Feminist Analysis of Tagore’s Selected Short Stories: A Subaltern Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of patriarchy in the marginalization of women and as a result turning them into subalterns who can’t speak for themselves and have no voice of their own. Tagore as an Indian writer is one of the strongest voices for women as his writings depict that he wants to emancipate women and to make them aware of who they are and also that education is important for both genders either male or female. For this purpose in this paper three stories have been selected from the short story collection of Rabindranath Tagore; Subha, The living and the dead and the Exercise-book to depict the plight of the suppressed and weak women in the patriarchal Indian society and how they got manipulated by their husbands and also by their society. This study is qualitative in nature and it employs the Subaltern Theory by Spivak (1988) for the analysis of selected data. Through the analysis it has been concluded that the three protagonists of the selected stories are subalterns as the society they are living in exploits their rights of being a human being because they are women and weak. Their silence depicts their miserable lives in a patriarchal society. For the further studies, it is suggested that the analysis of male and female subalterns can be done and also the comparative study of subalterns in the male and female writers would further help in the understanding of the theory.

Key words: patriarchy, subjugated women, subaltern studies, Tagore’s short stories.

1. Introduction

Literary works play an important in the understanding of languages, cultures and even civilizations. Every language has its own specific literature which provides the readers with deep understanding of the language. Andringa (1995a) has proposed two essential principles for the understanding of literary texts. Firstly, literary texts are distinguished by ‘indefiniteness’, openness and ambiguity. It is because they often raise questions about meanings (e.g. by open endings, allusions, conflicting perspectives) and the readers are asked to deal with gaps, search for connections, and to advance their own understandings. Second, the involvement of emotions and artistic beauty plays a major role in literature reading. Readers are requested to commiserate (or not) with the characters in a literary account, to endure emotions of suspense, to form aesthetic and moral judgments, and so on. Janssen, et al. (2010).
The Philosophy of the Short Story (1901) in the “Prefatory Note” of Brander Matthews one can find the term short story employed for the first time as a literary genre with his doubt about its taxonomy:

Although the short-story still lacks a satisfactory name, it is now seen to be clearly differentiated from the longer novel and also from the tale which merely likelihoods to be not prolonged. From both of these, it separates itself abruptly—from the novel by its brevity and from the more brief tale by its unity, its totality, its attention upon a single effect or a single series of effects (Mathews, 1901, p.3).

Short story is one of the oldest forms of literatures which has existed through the ages in various forms like myths, fairy, tales, ballads and parables to name a few. As a literary genre, short story developed in India with the publication of 'Lachmania' (1868) in the second half of the nineteenth century by Fakir Mohan Senapati thereby achieving the tag of becoming the first complete and comprehensive modern Indian short story and on the other hand the publication of Realities of Indian Life: Stories Collected from Criminal Reports of India (1885) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt makes it the first collection of short stories.

1.1. Significance of the Study

Subaltern study (SS) is one of the most important study of the postcolonial genre. It has been promoted and employed in the literary texts to highlight the miserable condition of the poor and miserable people. Spivak in her famous essay, Can the Subaltern Speak?, (1988) used the subaltern theory for the females who had been silenced and who were unable to speak for themselves. This study is important as it employs Spivak’s framework to highlight the plight of Indian women in the selected short stories of Tagore.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to understand the impact of patriarchy on the women’s role in the Indian society. Men seem to be the more privileged sex than the females in such a society and this type of attitude turns women into subalterns. This study has been based on Sipvak’s notion of subalternity to investigate the female subalterns in Tagore’s short stories.
1.3. Objectives of the Research
2. To find out the role of patriarchy in the selected short stories of Rabindranath Tagore.
3. To understand the notion of subalternity in Tagore’s selected short stories.

