Mrinmoyee and the Constraints of Femininity: A Look at Gender Norms in Rabindranath Tagore's “Samapti”

ENG 316

Seminar Paper and Viva Voce

Author

Anika Marjan

2020236035

2020-2021

Supervisor

Sahelee Parveen Dipa

Associate Professor



Department of English

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology

Sylhet 3114

2nd May 2024

Mrinmoyee and the Constraints of Femininity: A Look at Gender Norms in Rabindranath Tagore's “Samapti”

ENG 316

Seminar Paper and Viva Voce



Department of English

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology

Sylhet 3114

2nd May 2024

ENG 316

Seminar Paper and Viva Voce

2020-2021

9th May 2024

Mrinmoyee and the Constraints of Femininity: A Look at Gender Norms in Rabindranath Tagore's “Samapti”

This study investigates Rabindranath Tagore's characterization of the character Mrinmoyee in his short story “Samapti”(1893) in the context of late nineteenth-century Bengali culture. It explores how society would regard Mrinmoyee's behaviour during the period by analyzing Tagore's portrayal of her bold and lively behavior. In a society dominated by traditional gender roles and patriarchal standards, Mrinmoyee's disobedience of norms and aggressive attitude would have been met with mistrust and condemnation by conservatism. However, Tagore's detailed portrayal of Mrinmoyee as a complex multifaceted figure calls into question established gender norms and societal standards of that time. We will look at how society views women's autonomy and rejection of conventional gender norms through an analysis of Tagore's story and character development. We aim to explain the changing gender dynamics in Tagore's literary universe as well as late 19th-century Bengali society at large by exploring the details of Mrinmoyee's character and the responses she elicits from those around her.

Rabindranath Tagore is well recognized for his insightful approach to societal dynamics and human nature. He is an important figure in Bengali literature and played an essential part in the Bengal Renaissance. He also tried to uplift womanhood in the late 1800s. According to Pinaki Roy in her analysis of “Rabindranath Tagore, His Fiction, and His Feminisms”, says, “Rabindranath Tagore encouraged the females to write, and even sponsored them. His elder sister, Swarnakumari Ghosal (1855-1932), became one of the prominent female novelists of Bengal, and participated in the anti-imperial activities of the Indian National Congress” (Roy 2). The impact of colonialism, social reform movements, and the introduction of novel concepts, all contributed to the significant change in Bengali society in the late 1800s. However patriarchal standards and conventional gender roles continued to make a significant impact on societal roles and expectations for women's behavior. In context with this, Tagore questions traditional ideas of femininity and womanhood by representing female characters as progressive, fearless, and independent. Especially, his character Mrinmoyee from the 1893 short story “Samapti” provides a unique lens through which to explore societal attitudes toward women in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Kushik Ghosh, in his “Comparative Study of “Women selves” in Tagore’s selected Short stories”, says “[h]is campaign for women‟s liberation was ahead of its time. Rabindranath gave us some very powerful women characters befitting the new age” (Ghosh 4). Viha Samrutha in “Feminism Portrayed in Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore” wrote, “[t]hey were hindrances in the path of changes which Tagore wanted to bring. He materialized his thoughts on paper in the form of his writings which served as the best source to influence people who looked up to him” (Samrutha 1). Rabindranath Tagore's approach of uplifting womanhood for the sake of society was seen in his female characters portrayed in his literary works. Within limitations of short fictional settings, Tagore addresses themes of femininity, independence, and individualism through a variety of well-known Tagorean female characters, including Mriganayanee, Mrinmoyee, Giribala, Charulata, Binodini, Mrinal, Kalyani, Chitrangada, Chandalika, and Shyama. The main character Mriganayanee in “Kankal” (1892), defies ideals and norms of society by embodying a strong sense of autonomy and independence. Similarly, Giribala in “Manbhanjan” (1895) and Mrinmoyee in “Samapti” (1893) demonstrate an active role in determining their own fates by expressing their femininity and independence with their acts and thoughts. Binodini in “Chokher Bali” (1903) is a living example of resilience and courage. She eventually makes small but important statements about her independence and individuality. She defies conventional gender norms and deals with the difficulties of widowhood and society’s expectations. Mrinal in “Strir Patra” (1972) defies social norms by becoming literate, signifying the transformational potential of education in enabling women. Kalyani in “Aparichita” (1916), who fights for women's rights and independence in a culture that values conservatism, is notable for her radical ideas and actions. The lead character in Tagore's drama of the same name, Chitrangada in “Chitrangada” (1936), defies gender norms by accepting her identity as a warrior princess who embodies both femininity and strength. Similarly, Chandalika in “Chandalika” (1938) challenges caste divisions and societal norms in favor of equality and dignity for all. Tagore uses these different characters to give a complex analysis of gender and empowerment, emphasizing the variety of femininity and the value of human independence in defining one's future. Tagore's female characters show their autonomy and challenging traditional norms, whether with strong views, bold thinking, or acts of rebellion, making a lasting impression on both readers and society.

