

# Rabindranath Tagore's The Wife's Letter: A Story reveals Patriarchal Domination

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**Abstract:** Rabindranath Tagore is a great poet, philosopher, music composer and leader of Brahma Samaj, has taken the Indian culture and tradition to the whole world and becomes a voice of the Indian heritage. Tagore always has the favour for the equality of the men-women when women are exploited in different ways in the beginning part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian society. He reveals a grave issue: suppression of wife's intellect and marginalising her in everyday life through the characters of wives of his short stories. This paper tries to reveal the reality of man-woman relationship in the patriarchal society where women always have to face discrimination.

Key words: discrimination, marriage, inequality, exploitation etc.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), 'the man of all seasons,' makes himself through his compositions, be it his novels, short stories, plays, songs, essays, lectures, through his creative writings. His range of short stories highlights the interpretation of life and art and underline the suggestiveness of reality. His main motto is to bring out the erased portion of women's experience and show sympathy and understanding towards the plight of women which is quite unfamiliar trend for most works of that period. The themes of his stories are the problems of joint family system, social criticism, love---passionate or placid, conjugal bond, love in its waywardness, eccentricities of human relationships and the agony at the core of human life. The developing pressure of circumstances—local, social, economical and political---are reflected in his works.

Tagore himself has never been recorded to be a confirmed feminist, yet his idea about society included a new look, a new hope for women. He wants to give women an altogether new look of modernity of urban sophistication that will be reflected and in turn holistically exerts a positive force on the entire societal set up. Tagore's writings, especially his short stories have a feminist tilt; it is the problems- physical, social, mental ---confronting the women in their respective situations that claims the largest share of Tagore's attention. Men plays crucial roles by their positive/ negative independent approach to the problems treated.

The most important peculiarity of Tagore's short stories is that the characters are taken from socio domestic milieu and from the political arena, and so the men are identified in terms of inter-personal relationships. They are either brothers, fathers, husbands, lovers etc. They exhibit a general trend that strongly builds their masculinity—their vain tendency.

Tagore's short story, *Streer Patra*(The Wife's Letter) begins quite simply but gradually weave a tale where the woman protagonist comes to represent a world, which is not so simple, where she is subject to a system of ' pious house wife existence' under masculine domination and how she rises up and breaks away from the same. In this story, Tagore portrays pain and sufferings of the woman of a man's world, sometimes directly and sometimes through circumlocutory wit and satire that highlighted the injustice and absurdity all the more.

Mrinal, in her letter to her husband presents herself as an advocate of women emancipation, recalls that she is married off at an early age of twelve. She is selected by her mother-in laws for her beauty which is distinctly not seen in the eldest—daughter-in law in the family. In the letter, Mrinal makes a shrewd remarks about the selection procedure used by the groom's family to select her as a bride.

‘...the groom’s family had come to see the prospective bride, and whatever assessment or value judgement they made was the girl’s price. However beautiful or talented a girl might be, she needs must always be apologetic about herself and her worth...’ [Tagore, p. 637. My translation.]

The story reflects Rabindranath Tagore’s questions of unjust of Hindu Patriarchy. The incident that moved Tagore to write this story is the suicide by a poor teen-aged girl in Calcutta just a few weeks before the commencement of her marriage. A report is lodged that the girl named as Snehalata burnt herself to death on 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1914 just to give her parents relief from the heavy burden of dowry that the groom’s family demanded. (Amrita Bazar Patrika, February 7, 1914). Within a few months after this incident, Tagore wrote ‘*Streer Patra*’ and five other short stories in the literary magazine ‘*Sabuj Patra*’. The common theme connecting these stories is the articulation of autonomous subjectivity by the woman protagonist and her rebel against the patriarchal norms of Hindu society.

Mrinal’s nuptial journey starts at the age when she has no knowledge about the word marriage. She perceives that marriage is a voyage where a woman has to go to a unknown family from a secure parental home which Mrinal has faced. Her identity is changed. A new title, named as Mejo-bou (second daughter in law) imposed on her in the joint traditional Bengali family. Reflecting the position of women, Tagore reveals the dark picture of the society of his time when, women are not given any position, no liberty to lead their life in their own way or to select a suitable life partner. Their intelligence is subdued by the patriarchal norms of the society.

