

In Search of Woman Self, Challenges, and Ultimate Destiny in Tagore's "Subha": An Existential Approach

Md. Ibrahim Khalil

Lecturer

Department of English

Pabna University of Science and Technology

Pabna - 6600, Bangladesh

ibrahimkhalil@pust.ac.bd

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, the leading Bengali literary gem, and Nobel laureate (1913) in literature, has been largely enchanted by several vital worldwide issues such as recognized woman self, hearty care and compassion in troubles and distress, and more interestingly the ultimate purpose of a woman. From his life-long experience and passionate literary adventure, Tagore observes everlasting picture of Bengali rural women, their lifestyles and the inherent miseries from the context of patriarchal mechanism. In most of his short stories, he always keeps a permanent platform to examine the society as well as its traditional beliefs and barriers against the emancipation of women. The short story "Subha" is one of them. Through the deaf and dumb girl Subha, Tagore explains how cruel and terrible role a system can play to make one's life so devastating. The study demonstrates what sort of challenges this wretched girl has faced entirely to meet her "Woman Self" along with the ultimate destiny of life. Applying existentialistic approach, this study follows qualitative and descriptive analysis to get a comprehensive insight.

Keywords: Tagore, Subha, Woman Self, Individuality, Freedom, Anxiety, Destiny, Existentialism

Introduction

In the context of human existence, individuality and freedom, existentialism is one of the much discussed issues. "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (Sartre 24). Due to the impact of modern civilization and industrial revolution people began to judge everything applying science and reason. This scientific and enthusiastic sense forced human civilization to be detached from the traditional beliefs and systems once they had. To comment on this radical change, Panza argued, "As the scientific and Industrial Revolutions came to a head in the 19th century, and society became increasingly secularized, the traditional social order

underwent radical change in a very short time” (9). It has raised some fundamental questions towards the so called established systems and principles. “During this period, people began to feel disconnected from the traditional belief systems that had helped them make sense of the world and of their lives. In these conditions, people may not literally commit suicide, but a kind of spiritual death — a spiritual suicide — becomes a very real danger” (Panza 10). In fact, people began to feel a tragic concern of human relationship. According to Macquarrie, “For the existentialist, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities for tragic conflict” (17). Finding no possible ways to be followed as a part of the consequence, man abides by the command of the unending destiny. “It occurs when people give up to resignation and surrender in the face of what they see as the pointlessness of their existence” (Panza 10).

One of the best short story writers in Bangla literature is Rabindranath Tagore. “Tagore’s stories are relevant to the current society thematic reviews and readers perceptions will definitely promote idealistic views in the minds of the readers. Tagore had the unique natural genius to read women’s minds and analyze their strange structure, through his stories” (Prasanna TVN 143). In most of his stories, he has depicted multidimensional role of women as he had close connection with them in his childhood. “Rabindranath’s sympathy for the cause of women struck roots during his teenage years” (Unger 272). At the same time, he was influenced by some women. The reflection has been seen in his creative works. Unger commented, “Throughout his life several women had much influence on Tagore. Together with other impressions all this genuinely would become amalgamated in Rabindranath’s creativity in many fields” (284). He never supported the strong grasp of patriarchies. “Tagore was very dissatisfied with the prevailing patriarchal system which suppressed the basic human rights of a woman” (Banerjee 272). He observed that women cannot cross the box due to their limitations. “Most of the women in Tagore’s writing suffer to a greater extent, but few women stand out” (Rani B. et al. 11976). The study analyzes Tagore’s short story “Subha” from existentialistic perspective focusing the woman self, commonly faced challenges as a woman and finally the ultimate destiny of an individual.

