

Scripting Women in Three Short Stories of Tagore

Madhumita Roy
Visva-Bharati, India

Abstract

This paper explores Tagore's engagement with the wave of emancipation of women in the nineteenth century Bengal. Tagore's position was not akin to that of an extremist. Rather, he opted for a mid-way while representing female voices in his works. This paper focuses on three of Tagore's female protagonists - Mrinmayi, Uma and Mrinal - from *The Conclusion (Samapti)*, *Exercise-Book (Khata)* and *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra)* to show how their repeated individual scripting are mercilessly thwarted by social interventions.

[**Keywords** - Emancipation, Femininity, Scripting, Patriarchy, Self-assertion, Self-discovery].

"Dawn was breaking over Calcutta. The first rays of the sun had just crossed the boundary of the sky and fallen on the roof of the mansion. The indistinct veil of darkness had not moved away totally. Two Arab steeds, treading the dew-laden grass, emerged onto the hard surface of the road ... Everyone gaped in silence and disbelief ... A horsewoman on the streets of Calcutta! That too a Bengali, not an Englishwoman ... The erect horsewoman in full riding habit was Kadambari, wife of Jyotirindranath Tagore."¹ While the Tagore family emerged as a centre for emancipation of the Bengali women, Rabindranath nurtured a tolerant attitude of synthesis - a middle path between "radical modernism and proud traditionalism."² The 'traditionalism' was deeply ingrained in the Tagore household and despite its affirmative response to the upcoming surge of modernity, it could not restrain itself from preserving the custom of *pardah*, the *sadar-andar (home and the outside)* compartmentalization or the tradition of *palki*.

Tagore inherited this ambiguity, and he was posited within the conflict between tradition and modernity, between social dictates and individual assertions, that is to say, between social scripting and individual scripting. This paper tries to explore three of Tagore's short stories - *The Conclusion (Samapti 1893)*, *Exercise-Book (Khata 1894)* and *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra 1914)* - where social scripting and individual scripting confront each other in interesting ways.

Whether Tagore's fictional constructs - Mrinmayi, Uma or Mrinal - are the embodiments of his real life acquaintances or not is a matter of debate. Yet, there can be no doubt in considering that Tagore was highly inspired by the wave of emancipation that gave birth to a sense of freedom in the minds of the nineteenth century women. Kesab Sen's *Brahmo Samaj*, Derozio's *Young Bengal*, and a plethora of intellectuals like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Dakshinranjan Mukhopadhyay, Ramgopal Ghosh, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar also realized the

importance of such emancipation and the necessity of female education. Despite tremendous opposition, the Bethune School was established in 1849. It was originally called Hindu Female School. John Drinkwater Bethune founded the school which was originally housed in the *baithak-khana* of Raja Dakshinaranjan's mansion at Sukia Street. There were two schools of ideas regarding the mode of female education. While Kesab Chandra Sen and his supporters introduced an education system with divinity as its fountainhead, Shibnath Shastri voted for a secular mode of learning. In his *Atmcharita*, he recounts numerous sessions when he taught science to his students. The illustrious ones like Radharani Lahiri, Rajlakhsmi Sen, Saudamini Khastagir published his notes in the numerous issues of *Bambodhini* periodical. This aggravated the suppressed interests of other girl students and thus facilitated their pursuit of science in the academia. Shibnath Shastri was assisted by Ramtanu Lahiri, Sashipada Bandopadhyay, Dwarkanath Gangopadhyay, Rajaninath Roy. Dwarkanath took the responsibility of teaching in the Banga Mahila Vidyalaya founded in 1876. The school had Kadambini Basu (the first female graduate in India), Sarala Roy, Swarnaprabha Basu, Abala Das as its students. Shastri's own daughter Hemlata, too, enrolled her name there. Shibnath Shastri's endeavours attracted Tagore's attention too. Tagore has acknowledged Shastri's influence on him in *Prabashi*.³

