Woman and her Condition in the Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain

Shruti AMAR[1]

Abstract
In many of his letters and interviews Rabindranath Tagore confesses that he started writing short stories under the influence of the village folktales popular in rural Bengal. Like many authors of the period, though, he represents the condition of the woman in many of these stories. Short stories of Tagore, such as The Hungry Stone and Jibit or Mrit, particularly look at the women of the period. Similarly, Begum Rokeya portrays through her writing the condition of the nineteenth-century Indian woman. Countering the western notions of reform, she locates the idea of womanhood within the local boundaries. Disrupting the 'norms', she goes on to represent the nineteenth-century Bengali woman as 'free' and 'enlightened'. I will look at the short stories of these two authors and will examine the representation of the female anxiety in their texts.
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Introduction

In 1935, in an English Interview, Rabindranath Tagore confessed:

My whole heart went out to the simple village people as I came in close contact with them. They seemed to belong to quite another world, so very different from that of Calcutta. My earlier stories have this background, and they describe this contact of mine with the village people. They have freshness of youth. Before I had written these short stories there was not anything of that type in Bengali literature. No doubt Bankimchandra had written some stories but they were of the romantic type; mine were full of the temperament of the rural people... [Radice, 1991: 5]

Tagore in the interview recalls his early years at his father's estate. Then a young man, Tagore was swayed by the village life, particularly by its orality. The simple daily along with the local tradition fascinated him to write some of the most fascinating short stories such as *The Lost Jewel, The*

[1] Shruti Amar, MA, Ph. London, shruti.amar8@gmail.com

Hungry Stone. Skeleton. In all of these stories, he gives woman a space of their own. Representing feminine sensibilities, he gives voice to the woman through using some of the 'subaltern', 'oral spaces' of his era. The period when Rabindranath Tagore and other writers were writing in Bengal was an era of nation and nationalism. The woman was at the centre of this nationalistic discourse. Charu Gupta in her widely acclaimed book *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community* (2001) argues the with the growth of nationalism "gender symbols and women's roles could draw from and appeal to orthodox, traditionalist and reformist Hindus, and to the upper and lower castes". [Gupta, 2001:27] Woman and their inner quarters became subject of legal discourse. Many laws including obscenity laws were introduced in 1856 to sanities the inner spaces to maintain the 'purity' of the household. Also, woman was forced to suppress their desire and be chivalarous to men at home. In such a period, the authors like Tagore and Begum Rokeya louldly protests against female 'seclusion' through their text. In the article, I will look at the representation of the woman and her condition in the short stories of these two authors. If Tagore gives, I argue, woman their own space through his writings, Begum Rokeya loudly protests to 'disrupt the norms' in her *Sultana's Dream* (1905).

1. Gendering the Nation: Woman and her condition in the nineteenth-century Bengal

In a scintillating, though obscure voice, the narrator of the Short Story 'skeleton' by Rabindranath Tagore narrates his intimacy with a 'skeleton':

There was a whole skeleton hanging on the wall of the room next to the one where the three of us slept when we were young. At night the bones used to clatter as the breeze stirred them. During the day we ourselves had to stir them: we were, at that time, studying meghnād-badh kābya with a pundit, and anatomy with a student from the Campbell Medical School. Our guardian wanted us to become instant experts in all fields of learning. To reveal how far his wishes were fulfilled would be superfluous to those who know us and unwise to us who do not...

This was all a long time ago. Meanwhile the skeleton disappeared from the room, and anatomical knowledge from our heads-heaven knows where. [Tagore, Radice: 1991, 84]

Tagore recounts the sad tale of a child widow who later turns into a "skeleton". The girl is married at a young age of sixteen but just after two

months her husband dies. Soon she is typified as ‘a poison bride’, ‘a widow’ and is thrown out of her in-laws house. She comes back to her paternal house where she falls in love with a young Doctor who happens to be her brother’s friend. However, since the Doctor is married to somebody else, she dies in grief. The story begins with the voice of the woman; she ‘speaks’ her own tale. The narrator, a young scholar, listens to her tale with curiosity, leaving the reader in a state of wonder and awe.

The period when Tagore and other writers were writing in Colonial India was filled with the debates and discourses on woman. The condition of the woman had become a matter of great concern for the ruling British administration as “surviving records inform us that a few women became educated, attained fame, and commanded armies but most were denied men’s opportunities to acquire knowledge, property, and social status”. [Forbes, 1999:19] The women’s status became, therefore, the main focus of “reformist activities of the colonial state as of the educated Indians”. [Bandopadhyay, 2004:151] The missionaries, Western observers despised Indians due to the miserable condition of the woman. The gender issue was the key for condemning Indian civilisation. James Mill in his *The History of British India* vehemently criticizes Hindus for their contempt towards woman. The educated class of Indians took this criticism seriously and began to reform the condition of the Indian woman. Such reforms though, argues Shekhar Bandopadhyay “affected only a few women belonging to their own classes and that too in a very restricted way”. [Bandyopadhyay, 2004:152] The writers of the period often responded to these debates and discourses. Some of woman of the period also voiced loudly against any form of seclusion through their writing.

