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Confident Heroines in Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore: Saved, *The Elder Sister* and *The Postmaster*

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Abstract:

In this paper, the researcher studies the views of Rabindranath Tagore about women by studying his short stories. Tagore is known for his vast collection of poems, prose, plays, novels and stories. He puts women in the forefront in his works to convey feminism very strongly. Being a progressive thinker, his writings often were based on bold subjects that were far ahead of his times. He strongly believed in fighting for women's upliftment using his pen as a weapon. Focusing largely on emancipation, his writing campaigned for women's liberation, equality, freedom, justice, power, dignity and rights. The researcher has taken three stories – Saved, The Elder Sister and The Postmaster for her study. The story 'Saved' portrays the relationship of a young girl Gouri and her over possessive husband and its various twists and turns. The story 'The Elder Sister' elucidates how greed transforms the long lasting relationship of husband and wife. The story 'The Postmaster' describes the relationship of a young waif girl with the postmaster of a small town, how they are attached to each other as companions and how they separate.

Keywords: Determination, decision making, take a stand, courage, daring step, resolved.

Introduction:

Rabindranath Tagore wrote novels, essays, short stories, dramas and many poems. Of Tagore's prose, his short stories are most regarded; he is indeed credited with originating short story genre in Bengal. He began his career in short story in 1877 when was only sixteen years in age. His first short story was Bhikarini (The Beggar Women). He wrote on common characters in their day-to-day surroundings. He was probably a renaissance figure in the Bengali literature history and his literary creations gave an insight to the readers about the great status of his progressive thoughts that dwelt in his mind. What influenced him was his family and the experiences he had in his life. His family, right from his grandfather, Prince

Dwarkanath Tagore, was influenced by the western culture. Women of Tagore's household were all educated and progressive in their outlook. Tagore's brief stay in London made him aware of the freedom the women there were enjoying and made him compare it with the status of women in Bengal. After Tagore got the Nobel prize for his book *Gitanjali*, he visited several western countries where also he got the concept of women's liberation. Besides he was a voracious reader which influenced his thinking. It can be said about Tagore that he was a revolutionist throughout his life. He challenged the norms of the classroom as a young boy, took to the pen as a protest against the dominance of the British rule and most importantly gave a voice to women through his stories. His women characters have a tang of simplicity and complexity blend together. They are superb portrayals of keen observations intermingled with futuristic approach. All his heroines are bold, talented and empowered and challenged the embedded patriarchal notions of 19th century India. Contrary to his contemporaries, Tagore knew woman was important in any society and portrayed his heroine who needs nobody for her existence yet she gladly accepts a man to be hers, because she loves him fiercely. This is what is depicted in three of the stories of Tagore – *Saved*, *The Elder Sister* and *The Postmaster*.

The three main female characters of the three stories – *Saved*, *The Elder Sister* and *The Postmaster* are Gouri, Sasikala and Ratan. Gouri, the main protagonist of the story 'Saved' was a beautiful, delicately nurtured child of a wealthy family. She was married to Paresh, an advocate in a small western town. She lived along with her parents till Paresh was able to take care of her. She was a woman "of few words" but she felt offended when her husband suspected her, she "raged within her like a wounded lioness". (Tagore 2007: 153) She was religious in nature and liked to listen to the preaching of the Guru. She was simple girl but had the qualities of determination and decision making. Sasikala was the protagonist of the story, *The Elder Sister*. She was "only and much petted daughter of her parents". (Tagore 2007: 92) She belonged to a wealthy family and was married to not so wealthy Joygopal. She was married to him for 16 years and loved her husband. She was separated from her husband because of her brother, Nilmani, a child of late years for her parents and longed to be with him. But she judged the materialistic behavior of her husband and his apathy for her brother, Nilmani. She was disillusioned and determined to avenge him. In the story, *The Postmaster*, Ratan was small orphan girl who was emotionally related to the postmaster. She had a small family of father, mother and a small brother earlier but then they were all no more and she was a "lonesome waif". (Tagore 2007: 125) She was a simple, uneducated girl. She "did odd jobs" for the postmaster. (Tagore 2007: 118) She liked to talk with the postmaster and learn alphabets. She dreamt of living with the postmaster.

