

On Reading 'Streer Patra', Mrinal's Letter to Her Husband

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Abstract: Tagore's famous short story, 'Streer Patra', highlights the suffering, ignominy and neglect that women have to face in a male dominated society. Although set in late nineteenth century Kolkata, Tagore's story has relevance for the discerning reader even today. It dwells upon issues like child-marriage, commoditization of women, the appalling state of woman-and-child healthcare, high rates of infant mortality as well as the marginalisation of economically dependent women. The story also exposes the terrible plight of orphaned, homeless girls without any means, like Bindu whose way to survive was to accept servitude and total humiliation, from which death becomes the only form of escape. Mrinal's final rejection of her marital state and decision of leaving her husband is a lone woman's act of defiance against the relentless subjugation of women in society.

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In her letter written to her husband Mrinal reminisces that she was married off at the tender age of twelve. Her mother-in-law had chosen her for her good looks, which was distinctly lacking in the eldest daughter –in –law of the family. So, Mrinal's marital journey began at an age when she could hardly know what marriage meant. For her, marriage was a journey from the security of her parental home and all her familiar world, to an unknown household. In Mrinal's letter to her husband there is a trenchant comment on the process of selecting a suitable bride by the groom's party:

'...the groom's family had come to see the prospective bride, and whatever assessment or value judgement they made was the girl's price. However beautiful or talented a girl might be, she needs must always be apologetic about her self and her worth...' [Tagore, p. 637. *My translation.*]

After Mrinal's arrival at her in-law's place in Kolkata, she was subjected to a keen scrutiny by the women of her household who in the end had to grudgingly admit that she was indeed pretty. However, in her letter Mrinal wondered why God had endowed her with such good looks and intellect, for in the orthodox family of religious bigots into which she was married, such qualities in a woman were not appreciated. One is reminded here of Vrinda Nabar's comment in her book 'Caste As Woman' '...the body has ceased to be an object of celebration among Indian Women. It is a liability, something which has to be concealed...' (Nabar, p. 37.). Nabar also writes that:

'The innumerable emphases on a woman's honour as well as the methods and strictures laid down to preserve it mean that as a girl grows up, the burden of shame that accompanies femaleness makes it difficult for her to regard her body

as something to be proud of. We have a traditional horror against the concept of the body as worthy of admiration'. (Nabar, p. 87)

Mrinal wrote in her letter that her husband soon forgot that she was pretty and proceeded to neglect her. However, the unpalatable fact that she was intelligent was something that her husband and his family were constantly reminded of. Mrinal commented in her letter that her innate intelligence had survived the thralldom of fifteen long and laborious years of married life, not conducive to emotional or mental growth. She remembered that her mother used to be very worried of Mrinal's intelligence, for in the conservative Bengali middle-class milieu, intelligence and a capacity for independent thinking in a woman were flaws and not virtues. A woman was expected to comply and bow down in front of many restrictions and was bound to meet with opposition and obstacles if she tried to use her powers of reasoning and question the correctness and validity of existing rules and strictures. So, Mrinal had to face the flak in daring to question and go against existing norms and was severely criticized for her precocity. In her book Nabar examines some of the constraints implicit in being born a girl:

'...The girl-child moves on to her next pre-ordained role and becomes a wife. In doing so, she loses her identity and takes on her husband's' (Nabar, p. 43)

'...Brhaspati's definition of the devoted wife, the 'Pativrata' is as follows: 'She is someone, whose state of mind reflects that of her husband.....'(Smith and Doniger, p. 567)

A total emotive and spiritual immersion in the husband's being is implied in such a statement. There is something in it which is very endemic to our world-view of the self effacing role of the 'ardhangini'; a woman who has merged her identity with her husband's (ardha-half; anga-body, being). One may also mention in this context that the colonial construction of the ideal wife was tied to the old patriarchal figure of the Goddess Lakshmi in Puranic Hinduism) – a model wife embodying devotion, fidelity and submission to her consort, Lord Narayana and living in complete harmony with Him. This puranic figure was transformed to the image of the 'Griha Lakshmi' in the secular domain.

It would be interesting to note here that 19th century Bengal saw the emergence of a large body of conduct literature for women which gave the ideological construction of the ideal wife a strong footing. These conduct books extolled shamefacedness, timidity, meekness, self-sacrifice, benevolence, piety, purity and spirituality as essential feminine virtues. God had assigned duties of subservience and devotion to women and those who fell in line were 'good' women. The value judgement attached to this statement was clearly a warning to would be transgressors; they were by implication not 'good' women. In that case, the permission was granted to husbands to beat wayward wives.

