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DEFINING THE WOMANHOOD: RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S THOUGHTS ON GENDER DISCOURSE

Abstract: The main concern of this article is to deal with Rabindranath Tagore's thoughts on gender ideology. Although most of the critics assess Tagore's thoughts being antifeminist, an in-depth analysis of his works shows how he was much ahead of his time. This paper mainly focuses on two of his works, *The Wife's Letter* and *Chitrangada*, projecting two different versions of Tagore's thoughts on gender discourse. It is in the latter one with the idea of gender fluidity and construction of a new gender identity for women that Tagore's thoughts appear to be quite radical and much akin to Judith Butler's theoretical framework.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Gender, Discourse, Patriarchy, Woman, Butler

Who is a woman? What constitutes the idea of womanhood? Is she a body? an object of male fantasy and desire? a construct of patriarchy? a transcendental signified? a categorical taxonomy or a discourse? A woman is everything apart from a human being. Patriarchy defines woman as something a man is not and female as an incomplete male. As we are used to think in terms of binaries, so it is always the hegemonic segregation of haves and have nots that differentiates a

woman from a man. Yes it is a truth ,a woman is what a man is not. Yes, it is the biological experience that differentiates her from him. A woman goes through the experience of menstruation which a man does not, a woman carries within her womb a life form for nine months and brings forth a new life on earth which a man does not. Yet patriarchy constructs the theory of male supremacy in reproduction by projecting the idea of a man as the seed giver and woman as the field. We find this concept in *Manusamhita* where Manu raises the theory of ‘bija-ksetra’ (the seed and the field) arguing a woman(the field) is inferior to a man (the seed) since a seed if sown in a infertile land gets destroyed without giving any result.

Gender, Feminism, women empowerment all these are heavily loaded terms having various layers of understanding and modes of functioning. Although widely used, very few of us have a clear understanding of these words. Most of us have this misconception of gender as just a segregation between male and female existence, restricting it to the received notions of masculinity and femininity; feminism as transforming a woman into a man by breaking the defined gender roles and women empowerment as allotting a small bit of public space to women. We worship Goddess Durga as an iconic form and symbolic representation of women empowerment whom we call the ‘shakti’. But have we ever thought of how Goddess Durga ,the destroyer of evil forces, was originally a joint male venture. She was created with the help of three Gods Brahma, Bishnu and Maheswar. So, the very idea of omnipotent and empowered Devi Durga, the ‘shakti’, is actually a discourse, a construct of patriarchy itself. So is the concept of women empowerment, always a form of tokenism. A few selected women competing their male counterparts in the political domain sometimes with the help of reservation policy is not the name of women empowerment as it does not bring any change in the larger social landscape and in various gendered pockets of the society.

The most significant contribution of feminism is deconstruction of the accepted notions of sex and gender, formulating the distinction between these two categories; sex, a biologically given category, largely determined by sex organs and reproductive functions whereas gender a social and cultural construct, determined by social codes. Gender is a man made category. In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir claims “one is not born but rather becomes, a woman”. It unearths the constructive nature of gender signifying the idea of womanhood as a process of becoming, not a given and stable entity. A child is born without any gender identity but it is we, the society who makes that child a woman by imposing some traits which are naturally accepted as feminine. So the concept of womanhood is a social production. Gender is not a stable category. It is constructed and therefore always subject to change and Judith Butler goes one step further by calling it a performative construct in *Gender Trouble* where she projects the idea of womanhood as a subject-in-process that is constructed in discourse by the act it performs. Butler challenges the concept of womanhood as an ontological state of being. Both Beauvoir and Butler assert the concept of gender as a process and it is always about something one does rather than one is. Towards the end of the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that can not rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a telos that governs the process of acculturation and construction. (Butler, "Gender Trouble" 33)

Butler here argues how this process of becoming a woman or the production of the identity of womanhood is a continuous discursive practice. She calls for 'resignification', that is, giving a new dimension to the received notions of gender. She destabilizes the naturalized concepts of identity as being a man, woman or male, female and displaces them with a heterogeneous and fluid construction that she calls "constitutive categories".