Gouri, in the story "Saved", was the beautiful wife of Paresh. Paresh was very possessive husband and had a habit of prying on his wife. At first Gouri was puzzled and couldn't understand her husband's behavior but when he kept dismissing servants whom she favored, she understood his possessiveness. Gouri was an Indian bride determined to keep her relationship intact inspite of her husband's prying ways. She took refuge in religion and started listening to Gita as expounded by the young preacher, Swami Parmananda. Even then Paresh did not leave her alone. He suspected her to be involved with Swami Parmananda and



one day even closed the door on her. Being sacred, Gouri felt so insulted at this act of her husband that she “got the door opened somehow and left the house”. (Tagore 2007: 154) She resolved to save her home with the help of her guru. She tried to seek help from her Guru but was sent away by him. When Paresh saw the door open, he enquired who was at the house. She decided to take a stand against him and answered, “No one! I have been to the house of my Guru.” And Paresh enquired about its reason she blurted out: “Because I wanted to”. (Tagore 2007: 154) Paresh restricted Gouri’s movements and this news reached Parmananda Swami and he sent a letter to Gouri that he would rescue her. This letter came in Paresh’s hands and he was so shocked by it that he died of a stroke. Gouri was beside her deceased husband when she saw “her Guru stealing like a thief” (Tagore 2007: 156) outside the house. In that moment, Gouri resolved to end her life along with her husband to save herself from any sort of humiliation. Thus Gouri was a firm-willed character full of confidence.

Sasikala in the story “The Elder Sister” shared a sixteen-year long relationship with her husband, Joygopal, and even loved him. They shared a compatible relationship. When they were separated, Sasikala thought of her husband as “the dearest object of love” (Tagore 2007: 92) and longed to be with him. When her neighbor remarked against ‘wicked’ and ‘tyrannical’ husbands, she thought to herself, “I can’t imagine any offence a husband that could so harden the heart against him”. (Tagore 2007: 91) But destiny had some other plans for her. Her parents gave birth to a baby boy, Nilmani, who was a late arrival in the family. Her husband, who had relied on his father-in-law’s property when Sasikala was the only daughter, went to find some work for himself. The separation of her husband angered Sasikala and she was hostile to her brother. When her parents passed away, they handed over the responsibility of Nilmani to her along with her two children. Gradually she became fond of Nilmani and cared for him like her own child. When her husband, Joygopal, returned to home, he could not get the same attention of his wife because of Nilmani. He was indifferent to her orphaned brother. Sasikala understood that Joygopal did not love her brother and started screening him from her husband. Because of Nilmani, Joygopal sometimes behaved harshly to his wife and this created a rift in their relationship. Once when her brother was taken ill, she implored Joygopal to take him to a good doctor in the town but he did not relent to her wish. Ultimately, she herself “took a boat with her sick brother, and went straight to the doctor’s house”. When Joygopal came there to take her back, she shouted at him, “Even if you cut me to pieces, I won’t return. You all want to kill my Nilmani, who has no father, no mother, none other than me, but I will save him”. (Tagore 2007: 101) Thus she embodies the female courage in the male-dominated society. She even showed the same tenacity when Joygopal, who depended on his father-in-law’s wealth to lead a successful life, tried to pocket her brother, Nilmani’s property. She tried to seek help in the male-dominated world from the Deputy Magistrate. She entered “the zenana of the Deputy Magistrate, TariniBabu, appealed to his wife” for cooperation. (Tagore 2007: 102), but TariniBabu was acquainted with Joygopal and reported the matter to him. Thus Joygopal got the opportunity of bringing back his wife and brother-in-law back to home by force. After this episode, Sasikala planned to take a bigger step to save Nilmani. She heard of the Magistrate coming to their village for a visit and decided to put the matter before him. She went to his tent “closely veiled”,

“accompanied by Nilmani” and pleaded before him, “Saheb, into your hands I resign my helpless brother. Save him”. (Tagore 2007: 104) She had the courage to take such a daring step of going against her husband alone without any external help.