Amidst numerous social impediments, female education was given priority in the Tagore household since the time of Dwarkanath Tagore. His elder sister Rasibilasi could read *Hari Kusum Stabha* by Rup Goswami. Vaishnavis were appointed by Prince Dwarkanath for the education of women. Dwarkanath's mother Alakasundari, nurtured the spirit of freedom. Empowered by her husband, Ramlochan's will, she looked after the landed property after Ramlochan's demise. Her self-assertion is noted in her refusal to get subjugated under certain social inscriptions. She was not blind in her religious faith.. Her ultimate assertion made its presence during her last days when she did not agree to perform the ritual, *antarjali-yatra*. Dwarkanath's wife Digambari, showed the courage to attend the parties conducted by her husband in his garden house at Belgachia. Thus, she crossed the threshold of the *andarmahal* and entered the *baithak-khana*. The later generations, too, manifest a certain resoluteness in their nature. Debendranath's second daughter-in-law, Jnanadanandini showed much courage to set her foot outside Calcutta. She went to Bombay with her husband. She traveled all the way to England with her children. Moreover, it was Jnanadanandini who was the first to leave the ancestral home and move to a separate residence with her husband, son and daughter. Thus, she became a precursor of the modern nuclear family. Her literary acumen rests in her reminiscences *Puratani*, one which provides us with many domestic details. Jnanada Devi also collected all the young children and brought out a magazine called *Balak*. Sudhindra, Balendra, Sarala, Pratima, Indira - all of them owe their first literary efforts to *Balak*. Jnanada Devi was the editor of the magazine. She

also translated the daring escape of Debagorio Magrievitch from Siberia as published in the *Contemporary Review* and named it as *Ascharya Palayan* or the *Amazing Escape*. For the children, she dramatized two fairy tale-*Saat Bhai Champa* and *Tak Doomadoom*. Her articles like *Kinder garden* and *Women's Education* were published in *Bharati*. However, such spontaneity flourished not without impediments. Jnanada Devi had to receive bitter attacks of her mother-in-law and other inmates of the Tagore household.⁴ Thus behind every radiant countenance of an emancipated woman, there rested a pensive heart ceaselessly encountering significant barriers of admonitions, reproaches, inhibitions. Probably, Tagore's sensitive mind could sense these tensions preoccupying the minds of his sisters, his *Notun Bouthan* and his wife Mrinalini. Thus, the inner convulsions of these real-life characters reiterate their presence in Tagore's fictional constructs - Mrinmayi, Uma, Mrinal - too.

The catalogue of the Tagore household's rare talents would remain incomplete without Swarnakumari, Kadambari, Mrinalini and Indira. Swarnakumari's first novel, *DeepNirban*, came out in December 1876. Her first effort mesmerized Tagore too.⁵ She had the guts to educate widows and young unmarried girls. Her organization *Sakhi Samiti* served the purpose. Not really confined to a specific realm, Swarnakumari also attended the Congress sessions with her husband Janakinath Ghoshal, one of the main leaders of the Congress. There were several Bengali magazines edited by women. Between 1875 and 1900 at least twenty six women editors appeared on the scene. The first women's magazine with Thakamoni Dasi as the editor came out in 1875. About two years later, *Bharati* was brought by the Tagore family. Maharshi's granddaughters Protiva and Indira jointly edited *Ananda Sangeet* which was published for eight years. Protiva, the eldest daughter of Hemendranath, broke with tradition and sang *Brahmo Sangeet* with her brothers in public on the occasion of *Maghotsav*. She manifested her creativity in the field of music. Protiva Devi devised simple way of writing notations. The notations prepared by her were regularly published in *Balak*. Aalok, a collection of her lectures, was published many years ago. Indira, the only child of Satyendranath and Jnanadanandini, has left her prominent mark in the literary realm. Her works include reminiscences like *Smriti Samput*, *Jeevan Katha*, translations of Pramatha Chaudhuri's *Chaar Yarir Katha*, Maharshi's autobiography, four French texts into Bengali, non-fictional essays collected in *Narir Mukti*. She wrote innumerable articles on Rabindra Sangeet and also helped to recover the all-but-forgotten early compositions of Rabindranath.

