
Tracing Lesbian Continuum in Tagore's 'Streer Patra'

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ABSTRACT:

An attempt to explore the unconscious of the text 'Streer Patra' by Rabindranath Tagore (Translated from Bengali by Prasenjit Gupta as 'A Wife's Letter'), unravels the elements of Lesbian existence and Lesbian continuum in the relationship between the two major characters Mrinal and Bindu. Bindu acts as a catalyst in Mrinal's realisation of her true self and the two characters attain the saturation of companionship in each other's hands. The paper further investigates how patriarchy subjugates women by enforcing compulsory heterosexuality on them and ironically ensures the latter's involvement in this process. Total negligence of the literary competence of Mrinal, the chief protagonist, epitomises the long conceived prejudice against women as 'muses' who can be worshipped but are incapable of 'thinking'. Mrinal, at the end, establishes her identity as 'a thinking muse' by writing a letter to her husband reinstating her decision not to comply with the restrictive role assigned to her by the patriarchy and frees herself from the role of Mejo-Bou.

Key words: *lesbian continuum, thinking muse, compulsory heterosexuality, subjugation, patriarchy.*

Rabindranath Tagore's short story 'Streer Patra' (translated as 'A Wife's Letter') speaks about how women, who are entangled in the social norms of patriarchal society, can break away from these strictures and reclaim their true self. It is astounding to see that a person like Tagore, who once believed that women were physically and intellectually weaker than men, portrays a powerful female protagonist Mrinal who turns to be a saviour of Bindu, the former's elder sister-in-law's sister, a defenceless girl. The 19th century Calcutta forms the background of Streer Patra/A Wife's Letter. Tagore addresses a myriad of social issues such as child marriage, 'othering' of economically dependent women, treatment of woman as an object/commodity, infant mortality and the like which drew much acclaim from critics for their effective delineation, leaving the liaison between Mrinal and Bindu without proper consideration. On the surface, their relationship seems to be that of a rescuer and the rescued, but a more serious reading unravels that it is a manifestation of the fact that heterosexuality is not a preference for women. My attempt here is to bring forth the hidden filament of lesbian continuum that unites Bindu and Mrinal and a study of how the other female characters end up as mere instruments in the hands of their oppressors and knowingly or unknowingly, take part in their own oppression.

The unjust maltreatment of women, including Mrinal and Bindu by a male centred society, unfolds before us through a letter the former writes to her husband on their fifteenth wedding anniversary, which is resonated in the title of the short story. The very act of writing makes Bindu a thinking muse, a source of inspiration and thought, as envisaged by Iris Marian Young and Jeffner Allen in their monumental work 'The Thinking Muse and Modern French

Philosophy'. This term revolves around the concept of "thoughtful wanderings through the shadows of experience of women not in order to bring them into light but to reveal the ambiguous edges of things". (1989,1) Even though we don't have access to her poems, the letter written by Mrinal portrays the incidents from her perspective and enables us to have a glimpse of the hidden recess of the emotional world of the female figures. The act of destroying Bindu's suicidal note addressed to Mrinal can be viewed as the male chauvinistic society's intolerance and inhibition of seeing woman as capable of thinking, a manifestation of the long cherished concept of woman as a mere muse, devoid of the power to think.

In the letter, she reveals how she was forced to be the Mejo-Bou, the second wife of his joint family at the age of twelve, where the mother-in-law was anxious to compensate the 'plain appearance' of his first bride with the beauty of Mrinal. Tagore's cynicism on the rampant ideology that a woman is counted for her physical beauty and not her intellect is revealed to us in the form of Mrinal's defiance against those who are annoyed at her for being intelligent; including her own mother who believes that for woman intelligence is affliction. Mrinal scathingly remarks that the whole family was ignorant of her literary skills. It is a proof of the indifference of the patriarchal society towards 'thinking woman'. The relatives fling the rebuke, "precocious impertinent girl" whenever Mrinal exhibited the signs of intelligence.

