

PROGRESSIVE FEMALES BY TAGORE: A PSYCHO-PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

GITANJALI ROY

A Nobel laureate, Nationalist, and Idealist, Rabindranath Tagore's literature portrayed female characters with spitfire personalities. Charulata, Kalyani, Binodini, Mrinal, and Giribala are a few such characters who have gained popularity in Bengali literature and media. His female characters are anything but submissive muses to the patriarchal society. Secondary literature and media projected them as independent, shrewd, intuitive thinkers, fearless, stubborn, selfish, assertive, and intelligent. The pool of characteristics veils the true interpretation of their personalities and hence the Hermeneutic method of research is adopted in this paper. A critical review of Tagore's Bengali literature, the primary source of information, provided a new set of information. This new information has changed the context of the female characters in terms of the personality traits of Tagore's female characters. The paper presents psychological hermeneutic perspectives of these characters for understanding the similarity and differences in the portrayal of females now and decades ago.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Hermeneutic, Personality, Media

The idea of progressive women brings us to think of struggles and campaigns set out in the Western world during the 19th century. In Indian culture, ancient scriptures like *Manusmriti* and other *purana*-s made clarity in duties of both genders. After the invasion of the British in India, the society went through turmoil and scriptural knowledge. Its teachings became obtuse. There were swadeshi *andolan*, freedom struggles, formal education installation over traditional *gurukula*, and much more. In this mist of mayhem, Bengal (both east and west) saw an upsurge of literature via the writing of Rabindranath Tagore. His opinion and perspectives were far ahead of then social situations. The first Indian, a non-European to be embellished with the Nobel prize in Literature, an avid reader, philosopher across generations, and a visionary. Rabindranath Tagore needs no introduction and his line of work cannot be dated. He is considered to be a feminist and a keen observer of personality in society. He has given birth to varied ideas both imperishable and suitable to every society over decades. His list of writings includes plays, poems, novels, short stories, and magazine articles. His novels have been widely cast into plays and movies to depict the multiple shades of a character. It is hard to imagine that Tagore framed such powerful characters in an era where the society was undermining females by scoring them as objects rather than humans, and Bengal was witnessing turmoil of partition. Tagore stories are based on the culture, language, geography, and people communities of east and west Bengal. They depict minute details of culture and the intertwined role of each character in it, such as the clothing of women, food habits, etc. To modern society, it might seem orthodox and nearly tribal but a deeper analysis

reveals girth, innocence, and a strong socio-political message valid in the face of modern society. Tagore has always portrayed female characters in varied shades of personality as strong, independent, and nurturing. His authored novels showcase women with characteristics that can be sectioned as progressive women. From Tagore's perspective, the society was regressive but women had progressive personalities much earlier than the Western world revolution. Tagore became one of the pioneers of feminism in India (Banerjee, 2017, 274). P.K.Dutta aptly support the previous statement- "Rabindranath's most of the stories dealt with women as individual subjects engaged in negotiating with a problematic relationship in their marriages and with their household, but also women who created alternate life, some of which involved being single (Dutta, 2004, 9) .

Today in the 20th century we see women in India struggling to find their place in a patriarchal society. Tagore's stories have been an effort to change the face of society in every era. His efforts to display this variation give the reader opportunities to interpret and get close to the characters. Everyone can relate to some character or a few aspects of these characters. The women portrayed in Tagore's stories are both liked and criticized by society but their personalities are magnetic and flamboyant to leave an impression. Why Tagore? His short stories deal with the human mind and behavior, especially women's psychology (Banerjee, 2017, 271).

The purpose of this paper is to articulate Tagore's features of female protagonists in his novels using Gadamer's hermeneutic method. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation and once the author overcomes self-biases by reflexivity, this art is sharpened. Gadamer's hermeneutics is his ontological focus (Being) and capacity to not only interpret human understanding but misunderstanding as a mechanism for effective communication (Regan, 2012, 288). The hermeneutic is textual interpretation because humans experience the world through language for better understanding and knowledge (Byrne, 2001, 968).The characteristic features of the Gadamerian method are- pre-supposition, inter-subjectivity, authenticity, tradition, and history to interpret the words of the text (Regan, 2012, 287). Regan (2012, 301) has explained the concepts of pre-supposition, inter-subjectivity, authenticity, temporality, tradition, and history in relation to reading, understanding, and interpretation. These concepts are here explained in relation to the personalities of the female protagonists mentioned in the paper.