1.4. Research Questions:
2. What is the role of patriarchy in the marginalization of the women in Indian society?
3. Why most of the women are subaltern in Tagore’s short stories?
4. What is Tagore’s purpose of the portrayal of women in his short stories?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Feminism

The feminist movement includes sociological and political theories concerning with gender difference issues. According to Lois Tyson (2006), ―feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women.‖ The notion of feminism was initially used by Charles Fourier in the 18th century. Fourier maintained that social advancement can be possible with giving more privileges and liberty to women. (Warren, 2000)

2.2. Rabindranath Tagore as a writer

The west was undergoing through the first wave of feminism (1830-1920) with its suffragette movements and civil rights movement when Tagore started writing creative fiction, (Mandal, S. (2015). His distinguishing quality lies in his huge range of themes in his stories. Tagore’s short stories are initially in Bengali and later translated into English. It is notable that the short story has in modern times received an excellent attention of the readers. In this relation William H. Hudson remarks that the short story has definitely established itself as a favorite form in modern literature. Its immense trend is the result of many co-operating causes; among them, the rush of modern life.

Tagore's stories are perhaps most highly stricken; he is indeed recognized with originating the Bengali-language story of the genre. His works are often well-known for their rhythmic, optimistic, and lyrical nature. Tagore’s Stories are quite lucid and other hand using of poetic
language and in the dialogue marks him as the outstanding literary figure in the Indian English writing.

In Tagore’s writings there are many strong elements like the exposure of the female consciousness, their difficulties, trials and misfortunes and the way they resisted towards the domineering social forces. Especially his fictional works bring out the removed portion of women’s experience and express remarkable understanding and compassion towards the dilemma of women which was quite an unaccustomed trend at that time in the field of writing. Tagore’s writings which have been set in the 19th Century Colonial Bengal, represent the problems within Hindu norms. They also expose the disturbance of spiritual and scholarly tension between Bengali Renaissance and tradition highlighted by the arrival of the colonial education in the lives of Bengali women. In this way his works are quite effective documents of societal changes in their relation to the larger societal background of gender, state, and politics. Thus through his creative writings, Tagore seems to shatter the false customs of his society, therefore redeeming and literating women from their social servitudes.

In this context Subir Dhar writes:

Tagore’s short stories constitute a remarkable artistic achievement precisely because formally no two are quite the same, and because taken together the hundred-odd stories unfold before our eyes a breath-taking panorama of human existence. Ray, M. K., (2004).

In all of his stories, Tagore has questioned the system of arranged marriages and the entrapment women as wives. Though their husbands provide them shelter, security and sustenance, most of the women seem to be in a loveless marriages. Therefore, his stories revolve around the basic desires of a woman such as to feel free in home, to enjoy her freedom and individuality, try to break shackles of patriarchal society so and so on.

Tagore was a sign of the middle classes who devoted his life to the subaltern mission, which is in itself a sociological phenomenon worth commenting upon. Tagore has influenced a generation extensively influenced by the culture he had transmitted through his writings. “All we need to do”, Guha quotes Henri Lefebvre, the French philosopher as saying, just as Tagore did, “is to open our eyes and see”: guidance that has been overlooked by historians of the last 60 years’. Guha, R. (2000) (Chaudhuri, R. 2004).
In his study on the exploration of the gender in the Selected short stories of Rabindranath Tagore, Banerjee (2018) has analyzed three female characters in these stories. He concluded that the protagonist of these stories defied the common patriarchal norm of their time, i.e., to remain suppressed and submissive and championed the cause of women's emancipation from the clutches of patriarchal domination. They raise their voice in a strong manner against the biased patriarchal society and through their zeal, courage, grit, and determination ultimately come out victorious.

2.3. Female Subjugation in a Patriarchal Society

Patriarchy advocates the societal structure in which the males have more dominant roles. It has an extended history and has existed in every society in the world. It is a social as well as a political system that states that men are more superior to women and therefore have the right to subjugate women and maintain their power and control. Furthermore, it has been maintained through the incorporation of customs and norms through the socialization. These customs are operated to govern and control women. A patriarchal society is represented and strengthened by both men and women. (Hook, 2013). The social organizations and structures which instill the roots of patriarchy at all levels are household, family, state, and employment.

