

Voices beyond Death: The Spirits of Women in the Short Stories by Rabindranath Tagore

Sanghita Sarkar

Abstract: *Fears of ghosts and ghouls and devotion towards the unnumbered local gods and goddesses have always been an integral part of Bengali belief system. Inevitably, this has left a profound impact on Bengali literature as well. Be it the great Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore or the composer of Bengali folk narratives Dakshinaranjan Mitra – spirits and ghosts have always been an inseparable part of Bengali writers' creations. Though often reduced to the category of children's fictions, many of these Bengali ghosts' stories have crossed the boundaries of superstitions and beliefs and plunged into the opaque realm of human psychology. The current paper is an attempt to delve into this uncertain realm of human psyche with the help of three short stories by Rabindranath Tagore – 'Kankal' (The Skeleton), 'Nishithe' (In the Night), 'Monihara' (The Lost Jewel). The paper with the help of psychoanalytical feminist philosophy has attempted to explore how these ghosts' stories have gone beyond the limits of local beliefs and superstitious sensations and brought out the problematic representation of gender roles and identities in contemporary Bengali society. In order to bring out the societal fissures the current paper here tries to raise such hypothetical questions as: i) How do these short stories expose in a covert manner the subjugation of the women in contemporary Bengali society? ii) How has the woman-self obtained voice after death in these short stories? iii) How do these stories register protests by the woman-spirits against the patriarchal Bengali socio-cultural beliefs and system?*

Keywords: *Bengali Literature, ghost stories, psychology, gender discrimination, desire*

*“These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air.”
(The Tempest, Act 4, Scene 1)*

Fears of ghosts and ghouls and devotions towards the unnumbered local gods and goddess have always been an integral part of the socio-cultural fabric of geo-politically undivided Bengal which currently consists of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Such an ethno-linguistic belief inevitably has left a profound impact on the works of Bengali writers. Now there is a distinct differentiation between the beliefs in religious customs and beliefs in such superstitions as ghosts and spirits; while the issues and concerns of the first one had been considered as a matter of great importance and have been taken up by the scholars of the Bengali society, beliefs in the later one, though common have been pushed into the category of children's literature. However, such considerations have never been able to diminish the popularity of such supernatural fictions amongst the common folk of Bengal. In fact, many prominent Bengali writers like, Troilokyonath Mukhopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and Lila Mjumder have enriched this genre by writing several memorable supernatural fictions. The current paper is a study of three such immortal supernatural fictions written by Rabindranath Tagore – 'Kankal' (The Skeleton), 'Nishithe' (In the Night), 'Monihara' (The Lost Jewel). The study attempts to delve into the depth of unfathomable human psyche illustrated in these tales in order to bring out biased gender representation in contemporary Bengali community.

Objective of the Study:

The current paper is an effort to bring out, by using the approach of Psychoanalytical Feminism, the fragmented lived-experiences of a woman's life in Bengali community. By means of analyzing the examples of characters in the above-mentioned narratives, the paper aims to explore the differential status of the man and woman in the contemporary Bengali society. The paper also aims to critically analyze the effects that this differential status had on the formation of the woman-self and actions of the woman psyche. The paper in its study tries to address following critical questions that are construed by the gender representation in these fictions:

- i. How do these short stories expose in a covert manner the subjugation of the women in contemporary Bengali society?
- ii. How has woman obtained voices after death in these short stories?

iii. How do these stories register protests by the woman-spirits against the patriarchal Bengali socio-cultural beliefs and system?

In order to obtain hypothetical solutions to the afore-mentioned questions the paper has been divided into several subsections. In the first section, the author has discussed the ideological axiom of psychoanalytical Feminism used in this paper to analyze the three fictions. The second section of the paper consists of a brief review of the earlier literatures. The third section traces the traditional originary of Bengali ghost fiction by premising them against the particular socio-political chronotope. The fourth section of the essay critically scrutinizes the concerned short stories by Rabindranath Tagore through the critical lens of Psychoanalytical Feminism. In the concluding section of the essay the author has explored the marginalized experiences and the silent voices of protests of the women of the contemporary Bengali community.