Perceiving the rare talents in the Tagore household, it becomes easy to conjecture Tagore's horizon of expectation from his own fictional constructs. Mrinmayi, Uma and Mrinal, too, imbibe the bold femininity as embodied by Jnanada Devi, Swarnakumari, Kadambari, Protiva, Indira. But their attempts in individual scripting are mercilessly throttled by patriarchal inhibitions. Thus, if Mrinmayi, with her tomboyish demeanor, tries her hand in individual scripting, the

social scripting undermines her individual effort. Tagore constructs Mrinmayi in the image of a restless urchin - one who can create ripples in an otherwise unperturbed life of her locality. Unlike other maidens of her age, “her enormous black eyes held no shame or fear, and not the slightest coyness. She was tall, well-built, healthy, strong.”⁶ Her first meeting with Apurba provides her an ample scope to ridicule the educated Babu Apurba Krishna. Apurba's uneasy steps on the muddy riverbank and his subsequent fall are greeted by Mrinmayi's “melodious peel of high-pitched laughter.”⁷ His conscious decision to marry this unusual Mrinmayi shatters his mother's hope for a calm and quite daughter-in-law. The third person narrator of the story hints at the existing power equation in the relationship between husband and wife. Apurba chooses to marry Mrinmayi probably to tame her otherwise indomitable spirit: “Nevertheless whatever common sense might say, Mr. Apurba Krishna Roy was definitely unprepared to admit defeat at the hands of the flighty rustic girl.”⁸ Even after marriage, Mrinmayi retains her strong adherence to her pre-adolescent self. Her efforts to restore the days of her girlhood encounter insuperable impediments. The story explores this tension as it takes us into the girl's inner realm where we find her constantly tussling with the changing situation, with her new ‘self’ on its way to the domain of maturity. The social scripting ultimately succeeds and therefore undermines her individual efforts. Her gullibility, already indicated by her name ‘Mrinmayi’ (a figure made of clay and therefore can easily be molded according to the creator's whim), is reinstated as she succumbs into the realm of patriarchal expectations. Thus, social inscription trespasses the individual space and influences individual scripting. The ‘maturity’ makes its appearance all of a sudden: “Mrinmayi was unaware when the Creator's sword severed her childhood from her youth. She looked around her, astonished and bruised, and saw herself anew.”⁹ The former unruly Mrinmayi emerges as a docile wife, one that society appreciates and values. Mrinmayi's maturity, in a way, implies a loss of freedom, a sort of self-confinement. The title *The Conclusion (Samapti)* hints at the completion of the process where the girl's individuality undergoes transformation owing to repeated social interventions. The concluding part of the story presents a glimpse of Apurba's passionate physical encounter with Mrinmayi: “He was about to climb into it when with a sudden sound of bangles, a soft arm took him in its embrace, and a pair of lips like a flowering bud smothered him with a flood of passionate kisses that left no space to express surprise. He was startled for a moment. Then he knew that the half-kiss interrupted by fits of laughter was at long last being concluded among uninhibited tears.”¹⁰ Thus, if we frequently encounter her tomboyish laughter at the opening of the story, the laughter appears no more in the end. In its place, we have her squeamish, feminine sobs. Within the conventional romantic closure there is therefore an effacement of personality to accommodate a socially scripted version of normative femininity.

Exercise-Book (Khata) explores another forceful interruption of social norms, thereby, curbing the spirit of Uma. Though named after the warrior