2.4. Subaltern Studies (SS)

Post-colonial studies is one of the most striking academic disciplines which has triggered a great deal of literature in the disciplines of arts and critical studies. Historiography and SS have significantly contributed to the project of the analysis of colonial discourse and they have been the main focus in the contemporary work of arts and humanities. From the early 1980’s, the historians who involved themselves in its study were more concerned to write the histories of the margins into a more vital role than they normally did in any other colonial discourse. SS has instead been devoted to recuperating the “voice” of subaltern insurrection from within the spaces of official colonial archives. (Gilbert, 2003)

Subaltern Studies was introduced during the 1970s as the discipline of history as a critical approach. Its purpose was to challenge the authoritative voices in order to liberate the oppressed ones. Thus, all the supporters of the movement have utilized this method to rediscover the lost
historical accounts of the lowest levels of society by opening the coatings of hegemony personified at frequent levels (Parakash, 1994).

The term subaltern has been translated as ‘subordinate’ or ‘dependent’ (Gramsci 52-120) and it was first used by Gramsci in one of his article “Notes on Italian History. In his view, the subaltern classes refer primarily to a low-rank‖ person or a group in a specific society, who suffers the hegemony of a ruling class that discards their privilege of participation in the production of their culture and history as dynamic individuals of the same nation (Louai 5).

Ezzeldin, H.H. (2017)

Taking the theory from Gramsci, the _SS Group/Collective_ was founded in the early 1980s by Guha and some other literary scholars, critics and historians of South Asia. Guha defined the _subaltern_ as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way‖ (Guha, 1982). In order to create a more general distinction between elite and subaltern, SS Group has used the term subaltern as a class that cuts numerous types of cultural and political binaries such as nationalism versus colonialism, imperialism versus native cultural expression (Aschroft 218).

In her groundbreaking work _Can the Subaltern Speak?_ Spivak has reevaluated the complications of subalternity within new historical advancements due to the capitalistic politics which undermines the radical voice of laborers in a globalized world (Louai 6). In her essay, she has disapproved of Gramsci’s view of the independence of the subalterns and she has criticized the Subaltern Studies Group’s idea that the subaltern groups could be defined. She is of the view that it is not right to say that the subaltern groups know themselves or that when intellectuals talk for or about them, they are given voices. Spivak clarifies: _For the ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unpresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation_ (Subaltern 285).

In his book _Culture and Imperialism_, Edward Said argues that the representation of these groups is meant to fulfill ideological function of keeping the –subordinate subordinate, [and] the inferior inferior‖ (Said, 1993).

Moreover, Spivak has extended the question of the un-representability of the subaltern is to the question of gender. The women as the subalterns are even more silenced than men. Women’s
voices have been considered silent in between the imperialist/colonialist object-constitution and the nationalist/ patriarchical subject-formation. Spivak asserts that if in the background of colonial production the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more intensely in the shadow. (Subaltern 287). Subaltern women are exposed to oppression and subjugation more than subaltern men; no one is actually aware of their daily struggles to the extent that they are seen as mere ghosts in the society.

Spivak is of the view that subalternity is nothing but a rhetorical space; the –secretel and the –(im)possiblel. The subaltern never speaks because he is not given a chance to speak; and even when he is given this chance, there is always an ‘omnipotent’ individual who speaks for him considering that he is not gifted with the ability of talking and expressing himself.

There is a never ending debate on the views of Spivak. The current theorists and scholars are having discussions on the voice of subalterns. Young (2003) has represented a methodology to understand the miserable condition of the subalterns under appropriate socio-political circumstances. Furthermore, Ching (2014), claims that –self-namingl, –self –inventionl together with —new symbolismsl are few methods that can permit the subalterns to speak.