Psychoanalytic Feminism – a Study of the Woman-mind:

Psychoanalytic Feminism is a complex ontological approach that combines axioms from both Psychoanalysis and Feminism. Therefore, it is impossible to elaborate this onerous research approach within the limited confinement of this paper. However, the current study in its following section will try to introduce fundamental ideas associated with it by outlining the concepts provided by few of the high priests of this approach.

If Feminism is understood as an intellectual commitment and set of beliefs that seeks equality and justice for the women by eradicating all forms of sexism, and Psychoanalysis is comprehended as a set of ontological praxis and technical practices that deal with the opaque realm of human mind, then based on these two locales Psychoanalytic Feminism can be illustrated as a mixed approach that uses the methods of psychoanalysis to construe the theory of oppression of women by men among its other goals. This approach proffers that men have an inherent psychological compulsion to subjugate women. The theory further discloses that the root of this male compulsion and the surprising nominal female resistance against this compulsive suppression is deeply instated in the formation and function of human psyche (Psychoanalytical Feminism, 2011) To understand the originary as well as the workings of the human psyche,

psychoanalytic Feminism relies on Freud's understanding of his works on human psychology.

Apparently, complementarity between classical psychoanalysis and any form of Feminism may appear paradoxical as the classical ideologies of psychoanalysis are not really pro- women *per se*. To bridge this gap, what the later psychoanalytic feminists did was – they kept the basic concept of the Freudian unconscious and sought to understand the formation and function of human psychology using this concept according to their own benefit. They proffered that such understanding of human psychology will help us to retain a better understanding of women oppression and may ultimately offer a way out of this apparent ineluctable situation. Psychoanalytic Feminism instates that the pattern of women subjugation is in reality ingrained into the very fabric of the society which actively helps to create and nurture the system of patriarchy. Owing to its dogmatic dualism Psychoanalytic Feminism is intimately involved with both politics of societal functions and ambiguous workings of human psyche. So, this philosophical approach has often been termed as a social movement that traverse through the tangled tunnels of human and social psyche. Psychoanalytic Feminism employs different techniques of psychoanalysis to comprehend the methods by which gender, sexuality, and sexual differences is constructed and construed within a society.

Psychoanalytic Feminism strives to identify the socio-psychological pattern that valorizes the system of gender and sexuality by circumscribing it. (Gallop, 1982, xi-xv) In this context, Luce Irigaray, one major figures in the later phase of Psychoanalytic Feminism, has observed that there are three stages through which Psychoanalytic Feminism functions; the first stage attempts to deconstruct the masculine subject, the second stage puts serious attention on the possibility of female subject, and the final stage deals with the intersubjectivity in order to consider the problematic of sexual differences. (Irigary 1995,a, 96). Later theorists like Nancy Chodorow and Julia Kristeva emphasized on the pre-oedipal stage in forming the gender identity of a child. (Nayar on *Psychoanalytical Feminism*). They centered their ideas on individual subjectivity and difference by prioritizing the maternal framework as an active contrast to the fraternal framework as was premised in the Freudian model.

Literature Review:

Stories of supernatural entities and horror have always been an integral part of Indian subcontinent. Indian classics are replete with images of ghosts, monsters, demons and deities. But this genre of supernaturalism has always remained an uncharted territory in the field of Indian academia. The supernatural stories in Bengal have, similarly, received a short shrift in the field of scholastic study. There are numerous reasons that could be operating behind such negligence. The primary one being the assumption that stories of ghosts and monsters are intended for children and as such do not require much academic scrutiny. In such a context we can hardly expect to have an archive of extensive studies on female ghosts and the workings of women psyche. Therefore, it was an onerous task for the current paper to select literatures that were suitable for the present study. However, after much consideration the paper has chosen two previous works significant for the current study.