Rashsundari devi, for example, at the age of eighty-eight began to educate herself. Disrupting the norms, she dismantled patriarchy by writing her autobiography in Bengali language. While recording her life history in “Amar Jiban” goes on to recount her mother in the following manner:

‘Then I asked my mother: “Ma! How could Dayamadhav hear our cries from the shrine at home?” Mother said: “He is the Great Lord, he is everywhere, so he can hear everything. He listens to everyone. The Great Lord has created all of us. Wherever and however people call out to him, he will listen. [Sarkar, 1999:160]

*I*n this expert from her autobiography, Rashsundari is voicing herself and talking about her mother. An old woman at eighty-eight, she is feeling rather full of gratitude towards her mother and her Lord,

Dayamadhav. The writing frankly shows the condition of woman in nineteenth century, where they were denied education and were cautiously guarded against any form of 'modernity' that was seeping into after the arrival of the British. Any form of British mannerism, particularly the 'English Education' was considered harmful for the young girls and they were rather asked to pay heed to domestic duties and become 'devoted wives'. Born in such upper caste family where caste and gender norms were not only relevant but also mandatory for a woman, Rashsundari devi, therefore, feels highly elated to be able to voice her own words:

> *Account of My Life*
> *Where are you, Lord of the universe, Lord who fulfils all wishes*
> *Come to my heart, grant me mine.*
> *I am an ignorant, mean creature, Moreover, I am but a mere woman*
> *How will I ever learn to sing your praises?*
> *Still, I yearn to chant your name*
> *Out of your great mercy, bless Rashsundari*
> *[Sarkar, 1999:161]*

Rashsundari devi as recorded by Tanika Sarkar "never got a chance to be educated. In those days, learning was thought to be a vice in women". Sarkar, later, clarifies that "she [Rashsundari] learnt to read and write with tremendous effort, all by herself. It was her religious quest that inspired her to educate herself". [Sarkar, 1999, 160] Later, though, she went to create history by writing by her own self in a language that "carries sincere and simple sweetness that it is impossible to put it down before one has finished it". [Sarkar, 1999:159]. While commending her writing, Jyotindranath Tagore wrote to her:

> *Can there be an idea of God that is more advanced than this? Every household ought to possess a copy of this book. Few books are as satisfying as this one. [20 Jaistha, Ballygunge] [Sarkar, 199:161]*

Indeed, the writing of Rashsundari devi is full of innocence and records her urgency to express herself in written words. Such seclusion was common during the period when she was writing; women were not allowed to read or write and, therefore, she had to stay awake for long hours during night to educate herself:

I was so immersed in the sea of housework that I was not conscious of what I was going through day and night. After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read...That was one of the bad aspects of the old system. The other aspects were not so bad. People used to despise women of learning...In fact, older women used to show a great deal of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hands of a woman. But somehow I could not accept this. [Tharu and Lalita, 1999]

The outspoken words of Rashsundari devi embodies within itself the sex-segregated world of the nineteenth-century India that clearly demeaned, denied and distanced woman from any form of learning. For long, it was believed in majority of Hindu houses that "a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow". [Forbes, 1996:33] While referring to seclusion in Hindu household Geraldine Forbes states that "women interacted primarily with women and it was women who enforced the prohibition against female education". "Many of the women who learned to read before 1870s", she reports, "have reported hiding their accomplishments from other woman". [Forbes, 1996:33] A woman, thus, came to be identified by gender roles that 'correspond with the separation of the social space into 'ghar' and 'bahir' (Chatterjee, 1989:239). The classic Bengali household that was formed after the introduction of English Education in colonial India in 1835, thus, vociferously argued in favour of the ideal Hindu/Indian woman who can do housework 'thoughtfully', and 'systematically'.

Since the time of Queen Elizabeth's I's initial granting of the charter to the East India Company on the last day of 1600 until the British secured the diwani of the Bengal in 1760s, the British presence in India was restricted. Also, it faced enormous threat from its European rivals including the Portuguese, Dutch, and French, and indigenous polities. Even during aggressive military conquest between 1760 to about 1830, 'the company remained heavily dependent upon Indian capital and lines of credit (to say nothing of the indigenously organized military labour markers) to sustain its powers (Peabody, 2012:79). Later, in the nineteenth century, Britain was able to consolidate its empire. Also, with the course of the century, it becomes self-evident that most of the political conditions and material needs that defined the British engagement with India led to different forms of bureaucratic arrangements that developed in order to cope up with

different circumstances. It is, therefore, interesting to see that new forms of knowledge emerged under these shifting conditions but 'they in their scope, audiences, institutional linkages, and modes of deployment, even where some individual representational motifs-such as oriental despotism remained persistent' (Peabody, 2012:80). Till 1813, the company acted as a 'traditional ruler', but later:

The scenario changed under the ideological pressure of the intellectual movements mentioned above and also because the Industrial Revolution in Britain necessitated an integration of the markets throughout India and her development as a source for agricultural raw materials. All this required an unequivocal assertion of sovereignty, much greater penetration into Indian economy and society and control over Indian trade not only with Britain but with other countries as well. (Bandopadhyay, 2004: 96).