Ezzeldin, (2017) in her work has investigated the un-represented pictures of the Subalterns either male or female in three Victorian novels. What she has assessed from her study is that –In Victorian narratives, the subaltern never speaks for himself or tells his own story”. They all seem to be devoid of the right to speak for themselves and to express their inner feelings. Thus their presence is literally like some ghost or phantom. Jadoon, A. (2014). In her research thesis has analyzed five major Indian and Pakistani novels in which women as a divorcée suffer a lot. She has also employed the theoretical work of Spivak in her study. What she has found out in the end is that the divorce is not in itself a problem. It is only the matter of certain contexts in which the failed experiences make it undesirable and thus, we consider it as a disgraceful choice for a woman. Therefore, divorce seems to become a sign of probing the categories of subordinations and discriminations that surround the identity of a divorced woman within the postcolonial literature. The unhappy endings of all the novels depicts that the suppression of a divorced woman is not limited to the boundary of a particular social class and ethnic group.
3. Research Methodology

The data for the research have been selected from the short story collection of Rabindranath Tagore through purposive sampling technique. From which three selected four short stories namely: The Exercise-Book, The living and the dead and Subha has been analyzed. This study is qualitative in nature.

3.1. Conceptual Framework

Spivak’s notion of Subalternity (1988) has been used as the conceptual framework for the analysis of selected data. Spivak’s work has been selected by the researchers because it has been initially proposed by Spivak for the rights of the South Asian Women and also because it highlights the fact that a marginalized woman is a subaltern woman as she can’t speak for herself.

3.2. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the research are: firstly, to find out the role of patriarchy in the marginalization of women in the selected short stories of Tagore and secondly, it is to understand the notion of subalternity with reference to Tagore’s selected short stories. In the section of results and discussions a detailed analysis will be presented to understand the Tagore’s work in the light of the concept of subalternity.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of the Short Story The Living and The Dead

This story revolves around the theme of widowhood. The protagonist of the story is Kadambini who is a young widow in the family of Sharadashankar Babu, zamindar of Ranihat family. One monsoon night, she died as her heart stops due to no apparent reason and her in-laws without even calling a doctor for proper examining, sent her dead body at the night time for cremation. However, what really happened was that she had not died and her heart had stopped for a few moments and when her body was laid down in a hut for the waiting of the pyrewood for cremation, she became alive and ran from that hut.

When the four men whose responsibility was to cremate her arrived and found her body missing, they became fearful and instead of telling the truth to her family, they said that the body had
been cremated. And no one even doubted them and the ceremony ended. When Kadambini awoke she first thought of returning but then she realized that she had no place in the world of the living as she said, "I am my own ghost now". Here her words could be taken for her being a subaltern. As she was a widow, being a woman without a husband has made her life quite useless and dreary. Again and Again she reminds herself that her life has no value now because she was convinced that *I have no place in human society... I am nothing but a fearful evil presence- my own ghost.* (78). She decided not to return back to his in-laws and instead to go to her childhood friend Jogmaya. Her friend was unaware of her death ceremony so, she welcomed her openheartedly. Now that she stayed at her friend’s house still her she felt that she is quite different from her friend because *constant self-consciousness and self –doubt prevents real intimacy.* (79) As her friend had a husband, she was living her life completely and fully, she observed that, *Bound by all her duties and emotional ties, she is part of the material world, whereas I am an empty shadow. She is a part of existence, I am a part of eternity.* (79) When her friend tried to convince her to return back to her family, she argued with her. She felt so much helpless and placeless in this world and also she felt hurt due to jogmaya’s constant demand for returning to her in-laws. When Jogmays's husband returned after meeting Kadambini’s in-laws, she had to accept that she was really a dead woman but where she was supposed to go when she had no place in the world now? When she came back to her in-laws they also refused to accept her material and real existence and she had to die to prove she had not died.

Kadambini’s temporary death depicts the lifeless and pathetic lives of the widows in the Indian society. How the society treats them unjustly and its treatment turns them into subalterns who can’t ask for their rights and who don’t seem to have the right to live a happy life. Their objectification is only due to the patriarchal system in the Indian society. Therefore in Spivak’s view a subaltern is someone who is "removed from all lines of social mobility" (2005: 475) She further asserts that –subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, does not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action! (Spivak, 2014:139). Here the widowhood of Kadambini has made her life quite similar to a dead person who has no feelings or emotions and also no right to live because she is already dead. Thus she has become an ‘other‘ as well as a marginalized person in her society. As the ‘Subject‘ of her life which is man has gone thus she has no right now to live. In –Can the Subaltern speak?! Spivak says: –As object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the
male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (287).

