

Depiction of Genderization in Rabindranath Tagore's and Gurdial Singh's Selected Short Stories: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Gender, not sex, determines whether a person is a "woman" or a "man." As an ideology, it is firmly ingrained in the psyche of all civilizations and societies. Rabindranath Tagore (Hereinafter "Tagore") and Gurdial Singh have vividly portrayed genderization in many short stories. This article studies how modern urban Bengal of the pre-independent era and traditional rural Punjab of the post-independent era deal with gender and gender roles in the short stories of Tagore and Gurdial Singh. The reading of Tagore's and Gurdial Singh's short stories emphasizes the fact that genderization persists in one or the other form despite changes in time and space, and its hydra-heads can be found in all walks of life. The biological difference between a woman and a man is taken as a plea to uphold genderization at the psycho-social level through conditioning, cultural practices and value systems. Genderization is made to appear as a 'natural' way of life by the powerful.

Keywords : Bengal; Discrimination; Feminism; Gender; Woman.

One's sex is biologically determined, whereas one's gender is socially constructed. Genderization results from power dynamics in any culture; it is so deeply rooted in the human mind that it is almost a part of their primary identity. In a patriarchal society like India's, a woman is marginalized and sometimes objectified, whereas a man wields power and controls responsibilities such as political leadership, moral authority and property control. Simone de Beauvoir rightly says that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. The origin of the Indian idea of appropriate female behavior can be traced to the rules laid down by Manu in 200 B.C.: "by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be

done independently, even in her own house" (*Manusmriti*: 5/147). M. R. Anand, in his novel *Gauri*, dexterously depicts how the idea of a typical Indian woman is modeled on *Manusmriti*:

"You know that a woman can never do anything right! She can never do anything for herself! There is nothing for her- except marriage!" (118)

Based on the biological differentiation of sex (between male and female), human cultures have always tended to assign different duties, standards of behavior and morality and even different feelings and ideas to men and women, resulting in the development of the social distinction of gender (between masculine and feminine). Gender is visible in race, class, status, manners and beliefs. Literature voices the concerns of those whose voices are politically, socially and culturally suppressed by the powerful; it emerges as a platform to deliberate on the politics of genderization at various levels. This article attempts to explore how women are socially and culturally assigned marginalized roles in the selected stories of Tagore and Gurdial Singh. As literature holds a mirror to society, the depiction of women as the second sex brings the downside of the Indian patriarchal society to light.

Since 'gender' is a socio-cultural construct, one's idea of 'gender' is influenced by one's nationality, region, sex, society, family, etc. Tagore (1865-1941) and Gurdial Singh (1937-2018), two writers who belonged to two different eras and regions, beautifully expose genderization as a political tool in the Indian social matrix. Irrespective of the fact that they were exposed to different social milieus and cultural heritage, Tagore and Gurdial Singh share an innovative and revolutionary understanding of gender.

Born and brought up in Bengal, Tagore is the first non-European Nobel Prize winner and the father of Indian modernism. He gained stature and recognition in the world as a poet. He is much less acknowledged as a social crusader who uses his writings to reform contemporary social evils. He can be seen as one of those pioneer short story writers whose writings reflect maturity and social commitment. He is a progressive modern Indian writer who has minutely observed and efficiently portrayed the panoramic view of Bengali womanhood and woman psychology on the canvas of the short story. However, there is no doubt that he speaks of women's rights in a way that does not aggravate the persistent censorship of the orthodox Hindus against his apparent preference for modernist reforms.

“While Rabindranath was never comfortable with strident assertions of women’s rights, and was not kind to those who were known as feminists (Tagore, Chithipatra), he showed a remarkable understanding of woman’s psyche, perceived the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocated for greater freedom and decision-making power for women in the family and the larger society.” (Ray 69)

Tagore’s women exemplify how contemporary Bengali society would try to belittle a woman. Anyways, some women in Tagore’s stories assert their identity and individuality in their ways. “The women in his stories, of course, are splendidly womanly, frail and fair, yet wise and strong; always—or almost always—more sinned against than sinning. Tagore plumbs the depths of the womanly heart, and behind the seeming wiles and the helpless gestures, he sees reserves of devotion and sacrifice” (Iyengar 77).