goddess of Hindu mythology (*Durga*), Uma fails to imbibe the deity's strength. However, Tagore takes Uma a step further. Unlike Mrinmayi, Uma temporarily enjoys the scope to bask in the realm of education. Her whimsical scribbings on the wall, the new almanac, her father's daily account-book, or, even on her brother's thesis amply hint at her unconscious self-assertions. However, Uma's individual scripting echoes social scripting to a great extent. If she acquires the power of writing, her writing fails to transcend the boundary of social dictates. Her inscription from *Barnaparichay*: "So well-behaved is young Gopal/Whatever you give he eats it all"¹¹ delineates woman's dependence on male rhetoric to justify own presence. In fact, Uma's creativity is less explored. Her exercise-book, too, houses a number of quotations from the texts she read. Like her scribbings on the margins of texts, her voice, too, continues to preside upon the margins. Consequently, her unconscious identification with Joshi, the maid-servant, goads her to contribute a line on this marginalized figure of her household. Joshi succeeds to find a place in Uma's exercise-book. Uma's *khata* becomes an embodiment of her extended self. The buried-life within her finds its expression on the pages of her *khata*. With this girl, her exercise-book, too, receives an intense humiliation in the sarcasm of her in-laws and nonchalance of her husband, Pyarimohan. Pyarimohan voices the prevalent social norm despising female education. For a Hindu wife, to wield paper and pen was considered a sure prelude to widowhood. Pyarimohan's objection becomes reminiscent of vehement oppositions to female education voiced by eminent newspapers like *Samachar Chandrika*, *Sambad Prabhakar* at the instigation of orthodoxy and fundamentalism.¹² If periodical like *Bamabodhini Patrika* housed a plethora of women writers like Hemnalini Basu, Hemantakumari Devi, Manika Roy, a cursory glance at their articles consolidate society's constant interference into woman's thought process. Their articles like *Narir Kartavya*, *Streer Kartavya*, *Banga Badhu* only echo the social dictates regulating the ways of woman's existence. In a way, such a submission facilitates the long sustenance of the articles as well as the writers.¹³ Uma's exercise-book, however, encounters a harsh predicament. *Khata* endures its physical distortion at the hands of her husband. The moment she realizes her entrapped situation and begins to sense the pathos involved in her incarceration, she seeks refuge in her *khata*, the only space allotted to her. Thus, she finds her own tears in *Durga's* tearful complaint to her mother in the *āgamanī* song. "With the same soreness of heart, Uma's eyes filled with tears."¹⁴ This process of rediscovering her self, completely lost in the topos of her husband's realm, remains incomplete. Pyarimohan encroaches upon Uma's private space and dismantles her brain-child, the *khata*. "The girl held the exercise-book to her breast and looked at her husband, entreating him with her gaze ... She hurled it down, covered her face with her hands, and fell to the floor."¹⁵ Her self-assertion fails to endure the blows of social admonitions leaving Uma to accept subjugation with all her passivity. But the narrator's final comment: "Pyarimohan also had an exercise-book full of various subtly barbed essays, but no one was philanthropic enough to snatch his book away and destroy it,"¹⁶ implies Tagore's critical

response. The comment hints at Tagore's ruthless irony at his depiction of how the female self is curtailed by forceful interventions of patriarchy. Writing becomes metonymic of the autonomous self-hood of Uma. Probably, her husband could sense this and seeks to efface every possibility of Uma's self-expression. However, while the protagonist's individual assertion encounters a defeat, the narrator, in a way, succeeds to retain a resoluteness in his protest, muted but bold in its character.

A more prominent note of protest characterizes Tagore's *The Wife's Letter* (*Streer Patra*). Though the title pronounces the 'wife' as its central emphasis, the story follows an unconventional path. The 'wife' in *The Wife's Letter* finds her own voice. The writer's experimentation with the form is noticed in his departure from the conventional third person mode of story telling to an incorporation of the female voice assuming a first person assertive tone. The entire tale is enveloped in an epistle written by the protagonist to her husband. The story delineates a radical approach of its protagonist as well as the writer himself. The path-breaking radicalism is voiced in the very opening:

"... to this day I have never written you a letter. I have always been at hand—you have heard so many words from my lips, and I too have listened to you—but there has never been an interval in which a letter might have written."¹⁷

This boldness offers a prelude to the protagonist's autobiographical mode of narration. Mrinal surpasses both Uma and Mrinmayi in her ability to endure. She neither submits nor transforms herself. Rather, as her name suggests (Mrinal refers to lotus-stem), Mrinal stands erect. She crosses the confines of her married life and obscuring her parasitic identity as a wife, she declares: "It is not a letter from the second daughter-in-law of your family."¹⁸ The story encompasses Mrinal's girlhood, her state of deprivation as a daughter, a wife as well as a mother. It is this deprivation that could almost solely bedeck the then autobiographies of women. Published in 1876, Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, too, echoes her deprived condition, her disillusionment with her own existence:

"Wasn't it a matter to be regretted, that I had to go through all this humiliation just because I was a woman? Shut up like a thief, even trying to learn was considered an offense."¹⁹