Research plan

Gadamer's hermeneutics focused on understanding, interpretation, and application (Austgard, 2012, 829) using pre-supposition (bias), inter-subjectivity, authenticity (reflexivity), temporality (time affecting understanding/emotion), tradition, and history (culture) to interpret the words of the text (Regan, 2012, 287). The pre-supposition or bias arises from the lack of the interpreter's self-awareness and pre-conceptions that lead to false projection of the meaning of the text. In order to prevent clouding in judgment, the author identified and listed the expectations about the phrases depicting the personality characteristics of the female protagonist. Once this list was prepared, re-visiting the texts and developing a fresh understanding by eliminating listed expectations prevented self-imposed bias; thus, delivering an objective understanding of the text.

Inter-subjectivity occurs when understanding of a context is limited to self and hence one should discuss and seek others' advice, feedback and ideas. This process enhances one's learning about prejudice(s) in self-judgment/understanding of the context. For this step, the author reached out to two expert professors- one from psychology and the other from philosophy. These experts were selected as their interests and research areas were closely related to the article. So, with the triangulation of ideas (important criteria in qualitative research) as a result of brainstorming among the author and two experts. Triangulation raised the good cause of disagreement and agreement and finally distillation of true elements of personality with respect to each female protagonist.

Authenticity or reflexivity refers to asking fundamental questions of self-understanding to search for proper meaning and interpretation about values, beliefs, and ideologies (Regan, 2012, 395). Reflexivity provides opportunities for revisiting the method and making required changes in the process. The author used this step to revisit the texts, again and again, to develop an objective interpretation of the content. The objectivity here means being free from self-biases, pre-conceived ideas, and available study findings. The interpretation extracted from the first time reading of the texts mentioned in this study when compared to the fourth time reading of the text (following the elimination of biases, inter-subjectivity, and reflexivity) brought out objective and psycho-philosophically myopic perspective of personalities.

History and tradition are profound concepts that require an understanding within the context of temporality. An individual is born in this world and history; traditions and temporality affect him constantly. The essence of existence can be enhanced by knowing these three concepts. It prevents self-biases and naïve self-representation. The traditional background of the author is similar to the background represented in the texts mentioned in this paper. The author conducted a deep analysis of tradition before indulging in the interpretation of texts. It included collecting information about social relationships, community, language, and traditions from senior members in the family and reading historical texts highlighting Bengali culture. Due to the similarity in the background, the understanding of language tradition, customs, and cultural factors were easy to interpret and understand. The frame of reference of the author, although was dipped into the pre-conceived cultural, traditional, and historical ideas but proper measures (as cited above) were taken to keep objectivity intact. Temporality plays an important role in the modification of tradition and culture, hence the collection of information from senior members of the family and reading historical texts helped in resonating with the author's temporal understanding of tradition, culture, and history with that mentioned in Tagore's texts.

The author used the above-mentioned concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to drawing a framework for a research plan. To understand the personalities of female protagonists, the author made a critical read of the novels and watched stories directed by Anurag Basu named 'Stories by Tagore'. The interpretation of each character with story content and context was made in lines with Tagore's perspective while sketching them. The understanding and interpretation of the personalities lead to the application for profiling progressive women's pictures.

Understanding the personalities

Gadamer's idea of understanding is through the study of communication taking place between the characters (Regan, 2012, 288). The language used by the female protagonists provides cognizance. This allowed the author to get familiar with the characters' perspectives of perceiving their world. For this reason, negotiations between the female protagonists and their significant others were studied for understanding the matter of agreement and profiling personality. Starting with Binodini of *Choker Bali*, one of the most reckoned novels featured as movies and television series gained popularity over her charismatic and

dynamic personality. In the times when India was under the rule of the British and females were not promoted for education or appreciated for an intuitive mind, Binodini was educated, well versed with literature, and multilingual. She was trained in music, piano, and other forms of art. Her communication with other female and male protagonists shows clarity in thoughts and intentions. He felt jealous towards another married female and she clearly blamed society for her conditions as a widow. Tagore has portrayed the pain and agony of young widows as a shout for change. Through Binodini, he reflects the suppression of the widowed, her call for freedom, and her desperate urge to satisfy her basic needs. When she narrates about her despair over being a complete woman still a widow, she questions the unfair treatment of the almighty and society. She acts under the influence of egoism when she enchanted a married man (who refused to marry her and chose a less qualified woman according to Binodini). Afterward, her actions and words drifted towards guilt and penance. She donned the consequences of her actions and decided to surrender herself in self-discovery. Tagore portrayed Binodini as a role model for women in adversity due to personal loss but refused to surrender herself, her needs, and desires for the sake of social dogmas. He made an attempt to spike our thinking about vengeance and punishment whether imposed by society or self. Tagore, through the dialogues of Binodini, claims that women have the right to decide about their fate irrespective of their social or marital conditions.