Gurdial Singh, who is commonly known as a realist for his microscopic vision of life, is an excellent craftsman whose ideas and diction are matchless. His subjects, characters, language, idiom and actions bear the imprint of the region to which he belongs. Gurdial Singh’s implicit idea of the region is often complex and diverse; it is presented through different characters taken from the rural agricultural setting of mid-twentieth century Punjab (roughly covering three decades, i.e., from the 1950s to the 1970s). The dialect he has chosen, i.e., Malwai from the Malwa region of Punjab, is in harmony with the rural settings of his novels. Gurdial Singh’s characters have the simplicity and naturalness of countryside life. His stories reveal a close relationship among caste, class and power, and they reveal how the powerful marginalize and dominate the powerless. Although Gurdial Singh’s works are primarily about men, many of his female characters leave an indelible impression by their silent acquiescence, tantamount to their tacit acceptance of their fate. Many of his female characters suffer quietly up to a point, but once that point is reached, they break their silence and retaliate. The psychoanalytical delineation of his characters depicts his intrinsic understanding of life and social pressures that impact one’s life.

Storytelling is a special gift to human beings since it allows them to achieve mental satisfaction by sharing their pains and pleasures in stories. Inadvertently, it enhances human experiences, concretizes human beings’ dreams, feelings and imagination, and ignites as well as satisfies their deep-seated need for adventure and grandeur. It reveals many mysteries

and subtleties of the human spirit, mind, heart and existence. Since time immemorial, short stories are unquestionably a never-failing source of delight, inspiration and morality. They chronicle essential human experiences. Tagore and Gurdial Singh use stories as a medium of art with a unique visionary understanding. The delicacy with which they express the intricacies and complexities related to gender issues is highly commendable.

As regards Tagore's stories, Mrinal in "The Wife's Letter" and Anila in "House Number One" show a strong inner conflict arising from prescriptive gender roles. "The Wife's Letter" is a manifesto of feminism. The wife in the story leaves her husband and home as Nora does in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*. She writes a letter to her husband:

I am the second daughter-in-law of your father's house. Today, fifteen years later, standing by the ocean's shore, I have learnt that I have a different relation as well with the world and the Lord of the world. That is why I have taken courage to write this letter; it is not a letter from the second daughter-in-law in your family. (Tagore *Selected* 205)

The wife, who is intelligent, creative, sensitive and attractive, attempts to dispel numerous gender stereotypes. However, she realizes that societal constructs act as a significant barrier in the lives of women. Mrinal finds herself chained to her family's stereotypical environment, filling her with deep-seated disgust rooted in her family members' hypocrisy and her helplessness as a woman. In her letter, she harshly criticizes the society that encourages women to suffer silently by drawing an analogy of their situation with Sita, a mythological figure, who too suffered in her life.

The tendency to give a high pedestal to a woman for her physical beauty and not for her rationality is satirized in "The Wife's Letter." The dark complexion of the writer's cousin Bindu is a curse, whereas the writer is given space in the family for her beauty instead of rationality. The epistle writer tries to deconstruct the orthodox view of a wife dependent on her husband. When Bindu commits suicide, people say, "It's now the fashion for girls to set their saris on fire and kill themselves" (Tagore *Selected* 217). The writer remarks, "But, One should reflect why this play-acting takes its toll only on the saris of Bengali women, not of the dhotis of brave Bengali gentlemen" (217). She seems to question the deep-rooted genderization ingrained in the very foundation of society.

At the beginning of the story "House Number One", Anila is presented

as a committed, obedient, passive wife. She never expresses dissatisfaction with anything in the house where men enjoy special privileges. Men sit in the front room, generally the best room in the house; they involve themselves in 'serious' tasks with other men. Adwaitya, Anila's husband, indulges in pompous discussions on the latest books in the literary world. Women get confined to the inner sections of the house, which are airless and closed; they remain busy with kitchen affairs and other domestic chores. The male ego feeds on men's total command over their homes and wives. Anila is to bear everything without voicing her opinion. She puts up with her husband's narcissistic tendencies, idiosyncrasies and affectations of being an unparalleled scholar simply because she is his wife, and it is her lot to be the shadow of her husband and follow him blindly at every step of life.