How the patriarchal society incorporates women in their own subjugation and exploitation through powerful indoctrination is evident throughout the story. The women look down upon themselves as inferior. This is evident in two almost similar occasions in the life of Mrinal and Bindu. Mrinal shares a childhood experience where she and her brother were afflicted with typhoid. Only she survived which prompted the neighbourhood girls to form the assumption that, "Mrinal's a girl, that's why she lived. If she had been a boy, she couldn't have been saved" (1) leaving the impression that God took only precious things. The same attitude made her relatives to comment on Bindu's cure of red rashes, which they suspected as small pox, as "It's definitely smallpox, and it settled in-After all, it was Bindu." (4)

Social conditioning of women as an enduring figure, a devoted wife who never utter a word against the will of her husband are other taboos that are to be broken in order to ameliorate the state of women. Tagore constantly reminds us about this throughout the story, especially through the helplessness and inability of Bindu's sister, to safeguard her from the atrocities coerced upon her. When Bindu sought refuge in her sister from the mistreatment of her cousin, the latter draws a sorry figure as she can't escape from the image of 'a devoted wife'. Mrinal makes it explicit in the letter:

And I watched my Didi. Out of great compassion she had brought her sister Bindu in, but when she saw her husband's annoyance she began to pretend that Bindu's presence was an unbearable imposition on her too. And she'd be relieved to be rid of her. She couldn't muster up the courage to express her affection publically for her orphaned sister. She was a very devoted wife. (3)

Arrival of Bindu forms a breakthrough in the life of Mrinal. The hapless figure of Bindu, who in the eyes of other family members appears as a misfortune, draws the elixir of love and compassion from her heart. There after we witness Mrinal, possessing an invincible

personality, taking up the role of Bindu's guardian, evading all menacing glances of the relatives. She says, "When I saw that you were angry at her, my heart went out to this defenceless girl and I decided to stand firm at her side." (3) From here starts the saga of the affection between Mrinal and Bindu where we can trace the cord of Lesbian continuum which binds them together.

Adrienne Rich, a prominent poet of the late twentieth century, exposed the oppression of women and lesbians through her poetic discourse. In her monumental essay 'Compulsory Hetrosexuality and Lesbian Existence' she used the terms Lesbian Existence and Lesbian continuum to escape from the narrow interpretations offered by the term lesbianism i.e. the idea that women desired sexual relationship with another woman. She has used the term lesbian continuum to include "a range of woman identified experience." It encompasses "many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support etc." (1994, 11)

In the essay she laments the limiting of lesbian existence as mere sexual preference. She uses the term to point out the historical existence of lesbians. Here Rich states that Nancy Chodorow, a feminist sociologist of 20th century, almost acknowledges the lesbian existence when she stated that women "have learned to deny the limitations of masculine lovers for both psychological and practical reasons". (1999, 197-198) In her study of how mothering-by-women affects the psychological development of girl, Chodorow states that 'men are emotionally secondary in women's lives....women have a rich, ongoing inner world to fall back on...' (1999, 197-198) Here the notable point is that in the mother daughter emotions and connections, we can trace the elements of lesbian existence. Hence, Adrienne Rich openly declares that mothering by women is a sufficient cause of lesbian existence. This is very relevant in the context of our study because there are certain junctures where we feel that Bindu replaces Mrinal's deceased daughter. The fact that Bindu's entry into Mrinal's life is right after the death of her infant girl, strengthens this observation.

Tagore portrays the character of Bindu as someone who was beaten down by the abuses she had to suffer. "Bindu came to me in great fear, as if I might not be able to bear her touch, as if there were no reason for her having been born into this great universe. And she would always shrink away as she passed; lower her glance as she walked by." (4) Under Mrinal's compassionate patronage, Bindu evolved to be an ardent admirer of the former. Dreams started to sprout in the heart of the young girl. The elements of lesbian continuum can be deciphered from the given passage:

As Bindu's fear of me ebbed, another problem arose. She began to love me so much that it brought fear in to my heart. I have never seen such an embodiment of love in real life. I've read of it in books, of this kind of intense attachment, and, there too, between women. Not for many years had I had occasion to remember that I was beautiful; that long forgotten beauty had charmed this plain looking girl. She'd stare at my face, and the hope and trust in her eyes would grow. She's say to me, "Didi, no one but me has seen this face of yours." She'd become upset when I tied

my hair myself. She liked to play with my hair, arranging it this way and that. Apart from the occasional invitation, there was really no need for me to dress up. But Bindu was eager; and every day she would ornament me one way or another. She grew besotted with me (4).

Bindu appreciates the qualities in Mrinal which the entire household failed to acknowledge. Her assertion that, “..no one but me has seen this face of yours”(4) point to the fact that only a woman can appreciate and accept the indestructible individuality of another woman. Mrinal’s proclamation that while looking at Bindu she could see herself, her true self, her free self, act as a testimony to the existence of an irrevocable cord that joins these two female characters. Mrinal constantly assures Bindu that she will defend her from the misdeeds of other members of the family. Apart from giving refuge, Mrinal defiantly fights against the injustice done to her. She appoints a separate maid to assist Bindu when other maids refused to serve her, leaving the other members in utter dismay, including her husband. She refuses the comforts that others denied for Bindu and thus asserts her solidarity to her.