The first one chosen for the purpose is published in Bengali, *Thakur Barir Pretcharcha: Rabindranath O Ananya [Research on Spirits by the Tagores: Rabindranath and Others]* by Mahuya Dashgupta (2014). Dashgupta in her study has explored the intense curiosity and passion for the afterlife displayed by the different members of the Tagore family during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She has dealt with some of the key concerns that are in focus in the present paper. She in her paper has addressed i) Rabindranath Tagore's fascination with ghosts and spirits. Moreover, she has also mentioned how Tagore's interest in the supernatural got reflected in his works. The present study too, is focused on the depiction of spirits in his works. ii) Dashgupta has also dealt with the issues of the interrelations of the psychological and supernatural in the works of Tagore. But Tagore is only a small portion of Dashgupta's work. In fact, she has given only partial importance to the psychological exploration of the texts by Tagore. Also, she has not dealt with the problem of gendered understanding and representation of the spirits in Tagore's works which is the key issue addressed in this study. These issues of psychological understandings that condition the interpretation of the supernatural have been analyzed in detail in the following sections of the present paper.

The second significant work that can be mentioned in relation to the current paper is *Gender and Ghosts* by Jeannie Banks Thomas (2007). Thomas

in her work has dealt with the common pattern of the ghostly '*Deviant Woman*' (that she mentions as "The Deviant Femme", Thomas, p. 81-82) which have haunted the English horror stories for centuries. Thomas in her study has focused on such supernatural legends that 'rework gender and the cultural idea associated with it'. (Thomas, 82) She has observed how these '*deviant femme*' depart from the traditional concept of the 'Angel in the House' and display emotions such as anger, violence and madness. These spirits, argues Thomas, are victims either of some tragic incidents or murder and seek vengeance or justice by drawing attention to themselves. The current study, too, scrutinizes the female spirits of Tagore as victims of male-centered socio-cultural system of Bengal; at the same time, it also analyses how contrary to the western rendition, these spirits of Tagore do not haunt a place simply to draw attention to themselves. Their haunting instead is stamped as an expression of their intense passion for life and as a protest against the entire patriarchal societal system in Bengal.

The Spirit-way – Tracing the Orinary of Bengali Ghosts' stories:

"Ghosts signify, etymologically, something that has been finished, but not gone from earth... Ghosts are, therefore, lived impressions of the deads."

(Sukumar Sen in Ghosh, p.07, trans. self)

Death was a common everyday reality of pre-independent Bengal. Frequented with diseases like malaria and cholera or being bitten by poisonous insects, snakes and wild beasts, People witnessed death closely in rural Bengal every day. So, belief in ghosts and the ghostly was an integral part of Bengali life and literature. In fact, the folk tales of Bengal is most assuredly the greatest store house of these ghosts and spirits. Rev. Lal Behari Day in his *Folk-Tales of Bengal* (1883) talks of plethora of such ghosts that haunted the everyday Bengali life. So, this genre developed independently in Bengal without requiring help beyond the oceans.

Nirmalya Kumar Ghosh in his *Pret-Puran (Mythos of Ghosts, 2014)* has observed that with the passage of time a new group of Bengali writers, especially those learned in English, started writing supernatural fictions that bore occidental influences. Pyarichand Mitra's *Avedi* (1871) shows a clear influence of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599). Anweshan's dead father appears repeatedly in his dreams with words of wisdom and warnings. Later this *dream trend* was followed

by many other writers. So, in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Bishbrikhyo* (*The Poison Tree*, 1884) Kundanandini's dead mother cautions her twice against her impending future. But this belief in the supernatural sensations was suspended in the age of reason during nineteenth century. So, the later ghost story writers followed a completely different path to generate a sense of 'willing suspension of disbelief' in the hearts of their learned readers. For instance, Troilokyanath Mukhopadhyay rejected the earlier concept of ghosts as impressions of the non-deads. It must be mentioned here that Mukhopadhyay worked as a civil servant under the British Government and he had visited many European countries during the tenure of his service. As famous scholars like Dr. Tapodhir Bhattacharjee has observed; he "seems to have collected the ingredients of literature throughout his service life ..." (Bhattacharjee, p. 37). Not surprisingly, he introduced a kind of social ghostology and observed that "as water becomes ice when frozen, darkness turns into ghosts when solidified... There is no limit to darkness...The darkness in the hearts of men is endless" (Mukhopadhyay in Ghosh, p. 10, [trans. self]). With this sociological understanding of ghosts and spirits the supernatural fictions of Bengal stepped into new grounds of psychological fictions.