Women in the nineteenth century were psychologically conditioned to 'follow' their husbands even after their death through 'Sati,' a highly deplorable and inhuman practice followed by Hindus until the end of the century. Anila silently suffers the pain of her husband's callous indifference to her physical and emotional anguish. Her self-respect would not let her complain or reproach him for the endless meetings he has with the group he fondly called - Sect of two and one and frequent impulsive invitations to the members of his group to stay for meals without taking into account the supplies in the kitchen and the time of the day. She, the 'Annapurna', is to provide these untimely meals uncomplainingly. The Hindu culture tags a married woman as the goddess Annapurna, who feeds and nurtures. Ironically, it is meant to inspire worship-like devotion for the lady and transform her into a goddess in her own home. All this is meant to motivate her to do her household tasks diligently and without any complaint. In the whole process, she loses her identity and ends up with the identity imposed on her. Judy Syfers, in her essay "I want a Wife," presents a satirical view of a woman's traditional role as a servant to her husband. She sarcastically asks, "My God, who would not want a Wife" (Syfers 104).

When it becomes impossible for Anila to breathe in the suffocating familial atmosphere, she takes the courageous decision to leave the house. Adwaitya observes in retrospect his wife's silent bearing of everything he did. "She endured silently and for long the noisy process of my mental digestion" (Tagore *Selected* 233).

In Tagore's stories, various facets of a woman's life are presented in kaleidoscopic colors. Sometimes, she appears to be as innocent and non-hu-

man as a cow; she appears as an obedient and darling wife like Sita in *The Ramayan*; at other times, she seems to be an incarnation of Kali— an incarnation of the powerful deity that symbolizes the expression of inner strength of a woman under challenging circumstances. A woman, just like Kali, discovers within herself the power to combat any evil. Anila, too, finds the strength to break free from the shackles of the social and cultural expectations imposed on her through the politics of ‘genderization.’ She evolves as a self-sufficient, bold and strong woman who is ready to face the world independently. Her act of abandoning her self-centered husband and rejecting the appealing offer of her enamored neighbor Si-tangshumouli bespeaks her intention of getting rid of her identity as a helpless, weak, and dependent person. She is an individual, and she can live without the props of male support. Tagore here portrays a woman who rises like a Phoenix out of the confines of gender and emerges as a self-realized individual.

The stereotypical typecasting of genders is taken to an absurd level in society by exploiting and discriminating against women in the name of gender roles. The divisive mentality seems to have taken birth from the insecure and self-conscious complexes of the intrinsically patriarchal society. Tagore satirizes this social mentality in his short story “The Exercise Book”. In the story, Uma, a girl child who has just entered the beautiful world of letters, becomes a victim of child marriage; she is married to a self-opinionated chauvinist, Pyarimohan. He is steeped in the notions of gender so thoroughly and extensively that he upholds it loudly and clearly in his exceedingly subtle theory: “[T]he power of the female and the power of the male together produced the sacred power of conjugal relationship; but if the power of the female was vanquished through education and study, the power of male alone will be paramount” (*Selected* 48).

This indicates the masculine illogical logic that the female should not be given education, creating an imbalance in the marital relationship. If there is such an imbalance, “then male power would clash with male power to produce so terrible a destructive energy that the power of the conjugal bond would be completely destroyed, and so the woman would become a widow (48).” Widowhood was seen as a threat to the individuality of a woman, as it was considered that a woman could do nothing “independently” (*Manusmriti*: 5/147). Through the character of Pyarimohan, Tagore portrays the hypocrisy of a large section of society that considers education for women as a potential threat to the social fabric.

Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and prac-

tices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (20). Uma's brother also reposes faith in the patriarchal ideology that demeans women. His total agreement with his brother-in-law is shown in how he treated his younger sister when she inadvertently damaged his writing. Tagore claims that Gobindlal, Uma's brother, wrote for the newspaper on popular themes without resorting to logic and relied only on the strength of his rhetoric. Gurudev's portrayal of Gobindlal as a dilettante shows his disapproval of the thoughtlessness and inconsideration represented by the character. In the story, the male ego is unprepared to accept the flourishing of a female genius in the reserved domain for men. So, men will go to great lengths to ensure that a girl does not have this weapon of writing in her armory. Tagore brings out the fickleness and hypocrisy of this so-called 'modern society' of Bengal.

