



IN SEARCH OF SELF CONFIDENCE AND SELF IDENTITY: TAGORE'S MRINAL IS AN ANOTHER SELF

Pradip Kumar Bera

Assistant Professor in English, Pingla Thana Mahavidyalaya, Maligram,
Paschim Medinipur. West Bengal, India. email – ptmpradip@gmail.com

Abstract: - The first Asian noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore is one of the pioneers of the Bengal Renaissance who played an important role in extending modern education and social mobilization on the 19th and 20th century Indian society. His philosophy of education has been praised and accepted by all for better education. His epistolary short story “Streer Patra” (Translated as “The Wife’s Letter”) utters the voice of women, who are intertwined by the traditional norms of the nineteenth century’s patriarchal society, and want to set free themselves from those bindings, remained unchanged in the society and always struggling in search of their self identity. It is universally true to all the people of our male dominated society that women are physically and intellectually weaker than the men. But Rabindranath portrayed the strong, independent, powerful characters like – Mrinmoyee from “Samapti” (The Conclusion), Mrinal from “Streer Patra (The Wife’s Letter) and Charulata from “Nastaneer” (The Ruined Nest) etc as the protagonist of his writings as a model of the contemporary society who are able to live a free life, free from all sorts of social boundaries created by patriarchy to change the old dodmatic norms of the society. Tagore upholds before us a countless social issues related to woman which were reigned permanently like an old wound in our society, such as – child marriage, ill-treatment of woman as an object/commodity, infant and woman mortality etc through the letter of Mrinal, the protagonist of the story, to her husband after fifteen years of their marriage.

Key words: Bengal Renaissance, child marriage, dependent woman, ill-treatment of woman as an object/commodity, infant mortality women’s’ freedom and the self identity and women education.

The Bengal Renaissance was a cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement of India, which was started first in Bengal during the period of British Raj, from the nineteenth to early twentieth century. It is to be said that the spirit of Bengal Renaissance was started by the hands of Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833), Henry Louis Vivian Derozeo (1809-1831), Akshay Kumar Dutt (1824-1873), Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and various others eminent persons. All of them were struggling against some

permanent wounds of the then society such as – existing orthodoxies, particularly with respect of women, marriage – remarriage the widow, child marriage, the dowry system, women education, the caste system and the religion etc. their main aim was to establish a society that is free from all sorts of social diseases which were permanently took place in our society.

In this a social structure, like other Renaissance persons, Rabindranath Tagore also played an important role in extending modern education and social mobilization on the 19th and 20th century Indian society. His philosophy of education has been praised and accepted by all for better education. Being the first Asian noble laureate Rabindranatha tagore's epistolary short story "Streer Patra" (Translated as "The Wife's Letter") utters the voice of women, who are intertwined by the traditional norms of the nineteenth century's patriarchal society, and want to set free themselves from these bindings and reclaim their true self. It is universally true to all the people of our male dominated society that women are physically and intellectually weaker than the men. Being a world famous Bengali aristocrat writer Tagore also believes in the same point of view, though later he portrayed the strong, independent, powerful characters like – Mrinmoyee from "Samapti" (The Conclusion), Mrinal from "Streer Patra (The Wife's Letter) and Charulata from "Nastaneer" (The Ruined Nest) etc as the protagonist of his writing who are able to live a free life, free from all sorts of social boundaries created by patriarchy. Tagore upholds before us a countless social issues related to woman such as – child marriage, dependent woman, ill-treatment of woman as an object/commodity, infant mortality etc through the letter of Mrinal, the protagonist of the story, to her husband after fifteen years of their marriage.

Tagore represents the woman's voice and sentiment in composing a letter from the wife to her husband of no name, simple addressed him in the very beginning of the story as "My submission at your lotus feet" and it is because, due to the old traditional practice of our Indian patriarchal society that a Bengali wife cannot utter her husband's name. Tagore also showed by the letter that how Mrinal, the protagonist of the story, became a so called traditional 'Mejo Bou', the second daughter-in-law of her husband's joint family at the age of only twelve from a mere village girl. Mrinal's mother-in-law chooses her to see her beauty like object/commodity but not for her intelligence because her elder daughter-in-law was lack of beauty:

"How was a rustic worshipper to appease the gods of the city? Their hope lay solely in the beauty of their daughter. But their daughter took no pride in that beauty – it was priced at whatever the buyer offered. It is for this reason that women never lose their diffidence, whatever their beauty or virtue."

It is repeated again that women are compared with the objects or commodities when Bindu, the orphaned sister of Mrinal's elder sister-in-law, took shelter to save herself from the cruelty of her cousin in their house running away from her home. At this time Mrinal said: "My sister-in-law was anxious to prove to everyone that our

household, by some fluke, had secured Bindu at a bargain price. She yielded much labour but cost very little.”

It is abandoned on those days in the society that women did not go against their husband’s will/decision; they became an enduring figure, and a devoted wife staying in the corner of the household i.e. “Andarmahal/Grihakon’ on the feet of their husband (Pati Debata) . It is their cultured, righteous family--tradition that a wife should be the same as described in “Srimath Bhagavat Geeta”

“Karyeshu dasi; karaneshu mantri;
Rupecha lakshmi; kshamaya dharitri;
Bhojyeshu mata; sayaneshu vesya;
Shat dharmayukta kuladharmata patni.”

Which means she should be a good wife who possessed the following six qualities?

