RESEARCH ARTICLE

Race and Gender Conflicts in the Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews external and internal conflicts of race and gender which are more pronounced in the society. The analysis distinguishes the stratification among the people in the society and advances an understanding of crime and justice that achieves universal relevance and is free from the shortcomings of past ways of thinking. This study explores the intersections of gender and race in the stories of Rabindranath Tagore who exposed in his stories not only social conflicts but also psychological conflicts in respect of gender. In this context male dominance can be traced out in Tagore’s story *Once There was a King*. In this story a king had only a daughter not a son. Considering it, the king and the queen were frustrated, so the king decided to go away into the forest. Women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities. So men must have positive thinking towards women. The female literacy rate in India is gradually increasing as in Kerala yet still it is less than that of male.

Keywords: Race, Gender, Untouchability, Rabindranath Tagore, Socio-psychological perspective.

Literature brings to fore the reality of life that is represented in various genres. Literature has been a mirror of social and psychological perspectives existing in the world, of which story is more favourite and relevant in prose fiction in the modern literature. Over the centuries short fiction has developed into a literary form while the short story wasn't recognized as a true art form until the 1900's when innovative writers like Poe, Hawthorne, Maupassant, Chekov and Twain perfected the format. Short stories steeped in religion, tradition, myth, magic, romance, adventure and heroism.

Thus, a short story is a work of fiction, usually written in narrative prose that is shorter than a novel and usually deals with only a few characters. It is very close to life and is so short that it can be read out in one sitting. American writer, Edgar Allan Poe, one of the most influential writers of his time and a master of the short story has been called the creator of the detective story and of the horror story. Tales like *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* remain unsurpassed in evoking mood, setting and characterization. The contemporary writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain leaned more toward realism and life experiences. In Twain's case, his regionally flavoured tales were often overstated, whimsical or bordered on the fantastic. William Sydney Porter known as O’ Henry was another popular short story craftsman whose work relied heavily on coincidence. His short stories are *Gift of Magi*, *The Ransom of Red Chief*, *Mammon and the Archer*, *A Cosmopolite in a Cafe* etc. *Gift of Magi* O’Henry addresses various themes of love, sacrifice and wisdom.

Rudyard Kipling wrote immensely popular stories about British military life in India as well as wonderfully creative children's tales, most notably, *The Jungle Book*. He received the Nobel Prize for such stories for Literature in 1907. Russian writer, Anton Chekov crafted simple tales of life. His stories are slow moving with little in the way of plot or action, and could more accurately be called...
character studies. Joseph Conrad was another writer whose tales were character driven and whose settings usually revolved around realistic observances of naval life that didn't always have happy endings.

As far as Indian short story is concerned in literature, stories written in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century are a retelling of the folktales, legends and parables. They tend to be anecdotal, sentimental and didactic in nature. In twentieth century the short story really became popular. Indeed, during the first half of the 20th century, it was possible for a writer to make living writing short stories. Comella Sorabji was the first Indian short story writer with impressive work to credit. Other short story writers are S.M Natesha Sastrri, Dwijendranath Neogi and Sunity Devee. Shankar Ram presents rural reality, superstitions, caste system and poverty. Despite them a number of writers are known as the short story writers in all of the major languages like Saadat Hasan, Bibhuti Bhusan, Kartar Singh Duggal, Gopinath Mohanty, and Rudyard Kipling and Ruskin Bond, of which Rabindranath Tagore is known as the eminent short story writer. They also admitted the consideration of Henry David Thoreau that not that the story need to be long, but it will take a long while to make it short. The short stories of Tagore have been translated into English. It is the firm and integral part of literature in translation.

Rabindranath Tagore, (7th May 1861-7th Aug. 1947) affectionately called Gurudev by Gandhiji, was born at Jarasanko in Calcutta, Bengal in India. His father Devendranath Tagore was a famous religious reformer, mystic and scholar who was referred to as "Maharishi". Rabindranath Tagore belonged to an aristocratic family. His mother Sharada Devi was the mistress of a big household. She was so busy in domestic chores that she could hardly pay any attention to her children. Tagore grew up in a family atmosphere of Sanskrit and ancient Hindu culture which greatly influenced his thinking. Tagore got early education in a school with conventional pattern of education, but it failed to attract and mould his free spirit. Private lessons were regularly imparted to him at home.

Tagore began his literary career by writing Bhanphul his first narrative in Bengali. He has composed a number of poems, songs, essays, plays and short stories. His essay On Hindu Marriage assumed great social significance. His articles The English and The Indians, The Right of Justice, The Hesitations of Politics etc. reveal his love for his motherland. For Gitanjali, (1910) Tagore was awarded Noble Prize in 1913, that brought him into international distinction.