Gurdial Singh sheds light on the farcically preposterous levels of gender tagging in Punjabi society. In his short story "Ambo," he presents Surjit, a young and fragile woman who learns life from Ambo's older woman. In the story, Surjit happens to meet Ambo, a bold and loud woman, on a short train journey. Surjit, a young college-going girl, seems to be wholly entrenched in traditional gender roles. She is a girl; therefore, she is made to think that she is inherently weak and helpless. She cannot summon enough courage to protest and register any reaction when some city hooligans pester her. Therefore, when Ambo, a brash middle-aged village woman, enters the train compartment with three to four companions, Surjit is unconsciously enamored by the courage and strength of the woman who is bold enough to face any problem with the so-called 'manliness.' She is drawn to Ambo's talk about her exploits. The younger woman finds the uninhibited and reckless manner of the older one inspiring and admirable. Gurdial Singh presents Ambo in sharp contrast with Surjit and suggests that gender (in)equality operates at the psychological level; it takes its origin in social conditioning. The author believes that the behavior of a woman or a man is a psycho-social construction. Emile Zola's theory of Naturalism also highlights how one's character is conditioned and controlled by one's social environment.

Singh's short story "The Kareer Branch" depicts the exploitation of Balwanto, whose drunken and depraved brother-in-law and father-in-law consider her weak and helpless. Her parents are impoverished, and her husband, a timid and peace-loving guy, has elicited a promise from her that she would not respond to the routine insults and abuses hurled at her by these drunken imbeciles. Even Balwanto's husband is called names by his father and brother. In a patriarchal society, there is a clear gender di-

vide. Aggressiveness and assertiveness are regarded as characteristics of masculinity in Punjabi rural culture. If Balwanto's husband fails to show these, he is ridiculed as effeminate. Balwanto is expected to pocket all insults silently with her head always covered and her eyes downcast in a semblance of servitude, and if she fails to do this, she is called a prostitute. In an inebriated state, the father and son duo assert their manliness by insulting Balwanto in the presence of her almost grown-up daughter. She takes these insults for an extended period of nearly fourteen years in her stride, but she does not get immune to them. When the sanctity of the relationship is wholly lost, it is impossible for Balwanto to tolerate it. She does not keep the word given to her husband and retaliates in an unforeseen and unimaginable manner by confronting the wrongdoers and challenging their 'masculinity.' She screams, "Come on, you bloody brothers-in-law of my father! I'll see now who dares to come anywhere near me... Try and touch me if you want, then I'll dig into your intestines and scoop them out...!" (Singh 89). The felons did not know about her promise to her husband and wrongly interpreted her mute tolerance as her weakness earlier. Even the husband is overwhelmed by seeing this "Kalka Mai' side of his wife.

If religion, through figures like Kali, inspires women to fight back, it also propagates power politics and inequality through genderization in some cases. Thus, for women, it can emerge as an obstruction to self-assertion. *The Atharvaveda* contains many devotional hymns to get a son. It also encourages bringing about the miscarriage of a female embryo. And St. Thomas Aquinas says that a woman is an imperfect man. To quote *The Bible*, "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow, thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:16). Intiaz Dharker sees the practice of 'Purdah' as a major obstacle in the lives of Muslim women. In her poetry, she explores the injustice, tyranny, and brutality perpetrated by the Purdah culture. No wonder genderization runs deep in societies governed by religions. Are religions used as tools to dominate women? In the hands of men, religion seems to get transformed as one of the effective tools to 'control' women, 'use' them and assert masculine superiority.

Singh's short story "Bonding" delineates how socio-cultural contexts obstruct the blooming of a beautiful relationship owing to the traditionally constructed notions about genders. In the patriarchal society of Punjab, a widower can find the courage to dream about a future, but a widow cannot even imagine that. Bantu and Jai Kaur are lonely and at the mercy

of their insensitive relatives in their advanced age. In their youth, they felt attracted to each other, and now their meeting after thirty years has rekindled those memories. Jai Kaur is now a childless widow, who leads a dismal life because of her dependence on her brothers and nephew, and Bantu is also helpless; he is considered a burden by his sons. Bantu dares to think of having a life with Jai Kaur even in his advanced age, for he is a man, whereas Jai Kaur would not even be seen walking with Bantu, let alone be with him. Men have the edge over women in the rural interiors of Punjab.