Literature is that space which has always tried to address the woman question and form a resistance against gender ideology and the systematic injustice that women suffer because of gender discrimination. Tagore's literature is no exception. As we all know that no social aspect was left untouched by him. He has tasted every essence of life through his large vista of work and he was much ahead of his time. What he was able to think for women, western feminism did much later. But some critics have assessed him having an antifeminist position by pointing out how he never liberates his female protagonists completely and his Herbert lectures on the 'woman question' shows how he forms resistance against gender ideology within an existing patriarchal framework without challenging the status quo. As Sati Chatterjee, retired Professor of English, Jadavpur University argues that "Tagore is no feminist, his women are and his disposition toward women was strictly collared to the idea of woman's nurturing iconicity (kalyani rup)". To a certain extent it is true that Tagore's views regarding woman question is complex and contradictory as well. He was a progressive individual and tried to address the gender issues in his works in a pragmatic manner.

Tagore's works to name a few like *Chandalika*, *Chitra*, *Chitrangada*, *Steer Patra*, *Ghare baire* and the essays entitled *Woman and Home*, *Woman*, *Woman's place in the World* provide different contradictory versions of Tagore's thoughts on gender ideology. But what is common in all those is an attempt to move beyond the clutches of essentialism and forming a vision that is

pluralistic, spiritual ,infinite and most importantly humanistic. We are quite aware of how our society has created a segregation of space into private and public for women and men respectively . This separation of social space into ‘ghar’ and ‘bahir’ embodies gender politics. Tagore tried to liberate the women from this gender politics by redefining and reconstructing this space called home. In the essay called *Woman* he says-

Wherever there is something which is concretely personal and human, there is woman's world. The domestic world is the world where every individual finds his worth as an individual ,therefore his value is not the market value, but the value of love: that is to say ,the value that god in his infinite mercy has set upon all his creatures. This domestic world has been the gift of god to women. She can extend her radiance of love beyond its boundaries on all sides, and even leave it to prove her woman's nature when the call comes to her. But this is a truth which can not be ignored, that the moment she is born in her mother's arms ,she is born in the center of her own true world, the world of human relationship.(Tagore, "Woman" 120)

This humanistic approach of Tagore to reform the domestic space as a locus of human love can be looked upon both as feminist and antifeminist . It is feminist because it entrusts women with a much bigger responsibility that is to extend the radiance of love and build human relationships. But it is antifeminist as well since the domestic space is one where women suffer more, so this kind of modification and glorification of the domestic space will never be able to liberate them from suffering different types of institutionalized injustice, rather it will be another form of discourse. Then how did Tagore's female subjects protest against such suffering?

Mrinal in *The Wife's Letter or Steer Patra* is one who refuses to abide by social norms and forms a resistance against the forces which cause women to suffer. *The Wife's Letter* is the story of this young woman, Mrinal who questions the validity of this social institution called marriage. She abandons her husband's house, terminates her marriage and writes a letter to explain how her personal rebellion is actually a protest against all those domestic and social norms which make the women doomed in a world of suffering. This letter begins with the invocation 'Shricharanakamaleshu' signifying the letter is addressed to her husband's lotus feet and her name 'Mrinal' meaning the lotus, it suggests that a woman's place is in her husband's feet. Interestingly this letter ends with the word 'tomader Charantalsroychinno' meaning 'freed from the shelter beneath your feet' signifying Mrinal's rejection of the patriarchy. In this whole journey of Mrinal from submission to patriarchy to rejection of it one thing that plays most important role is Bindu's suicide. Bindu's death by committing suicide is looked upon by Mrinal as an act of rebellion against all the forces which subjugate women. But she herself chooses a different mode of protest against gender atrocity:

