

AGGRANDIZEMENT OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN STORIES OF TAGORE- EXERCISE BOOK & MY FAIR NEIGHBOUR

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Abstract

India is one of the oldest civilizations and is basically recognized as a male-domineering society. The status of women in early India was not good. They were considered to be responsible for looking after their home and cook for the family. They did not have rights to participate in social and political activities. They were denied education. Many of the malpractices like child marriages, sati, purdah system etc. were practiced at the time. Rabindranath Tagore was not happy with the condition of women at the time. He had radical ideas of aggrandizing women which are reflected in his work. His campaign for women was much ahead of his time and it helped in shaping the society at that time. In this paper, the researcher explores two stories of Tagore – Exercise Book and My Fair Neighbour to bring to light his views on women.

Introduction

India is a country known for its diverse culture and amalgamation of religions and caste living together. It is also known for its male-dominated society. Women in India have been confined to the four walls of the house limited to household chores and looking after her family members. They have been totally unaware of their rights and development in the society. The customs like child marriage and sati were much common in all parts of India especially in Bengal, the native of Tagore. The girl child was not educated and if educated, was not supposed to further their education after marriage at an early age. The widows did not receive proper treatment and did not have a right to remarry. Tagore was very much grieved at the plight of women in the society. He had revolutionary ideas about status of women in India. He believed that women were equal to men and they should get their much deserved honor. His feelings are reciprocated through his work. Some of his short stories convey his viewpoint on honoring the fairer sex.

One of his stories “Exercise Book” reflects his ideology about women. It is a story about Uma, a small girl, who started to learn alphabets at school. The learning at school aroused her to practice her dexterity and repeatedly wrote here and there to sharpen it. She wrote the line “Rain patters, leaves flutter” (Tagore: 2000, 140) on all the walls of the house with a piece of coal. She even practiced some lines on her father’s account book. Gobindalal, Uma’s brother, used to express his opinion for the gazette. Once when Gobindalal completed an essay Uma took his brother’s pen and wrote on his essay-“So well-behaved is young Gopal, whatever you give he eats it all.” (140) This enraged her sibling and he forfeited all her writing paraphernalia. Uma was just seven years then and could not understand her brother’s reaction and started sobbing in a corner. When Gobindlal’s anger calmed down, he conferred her all her belongings and also presented her an exercise book to do her writing practice. She loved her exercise book and it was a constant companion of her everywhere. She accrued small poems and lines in it. She even wrote details of her friendship or her fights with her friends in it.

As was the tradition in Bengal, Uma was married off at the tender age of nine years to Pyarimohan, a fellow writer of Gobindalal. Here Tagore refers to the malpractice of child marriage which was prevalent in Bihar at that time. Uma, a small girl of nine, whose age was to learn new things at school and play with her schoolmates was tied in the bond of marriage. She even got instructions from her mother to behave well at her new home, listen to her mother-in-law and not to waste time in reading and writing. Yashi, her housemaid, also went along with her to make her settle in her in-law’s house. She kept Uma’s exercise book along with them as a memento of her parental home.

For the first few days at her in-law’s house, Uma did not get time to write anything in her exercise book, but when Yashi returned to her place, she wrote:-“Yashi has gone home, I shall go back to Mother too.” (142) She did not have time to practice her English writing. Here Tagore shows how the responsibility of the household on the shoulders of a small girl curbed her ability to write and learn more. But Uma yearned to be back at her home and wrote in her book-“If only Dada could take me home again, I would never spoil his writings again.” (143) Uma’s father wanted to take her back home for a short time but Gobindalal and Pyarimohan denied it saying it was her time to learn her household responsibilities.

Once Uma was intrigued to write something in her exercise book but her three sisters-in-law, Tilakmanjari, Kanakmanjari and Anangamanjari, came to know about it. They even complained about Uma to Pyarimohan. Pyarimohan, though educated was an old fashioned person. He was vexed with Uma for devoting her time to studies and neglecting her household duties. He believed that education would weaken female power and this would disrupt their married life. He got angry with Uma for it and she did not write anything in her book for a long time.