So one can see, religious pronouncements strengthened this anti-woman sensibility and asserted the need for stricter control over women. According to Manu, no female - whether girl, young woman or old woman – was to be allowed

independence of action. A woman was to be under her father's control in childhood, her husband's once married and her son's when widowed. (Smith and Doniger, p. 147-8.) Nothing could be more damning – from the very beginning a woman's role was a non-role in the scheme of things. In her book Nabar writes that from the earliest times, the gender –distinction was operative in several respects. Women were denied education and knowledge of the scriptures. They were kept under a veil of ignorance. Secrecy as regards knowledge clearly meant that women had no part in any sort of policy or rule making. Nor were they in a position to question man made strictures or argue against a position with any strength of convictions. (nabar, p. 65.) Since a woman was declared unfit for independence, the question of her being equipped in the way men were with intellectual training did not arise. Amidst all these strictures and restrictions, there was one thing that set Mrinal free. She used to write poetry. This was her inner sanctum, her independent identity and her closely guarded secret, which set her free from being a mere housewife in a restrictive, orthodox, Bengali middle class household at 'Number 27, Makhan Boral Lane'. Writing poetry was Mrinal's only means of claiming agency, of letting her imagination cast its magic glow over an otherwise monotonous life of drudgery and toil. Writing was her freedom, her only way of defying the societal 'vidhinishedha' that held her captive.

Mrinal remembered how her daughter had died immediately after being born and how the English physician who attended upon her had been surprised and irritated upon seeing the deplorable living conditions of the women's quarters and the unhygienic condition of the nursery. In this context, Mrinal commented that neglect was like the ashes which hid the embers beneath and did not let the heat permeate outside. Also, continual erosion of women's sense of self-respect over a period of time, owing to the mal-treatment they received at their in-laws' hands, made them indifferent to neglect and caused no new pain. So, Mrinal wrote,

'women felt ashamed even to feel sad...If it was the destiny of women to suffer at the hands of society, then it was better to let them wallow in neglect; love or caring merely increased the pain caused by neglect.' [Tagore, p.639 My translation.]

The woman's situation was marginal in her husband's home; she was forever an alien and an outsider and it was man-made laws and social strictures that made her so. Some lines from a poem by Vrinda Nabar best expresses the situation of the Indian wife:

'We've got a daughter we're willing to sell
His is the bargain, the profit as well:
.....
She'll...produce brat after brat,
Forget all her youth as she spins out her life
In waddling behind him, a good Indian wife.'
(Nabar, p. 97-98.)

Mrinal's life was going on as usual when something happened that shook the foundation of her wedded life. Mrinal's eldest sister-in-law's sibling, Bindu, came to stay at their house when her widowed mother died and she received ill treatment at the hands of her cousin brothers. While the entire family considered Bindu to be an unwanted burden, Mrinal gave shelter to the orphaned girl despite severe criticism, hostility and opposition. Mrinal also noted her elder sister-in-law's predicament. Though she had brought her own sister to stay with her out of a sense of concern, upon her husband's reluctance and displeasure she started treating Bindu badly. Mrinal commented with subtle irony that her sister-in-law dared not show her love for her sister Bindu openly as she was a faithful and obedient wife. Nabar comments that after marriage ownership of the woman passed from father to husband and so Mrinal's sister-in-law had no power or right to exercise her own free will vis-à-vis Bindu. Mrinal was greatly saddened on seeing Bindu's maltreatment at the hands of her own sister, who was doing all this in an effort to appease her husband and in-laws. Bindu was made to do all the household chores and fed and clothed very shabbily. Her sister seemed eager to prove to everyone in the family that allowing Bindu to stay on had been a profitable bargain for the family as she provided cheap labour.

It was made clear to Bindu that she was a second class citizen in the household. Mrinal wrote in her letter that her elder sister-in-law had neither looks nor money and her poor father had virtually begged and pleaded with the groom's father so that the marriage might take place. So she was extremely ashamed about her presence in her husband's house and tried her level best to make herself a non-entity in the household, living an extremely circumscribed existence. Mrinal's nature was her sister-in-law's exact opposite and she refused to accept such an extremely subservient, diminutive, puny existence merely to appease others. She wrote that she believed in standing up for what was right and protesting against what was wrong, even though it meant going against the current and swimming against the tide of opposition. She was a rebel. When Mrinal took Bindu under her wings, her elder sister-in-law was secretly relieved, even though she criticised Mrinal in front of other family members for spoiling the girl. Mrinal noted that Bindu was over fourteen years old and so of marriageable age, a fact that her elder sister took great pains to try and conceal. Yet, as Bindu was rather plain looking and an orphan, no one was bothered about her marriage, nor was a prospective groom ready to accept such a liability as Bindu.