Mrinal becomes a loathsome figure in her husband’s house as she denies to fit into the ideal of a ‘devoted wife’. The emotional security, appreciation of her true self which every woman expects from their partner, can be found only among Bindu and Mrinal. Tagore’s portrayal of the institution of marriage as a hammer in the hands of a society to exert the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality in the life of women, who identified their own sex as their best partner, makes him a visionary who thought far beyond his time. The family members use the same weapon to get rid of Bindu, a speck in their eye.

The myth of marriage as a sole means to improve a woman’s present state is so strong that, even Mrinal appears to be silenced before this move. Tagore depicts a picture of Mrinal who desperately tries to pacify Bindu. But the inferiority complex inflicted on her by the distorted thoughts, that a woman is counted for her physical beauty, leaves Bindu in utter turmoil. There again Mrinal tries her level best to support Bindu by furtively giving some of her ornaments, an act which is notable at a juncture where the others refuse to spend a single penny on the latter.

The politics functioning to suppress women’s liberation finds a way through the words spoken by Bindu’s sister: “..You must realize, Bindi dear, a husband is a woman’s shelter, her protector, her salvation, her everything. If suffering is written on your forehead, no one can avert it.” (Part II, 2.)

These words foreshadow the impending doom on Bindu’s life. Tagore makes use of the long celebrated concept of an evil mother-in-law, who in this story draws an innocent girl to marry her lunatic son, against her husband’s wish. The lady reiterates the patriarchal society’s idealisation of woman as a ‘most enduring’ figure by expecting Bindu to sacrifice her life for the betterment of her son. She nourishes a false illusion that a marriage will cure her son. Here the attempt to justify the marriage of two socially outcast people is under sway. Bindu as a woman and her husband as an insane person are marginalised and treated as the other. It looks as if the two souls are ostracised from the realm of justice!

As Bindu falls into Mrinal's arms lamenting about the torments she had to suffer, the former's conscience arises as a phoenix and vows that she will never send her back to the pathetic plight. As Bindu's brother-in-law approaches to take her back, we see Mrinal as a lioness roars at them and states that she will never let her go back to the hell. But Bindu, who nurtures a selfless love for Mrinal, sacrifices herself by going along with the brother-in-law. Mrinal's efforts to rescue her from there, proves futile as Bindu defiantly embraces death not to succumb to the pressures of the society which will compel her to spend the rest of her life with an insane man. This has become evident in the words of Mrinal on Didi's lamentation over Bindu's death: "Didi hid in her room and cried. But there was some solace in her tears. However it was, at least the girl was beyond suffering. She had only died; who knew what might have happened if she'd lived." (Part II, 5.)

Bindu's demise acts as an impetus for Mrinal to break away from the shackles of the hypocritical world. Mrinal realises that death has elevated Bindu to an unconquerable realm where nobody can reduce her to the mere roles that patriarchy enforces on women. She mocks at the petty mindedness of the society thus:

...You thought that, by your turn of whim and your custom graven in stone, you could keep her life crushed under your feet forever, but your feet weren't powerful enough. Death was stronger. In her death Bindu has become great; she is not mere Bengali girl anymore, no more just a female cousin of her father's nephews, no longer only a lunatic stranger's deceived wife. Now she is without limits, without end. (Part II, 5.)

Mrinal acknowledges that the acquaintance with Bindu enabled her to realise the real worth of a woman and asserts that she no longer wishes to be part of a system that obstructs women from realising the same. Thereby she decrees the death of Mejo-Bou, the role assigned to her by the oppressive scenario:

The dark veil of your custom had cloaked me completely, but for an instant Bindu came and touched me through a gap in the veil; and by her own death she tore that awful veil to shreds. Today I see there is no longer any need to maintain your family's dignity or self-pride. He who smiles at this unloved face of mine is in front of me today, looking at me with the sublime expanse of His sky. Now Mejo- Bou dies. (Part II, 6.)

She compares herself with the unrelenting image of Meera - Bai who stood firm before all mishaps, dedicating herself wholly at the feet of the great Almighty. The letter concludes with this assertion of her long denied freedom.

The glimpses of lesbian continuum can be traced in the relationship between these two women characters that complement each other in their search for true self. Their relationship acts as a testimony to the fact that the search for love and tenderness ultimately leads to women themselves. Their story adds power to the argument that women always resisted male tyranny and offers an excellent study of women's struggle against powerlessness.

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