On her arrival to Puri (a city in Orissa), Mrinal writes a letter to her husband. She narrates her experiences being his wife and a young bride to her in-laws. She expressed her disappointment playing these roles, sabotaging her being that is more than these roles. The epistolary format of *Strir Patra* unfolds her agony and dissatisfaction towards her husband, married life, and his household. Mrinal was chosen as a bride in an aristocratic family because of her beauty. Unlike her elder sister-in-law, Mrinal refused to surrender to the family norms of subjecting herself to insults, remained confined to the kitchen, and did not voice her opinions. She well communicated to her husband about the unjust behavior of her in-laws, their wrongful expectation, and biased rules for a woman. In her letter, she clearly stated that she was more than just being a younger bride- she was a poet, had her opinion on personal and social matters, and was a forward thinker not afraid of orthodox customs. At one instance she says by the end of her pregnancy, she was shifted to an unhygienic dark corner of the house because she will become impure after giving birth. She objects to this by raising the question- How can a woman

raise to the status of a mother (such a pure and pious role) and be impure at the same time? How is this rule justified as it hampers the self-esteem of women? She was feeling suffocated due to gender biases and in her search for self-esteem and confidence, she always stood for a young girl (her elder sister-in-law's sister who came for shelter) during her stay and was falsely married. She said that she wanted to keep this young girl under her wing until she came to know about her death (suicide). Mrinal was shaken to the core by this young girl's actions and said it made her realize that nothing is worth one's self-esteem. Hence, she took a drastic step of moving out of her marital house but not returning in the future. She made it clear to her husband that she regretted losing her self-worth, realized her value, and would no longer be ready to compromise. Tagore has beautifully wrapped Mrinal's story in a letter where he recited the no-freedom situation of women in the patriarchal society. He suggests through the character that only women have to take that step where she seeks a place in such society. She has to be a self-advocate, not let go of her personality and identity for social acceptance. She needs to find her way to self-development and voice her concerns in any way possible.

Kalyani in *Aparichita* talks about her discovery of identity beyond marriage after her marriage was called off due to the greed of the groom's family. She narrates that the insult she and her father had to bear in the hands of the groom's maternal uncle led to the cancellation of the marriage. But after, she found her true calling-looking after the orphaned girls. Her interactions with British government officers showed that she is fearless in the face of truth. This was a significant difference between Kalyani and the groom; he was kind and gentle but chose to not speak even when he witnessed the wrongdoing of his uncle. Kalyani was contacted by the groom to rethink the marriage proposal as he was impressed by her personality and guilt-ridden by his cowardly actions. To this, Kalyani humbly refused and suggested that he move on with his life as she had with her social work. According to her, marriage is not the ultimate goal of life for a girl. There can be other goals to define herself and she has to make her choices. Refusing a marriage proposal in times when females did not have many opportunities in society shows her mental clarity and strong will-power. She chose to be a spinster, independent, guardian to orphaned girls, and a woman with the willpower to lead her life on her terms.

Giribala, the female protagonist of the short story ‘*Giribala*(1895)’ protested against the misbehaviors, physical assault, and infidelity of her husband. She is married to a wealthy man who has a lustful interest in a theater artist. He likes to spend nights with his mistress rather than his wife, as he is enchanted by her beauty and personality. Giribala was beautiful and took care of her husband, despite his negligence. She starts visiting the theater and gets refuted over her husband’s indecent behavior towards the actress. She decides to enchant him with the same dramatic skill and starts copying the actress. She even refuses to give locker keys to her husband for spending on the actress and as a result, she got beaten up and abused by him. He snatches all her jewelry and runs away with the actress. Giribala decided to break the tradition of housewife, not sobbing for her loss and taking revenge on her husband by joining the theatre. Tagore, through Giribala, sought the solution for women’s oppression i.e., giving back what people make you go through (Banerjee, 2017, 275). She is liberated, self-dependent, popular, and spreads an awakening for women.

Interpretation of each character

The status of women in the 20th century is contrary to women portrayed in Tagore stories. He created a space for them to find and establish an identity for themselves. He put them beyond the household to a freedom fighter, education, musician, actress, etc.

Binodini, a young widow, refused to shy away from her emotional and physical desires. She questioned the social rules of marriage at an early age and the restrictions on widows. She displayed the power of education to bring in societal change in the perception of men and women both.

Mrinal recalls her conjugal marriage and regrets losing her self-esteem for the sake of others who do not recognize her as a person. She displays those women need to make their own choices and take charge of their lives. They have to struggle for their self-worth and only then society will look up to them.