4.2. Analysis of the Short Story “Subha”

This story is about a young misfortunate girl named Subhashini which means _she who speaks sweetly_. Her name seems to bore opposite effect on the poor soul and she was an inborn dumb child. Everyone in the village seems to treat her as if she is deaf as well because they express their anxiety and frustrations about her future on her face without even realizing that one who does not speak might nevertheless feel (104). As she grew up from the very childhood she had understood that maybe she was sent as a curse by God. Her mother especially thought of her daughter as a lapse on her own part. de Beauvoir has also mentioned this kind of false thinking in the Second Sex as she writes that a mother considers her daughter as both her double and as another person that is why she is quite presumptuous towards her daughter and thus encumbers her child with her own destiny (285) Subha’s mother for this reason never loved her because she considered her _a stain on her womb_.

Subha knowing all of these bitter facts would always strive to conceal herself from the other people. Though Tagore himself accepts that we human beings can’t even use language to completely express our thoughts as the words seem to be a translation of them so what importance the words could have in our lives. Subha seems to express herself through the language of her eyes which is in itself limitless, generous, of unplumbed depths. (105) However, she grew up as a lonely, friendless and wordless child. In the story, Tagore has described the river which flowed near the village as the daughter of a humble household, it did not flow far; slender, unrestingly, it would confine its work within its banks. (105) It shows the sarcasm on the life of a village girl in a patriarchal society who has to remain in the limitations which her society sets for her and also that she works restlessly and all day long. Subha had a companion as well, Pratap who was quite an idle fellow as he use to do fishing and Subha used to sit near him and she watched him fishing all day long.

As she grew older, she began to become conscious of herself as she was beginning to look at herself, to think, to ask herself questions, and yet she could not understand herself (107). She has an intense desire to know her worth and to enjoy life. On the other hand, her parents now were becoming constantly worried for her marriage because other people were criticizing them for not
marring their daughter though they could easily afford her dowry. Simone de Beauvoir has also pointed out that marriage is only a way for women to maintain their social dignity and thus is an honorable career for them. (327). Her parents found a match for her in Calcutta and they travelled Calcutta to meet the groom. When the groom can himself to inspect his future wife, Subha’s parents grew anxious as if their daughter, like an animal, was going to be inspected by its owner before the sacrifice. (109) Here we can see the superiority or male dominance in the Indian society that a woman has no word in her own marriage and it’s all up to the man who will decide whether he will marry the girl or not. Though Subha did not want to deceive her future husband about her being dumb but she could not tell him that and only confined herself to weeping. After the marriage the groom came to realize his mistake and he married another woman who could talk.

In this story, Subha’s silence can be considered as both literal silence as well as the figurative silence of a woman in the Indian society where she could not express her true feelings or desires. Subha is a subaltern in the story because she is a voiceless, helpless and invisible woman who has to endure the atrocities of the patriarchal society due to the gender discriminations. She could not even say no to her parents in the matter of her marriage. Her insecure and fearful life which is her destiny is only because she is a woman otherwise her companion Partap also had no work to do but his being a male seems to resolve all the issues on his side. Subha has to bear the injustices and subjugation of the society silently and has to accept it without any question because she is a double marginalized woman. It shows the dual standards of the chauvinistic male dominated society. Therefore if we look at the deeper meanings of -Can the Subaltern Speak?! in this story, we can say that Subha like many other Indian girls in her society in the end has to live a silenced life of a subaltern and endure the pains of being suppressed and marginalized.