Findings and Discussion

People generally love to believe that they are fortunate enough to enjoy a meaningful and authentic life. Here, the words “authentic” and “meaningful” are used in the sense that they will meet their logical expectations and desires. Whatever the situation comes, people will be on the back and front. They will enjoy their individuality experiencing no alienation and anxiety. But the reality is people hardly meet these expectations. In the time of rational or irrational danger they find none in their surroundings. The most striking thing is that parents who are responsible for the birth of a child sometimes deny their responsibilities. Providing no shelter or sympathy,

they consider this innocent super creature a curse only for the biological malfunction of a human action. In such a position, a child, a girl, or a boy feels suffocation to survive nowhere. The question of existence and essence seems very irrational to them. This aspect of life and predicament did not escape Tagore's eyes and thereby he incorporated these existential ideas into his short story "Subha".

The Search for Woman Self and Individuality

In order to clarify the importance of individualism in the context of existentialism, Flynn remarked, "Existentialism is a person centered philosophy. Though not anti-science, its focus is on the human individual's pursuit of identity and meaning amidst the social and economic pressure of mass society for superficiality and conformism" (08). Like other existential elements, individualism is also important to be observed. "Existentialism is known as an 'individualistic' philosophy" (Flynn 24). Tagore was much more concerned about women's identity, dignity and individuality. "Tagore urges women to find an identity of their own, and realize that wifhood and motherhood are but fractions of their whole being. They should not lose their individuality, independence and identity" (Prasanna TVN 143). In the short story "Subha", the protagonist got no particular platform to prosper her individuality. Neither her family nor her society provided any congenial atmosphere. It was true that Subha was wordless. If she got proper care, facilities and education, she could have a different life story. "Nietzsche has spoken eloquently of the loneliness of the individual who has risen above the herd" (Flynn 25). Whatever Subha's family decided, Subha accepted. Her family was much more concerned about dignity of the family rather than her future crisis.

According to Benjamin, "A key concept in French Existentialist thought, choice is important to the individual since beyond being a simple option, it is a process in which we are compelled to engage ourselves" (14). But Subha did not have this choice. On the other hand, Macquarrie explained his consideration as less emotional and analytic saying, "It consists in the claim that existential analysis reveals man an emerging essence which cannot be fulfilled within the limit of earthly life and which therefore points to the possibility of a fulfillment beyond death" (254). In the context of Subha, it has been observed that she could not fulfill her desire and aspiration. Since she liked and accompanied Pratap, there could be a different ending. The narrator noted Subha's condition, "Subha looked at Pratap just as deer, pierced to the heart, looks at the hunter, as if to say, 'What harm I have done you?'" (108) Therefore, Subha passed her childhood having no human friends. When she grew up, she did not marry according to her choice. It means that Subha failed to develop as an individual.

Challenges as a Woman

Ridiculous Naming: Sign of Insult and Humiliation

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In the short story “Subha”, the first thing to be concerned is the authenticity of the name of the protagonist. To define “Authenticity”, Panza stated, “People want authenticity — to live in a way that’s in tune with the truth of who they are as human beings and the world they live in” (12). The two elder daughters of Banikantha named Sukhesini and Suhasini had no biological complications. For that they got meaningful and good sounding names. In terms of the third daughter Subha, it is observed that she cannot speak. Therefore, her name does not match with her action. “When the girl was named Subhashini, ‘she speaks sweetly, who could know that she would be dumb?’” (Tagore 104) The narrator threw no question towards anybody due to the unpredictable reality one has to face.

It was quite natural for Banikantha to think that his third daughter would be as normal as his two other daughters. Since he named her in a particular age when it was hard to detect the real characteristics of somebody. If Banikantha named her after her problem detected, his action could be questionable. Flynn raises the basic question of humanism, “But the reference to the factual basis of authenticity brings us back to the basic question of humanism: What is the human being? What, if anything, distinguishes us from the rest of nature?” (65) The only cause the narrator added is, “Her two elder sisters were called Sukeshini and Suhashini. It was to preserve the rhyme that her father named her Subhashini” (104). It was true that Banikantha named Subha having a good intention in his mind. Yet this faulty name seemed insulting raising the question of authenticity.