Tagore began his dramatic career when he was sixteen years old, with his brother Jyotirindranath Tagore. Tagore wrote his first original dramatic piece when he was twenty years old. His works sought to articulate the play of feeling and not of action. In 1890 he wrote Visarjan. It has been regarded as his finest drama. In the original Bengali language, such works included intricate subplots and extended monologues. Later, Tagore's dramas used more philosophical and allegorical themes. Lastly, Tagore's Chandalika was modeled on an ancient legend. It describes how Gautama Buddha's disciple asks water of a tribal girl.

Tagore’s plays also are important to Bengali literature. All of his plays have been repeatedly staged and re-interpreted over the years. His most famous play, perhaps, is Raktakaravi ("Red Oleanders"). Tagore's other notable plays include Chitrangada, Raja, Valmiki-Pratibha, and Mayar Khela, Post Office, Sacrifice, and The Home and The World. Tagore was also an accomplished musician and painter. Indeed, he wrote some 25000 songs; together, these comprise, Rabindra Sangeet, an integral part of Bengali culture. Tagore's music is inseparable from his literature (poems or parts of novels, stories, or plays alike), most of which became lyrics for his songs. These explored the gamut of human emotions and are reflected in his two national anthems: Bangladesh's Aamaar Sonaar Baanglaa and India's Janaa Ganaa Mana.

Thus, Tagore became the only person ever to have written the national anthems of two nations.

As far as race and gender is concerned, these are inequalities between females and males, and between people of different colors which distinguish social stratification and reduce love, affection, harmony and interdependence among the people. Race and gender have been revised to reflect ongoing changes in the structure of inequality and the tools that scholars have used to understand these changes. As we all know, socio-psychological and economic inequalities are
every day fare in conventional newspaper and television but such fare often rests on a naive understanding of stratification systems. So the main task of the study is to develop accounts of gender and race that will be effective tools in the fight against injustice and explain a variety of connected phenomena in terms of their relations that constitute the social classes of men as dominant and women as subordinate norms. These identities are gendered in relation to the social relations that constitute gender. In Twentieth Century Literature in English Mammon Chhotnagar accepts male domination and quotes Ms. Mukherjee’s remark, “The man woman relationship in which the man’s role is dynamic and the woman’s passive is a pattern that goes very deep into the Indian ethos” (1).

The domination, abuse and suppression of women by men have existed throughout history. Men psychologically, physically, socially and emotionally dominate women all over the world. This concept has existed since ancient times. In the age of Ramayan women were supposed as inferiors to men even in the highest families. Ravana, a profound scholar, considered men superior to women. When the army of Ravana was defeated by Lord Ram, he was shocked and embarrassed, he became too panicked. When his wife, Mandodari read Ravana’s face, she understood his anguish and tried to advise him not to fight Shri Ram because he was not an ordinary man but an incarnation of God. Ravana ignored her advice and snubbed her saying that women are mean and cowardice. Hanuman Prasad Poddar quotes from Shri Mad Goswami Tulsidas Virachit: Shri Ram Charit Manas “Nari Subhau Satya sad Kahahi, Avagun Aath Sada ur Rahai”. “Sahas Anrat Chapalta Maya, Bhaya, Abibek, Asauch adaya” (2). In the Victorian age, Alfred Lord Tennyson defined the relative position of man and woman in the society in his age.

Man for the field and woman for the hearth, Man for the sword and for the needle she, Man with the head and woman with the heart; Man to command and woman to obey, All else confusion. (3)