Singh's short story "Kath ki Putli" (translation: The Rag Doll) depicts the inner turmoils of a female heart. Kuljit, a newlywed girl, arrives at her Gursikh husband's house, stripped of her bridal finery and dressed in an immaculate white gown, as per her husband's desires. She has to comply with her husband's wishes because she is a woman. A woman's situation has been more or less comparable with that of a laborer. Babel, while tracing the history of women in the past, writes, "However much in common woman may be shown to have with the workingman, she leads him in one thing; Woman was the first human being to come into bondage: she was a slave before the male slave existed" (Babel 15). Marriage is a means to ensure the bondage of a woman. "He [man] dominates woman both to imprison another consciousness which reflects his own and to provide him with children that are securely his (his fear of illegitimacy)" (Beauvoir 192).

No one seems to care about Kuljit's ambitions and dreams in this patriarchal world. When she is single, she is her father's property, and her ownership passes to her husband when she marries. Her circumstances remind us of Nora in Henrik Ibsen's play *The Doll's House*. Nora says,

"...Our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here, I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I used to be papa's doll child. And the children in their turn have been my dolls. I thought it fun when you played with me, just as the children did when I played with them. That has been our marriage Torvald." She adds, "I must try to educate myself. You are not the man to help me in that. I must set about it alone. And that is why I am leaving you." (Ibsen 60)

Whether it is Sita in *The Ramayana* or Nora in *The Doll's House* or Anila in "House Number One" or Mrinal in "The Wife's Letter" or Uma in "The Exercise Book" or Surjit in "Ambo" or Balwanto in "The Kareer Branch" or Jai Kaur in "Bonding" or Kuljit in "Kath ki Putli," every female char-

acter epitomizes the extremes of the struggle for existence in the world of male-chauvinism. In their stories, Tagore and Gurdial Singh bring forth the idea of a woman's subordinated status as a social and cultural construct. A man holds authority over a woman's mind and body, and after ages of suppression, even she ends up believing in the hegemony of masculinity. Through the assertion of their characters' identity and individuality, both Tagore and Gurdial Singh create an upbeat tone for the dismantling of subtle and brutal power maneuvers. Their creative and artistic attempt to highlight the latent potentialities of the oppressed on the canvas of the short story is impressive. The authors seem to claim that every woman has innate strength, and she can retain her dignity if she musters up the courage to raise her voice against the hollowness of the evil face of the patriarchal society.

Tagore's and Gurdial Singh's cultural backgrounds and social status have left a mark on their works. Tagore, who was born into a wealthy and prominent Brahmin family in Bengal (Calcutta), is very suave and quiet in making room for the deep unrest of the woman's soul. The characters in his stories—men or women—are subtle and sophisticated, and we see a strong imprint of Tagore's background in his delineation of these characters. The enigma and complexity associated with gender are visible in Tagore's stories and point towards a progressive pro-feminism. Gurdial Singh, a son of a proletariat father, sketches characters that are predominantly rural, illiterate, and earthly. His portrayal of gender in his stories is in tandem with the real-life situations of rural Punjab. He unleashes the fury and agony of his characters caught in the constraints of genderization. His characters lack the subtle nuances of Tagore's characters. They are living examples from his insipid village life, carrying a strong imprint of the writer's inner urge to spread awareness. The actions taken by Anila and Mrinal are marked by spiritual strength; Balwanto's sudden surge of strength is seemingly more of a rush of adrenaline, and it has a primaeval factor. Kuljit's helplessness and Jaikaur's and Surjit's consciousness of societal pressures depict their feeling of powerlessness. The characters delineated by both writers are different in their nature, spirit, and circumstances. Tagore hardly ever delves into crude economic issues. Even if he does, it is done in a very polished or romantic way. In fact, the depiction of human relationships in Tagore's stories lacks the touch of vital and throbbing reality. On the other hand, Gurdial Singh's depiction of human relationships has been deeply impacted by poverty and adversity; it has a nostalgic appeal, and it is realistic.

Tagore's stories are primarily concerned with the recognition of women

as strong human beings at par with men. Gurdial Singh's era was a time of introspection, and "...literature is meant to voice social concerns" (Interview). In his stories, Gurdial Singh draws attention to a destructive form of genderization that results from poverty and injustice as well as its dehumanizing effects.

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