharmayukta kuladharmata patni.

which means

A good wife should have the following six qualities:

ability to be an efficient and loyal worker

ability to advise like an able minister

fortunate to look like the Goddess Lakshmi herself

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blessed with the patience of mother Earth
ability to cook and serve like a caring mother
ability to satisfy her partner with her skill in marital relations

Failure to Define the Role of Family in Woman's Life

But unfortunately, feminists, modern day courts, progressive men all have failed to define the role of a family in a woman's life. Similarly, the husband's role in a wife's life is left unmentioned. Whenever a marriage breaks up, a woman's insubordination is held responsible for the breakup. Woman is a second-class citizen throughout the world and more so in India. The voices or cries for help are heard but there are few hands to wipe the tears or to reach out and help her.

Tagore's Bold and Futuristic Approach

It is gratifying that progressive Indian authors like Tagore in the colonial period have taken up the woman's cause, in the time period, when in the West also feminists like Margaret Sanger, Alice S. Rossi, Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir, and writers like Kate Chopin, Theodore Dreiser, and Edna Ferber were fervently fighting for women's cause.

After reading Tagore's "Strir Patra" the reader would contend that it is the author's attempt at redemption, to guide Charulatha in "Nastanirh" whose role is modelled after his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi. Probably it is Tagore's anguish which comes out in narrating a "progressive" end to "Strir Patra" when Mrinal decides to leave her home declaring *Amio bachbo. Ei bachlum* ("And I shall live. Here, I live") instead of killing herself like Bindu. This is a welcome development in stories which depict issues concerning women in a forthright manner.

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Controversy surrounding Kate Chopin's "The Awakening"

Kate Chopin's "The Awakening" has created a great furore in Chopin's hometown, St. Louis. The reputation of Chopin was damaged to the extent that her club membership was withdrawn with immediate effect. Chopin was universally criticized for not taking a stand against Edna's actions and for the controversial ending of the novella. Chopin had dealt with a very sensitive issue which was not addressed before in literature by a woman author. But the novella was denounced by many critics and readers without considering the fact that literature imitates real life.

Tagore's Story was Accepted and Appreciated

Amazingly "Strir Patra" was received well in a country steeped in tradition and religious diktat, perhaps because of the changing trends in education and changing times. In addition, Tagore has already become a great celebrity whose stories and words had established great effect in Indian mind. The fact that Mrinal was leaving her family for the sake of a just cause was appreciated by the readers.

Double Standards

This paper tries to draw your attention to the fact that whereas Chopin's "The Awakening" has created a furore similar to Tagore's "Nastanirh" and "Gharebhaire" in their respective countries, "Strir Patra" was accepted by society, thereby proving the double standards of the society we are living in. A woman who leaves her home for a reason which is virtuous according to the standards of our society, is accepted, whereas, a woman who gives in to her inner feelings, or who does not suppress her sexuality is never accepted by society as a woman with feelings since she threatens the very pillars of the foundation of the society we live in. It is nothing but calamity for the woman who fails to deliver society's dictates.

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The Present Need

In the present day's context, there is a crying need for a support group to fall back on when a woman is in need of it. Leaving home, having affairs which lead to the breakup of the family, or suicide is not a solution for this problem. As times change, we too must change and accept that the present-day women are far more knowledgeable than their predecessors, and try to accommodate the new woman in the family. A woman or/and a wife needs her family, her husband to support her, to love her and to guide her in troubled times. It is high time that the role of a family in a woman's life comes into the picture. As is expected of a woman that she should be a pillar of strength behind the family, the family also should reciprocate when times and circumstances demand the support of a family in a woman's life.

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K. Tejaswani, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor in English
Gandhi Institute of Technology and Management University
Hyderabad Campus
Hyderabad 502329
Andhra Pradesh
India tej_hyd@rediffmail.com

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