Crisis of Essence and Existence

Without essence there remains no existence. According to Sartre, “What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards” (24). Therefore, it is clear that man first tries to exist, and then he thinks of his/her own position. “If the existence of anything has to do with the fact ‘that it is’, its essence consists in ‘what it is’. The essence of an object is constituted by those basic characteristics that make it one kind of object rather than another” (Macquarrie 61). Being wordless and helpless, Subha needed something to be essence on which she would exist. In fact, it makes a sense that she required a minimum platform to stand. This platform could be her family or the surroundings she was brought up in. If the society became her support or essence, Subha could survive. She could get the essence from her parents too. The narrator pointed out Subha’s humble application towards the unspeaking mother of humankind, “Mother, don’t let me go. Spread out your two arms like mine and hold me to you” (109). Subha could seek help from her biological mother. She did not approach her expectation because she knew that her mother would not support her. Therefore, it was better option for her to turn towards the nature that she considered the speechless mother. Subha’s husband could act as a better platform for this wretched girl. At least, she could get an essence to exist.

Cruel Face of Truth and Lack of True Humanity

The definition of truth varies from person to person. Sometimes truth appears with its cruel face before the innocent and helpless. Macquarrie argued, “Traditionally, truth has been considered to be the agreement between a mental content (a judgment or an idea) and the fact in the world that the judgment or idea ‘represents’” (137). Subha knew a truth or idea that people would appreciate her condition. The reason for what she could not talk was not for her own fault. As a human being she also had same expectations like others. But Subha could not enjoy the bright face of truth. “She had understood from childhood that she had been born in her father’s house as a curse sent by God” (Tagore 104). This statement proves what kind of truth Subha met from the very beginning of her life. Therefore, the existentialists failed to accept the traditional truth. “The existentialist philosopher rejects this traditional conception of truth as inadequate” (Macquarrie 137). As for example, the negligence and insult of other people in the short story can be relevant here, “Many people do not realize that one who does not speak might nevertheless feel, and so they would express their anxiety regarding the girl’s future to her face” (Tagore 104).

Subha understood that humanity would not pay any heed to her vulnerable condition. But she had a belief that at least her family members would support her. She expected that mother would feel her sufferings as she had given birth to her. But in return, Subha discovered a new kind of cruelty that she could not make any title for. The narrator noted, “But her mother, regarding her as a stain on her womb, was always displeased with her” (Tagore 104). When a helpless girl does not find shelter from her own mother, the beautiful world seems to her a meaningless world.

Darkness of Patriarchy and Social Conventions

In the story, one of the most important issues is the dark side of the patriarchal mechanism. Like others, Subha belonged to the same human species of the same universe. Yet she did not get the recognition. She had experience of tragic conflict and guilt. According to Macquarrie:

Even where the contrast is not so sharply drawn, there is still the recognition of conflict and of the experiences of guilt and alienation. For the existentialist, man is never just part of the cosmos but always stands to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities for tragic conflict (17).

Since Subha understood both her and her social position well, she wanted to stay away from the people so that people would not be disturbed by her silent regular activities. In the

story, the narrator stated Subha's stand, "Consequently she would always strive to conceal herself from the general view. She would think: 'It is best if people forget me.'" (104). Banikantah could take more time to choose a suitable husband for Subha. Of course, he was much more concerned of his last daughter's age, "Meanwhile the parents, burdened with the duty of getting their daughter married, were becoming anxious" (Tagore 108).

Subha was not a burden to her parents. It was the patriarchal set up which forced them to feel her like burden. The narrator remarked that people were much more tensed about Subha's marriage than her parents were. They were not only concerned but also critical (108). The people in the society were so cruel that they did not try to understand the complicacies of the girl. They began to spread a rumor that they would ostracize her parents if they failed to marry off Subha timely. The tension was made so high that Subha's parents felt suffocation. In the story, the narrator drew the picture, "The girl's parents grew anxious, worried, agitated, as if the deity himself had come to choose the animal for sacrifice" (109). This statement especially the word "animal" is enough to prove what negligence and insult Subha had to digest only for her dumbness. "Subha is a simple story of a dumb girl. Subha, whose parents get her married without informing the bridegroom of her defect" (P. Satyanarayana and A. Phaniraja 4). If the society never forced, Banikantha would not allow the later farce to be staged to hide a greater truth. Therefore, the people who came to marry Subha would not agree to marry her. As a consequence, Subha would not have to face fatal destiny so early. The most important point here to be noted is- the mechanism of the patriarchal set up.