Do you think I am going to kill myself? Have no fear, I shan't indulge in such a stale jest with you. Mirabai too was a woman like me. Her fetters were not light either, but she did not need to die in order to live. Mirabai said in her song, 'Let father, mother, everyone abandon her, O Lord, but Mira will never let you go, whatever befalls her!' It is this holding on which is life. I too shall live. At last, I live. (Tagore, "The Wife's Letter" 218)

Mrinal choose life over death to protest against patriarchy. But the question is was she able to achieve complete emancipation from the patriarchy? Freeing herself from her husband's

domination she devotes herself to Mirabai who is again a religious construction symbolizing the spirit of an emancipated yet bonded woman. Mirabai devotes herself to God Krishna who is also a signifier of the phallus. So Mrinal's transformation from a wife to Lord Krishna's devoted dasi is not an act of transgression or rebellion, rather it is a substitution of patriarchy with another reformed patriarchy, replacing one discourse with another. It is a journey not from home to the world rather from home to another reconstituted home. This is how Tagore liberates women, not dismantling the patriarchy but substituting it with a reformed one. This may lead one to mark Tagore as an antifeminist.

But there is nothing called the essential Rabindranath Tagore as his views regarding gender ideology is not a fixed one like gender itself. He takes different positions in different works and his thoughts on gender discourse is multifaceted. It is in his dance drama *Chitrangada* where he brings forth the idea of an androgyny which actually challenges the ideology of heteronormative. Now androgyny which literally means the combination of both masculine and feminine traits in one is not simply someone whom we call the hermaphrodite, one with a half male and half female body. Rather I would like to explain it as an agendered creative and beautiful thought or a mind or a spirit, a complete whole in itself. Chitrangada is the symbol of that agendered thought. She is the prototype of Virginia Woolf's psychological androgyny that she talks about in *A Room Of One's Own*. Chitrangada has no gender identity, she is neither man nor a woman, she is an incarnation of the spirit of 'Ordhonariswar'. In his representation of Chitrangada as an agendered entity, Tagore departs from *Mahabharata*'s portrayal of her as a desirable feminine object. Her quest for love is a metaphor of a quest for a new gender identity.

She is endowed with both beauty and intellect. She is aware of her identity as a woman yet she unfixes the idea of womanhood to the received notion of feminine beauty and passivity:

I am Chitrangada, the daughter of a king
Not goddess to be worshipped and put on a pedestal;
Not one to be ignored, subjugated, and treated with indifference.
If you design to keep me by your side during good times and bad
If you let me be a part of your endeavours,
Then only you will know me for
Who I am. (Tagore, "Chitrangada" 55)

Chitrangada defines her womanhood neither to be worshipped nor to be neglected. A woman's place is not beneath a man's lotus feet but beside him. She asserts her identity claiming to be a man's equal in all circumstances. She chooses to be what she is, sometimes feminine in affection and sometimes masculine in valour. She 'resignifies' (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33) the received notion of womanhood. Her identity is not a fixed one. She is neither a man nor a woman rather her identity is that of a human being and more importantly a free individual. Tagore's thoughts on gender ideology is a syncretic one and we can place both Tagore and Butler within the same theoretical horizon as both viewed an effective mode of challenging the received notions of gender is to displace the categories like man and woman, with the former addressing this within a humanistic framework and the latter a poststructuralist one. What for Tagore is human being, a gender fluid heterogeneous category of identity; that for Butler is the "constitutive categories".

Both looked at gender as a “free floating artifice”(Butler, Gender Trouble 7) , suggesting a hydrodynamic nature of its construction and opening up the field of possibility for gender ,where one can choose one’s gender.

Notes: The quotation from Tagore’s *The Wife’s Letter* refers to Supriya Chaudhuri’s translation of the story collected in *Selected Short Stories* ,edited by Sukanta Chaudhury.

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