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After entering at the in law’s house, Mrinal is inspected by the women of the new home, who after scrutinising her properly make comments that she is really good looking. However in the letter, she ponders why God has furnished her with such nice-looking and intelligence because such qualities in a woman never cherishes in the conservative family where she is married. She comments that her innate intelligence have lain deep within her for fifteen years of married life but she is never allowed to show that in the family and in society. After fifteen years of her marriage, she has mustered the courage to raise questions and grapples against the concrete norms of the society. She reveals that her intelligent mind has become a great headache for the whole family. She writes “It didn’t take you long to forget that I had beauty. But that I was intelligent, that is what you were reminded of at every step..... My mother was always very anxious about this intelligence of mine. For one who has to accept the line of control, if she desires to follow her rational thinking then she is destined to stumble at every step.” (Sharma 9)

The tags attached to a good woman in Indian society at that time should have shamefulness, patience, modesty, selflessness, purity, and many more. Religious proclamation also reinforced this anti-women discrimination and asserted to impose some strict rule over women. Manu, the progenitor remarks that female whether girl, young woman or old woman is not permitted to do any independent action. In childhood she is to be under the control of her father, after marriage her husband controls her and when she becomes widow, she is controlled by her son. In all these constraints, just one thing that set Mrinal free is that she writes poetry. It is her only inner creation which reflects her self –supporting identity which motivates her to set free from the shackle of bondage, where she captivated. She remembers the immediate death of her daughter after being born and the unhygienic delivery room where she is put together. Mrinal reveals,

‘women felt ashamed even to feel sad...If it was the destiny of women to suffer at the hands of society, then it was better to let them wallow in neglect; love or caring merely increased the pain caused by neglect.’ (Tagore, 639, My translation.)

A change appears in Mrinal's boredom life when Bindu, eldest sister-in-law's sibling, has come to reside at their house after the death of her mother, but she is not properly welcome in the family and is treated as the burden which Mrinal never tolerates. She gives protection to her, inspite of appalling criticism, antagonism and opposition by the family members. As Bindu is of marriageable age, Mrinal's in-laws finally search a plot to remove the unwanted freight from the house permanently, and very quickly arranges her marriage without proper investigation about the groom's family and specially the groom. Mrinal is very much concerned about the future for this orphan girl, yet she knows the truth about the separation from Bindu whom she likes most. For Bindu also, marriage is a physical journey away from all the caring comfort and protection of Mrinal's love as well as a mental journey. Unfortunately, sky breaks on Bindu's fortune after her marriage. Bindu, after three days of her marriage elopes from her husband's house as she has found that her husband is a mad man, which is consciously suppressed by the groom's mother, who feels that mentally ill is just a minor fault in a man. Mrinal is confounded with anger at this condition and makes argument that the court will surely protect Bindu's rights as she has been cheated into marriage with an insane, and if it is required, Mrinal may sell her ornaments to finance the case but unfortunately, when she gets challenge by her husband about stepping out of the house and going to a lawyer for Bindu, she quietly has received her defeat, as she knows that without the support of the family members, she cannot lead her life. The whole family and society blame her that she has committed a great mistake in running away because, her proper place is by the side of her husband. The norms of patriarchal society is that after marriage, the woman's only place is her husband's home, and she must return to her in laws' house, even she may faces of all kinds of humiliation and brutality. Manu wrote that: 'A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities.'(Smith and Doniger 115.)

In the mean time, a relative of Mrinal's family has decided to go to Puri on pilgrimage and Mrinal expresses her desire to accompany the lady. Meanwhile she requests her brother Sarat to escort Bindu and put her on the train taking Mrinal to Puri. Sarat however comes with a shocking and tragic news that Bindu has made suicide by setting herself on fire. Her act of killing herself was severely criticized by Mrinal's husband's family, but Mrinal comments that Bindu ,being an unwanted girl in a Bengali middle-class family, cast off by her own kin and is tricked into marriage to a madman, she has been set free by death and transformed into an immortal soul, one with the great God Himself. Bindu's death is like an awakening call to Mrinal's soul to emerge out of its hemmed in existence and go forth towards freedom. Mrinal breaks the shackles of married life and emerges out of the confines of home into the vast outer-world, refusing to become a martyr to her husband's views and wishes and those of his family. Her leaving behind the confines of family life is the celebration of being alive, as well as a protest against wrongs perpetrated by society on women. In her letter to her husband Mrinal writes that she has decided never to return back to her husband's house again. She has witnessed Bindu's tragedy and realises the pathetic condition of women in society. She also feels that when society had disowned Bindu , God has not cast her away. However powerful societal oppression is, it cannot hold Bindu prisoner forever. Death, which is more powerful than any mortal agent and also the ultimate liberator, has claimed her. In death, Bindu has achieved greatness. From being an orphaned, unwanted girl in a Bengali middle-class household, cast off by her own kin and tricked into marriage to a madman, she has been set free by death and transformed into an immortal soul, one with the great God Himself.