Ratan in the short story “The Postmaster” was a small orphan girl who used to do some “odd jobs” for the postmaster. She was the only companion of the postmaster in the small village of Ulapur as there were not amusement activities there. He used to share his meals with Ratan. To while away his time, the postmaster used to talk about “memories from his own home, of his mother and sister”. (Tagore 2007: 120) After telling about his family, the postmaster would ask Ratan to share about her family by asking “Well, Ratan, do you remember anything of your mother? (Tagore 2007: 119) Then Ratan also used to share talks about her family. He would also teach her alphabets to spend the time. Ratan only entered the postmaster’s house when she got call from her master. Once Ratan was waiting for the call but she did not get the call of her master. So she entered the room and asked timidly, “Were you sleeping Dada? The postmaster replied, “I am not well. Feel my hand; is it very hot?” Though Ratan was a small girl, she took the charge of the postmaster and “stepped in the post of mother”. (Tagore 2007: 122) She resolved to take care of the postmaster and cure him and she did so till he got better. After getting better, the postmaster longed for some female care around him. He missed his mother and sister who were in Calcutta. Being homesick, the postmaster applied for the transfer to his hometown but it was rejected. Then he decided to resign from his job as a postmaster and go to his hometown. When he revealed this fact to Ratan, she was devastated. She was an orphan and had no one to call her own. The postmaster was her only companion. She asked him hopefully, “Dada, will you take me to your home?” The postmaster listened to her and answered laughingly, “What an idea!” (Tagore 2007: 124) Though Ratan did not say anything to this but this reply broke her heart. She could sleep in the night and thought of the reply given by the postmaster. Next morning, she decided not to take any help from the postmaster. She got up early and got the water ready for the postmaster’s bath. After the bath, when the postmaster called her and informed her, “You need not be anxious about my going away, Ratan; I shall tell my successor to look after you.” Ratan replied decisively to this, “No, no, you need not tell anybody anything at all about me; I don’t want to stay on here.” (Tagore 2007: 125) The postmaster was shocked because the meek girl who used to serve him had changed into a determined girl. When the new postmaster joined and he was handed charge, the postmaster prepared to depart. He again called Ratan and offered her some money saying, “Here is something for you; I hope it will keep you for some little time”. Ratan politely but firmly refused to take the money saying, “Oh, Dada, I pray you, don’t give me anything, don’t in any way trouble about me.” (Tagore 2007: 125) Thus though Ratan was a small orphan girl and had nowhere to go, she had the confidence to take a stand. She resolved not to take any help from the postmaster and stuck to it till the end.

Conclusion:

Tagore wanted to improve the social and political conditions of women in the society at that time. He had revolutionary ideas about women at the time when people in India had a



patriarchal outlook about women. He wanted them to have social status in society equal to their male counterparts. He wanted the women to have pride in their identity as a woman, instead of being defined as a wife, a mother or a daughter and their rights and wrongs should not be shaped by what the society expects of them. They should not leave behind their passions and hobbies in the responsibilities of their marriage. They should have self-confidence and challenge the concepts of dowry, femininity, chastity of widows and honour. . The social reformer in Tagore wanted to give priority to women and he did this through his works. They took a centre stage in his works. His portrayal of women changed with the changes in the society. He showed in his works that women were no longer mute sufferers of patriarchal oppression. They had their individuality. They were bold and had a futuristic outlook. Thus he in his time created women characters who challenged the conventions of the world as people know it even today.

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