In *Aparichita*, Tagore suggested an initiation from the bride’s family to stop social evils like dowry. The story depicts the revolutionary and proactive thinking of a father for the welfare of her daughter (Banerjee, 2017, 273). Traditionally, marriage included men making decisions and women dreaming and praying for a

suitor. But here, Kalyani's character reflected an emerging modern woman of India who was bold, courageous, and assertive.

Giribala, deserted by her husband, refused to surrender her identity in the darkness of her house. She became self-reliant, earned a social status, and earned back her pride in society.

Application for profiling

The word 'progressive' is defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary as moving forward or developing gradually especially social improvement, interested in new or modern ideas or opportunities, characterized by progress and state in progress at the time of speaking. These definitions align well with the characteristics of female protagonists. If pooled together, the characteristics are well-educated, intelligent, willing to the social improvement of females, invites new ideas with respect to their time, strong-willed, and divination. These characteristics and the definition of progressive, with a closer view, provide similarities.

They all chose to face the hardship with grace and hold their heads up through their struggles. Their stories were short but the impact is long-lasting. Through the stories, we can understand the social problems faced by women. Such issues have no specific timeline, women before this era and after had gone through such struggles but, Tagore's stories iterate them for sensitivity in the society and bring open-mindedness among the community to acknowledge these problems and seek a solution. He portrayed females as insightful and capable to speak their minds, unlike the general social norm where females are required to keep quiet, follow social norms and not have an opinion. With respect to the above definition of progressive, we are required to put a philosophical lens and judge that it's not a modern term or a modern-day need. Women for centuries had to take steps and break the social rules and stereotypes to find their identity. Why does she have to struggle to speak her mind? Why she is expected to adhere to social norms solely? Despite being the other half of the population, she is made the weaker sex who needs protection or support for upliftment? In Indian Ethos and mythological stories, women are represented as powerful with multiple arms and energy to destroy evil when all the power of gods failed. Society praises idols of goddesses without a pint of hesitation, but the attitude differs for the women as human beings. Indian ethos and mythologies are full of stories where women display strength, be it Savitri who fights for her husband's life, or Gargi who is a scholar

of Vedas and Upanishads among the male sages. Samkhya Darshana, one of the Indian philosophical schools has presented the concept of Prakriti and Purusha responsible for the evolution of every element in this world. The term ‘Prakriti’ is often used as an analogy to the female who is responsible for the existence of all the creatures, mother of all. Shiva and Parvati (God and Goddess in Hindu religion) are called Purusha and Prakriti respectively and their interaction leads to the evolution of the world. Female scholars in ancient Indian philosophy like Gargi, Lopamudra, Maitreyi were insightful and challenged the gender gap in the academic and philosophical sphere. Often these mythological stories are categorized as mystical and religious and the role of the female is portrayed as Goddess; without giving it an opportunity to taper down in human life. To bridge this gap between mythology, ethos, and reality, literature plays an important role due to its simplicity and approachability to the common man. Literature helps the common man to think and rationalize with evidence and experiences. “Rabindranath’s success as a writer was actually ensured by his essentially lyrical temperament since there is a close affinity between short stories and lyrics (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Women have to believe that they are progressive and need to take certain steps as discussed above and in Tagore’s literature. Their behavior is like poetry that needs to inspire society for bringing immense change and energy for sustainability.

Disclosure Statement- No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

Ethical Statement- The study has no human participants’ data.

References:

- Austgard, K. (2012). Doing it the Gadamerian way – using philosophical hermeneutics as a methodological approach in nursing science. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences*, 26(4), 829-834. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6712.2012.00993.x>
- Bandyopadhyay, A. (2004). *Rabindranath Tagore: Novelist, Short story writer and Essayist*. “*Studies on Rabindranath Tagore* (M. Ray, Ed.; Vol. 1). New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- Banerjee, S. (2017). Emancipated Women in Rabindranath Tagore’s Selected Short Stories. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 8(1), 271-279.
- Byrne, M. (2001, March). Hermeneutics as a methodology for textual analysis. *AORN Journal*, 73(5), 968. Gale Academic OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A74571586/AONE?u=anon~9329d57&sid=googleScholar&xid=43900533.
- Dutta, P. K. (2004). *Rabindranath Tagore’s The Home and the World: A Critical Companion*. Permanent Black, New Delhi.

- Gadamer, H. G. (2004b). *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. In (Second ed., p. 288). University of California Press. Berkeley.
- Regan, P. (2012, December). Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics: Concepts of reading, understanding and interpretation. *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology and Practical Philosophy*, 4(2), 286-303. www.metajournal.org