Subha's family kept her real condition secret for the reason that if others came to know of her dumbness, they would not marry her at all. Now the question is who will take the responsibility to be a dumb in the society. The narrator grasped this condition: Within a week everyone realized that the bride was dumb. But what they did not realize was that this was not her fault. She did not deceive anyone. Her eyes had said everything, but no one understood her (109). The result moved forward one-sided with the immense push of strong patriarchal force.

Obscurity in Language and Expression

One of the most important existential elements in "Subha" was the lack of proper communication and language. According to Macquarrie, "Thinking is articulated in language. Whether any kind of thinking is possible without language is doubtful, for even our unspoken thoughts are put into words and sentences" (144). Therefore, language is mandatory to communicate with each other. Since Subha could not speak properly, she failed to express her inner feelings. "Subha was a mute girl, did not know the language of humans, except the language of silent nature and animals who did not speak in human language" (Rani B. et al. 1977). On the other hand, people could not understand Subha well. This situation created a gap

between Subha and the entire world. The narrator indicated Subha's position saying, "Subha had no words, but she had two long-lashed large black eyes-and her lips would tremble like a leaf bud at the slightest touch of feeling" (104). This statement clarifies that Subha had many things to prove her existence but she failed due to the ambiguity of her language. "What we express in language has largely to be constructed by our own efforts, somewhat like translation; it is not always adequate, and through lack of skill may often be wrong" (Tagore 104). The reflection of the ambiguity had been reflected when the groom came for the first time to see Subha. It was hard to detect for which reason actually Subha shed her tears. The common questions rise in the readers' mind like- Was Subha worried about future? Or, did she not agree to marry? Or, had she a different choice? Only tears cannot reply these questions specifically. If Subha could speak, she would translate her thoughts into language and let everybody know her opinions.

Finally Subha became alienated from the society. She had to create a new island for her survival. In fact, Subha discovered a new identity like a stranger in the society. To define alienation, Panza stated, "This is the feeling that you're a stranger in your own life, a stranger in the world" (12). Being exhausted to create friendship with human beings, Subha turned to nature and the domestic animals. The narrator wrote, "Nature seemed to compensate her for the lack of language. It seemed to speak for her" (105). The shelter and support Subha expected from her family had been recovered by the generosity of nature. The sweet sounds of stream, the song of boatmen and the calls of birds filled her desert heart. "These various sounds and motions of nature, too, were the language of the dumb: an extension into the universe of the language of Subha's long-lashed eyes" (Tagore 105). Interestingly, Subha observed a common feeling between herself and the nature. The narrator included, "Only a dumb nature and a dumb girl would sit speechlessly face to face- the one in the sun's broad rays, the other in the narrow shade of a tree" (105-106). Besides nature, the domestic animals like goats, cows and cat supported Subha a lot. The narrator remarked the differences:

It was not that Subha did not have a few intimate friends. There were two cows in the cattle-shed, called Sarbashi and Panguli. They had never heard their names uttered by the girl, but they knew the footsteps-she had a wordless, tender crooning which they understood better than words. They could understand, better than her fellow human beings (Tagore 106).

Whenever she felt something uninteresting or discomfort, she ran to these animals. "When she was made to hear hard words in the house, she would come to these dumb friends of hers-and from her long suffering, melancholy-stilled gaze, they would seem to fathom the girl's heartache with a kind of blind understanding" (Tagore 106). From this statement, it is clear how

much support Subha got from these domestic animals. Although they did not have human hearts, they accompanied Subha in her self-formed world.