“Ability to be an efficient and loyal worker
Ability to advise like an able minister
Fortunate to look like the Goddess Lakshmi herself
Blessed with the patience of mother earth
Ability to cook and serve likes a caring mother
Ability to satisfy her partner with her skill in marital relations.”

On the contrary a woman or if she would be a wife needs the same from the opposite, she wants a husband, a family and the family members who were entangled with the thread of love, affection, honour etc and she wants those who support her, love her, and guide her in the crucial moment of their life that she expects not only from her husband but also from her family. But in the present story “The Wife’s Letter” all are supposed to neglect as Tagore said:

“Neglect is like the ashes which cover the fire: perhaps keeping it alive, but preventing its heat from being outwardly felt. When self-respect dwindles, neglect does not seem unjust; for this reason, it causes no suffering. That is also why women are ashamed to feel pain. I say, therefore, if it is your decree that women must suffer, then it is best to keep them in as neglected a state as possible,…”

Tagore always reminded us especially when Bindu, the sister of Mrinal’s elder sister-in-law, is running up to their house to save her from the cruel/tyrannous hands of her cousin brother, the present situation of woman in our society. And later when Bindu comes secretly to Mrinal after three days of her marriage, knowing that her husband is a mad man. At this situation Mrinal observed her elder sister-in-law’s helplessness and inability to give a safeguard to her own blooded sister, Bindu, at her home. It is impossible to her because “she lacked the courage to show her love openly, from the heart, to her orphaned sister. She is an obedient wife” of her house. After that all the family members including her own sister also started to give the ill-treatment to her because she was an unfortunate parentless girl. To see this Mrinal, holding an invincible personality, taking up the role of Bindu’s guardian, evading all

menacing glances of the relatives. But here she was not free when Mrinal drew Bindu to her room, her sister-in-law said; “Meja Bou is simply spoiling a poor man’s daughter’. She went around complaining to everyone as though I had brought about some terrible disaster.” She takes all the responsibilities of Bindu, even after her marriage, but all reduced to vein when she got the news from her brother, Sharat, that Bindu was killing herself by setting herself on fire to live freely from all the social burdens. And in this way she gets free herself from this male dominated artificial, dogmatic society, otherwise she has no alternatives.

Mrinal in her letter to her husband wrote that her husband and her household members always pretend to forget that she had beauty but they constantly force to remember at every step that she had a brain. Mrinal’s mother became always anxious of her intelligence, for in the conservative Bengali middle-class milieu this quality of a woman was a fault or impediment. But it is inherent. So it would not be changed or gives to someone else. Mrinal said; “God had carelessly given me much more intelligence than I needed to be a wife in your household; to whom was I now to return it?” And due to this intelligence she protest raising her voice in overtaking the male domination against the existing traditional norms of the society.

Mrinal remembered that her daughter was died almost immediately after she was born. After that her family members have no feelings to know the dreadful incident. She felt the lovable feelings of motherhood after suffering a great pain. Here she is exceptional. She observed every little thing of her house hold minutely and takes care about those that were unnoticed by her family members. When the English Doctor was coming to their house to check up Mrinal, he was astonished to see the women’s quarter and scolded them angrily about the condition of the lying-in-room:

“The inner rooms are like the reverse of a piece of work in wool; they have neither decorum, nor grace, nor ornament. There light burn dimly; the air enters by stealth, like a thief; the country yard is immovably choked with rubbish; the stain of the walls and floors reign undisturbed.”

In the letter to her husband Mrinal informed to her husband that it is well known to her that suffering is a common matter in her husband’s house. So she did not want to suffer any more in his house. For this she would not complain to anybody else only said that she would not return again “Bereft of the shelter of your family’s feet”. Seeing the tragedy of Bindu, Mrinal realized the present condition of woman in the society. Gradually it became unbearable to her. To get free herself first she thought that she will find herself, her own self in writing poetry which was her innate quality, she said,

“I used to write poems in secret. Whatever rubbish they were, the walls of your women’s quarters had not grown round them. In them lay my freedom – I was myself in them.”

But after all in search of self identity Mrinal took a tremendous decision to leave the house, avoiding the threatening eyes of the patriarchal society. She is free now, free

from all sorts of orthodoxy, manmade rules and regulations, and the boastful patriarchy would not do anything to her. Here she able to achieved her identity in slapping the so called patriarchal society as she said about Bindu's death in connection of freedom.

“I have seen Bindu. I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it. ...

...God did not abandon her. Whatever the powers you exercised over her, there was a limit to them. She was greater than her wretched human birth. Your feet were not long enough to tread her life underfoot for ever, at your wish and by your custom. Death is more powerful than you. In that death, she has attained greatness. There, she is no longer simply the daughter of a Bengali household, the young 'sister' of her tyrannical cousins, the deceived wife of an unknown, mad husband. There she is infinite.”

So why should she not cross over the threshold of her husband's house to get free her to the outer world created by the God. Why should she spend a prisoner's life, confounding herself in her husband's righteous house? To get free herself, Mrinal crossed the 'Lakshmana – Rekha' the boundary, drawn by the patriarchal society, she decided to leave her house and kin forever like Queen Mirabai, who left her family for salvation.

“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.’”

So Mrinal also thought the same that it is a release, a freedom to her from the restriction 'Vidhinisedha' made by patriarchal society. She left her house forever and entered into the broad world, an open place without any restriction or boundary, created by God, where she finds herself particularly her own self.

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