During the twentieth century (after the Bengal Renaissance) three major trends were perceived in the ghost stories of Bengal. As Ghosh has observed, the first of these thoughts belonged to the people who believed in ghosts and life after death; prominent amongst them are Swami Dibyananda, Swami Avedananda, Jogendranath Gupta, Rakhal Das Sengupta, Nikhilnath Roy among others. Many of them had spiritual experiences and written books on mysteries of death or on life after death. The second group included people who enlightened by the age of reason and therefore rejected all sorts of supernatural beliefs. So, ghost stories for them were not only unscientific but were also unnecessary. The third group is perhaps most common and yet the most interesting one; it includes people who stood apart from the limits of beliefs and disbeliefs and simply chose to enjoy the thrills of supernatural fictions. These scholastic contestations on the ghosts' and ghost stories could not diminish their popularity amongst the Bengali reading community. People who live and die with so many desires simply cannot be expected to be reduced to ashes after their deaths. So, the belief in ghosts and the ghostly had always been and will always be a part of Bengali culture.

Bengalis have, like the rest of the world, categorized and theorized ghosts in order to understand them. Just like in other major cultures, they believe that ghosts can have different in nature depending upon the actions and experiences in their life before death. They can be good or bad, helpful or mischievous, but all of them share one common ground, the earthly attachment that bind them to this world even after their death. These attachments can be of different types; they can be places like buildings (popularly known in English as Haunted Houses), a water body or even a tree. They can be earthy possessions; like the skeleton in case of the young widow in 'Kankal' and jewelry in case of Monimalika in 'Monihara'. Sometimes these attachments can also relate to lingering emotions that a dead person might have had towards another person and this is exactly what happens in 'Nishithe' (In the Night), where the first wife of babu cannot forget the betrayal by her husband before her death.

Her Voices beyond Death: Tagore and His Phantom Female Protagonists

The current study critically analyses three immortal short stories by Tagore – 'Kankal' (The Skeleton), 'Nishithe' (In the Night) and 'Manihara' (The Lost Jewel) from the praxis of Psychoanalytic Feminism in order to expose the paradoxical dialectic in between the conscious and unconscious realms of woman psyche. 'Kankal' was published in 1892; three years after that 'Nishithe' was published; and 'Manihara' appeared in the last decade of the nineteenth century, in 1898. From the context of the socio-literary context of Bengal such supernatural tales were completely novel. They evidently bore the occidental influences - the sense of chilling horrors, the plunge into the opaque realm of unconscious opened up new horizons for the readers of the time.

'Kankal' (The Skeleton) tells the tale of a beautiful young widow. Married in her early childhood she got suffocated in the prison of unwanted relations – an older husband to fear, strict rules and people to obey day and night. She only heaved a sigh of relief when she got released from the shackles of this marriage after the death of her husband. Consequently, she was more than happy to return to her home as a widow two months after her marriage. She forgot that a woman is forever defined by her relations with the men in her life; so now the society recognized her as nothing more than a widow; they wrapped her in white cloth, took away all her rights over her own body by binding her in the rigid rules of patriarchy – just to let her know that for this life she had no more rights to