However, what the real life women like Rassundari or Nistarini Devi could not perform, the fictional characters are empowered to do so. Thus, Mrinal interrogates the falsifications everywhere circumscribing her existence, while seeking to transcend them by crossing the superficial limits that patriarchy deliberately set before women. Her yearning to taste freedom is aggravated by the presence of two suppressed female figures - her sister-in-law and Bindu. Mrinal's sister-in-law is an epitome of ideal Hindu wife. "She lacked the courage to show her love openly, from the heart, to her orphaned sister. She is an obedient wife."²⁰ The docile housewife acts as an anti-polar contrast to Mrinal, in a way, aggravating her desire to assert herself. But the initial stir in Mrinal's heart

is caused by Bindu, the hapless orphan, whom she endeavours to protect and preserve. Soon, they begin to share a companionship. Their undefined relationship takes up an anonymity with Mrinal's contemplation:

"She developed so great a love for me that it made me afraid. I had never seen such an image of love in my household. I had read of such love in books, but that was love between men and women ... after so many years, this ugly girl became obsessed with my beauty ... She loved to handle the weight of my hair ... The girl was infatuated with me."²¹

The possibility of an independent scripting of a tale of love between two women is interrupted by society again. Bindu is compelled to embrace the conventional life of a wife. Disenchanted with her hasty marriage, the girl returns but fails to mend the severed tie with her former love, Mrinal. However, society fails to undermine the spirit of both Bindu and Mrinal. Bindu's suicide is condemned by many but Mrinal interprets it as an act of assertion, one which enables the girl to transcend her imprisonment. The suicide becomes a text, an individual scripting, that Bindu writes from her body. Mrinal's sarcasm directed towards the society lies in her cautionary comment: "But one should reflect why this play-acting takes its toll only of the saris of Bengali women, not of the dhotis of brave Bengali gentlemen."²² In interpreting Bindu's self-immolation, Mrinal, shares the sensitivity of the author, who manifested an equal admiration for his deceased *Notun Bouthan*, thereby, identifying her with the 'life's deity' (*Jiban-Debata*). In Tagore's own words, this deity linked his life "to the vast, the Immense through separation and deep pain."²³ A similar realization preoccupies Mrinal as she speaks of Bindu with a deeper admiration: "There she is infinite."²⁴ As for her own scripting, Mrinal opts for something more radical. She resolves astutely: "But I will never again return to your house at number 27, Makhan Baral Lane. I have seen Bindu. I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it."²⁵ She never seeks solace in the deathbed. Rather, Mrinal chooses a life that would be her own. Instead of searching security within the confines of four walls, Mrinal tends to justify her position in the vast cosmos. Her self-realization is complete with the declaration: "How trivial is this daily commerce of my life, how trivial are its set rules, set habits, set phrases, set blows."²⁶ Finally, it is this realization that effaces the obscurity of her identity. The shroud of *Mejo-Bou* disappears leaving Mrinal, radiant with the knowledge of self-discovery. Her scripting is complete with a re-scripting of Mirabai's song: "I too shall live. At last I live."²⁷ However, the question remains - how far did Mirabai succeed in her attempt? The story concludes with Mrinal's resolution to undertake a new journey. But will that journey secure complete freedom from social inhibitions? Will her individual scripting really prosper ignoring all impediments? The first person narrator is not empowered enough to resolve this enigma. Probably, the enigma remains unresolved forever.

Thus all of the three tales *The Conclusion (Samapti)*, *Exercise-Book (Khata)*, *The Wife's Letter (Streer Patra)* unfold the tormented female psyche

continually hindered in their self-assertive aspirations. While the tales represent the experiences of fictional characters, it should not be forgotten that they represent Tagore's sensitive evaluation of the condition of contemporary women. The tales reveal attempts at individual scripting that come into conflict with scripts established by society. Tagore treads a middle path often accommodating the social stricture over individual attempts at self-expression. But the pathos and the irony that he systematically uses sensitizes us to his deep sympathies on this issue.²⁸ The radicalism in allowing the narrative to be taken over by Mrinal allows free access to the sensibility of the woman, an experiment that was scathingly attacked in contemporary society. The short stories acknowledge the desire and the urgency to allow contemporary women to script a space of their own.