When Bindu came to Mrinal, she was apprehensive of the sort of treatment she would get from Mrinal. Mrinal tersely commented that though people were ready to keep unnecessary items in the household, it was not so in the case of an unwanted girl, as she was unwanted as well as an eyesore, best relegated to the dustbin. Yet Bindu's cousin brothers were cherished in their own house as they were male children. Vrinda Nabar writes in 'Caste As Woman':

'There is a sense of the *other* when referring to the girl child. One also finds a clear discrimination between the rights and privileges of a daughter/girl and a son/boy....' (Nabar, p. 65.)

'The girl child in India...is an alien' from birth, a fact which is reinforced in later life by innumerable tragic instances of deprivation and discrimination. Mrinal soon realized that by giving shelter to Bindu, she had angered the entire household. However she determinedly made it clear to all that she had taken Bindu under her wings. If anything untoward happened in the household or anything went missing, all members of the household promptly put the blame on Bindu. Mrinal gave Bindu succor in the face of great antagonism and opposition. Bindu blossomed in the secure haven of Mrinal's love and grew very devoted to Mrinal. As Bindu was of marriageable age, Mrinal's in-laws finally found a ploy to remove the unwanted girl from the household permanently, and hastily arranged for Bindu's marriage. Mrinal was very concerned about what the future had in store for this dark, plain-looking, orphan girl after marriage and what sort of a house she was marrying into, for no one had come to see Bindu from the groom's family. Yet Mrinal was aware of the harsh truth that there was no other option for Bindu but marriage. Bindu was very upset and cried bitterly at the thought of separation from Mrinal whom she dearly loved. For Bindu, marriage was a physical journey away from all the caring comfort and protection of Mrinal's love; as well as a mental journey undertaken through the searing anguish of estrangement, the fear of uncertainty, unseen predicament and danger. It was a moment of trial for her. Rather than being separated from Mrinal, Bindu wished that she would die. To describe her state one may use an animal image of a caged bird or a sacrificial lamb. Mrinal knew that there was no escape for Bindu from getting married, but she vowed to stay by Bindu's side always, no matter what. Three days after Bindu's marriage she ran back from her husband's house. She had discovered to her horror that her husband was insane, a fact which had been deliberately suppressed by the groom's mother, who claimed madness was but a minor fault in a man. She had even forced the terrified girl to spend the night with her insane husband after marriage. Bindu had managed to escape unnoticed when her husband had fallen asleep.

Mrinal was confounded with rage at this deception and refused to acknowledge Bindu's marriage to a madman as binding, and asked her to stay back at Mrinal's place. However, Mrinal's husband and in-laws accused Bindu of lying. When Mrinal staunchly defended Bindu, they said that Bindu's in-laws would file a complaint to the police against them. Mrinal argued that the court would surely defend Bindu's rights as she had been cheated into marriage with a madman, and if necessary Mrinal would sell her ornaments to finance the case. However, when challenged by her husband as to whether she was capable of stepping out of the house and going to a lawyer for Bindu, Mrinal quietly accepted defeat, as she was incapable of taking up any such step without the help of the menfolk of the household.

When a desperate Mrinal was about to go to her room along with Bindu and lock herself inside, she found to her dismay that Bindu had gone downstairs to meet her brother-in-law, who had come to take her back to her husband and had departed with him, never to return back again. Mrinal came to know that Bindu's mother-in-law had claimed that compared to errant husbands, her son was good enough. The worst comment came from Bindu's own sister's lips. She said that mad or half-witted, he was Bindu's husband after all; implying that Bindu had committed a great mistake in running away and her proper place was by the side of her husband, no matter what. Nothing would be more expressive of the idea of feudal ownership than the notion that, with marriage, the woman's only place was her husband's home, and she must go back to her husband even in the face of all kinds of excesses and brutality. Manu wrote that: 'A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities.' (Smith and Doniger p. 115.) As Vrinda Nabar clearly states, "...there is a fundamental parity between our perception of mythical stereotypes like Sita and Draupadi and our present day reluctance to admit any change that threatens the androcentric patriarchal set – up. In her poem, 'The Slave', Maratha poet Hira Bansode draws attention to the continuity between myth and reality:

“...The woman is still a slave
 where Sita had to pass
 the ordeal by fire
 to prove she was a pativrata,

 and Draupadi was divided up
 among five men,
 the woman of that country
 still remains a slave.....’

Bansode concludes that though we celebrate festivals which commemorate spiritual victory of good over evil, the sad examples listed in her poem serve to assert that a woman's life is filled with oppression and torture.” (Nabar, p. 118-119.)