dream or hope. But this girl was a born rebel, and her only older unmarried brother did not have the heart to curb the little quirks that this young, innocent sister of his still had. So, she was allowed to roam freely inside the house, talk to the men from outside and that was how she met the doctor friend of her brother, Shekhar. It took no time for this young, naive girl to fall in love with this man and, from what we can decipher in due course of the story, that this attraction had been mutual. So, she dreamt of her own happy-world, wore yellow sari when alone, adorned her hair with scented jasmine. Embolden by her unparalleled beauty and youth she awaited her happy future with this man. But her intense passion turned into uncontrolled fury as she came to know that adhering conveniently to the norms of patriarchal Bengal society the man of her dreams had chosen to marry someone else. More than the pangs of separation she could not forget the pain of her humiliation. She chose not to forgive him and meekly accept her fate. On the day of his marriage, she poisoned both Shekhar and herself. The self-righteous patriarchal Bengali society was stunned by this act of rebellion. They could accept the suicide of a widow, but this damned girl even dared to kill the friend of her brother! A Hindu widow, dared to wear red sari and sindoor even in her death bed was unimaginable. In futile fury the society chose to punish her dead body. She was denied her last rights, even her only family, her older brother, chose to abandon her. But contrary to the conventional writers Tagore's ghost spirit in the story remains spirited even after her death.

'Kankal' opens as the Tagore's phantom protagonist shares her story with an unknown student of anatomy. Thirty-five years after her death, she no longer has the beauty of her youth; petals of her pink lips have long been replaced by white bony teeth, the depth of dark eyes are replaced by the void of emptiness. But as lights of days are replaced by night, she still searches for the bones guarding her heart that carried her long cherished love for her beloved. What surprises the readers is her uncompromising nature. She might have been aware of the sins of murder but she does not repent her action. Here Tagore crosses the boundary of the conscious and delves into the realm of unconscious in order to explore the psyche of the women of the time. The society that did not even accept the basic rights of women, did not even acknowledge the need to ameliorate the wrong deeds of the men, how can the helpless cry be sufficient to vent the unconscious emotions of these women? So, in the depth of death, in the middle

of the night, they come back to haunt the society which has long denied their happiness.

Tagore's next supernatural story 'Nishithe' takes this question to a further level. This embedded narrative tells the account of zamindar Dakshinacharan whose first wife had passed away after a prolonged period of illness. Indeed, he had cared for her at the beginning, but the hazards of treating a patient had turned him cold towards her. He could not even respond to the heart-warming affections of his lifelong companion, as he himself realized; "in the heart of (his) hearts (he had) got tired of nursing the helpless invalid." (Tagore, p. 97) He rather found solace in the company of Manorama, the beautiful, young daughter of his wife's doctor. Therefore, his frequent visits to the doctor's house, negligence in giving medicines to his sick wife, her convenient death due to the consumption of wrong medicine and his quick remarriage after the first wife's death – are parts of the common pattern that have been accepted and naturalised in the tales of this patriarchal society. Dakshinacharan's wife too understood that, accepted that. But even then, when Manorama visited her house for the first time, she asked her husband '*O ke? O ke?*' (Who is she? Who is she?) (Tagore, p. 99) How could Dokhinbabu answer this pithy and pungent question? How could he accept that the company of his sick wife had turned into joyless bondage for him? How could he accept that he had already replaced her? But his wife already knew, with the ability that all women possess, who Manorama was, or what she meant for her husband. She understood it too well and perhaps laughed in silence. As Dokhinbabu himself observed even after this prolonged period of illness she had this uncanny ability to laugh. And this laughter haunted Dokhinbabu even after her death. He could hear her sharp, satirical and criticizing laughter in the evening breezes of his garden, in the waves of Ganges, in the sound of the flock of flying birds.

Tagore has premised the protest of this first wife in this laughter, in her apparent harmless question which could be heard by none else but Dokhin babu. No matter how hard he tried, it made him remember of a quiet evening, a sickly woman and her wounded accusing eyes. Perhaps this loving devoted wife herself was unaware of the rebellion fuming inside her; but Tagore did understand it. He understood the pattern of patriarchal politics that ruled the everyday lives of these women confined within the four walls of their homes, the silent laws that muted

their words of protests, the rules that ignored their silent tears and pushed their hopes and desires into the unfathomable realm of the unconscious.