Mrinal writes in her letter that Bindu's death has torn her heart asunder. She wonders why the imprisoning bubble of unhappiness inside which she lives, is so difficult for her to break out from? Why could she not cross over the threshold of her husband's house and come out into the larger world created by God? Why should she be forced to live her life like a prisoner, hemmed in by insignificant man-made rules and constraints and die a miserable death, when the beautiful universe created by God beckoned to her soul? Bindu's death is like an awakening call to Mrinal's soul to emerge out of its hemmed in existence and go forth towards freedom. Mrinal breaks the shackles of married life and emerged out of the confines of home into the vast outer-world, refusing to become a martyr to her husband's views and wishes and those of his family. she has always refused to surrender unquestioningly to her husband's views and wishes, and vehemently opposes an irrational acceptance of practices that seemed to her wrong, unjust and meaningless.

She crosses over the constraining *lakshmana-rekha*, the boundary drawn by patriarchal society to separate the outer world (*bahir*) from the home (*andar, ghar*), which society claims is the rightful place for a woman.

Mrinal has crossed over this boundary and went forth on a journey of no return. In her letter she writes about Queen Mirabai, who has freed herself from the shackles of society imprisoning her and gone forth alone in her quest for salvation through the worship of Lord Krishna, leaving behind family and kin. Mrinal writes that just as Mirabai has lived her life with her undying devotion for the Lord, she also does the same. Her leaving behind the confines of family life is for the celebration of being alive, as well as a protest against wrongs perpetrated by society on women.

Though written more than a hundred years ago, Tagore's short story 'Streer Patra' can hardly be called out dated. It has pertinence for the relevance reader of today. Actually, this letter is not only written by a wife to her husband but also a document submitted to a man by a woman. It is a protest story---a protest, against traditional orthodox patriarchal system, which is deeply rooted in Indian society. It makes questions about the institutions of marriage and the inequalities and injustice inherent in a man-woman relationship. The beginning and the end of the letter is worthy, as they reflect the feminist protest. Tagore artistically uses the epistolary form to enter the voice, mind and experience of Mrinal. After fifteen years, at the age of twenty seven, she leaves the house forever to Puri. Showing anger against a system where women are neglected, abused and abandoned, Mrinal's decision not to return to her house shows the disrespects that she has to meet by the family and the society. Tagore constructs a very sensitive issue in which he systematically records Mrinal's responses in her own voice that becomes gradually more assured and confident as the text approaches the decisive resolution not to her husband's house, which never has become a home for her, though she lived there for fifteen years—

“ .....I shall not return to 27, Makhn Baral Lane ever again. I saw what happened to Bindu. I have realised the position women have in this society. I don't want to go through it anymore.” (Sharma 24)

The sufferings of Mrinal and Bindu are visible in every nook and corner of the Indian society. It is an epoch making story which Tagore himself has admitted that it is the first attempt at writing a pro-woman text. It is a treatise on the liberation of women. Mrinal, through her writing the letter relieves herself from the shackle of patriarchal oppression.

Tagore artistically uses the strategy of epistolary form to get into the mind, voice and experience of Mrinal. He accords with the problems of female oppression by patriarchy and advocates women's upliftment through the first person narrative. By creating the character Mrinal, the protagonist, Tagore has foreseen the new age of liberated women that is to emerge in the next few decades. She becomes aware of her right to live “I too shall live. I am living”(Sharma26) Tagore presents her as a precursor of the women-hood which is idealised by Simon de Beauvoir, a great French feminist thinker.

As a true feminist, Tagore is very much concerned about the lives of women. In making a female to voice against the degraded status of women and patriarchal oppression, Tagore makes a clarion call to all the womenfolk to realise their status of subordination and to fight for their rights.

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