Mrinal wrote in her letter to her husband that she was aggrieved at Bindu's suffering and ashamed of the reaction of her husband's family who blamed Bindu for running away from her mad husband. She was also sure that Bindu would die rather than return back once again to Mrinal. But she remembered her own promise not to forsake Bindu till the end. So Mrinal sought help from her younger brother Sarat in order to get news about Bindu, as Bindu would never dare to write a letter to her, nor would any letter from Bindu ever reach Mrinal. On seeing Sarat and Mrinal engaged in serious discussions, Mrinal's husband enquired what nuisance they were up to and whether they had smuggled Bindu back from her in-laws' place. Mrinal retorted that if Bindu had returned, Mrinal would surely have kept her hidden, but she would never return. From her husband Mrinal came

to know that Bindu had escaped once again from her husband's house. The news grieved her greatly for she understood Bindu's suffering, but she was helpless and could not do anything. It was revealed that Bindu had escaped to her cousin brothers' house, much to their displeasure, only to be returned back summarily to her in-laws' place.

In the meantime, an elderly relative of Mrinal's family decided to go to Puri on pilgrimage and Mrinal expressed her desire to accompany the lady. Mrinal's husband and in-laws were overjoyed on seeing this sign of religiosity in their stubborn and rebellious daughter-in-law and were also relieved that she would not be in Kolkata, thus avoiding any possibility of trouble relating to Bindu's affairs. Meanwhile Mrinal requested her brother Sarat to escort Bindu and put her on the train taking Mrinal to Puri. Sarat however returned with the shocking and tragic news that Bindu had killed herself by setting herself on fire. She had left a letter addressed to Mrinal, but it had been destroyed by her husband's family. Bindu's act of killing herself was severely criticized by Mrinal's husband's family. Mrinal commented that poor Bindu had earned a bad name even in her death. Apart from Mrinal, only Bindu's sister shed tears for her secretly but she simultaneously heaved a sigh of relief that Bindu was dead. Bindu's martyrdom was unacknowledged.

In her letter to her husband Mrinal wrote that she had decided never to return back to her husband's house again. She had witnessed Bindu's tragedy and realised the pathetic condition of women in society. She also felt that when society had disowned Bindu, God had not cast her away. However powerful societal oppression was, it could not hold Bindu prisoner forever. Death, which was more powerful than any mortal agent and also the ultimate liberator, had claimed her. In death Bindu had achieved greatness. From being an orphaned, unwanted girl in a Bengali middle-class household, cast off by her own kin and tricked into marriage to a madman, she had been set free by death and transformed into an immortal soul, one with the great God Himself.

Mrinal wrote in her letter that Bindu's death had torn her heart asunder. She wondered why the imprisoning bubble of unhappiness inside which she lived was so difficult for her to break out from? Why could she not cross over the threshold of her husband's house and come out into the larger world created by God? Why should she be forced to live her life like a prisoner, hemmed in by insignificant man-made rules and constraints and die a miserable death, when the beautiful universe created by God beckoned to her soul? Bindu's death was like an awakening call to Mrinal's soul to emerge out of its hemmed in existence and go forth towards freedom. Mrinal broke the shackles of married life and emerged out of the confines of home into the vast outer-world, refusing to become a martyr to her husband's views and wishes and those of his family. Mrinal had always refused to surrender unquestioningly to her husband's views and wishes, and vehemently opposed an irrational acceptance of practices that seemed to her wrong, unjust and meaningless. She crossed over the

constraining *laksmāna-rekha*, the boundary drawn by patriarchal society to separate the outer world (*bahir*) from the home (*andar, ghar*), which society claimed was the rightful place for a woman. One may note that this view of the boundary or *rekha* is given a clever twist in a Marathi poem entitled 'Laxmana-rekha' by Padma Gole, a Marathi poet born in 1913, who questioned conventional gender attitudes in her work. Part of the poem translated by Vrinda Nabar is given below:

'Laksmāna drew but one line
in front of Sita.

.....
we face Laksmāna-rekhas
on all sides:
they have to be crossed
the Rāvanas confronted'
(Nabar, p. 111.)

Mrinal crossed over this boundary and went forth on a journey of no return. In her letter she wrote about Queen Mirabai, who had freed herself from the shackles of society imprisoning her and gone forth alone in her quest for salvation through the worship of Lord Krishna, leaving behind family and kin. Mrinal wrote that just as Mirabai had lived her life with her undying devotion for the Lord, so also would she. Her leaving behind the confines of family life was for Mrinal the celebration of being alive, as well as a protest against wrongs perpetrated by society on women.

Though written more than a hundred years ago, Tagore's short story 'Streer Patra' can hardly be called dated. It has relevance for the discerning reader even today. Mrinal found a means of expressing her unheeded thoughts through the letter written by her to her husband. It was a release from the restrictive 'vidhinishedha' that bound the lives of women like her, and iconoclastic in its defiance of patriarchal codes.

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