In Rabindranath Tagore's “Samapti” Mrinmoyee is presented as a restless and lively young woman, similar to a rebellious kid upset the peace of her surroundings. Unlike her contemporaries, Mrinmoyee has large black eyes that are devoid of guilt or fear, expressing her confident and unconcerned character. With her brazen manner, she pushes cultural norms while being physically robust and healthy. Mrinmoyee's first encounter with Apurba allows her to insult the educated Babu, demonstrating her distaste of conventional authority. The narrator quietly hints at the power dynamics in their relationship, implying that Apurba's decision to marry Mrinmoyee was driven by a wish to control her relentless spirit. Even after marriage, Mrinmoyee remains true to her pre-adolescent personality, defying social norms and patriarchal traditions. As the novel progresses, Mrinmoyee struggles with the internal conflict between her young exuberance and the social norms that push her into maturity. Despite her efforts to maintain her individuality, she eventually gives way to social norms, as indicated by her name ‘Mrinmoyee,’ which implies her susceptibility to external influences. The story explores the conflict between individual autonomy and social code, emphasizing how external factors influence Mrinmoyee's path to maturity. Her rapid discovery of maturity represents a loss of freedom and self-confidence, as she adheres to conventional norms at the sacrifice of her own identity. The title “Samapti” (1893) refers to the end of this transforming process, in which Mrinmoyee's uniqueness is overshadowed by society expectations. Her story is a powerful observation on the complexity of gender dynamics and the struggle for independence in patriarchal society. Through the character of Mrinmoyee, Tagore challenges readers to consider the complex balance between autonomy and societal limitations providing explanations for human nature and the search for self-discovery in the face of external forces.

In a society dominated by traditional gender roles and patriarchal customs, Mrinmoyee's restlessness and lively personality would have been regarded unorthodox and rebellious. In the late nineteenth century, women in Bengal were expected to abide by societal norms of modesty, submissiveness, and domesticity. They were frequently bound to traditional gender roles of wife and mother, with few prospects for education or freedom. As a result, Mrinmoyee's refusal to follow these customs, as well as her aggressive personality, would have challenged traditional attitudes toward women's behavior. Her boldness and independence may have been viewed as a threat to the existing order, particularly in the context of marriage and family issues. However, Tagore's characterization of Mrinmoyee shows a sophisticated appreciation of female autonomy. While her actions may have been thought unusual by some, Tagore portrays her as a complex and versatile figure who challenges readers to rethink established gender norms and society expectations. Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of diverse female characters, like Mrinmoyee, helped pave the path for the freedom of women in the late nineteenth century. Tagore's literature questioned traditional norms and allowed women to demonstrate their independence. Characters like Mrinmoyee show Tagore's dedication to portray women as multifaceted beings with their own ambitions, dreams, and challenges. Tagore's portrayal of female characters who reject established gender stereotypes and show their independence pushed readers to rethink conventional perceptions toward women and their place in society. Tagore's literary works had an important influence in promoting a more inclusive and progressive attitude toward women's rights and empowerment during a time of societal change and instability.

Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of Mrinmoyee in “Samapti” offers a nuanced exploration of gender dynamics in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Mrinmoyee's defiance of societal expectations and her vibrant personality challenge the prevailing norms of femininity. While her actions may have been met with disapproval by conservative elements, Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal ultimately questions the limitations placed upon women. Through Mrinmoyee's journey, Rabindranath Tagore compels readers to consider the complexities of female identity and the struggle for autonomy within a patriarchal structure. Furthermore, his portrayal of diverse female characters like Mrinmoyee served as a catalyst for change, paving the way for a more progressive discourse on women's rights and empowerment in Bengal.

Works Cited

Ghosh, Koushik. "A Comparative Study of “Women selves” in Tagore’s selected Short stories." *Literary Herald*, 2018, 4.

Roy, Pinaki. "Rabindranath Tagore, His Fiction, and His Feminisms: Some Examples." 2020, 2.

Samrutha, Viha. "Feminism Portrayed in Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore." *Language in India*, 2018, 1.

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Samapti." *Golpoguccho*, 1893, 154-163.