Notes and References

1. Deb, Chitra. *Women of the Tagore Household*. Trans. Smita Chowdhry and Sona Roy. India: Penguin Books, 2010. p.1.
2. Dasgupta, Uma. "Rabindranath Tagore and Modernity". *Tagore and Modernity*. Ed. Krishna Sen and Tapati Guha. Kolkata: Dasgupta and Co. Pvt. Ltd., 2006.p.1.
3. Mukhopadhyay, Dr. Prashanta, *Unish Shotoker Nari Jagritir Aloke Rabindra-galpa*. Kolkata: Potrolekha, 2003. p. 46.
4. Jnanada Devi's mother-in-law Sarada Devi often refused to speak to her. Satyendranath's letters provide the evidence. From *Atmakatha*, the autobiography of Satyendranath's daughter Indira, we learn that the Maharshi's wife took away Jnanadanandini's jewellery on the pretext that a lot of expense had been incurred to send Satyendra abroad. This jewellery was used by the Maharshi's wife for the marriages of her two daughters. (*Women of the Tagore Household*. p. 32.).
5. Swarnakumari's writings included historical novels like *Bidroho*, *Mibar Raj*, *Phooler Mala*, social novels like *Snehalata*, *Kahake*, musical play like *Basanta Utsav* and innumerable satires, poetry, songs, non-fictional articles, travelogues, reminiscences and school texts.
6. *Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore*. Trans. Krishna Dutta and Mary Lago. London: Macmillan London Ltd., 1991.p.81. Haraprashad Shastri's *Chotogalpa* is a collection of small but very touching stories. It is also written in support of the same movement (Reform). Some of these stories will be enjoyed by the orthodox and the non-orthodox community alike. (*Visva-Bharati Patrika*, Magh-Chaitra 1369 B.S., P.289)
7. *Ibid.*, p.81.
8. *Ibid.*, p.87.
9. *Ibid.*, p.97.
10. *Ibid.*, p.102.
11. Tagore, Rabindranath, *Selected Short Stories*. Trans. William Radice. India: Penguin Books, 1991. p.140
12. Innumerable limericks and satires had been composed about the students of Bethune School. Ishwar Gupta lamented: "*Joto chhundigulo tudi merey ketab hatey nichchhe jobe,/ Takhan A B shikhe Bibi sheje bilati bole kabeyi kobe.*"(Now that all the young lasses are taking up books, they will learn A-B and certainly prattle away in the foreign

- tongue.). Numerous satires were penned about women educated in Bethune College. A few of those are *Boubabu*, *Pundit Meyey*, *Kalir Bou Haar Jalani*, *Behadda Behaya* and so on. (From *Women of the Tagore Household*. p.24.)
13. From Bharati Roy, ed. *Nari O Paribar: Bamabodhini Patrika*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2002.
 14. Tagore, Rabindranath, *Selected Short Stories*. p.144.
 15. *Ibid.*, p.145.
 16. *Ibid.*, p.145.
 17. Sukanta Choudhuri, ed. *Selected Short Stories*. India: Oxford University Press, 2000.p.205.
 18. *Ibid.*, p.205
 19. Enakshi Chatterjee, trans. *Amar Jiban*. By Rassundari Devi in *Purdah, An Anthology*. Ed. Eunice de Souza. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004. p.363.
 20. Sukanta Choudhuri, ed. *Selected Short Stories*. India: Oxford University Press, 2000. p.209.
 21. *Ibid.*, p.211.
 22. *Ibid.*, p.217.
 23. Sukanta Choudhuri, ed. *Selected Short Stories*. India: Oxford University Press, 2000. Introduction, p. 28.
 24. *Ibid.*, p.217.
 25. *Ibid.*, p.217.
 26. *Ibid.*, p.218.
 27. *Ibid.*, p.218.
 28. In response to Tagore's *Streer Patra*, Bipin Chandra Pal wrote a story, titled as, *Mrinaler Katha* The story was published in the periodical *Narayan*, edited by Chittaranjan Das. The story deliberately dramatizes Mrinal's frustration in her secluded life. Here her resoluteness suffers and she begs her husband's favour in the end. Tagore's heroine undergoes modifications in the pages of Bipin Chandra Pal's version. (From Mukhopadhyay, Dr. Prashanta, *Unish Shotoker Nari Jagritir Aloke Rabindra-galpa*. Kolkata: Potrolekha, 2003.p.128.)