Uma heard a beggar woman singing a song one morning in the autumn. She was very much captivated by the song as it brought back the memories of her childhood. She called the beggar woman and wrote the following verse in her exercise book:-

The citizens say to Uma’s mother,
‘Your lost star has returned.’
The Queen runs, madly weeping.
‘Where is Uma, tell me?
My Uma has returned –
Come, my darling,
Let me clasp you to me!’

Stretching her arms,
Hugging her mother's neck,
Uma chides her, sore at heart:
'Why did you not send for me?' (144)

Tagore here brings forth the pain and longing of a small girl to go back to her own house and her parents. As Uma wrote down the verse in her exercise book, her sisters-in-law eavesdropped and came to know that she was writing in the book again. They began to shout: - "Baudidi, we've seen everything, Baudidi!" (144) Uma requested them not to tell anyone and she won't write again - "Dear sisters, don't tell anyone please, I beg you. I won't do it again. I won't write again." (144) Tilakmanjari snatched the book from her and they called Pyarimohan and informed him about Uma's act of using the exercise book again. Thus the exercise book was taken away from Uma permanently and childish desire to learn to write checked forever though Pyarimohan, her husband continued to flourish as a writer. Tagore here talks about women empowerment by bringing out the stark reality of injustice done with women at that time. Women did not have the freedom to pursue their studies due the superstitious belief that education interfered with smooth functioning of marriage.

In the short story "My Fair Neighbour", Tagore takes up the issue of widow remarriage. In the age when widow were treated with contempt and had to follow various restrictions, Tagore showed a new path to the readers by writing about widow remarriage. The story is about two friends, Nabin and the author. The author had some liking for the young widow who lived in the house next door but he did not reveal his feelings even to his friend. He thought of her as - "dew-drenched sephali-blossom, untimely fallen to earth" (Tagore: 2012, 157) But because of some pride, the author was not able to reveal his true feelings to the young lady. Here Tagore conveys the discomfiture of a person to advance on a path forbidden by the society. At that time, the condition of widowed women was not good. They were not cared for and men did come forward to marry them.

The author tried to pen down his emotions in the form of poems but he was not able to do so. It so happened one day, Nabin was overpowered by the urge to write poetry but could not get the rhyme correct. So he came to the author to get some poems edited, which he had written to his beloved. The author helped his friend in revising and improving his crude work and larger part of the poem became his own. He edited and modified many of his poems. The author saw this exercise as a way to vent his own emotions for the widow. He let his feelings flow in the form of the poetry under the shield of Nabin. Nabin wanted the poems to be published in the author's name and coxed him by saying - "But these are yours! Let me publish them over your name." (159) But the author credited Nabin to be the poet of the poems saying - "Nonsense!" and adding, "They are yours, my dear fellow; I have only added a touch or two here and there." (159) and thus convincing Nabin of the fact.

The author was so passionate about the young lady next door that he even thought of devoting himself to make widow-remarriage popular in the country. Once he had an argument with Nabin about this matter and he convinced him that widowhood was all about pain and longing and remarriage should be allowed by the society - "It is all very well for you to idealise widowhood from your safe distance, but you should remember that within widowhood there is a sensitive human heart, throbbing with pain and desire." (161)

After about a week, Nabin came back to the author and told him that he was prepared to marry a widow and wanted his help. The author was overjoyed to hear this decision of Nabin. He

even wrote a cheque for him to help him financially. Nabin told the author that the poems published in the magazine were the means by which he made a place in the heart of the widow. He also thanked the author that because of the argument they had, he had mustered courage to propose to the widow for marriage. The widow turned out to be same young lady for which the author had some feelings but was not able to convey to her. Thus Tagore treads on the thorny path of widow remarriage in the story. He conveys a new and modernized approach for the readers

Conclusion- Tagore wanted to improve the social and political conditions of women in the society. He had revolutionary ideas about women at the time when people in India had a parochial outlook about women. He wanted them to have social status in society and live with dignity. He opined that they had a right to education and a professional career. He voiced his opinion against social evils like child marriage, caste system, religious hypocrisy etc. The two stories stated above reflect the views of Tagore that every women has a right to be respected, valued and protected

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