Manimalika the protagonist of Tagore's 'Manihara' was, however, a fresh departure from her predecessors. As a wife she had been immaculate both in her looks and actions; and as such had been pampered by her rich husband Fanibhushan. But the half-hearted efforts of Bhushan had never been able to touch the unfathomable depths of her complex mind. Away from the mercurial emotions of men she had been content to live in her lonely palace amidst the riches showered upon her by her husband. She was a woman who had not ever been afraid to forsake her husband for the things that were important and constant to her; but she did return to him in the middle of the night when the ceaseless rain and impenetrable darkness had wiped out the boundary between the earth and the sky, between life and death. That night Bhushan felt "as if he had only to cry out to be able to recover sight of those things which seemed to have been lost forever" (Tagore, p.145). He did see something that had been lost, his wife, his dear Mani. Crossing the limitless boundary of death, Mani had returned to him. She had looked at him with those same deep, vibrant eyes that had stared back at him, eighteen years ago, on the night of their marriage.

In these three stories, Tagore has subtly questioned the gender roles and stereotypes ascribed to the women by the contemporary Bengali society. Arguments can be made whether these stories register actual ghostly encounter or not. In 'Kankal' the story of the beautiful young widow could very well be a student's figment of imagination in a sleepless night; in "Nishithe" the husband was obviously too guilt ridden; in 'Manihara' Bhushan's intense longing for Mani could very well be the reason for him hallucinating about his wife. But all these stories do question the happily ever after promised to women in marriage.

The Last Words:

Patriarchy has always tried to control the ways in which a woman should think or act, live or die. When alive the women were not allowed to think of leaving their homes, and once dead they were not allowed to return. They were expected to follow this inside-outside dichotomy throughout their life and death. But Tagore has satirized the futility of such efforts through his female phantom protagonists. So Manimalika had twice crossed the boundary imposed upon her

by the rules of marriage, once when she was alive and again after her cold death. The nameless female spirit in Kankal is also a rebel; she dared to love and hate in spite of being a widow. The devoted loving wife of Dokhin babu had also laughed away the sanctity of the institution of marriage.

The current study does not make the point that all the male characters in Tagore are oppressive or violent; in fact, most are not. Dokhinbabu in 'Nishithe' suffered from extreme sense of guilt over the death of his first wife which kept him awake night after night; Fanibhushan in 'Monihara' had tried hard to win favors of his wife Moni. They are indeed not the conscious perpetrator of patriarchy. But as the sociologists have pointed out that the men in Bengali community learn early that all the social norms and conventions move around their interests, they learn that women are but expendable variables, that they need not give attention or sympathetic understanding to the rights or needs of these 'second sex'. Therefore, the problem of gender and gendered understanding of socio-cultural beliefs and practices in Bengal are not premised in the conscious oppression of and violence against the women, it is rather premised in the unconscious need that urges men to assert their superiority by subjugating the rights and needs of the women. The above three ghostly narratives of Tagore points towards this socio-psychological problem found in the everyday life of Bengali community.

The current study focuses on this unconscious essentialism that accepts, promotes and perpetuates women's exploitation in a patriarchal society. The study further observes that Tagore's narratives are exposition of this pattern which skillfully naturalizes the gendered understanding of the roles and models of women that were proselytized by the Bengali society. To nurture this unconscious compulsion Bengali culture idolized such stereotypes of women who sacrificed their own needs for others, who kept silence and uttered no words of protests, who endured everything no matter how society treated them. In its need to subjugate the women this society had pushed their very existence as human beings to the opaque realm of unconscious. But can their needs and desires, their hopes and tears be so easily silenced? So, they return, denying the meticulous cautions adopted by the society, crossing the grey path of death or memories to haunt the society. This return of the silent lives to the rebelling deads is the nexus where Tagore has premised the protests of his female phantom

protagonists. So, these narratives of Tagore are accounts of the journey of the conscious to the unknown of unconscious to find voices of protests that cross the boundary of life and death to haunt the readers across the time – to make them remember even when the stories are over that these women's stories are far from over.

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