Lack of Freedom, Anxiety and Forlornness

In order to clarify the urgency of freedom in existentialism, Flynn noted, “Existentialism is philosophy of freedom. Its basis is the fact that we can stand back from our lives and reflect on what we have been doing” (8). So, it will not be hard to say that there is nobody who wants freedom. “Action implies freedom, and there can be few themes, if any, nearer to the heart of existentialism than freedom. The theme is present in all the existentialist writers” (Macquarrie 177). The question of freedom pervades the entire story. Subha could not see the reflection of her freedom anywhere. She could not raise her voice against the exploitation that she experienced. When her family kept her condition secret before the groom, she could not protest. Even she could not opine about her choice and decision. According to Macquarrie, “Existentialist writings abound in allusions to decision, choice, commitment, engagement, resoluteness and the like” (182). In the short story “Subha”, the protagonist did not meet her choice. This lacking directs her to the world of anxiety. According to Panza, “This is the feeling of unease you get when you start to recognize that life is absurd.” (12) Since she did not get minimum comfortable atmosphere in her own family, she had no chance to expect from her husband’s house. Subha was not ready to leave her self-formed world where she exercised minimum freedom. But the problem was that she could not make anyone understand. “This is the feeling of loneliness you get when you realize that no one can help you make sense of your existence” (Panza 12). Therefore, a sense of forlornness appeared in her mind.

False Consciousness and Superstitious Ideology

The actions of Subha’s mother are questionable. As she knew that her third daughter is dumb and helpless, she could be a great source of shelter for Subha. But Banikantha’s wife could not hold this position. “Women’s identity especially during the twentieth century society was shadowed in respect to that with man” (Banerjee 275). The statements of Subha’s mother can be relevant here. To point out the false consciousness, the narrator stated, “Her mother, in particular, thought of her daughter as a lapse on her own part. This is because a mother always sees a daughter, rather a son, as a part of herself – a lack in her daughter seems to her a special cause of personal shame” (Tagore 104). The previously mentioned statement of Banerjee proves that Subha’s mother alone did not think like that. In the society, there were more women who had same superstitious ideology. If Subha’s mother did not have false ideology, she could be more reliable and affectionate to Subha. According to Barry, “Ideology is a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case) endowed with an existence and historical role at the heart of a given society” (163). Due to

this strong false consciousness, Subha's mother could not exceed the deep-rooted wall. Subha's mother can be explained as a victim of the dominant social set up. Nayar argued:

False consciousness or ideology is a mode of misrecognizing the true nature of our material lives and social roles when we consume a cultural artifact. It is a system of ideas, values, beliefs that we live by, through which we perceive the world (130). The intention lies here is not for Subha's mother to be proved innocent or villain. It has been tried to find out the concepts or ideas that made Subha's mother behave like that. In this perspective Subha's mother is also a victim of false consciousness or faulty ideology.

The Ultimate Destiny

Death is the ultimate result of an existential character. "This is the ultimate context for all human actions and an important source of the absurdity of life" (Panza 12). The short story "Subha" indirectly says that Subha died finally. "In the young girl's ever-silent heart, an endless inexpressible weeping reverberated, but no one except God could hear it" (Tagore 109). This statement proved that God responded Subha's call. "The story closes with this as the climax. We have to imagine that she was ill-treated on account of their anger at the fraud practised on them." (P. Satyanarayana and A. Phanirajac 4) After getting the information of second marriage of Subha's husband, it became clear that Subha left the world. In fact, it was death which closed all the sources of Subha's cries, sorrows and sufferings.

Conclusion

Through the creation of a dumb girl Subha, Tagore has unveiled a dark picture of Bengali society. Here, people are much more concerned about social norms, dogmas and values. To them, social custom like marriage is more important than someone's life. Like Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa, Tagore's Subha raised questions towards the so called humanity. His main concern was to show diversified human behavior in different contexts especially during the time of danger. The most interesting truth that Tagore tried to expose was the brutal treatment of the family members like parents. Thinking nothing about the future, they married off their wordless daughter in order to lighten the long carried burden and curse. Pushing an innocent girl to fatal destiny, they invited the questions of truth, sympathy and the ultimate meaning of life. For that Tagore's Subha felt the crisis of existence. Although she could be a promising and flourishing character in the story, Subha became an existential heroine at the end.

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