4.3. Analysis of the Short Story The Exercise-Book

In this story, a young girl named Uma is the protagonist. From her early childhood, Uma had a natural inclination towards writing as she would write on the walls of her house with a piece of coal. One day when she wrote on her brother Gobindalal’s essay some words, she was bitten by her brother for this unsuitable act though at that time she was only seven years old. After sometime, her brother felt remorse and to satisfy little girl’s grief, he gave her an exercise book.
This book became her most important possession. When she was nine years old, she got married to Pyarimohan who was the literary associate of Gobindalal. In the beginning, she did not open her book as she was quite busy. However, as some time passed, she started missing her family. She started writing again in her exercise-book and thus giving vent to her feelings of loneliness. One day when she was writing, her sister-in-law from a crack in the door saw that Uma was writing something. It was a quite astonishing news for the women in the house because no woman before had done that.

When her sister-in-law told her husband about that he ridiculed her studying and writing because in his view only men have the right to write and thus to remain superior in the patriarchal society. In his essay he had wrote that if women became literate than it would become difficult to maintain the discipline of their homes. Here one can observe the double standards of a patriarchal society in which women have no right to speak for themselves and it is only men who provide them importance and define their value. As in the Second Sex, Beauvoir observes that “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him” (16)

After many days Uma did not write anything but one day she heard a beggar woman’s song and called out for her and started writing the song in her eccentric spelling. Her sister-in-law when witnessed this incident, she called for their brother to come and teach Uma a lesson. Pyarimohan arrived and took her exercise-book in his custody. Uma felt quite depressed but she never got her book back. On the other hand, Pyarimohan also had an exercise-book too filled with barbed essays expounding his elaborate theories but no one snatched it from him as he was a male. In this painful story of Uma the patriarchal society seems to have strong control over the women. Uma is a subaltern in the sense that she can’t speak for herself. Spivak argues that, “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (1988: 307). She waits desperately at her home of her parents and brother to come and take her from her in-laws for some time but no one came. She wanted to express her desires in a written form but she was not even given the opportunity to do that as well. She has no right to speak for herself and also to educate herself because it only suites men the best to express their elevated thoughts and ideas through their great writings. In her article, “Can the Subaltern speak?!” Spivak has asserted that a subaltern will not remain a subaltern if she will raise her voice for herself. Thus her account of subalternity is to encourage Third world women to speak for themselves and for their rights so that they could
get rid of the male gaze and patriarchal domination of their societies. They have to raise a voice against the hegemony of the dominating structures in their society.

5. Conclusions and Future Recommendations

The analysis indicates that Tagore’s short stories and novels are an elaborate portrayal of male chauvinism and female condition. Most of the women at that time had to face suppression or tyranny due to the societal constraints and control. Patriarchal domination seems to encompass all the stories as the female characters do not have the right to do what they want and most of all, their views have no significance in society they live in. Kadambini has to kill herself to prove that she is not dead, Subha has to endure the grudge of her husband for deceiving him though she has nothing to do with it and Uma has to lose both her exercise-book as well as her creativity because she is a female. Therefore the role of patriarchy is quite strong in turning the lives of these women into a total misery and also in making them the marginalized entities. It can also be observed that whether a marriage of a female character ends with divorce or with the death of her husband, she is delineated and marginalized as a subaltern figure within the postcolonial society as Kadambini’s story in The Living and the Dead portrays the fact. Subha and Uma also presents the stories of the subalterns who do not have any right in any important matter of their lives. The restrictions regarding the education have turned an ambitious and creative girl like Uma into a miserably helpless and silent girl. In her story, Tagore’s favor for the rights of equality and education seems to resonate the most. He has strongly criticized the attitude of the males in the Indian society who believe that women have nothing to do with reading, writing and such type of intellectual activities. All of these three women are the victims of the patriarchal society in which women are only supposed to obey men and to better remain silent without expressing themselves and a sense of inferiority seems to be ingrained in their nature due to this treatment of their society. Tagore’s purpose of writing these stories might be that he wants to highlight the plight of the Indian women in the postcolonial times who had to struggle a lot emotionally, intellectually and physically in the male-dominated society. He wants to bring awareness in the people especially women to speak for their rights and to gain their own voice in all the matters of life.
It can be suggested that further research can be conducted on comparative analysis of colonial and postcolonial writers’ portrayal of female subalterns. Moreover, another study can be carried out on how female writers portray the issue of subalternity as compared to male writers.

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