Tagore is also known as the inventor of the modern Bengali short story. He has been compared to such masters of the short story as Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekov and Guy de Maupassant. He began his career in the genre of short story in 1877 at the age of seventeen with Bhikarini (The Beggar Woman). He wrote a collection of eighty four stories in three volumes - Golpaguchha. These stories usually show Tagore’s reflection upon his surroundings, on modern and fashionable ideas and interesting mind puzzles. He typically associated his earlier stories with vitality and spontaneity. These features were connected with Tagore’s life in the common villages. He was grieved at the social ills in the society. So he tried to arouse mass consciousness and eradicate social evils. He beheld the lives of India’s poor and common people. His short stories teem with people of various hues of homogenous nature. His stories are highly reflective of the socio-psychological, cultural, religious and spiritual heritage of his times and still convey ideas and feelings that are perennially relevant to a humanitarian society. Being a sensitive and humanistic Indian short story writer, Rabindranath Tagore understood joys and sorrows, hopes and despairs of women very well. So Tagore exposed in his stories both psychological and physical oppression against women in respect of gender in the society. In this context Tagore delineated male dominance in his story Humbling of Ego. Nirjhani, wife of Harish had an interest in writing poetry. Few people knew about it because she lived in the society under supremacy of man, who believed that woman lacked knowledge to do and create anything. A woman has to know caring the children, cooking food, and cleaning house and clothes and have no right to education. Though she wrote poetry better than her husband yet she was unable to express her inner feelings, experience and knowledge. She developed inferiority complex and said, “People praise them falsely only because a woman had written them” (4). In punishment Dukhiram Rui and Chhidam Rui, the two brothers were hard working poor farmers. It was the rainy season. One day it rained heavily and Zamidar’s room began to leak so they were called him to repair it. They worked very hard without eating. Even they were not given their wages. After finishing work in the evening when they came home Dukhiram asked his wife Radha for meal but it was not ready because there was no grain. She cried “should I earn money?” On hearing this without thinking he hit her head with a chopper. Radha died on the spot. The news spread all over the village.
like fire accusing Chhidam’s wife, Chandra of the assault. He consulted Ramlochan, Principal advisor of the village in all masters relating to lawsuits to save his wife. He advised him to tell the truth of the death of his sister-in-law to the police. Chhoodam’s throat became dry and he said, “Thakur, if I lose my wife I will get another, but if my brother is hanged I will never get another” (5). Similarly in his story The Son of Rashmani Abhaycharan had two sons Shyamcharan from his first wife and Bhavani from second one. In his early life Abhaycharan had bequeathed property his son Tarapada in his childhood. When Brijasundari, first wife of Abhaycharan and Bhavani’s mother came to know about this, she became very unhappy considering his son Tarapada’s future. So Rashmani curses his fate and male domination of society that “Women lose their delicacy of refinement when they are compelled night and day to haggle with their destiny over things which are pitifully small and for this they are blamed by those for whom they toil” (6).

Tagore also employed inferiority complex attributed to race as different colours of people or untouchability that the individual feels not as good or important as or as intelligent as other people and possess neither proper place nor equal rights in the society. It is a feeling of intense insecurity that can be seen in the negative or useless reactions to problems of life. The idea of race is exposed as vacuous. Race acts as an apparently ineradicable marker of social difference. This problem can also be traced in his story Sunlight and Shade. In this story A Joint Magistrate pitched his tent in a village for a particular reason with some constables, riflemen, cooks, dogs, horses and an untouchable. The Naib rent collector would go to Sahib to supply eggs, ghee and milk. He would put it all in the expense account. He had budgeted for quantities much more than the Sahib required. But one day he lost control over himself when the Jemadar went to Naib and asked for four seer’s ghee for the dogs. The Naib pretended and advised him not to take so much ghee as it would be bad for digestion because he was an untouchable. When Jemadar came back to Sahib and complained to him about this matter, Sahib called for Naib and asked him about this matter. After all Naib was examined as liar so Magistrate ordered to make him go round and round the tent as a punishment because “Harakumar, being a Brahmin, was doubly humiliated by being driven about by an untouchable, Jemadar” (7).

To Rabindranath Tagore casteism and sectarianism, bigotry and narrowness were all basically inhuman and antisocial. The problem of caste system as racism can be traced in his short story The Laboratory. Nandkishore, an intelligent and brilliant engineer got a project of constructing buildings and he worked very hard to accomplish them. Suddenly he had to go on a business trip to Punjab where he found a beautiful girl, Sohini. When both interacted with each other Sohini was impressed. So observing his diligence and brilliance she fell in love with him and proposed him for marriage but he turned down her proposal because of not being same caste “He was not in favour of inter-caste marriages” (8). Similarly in Once There Was a King Tagore also shows the social inequality of caste in Indian society. A King had only a daughter but no son. So he had gone away to the forest for a particular reason. But having passed many years, when he did not come back the queen ordered her men to bring the king back from forest to the palace. The king was brought to his palace by the men. During dinner seeing a beautiful girl he was greatly surprised to know that she was his young daughter. When the queen broached the idea of her marriage he was worried at it. After days when he came out of the palace in the search of a boy for her daughter he found a Brahmin boy, younger than the girl. Despite the difference of age he decided to marry her daughter with the Brahmin boy but in the society there was a doubt “how would there be a marriage between a princess of the Warriors caste and a boy of priestly Brahmin caste” (9).

Although the country’s constitution says women have equal status to men, women are powerless and are mistreated inside and outside home. India is a society where male is greatly revered. Therefore women, especially the young girls, get very little respect and position in this country. The women of the household are required to prepare the meal for men, who eat most of the food. Only after the male have finished eating, the females can eat. In the society woman is not only suppressed and abused but also given importance because love is a strong attraction between man and woman. Usually when they have love they want to create a family. It is truth that both
man and woman are each a savage without the other. Both are only halves of an integrated human personality. Women seek protection from men and protection of men in the same breath that she strives for freedom from man’s domination. This contradiction is really the crux of the problem. The analysis of the interconnection between race and gender must take account of position of racism with respect to one-another and may go a long way in explaining the ethnic variations found in psychosis.
References