With this entire utilitarian effort, the agency of the native was negated. Norbert Peabody, therefore, states that 'once the British arrived on the scene Indian apparently became 'passive onlookers' (Peabody, 2012, 80). In the words of Ashish Nandy, 'the ultimate violence which colonialism does to its victims [is] that it creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within psychological limits set by the latter' (Nandy, 1983:3). The legal judicial system then became a legitimate apparatus for the subjugation and later marginalization of the natives. Particularly, Woman as 'early modern subject' was made to suffer; they were doubly marginalised and oppressed by imposition of vicious laws. While examining the condition of the Hindu woman in colonial India, Charu Gupta describes how upper-caste reformers attempted to 'improve' "the popular cultural practices of the lower caste woman". [Gupta, 2001:26] Such cleansing of popular culture, argues Gupta, "had the effect of maintaining upper-caste hegemony; upper-caste norms and ideals became further embedded". [Gupta, 2001:26]

With the grant of Diwani in 1765 to the East India Company, the British obtained legal right to collect revenue in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The Nawabi administration and the Mughal system were in place, but they were "overtly and systematically undermined by the company" (Bandopadhyay, 2004:96). When Warren Hasting took charge as governor in 1772, he took full control of the justice system. Under the new system of 1772, each district was to have two courts, a civil court (or diwani adalat) and a criminal court (or faujdari adalat). Thus, the Muslim laws were

retained in criminal justice while both Muslim or Hindu laws were … in adjudicating the disputes related to inheritance and marriage. The division of the topics of law was in accordance with the English system, which left such matters as marriage, divorce, property, religious worship or excommunication, in the jurisdiction of the Bishop's courts, where the law applicable was the ecclesiastical law.

In this new system, the civil courts in India came to be presided over by the European District Collectors, and were advised and assisted by maulvis and Brahmin pundits. The maulvis and pundits were often used for interpreting indigenous laws to the District collector. There used to be an appeal court in Calcutta, which was presided over by the president and two members of the council. There was a certain change in the judicial system in 1787. Lord Cornwallis, through his code of 1793, set the rule of separating revenue collection from administration of civil justice as a safeguard for property rights. Shekhar Bandopadhyay, however, condemns the British effort to govern India by law and says 'the entire judicial reform of Cornwallis spoke of one thing-a total exclusion of Indians from the whole system' (Bandopadhyay, 2004:99). The complex task of the codification of laws was, however, done by 1837. The implementation had to wait due to the Uprising of 1857. In this new system, the South Asian woman became the worst victim of racial atrocity. In the Bengal presidency, many women had to lose their possession of property. For instance, in a legal brawl between Erkedeswar Singh and his widow elder sister-in-law, Janeswari Buasin, the sister-in-law eventually lost the possession of her property on account of being a "woman" and a widow. The judgement by Justice J. Phillimore read thus:

> *It appears that a former Maharaja of Darbhanga, who was the grandfather and predecessor-in-title of the appellant, made a Babuana grant of land to his younger son on condition that the Government revenue and cesses to which it was subject should be regularly provided for payment over to the Government, This younger son died leaving two sons of his own, Ekradeshvar and Janeshvar, who lived jointly for some time and then divided the property.*

On the death of Janeshvar, in April 1906, his widow had obtained possession of his share of the Babuana property. A suit was brought in the Civil Court by Ekradeshvar against the widow, claiming that, in

accordance with the custom, the property was his. On the 15th August, 1908, the Subordinate Judge decided in his favour. But on the 2nd August, 1909, the High Court at Calcutta (execution having been stayed mean-time) reversed this judgment. Ekradeshvar then appealed to the King in Council, and this Board, on the 22nd July, 1914, reversed the judgment of the High Court and decided in his favour. The property in question had remained throughout in the possession of the widow, and it was not until after the judgment of the Privy Council that Ekradeshvar obtained Possession.[1]

The judgement establishes the carefully crafted collusion between the Brahmin patriarchy and the British administration to subjugate woman. In this new 'Rule of Law', women were "not only to be protected but also disciplined" [Gupta, 2001:29]. Also, the books, oral songs, ritual traditions such as '*bashargarh*', popular among woman, were considered as "obscene". The first obscenity laws appeared in India in the late nineteenth century. Sections 292, 293, and 294 were explicitly designed to curb obscene material from people's drawing room. Authors like Rabindranath Tagore protested against such disciplining of woman through their writing. In many of his short stories, I argue, Tagore records female sensibilities, giving woman a space of their own. I will look at one of his short stories entitled 'Skeleton' to explore the manner in which the author gives voice to the silenced woman.

2. Woman and her Condition in Rabindranath Tagore's *Skeleton*

In a conversation with Jitendralal Bandopadhyay in May 1909, Rabindranath explains "how" and "why" he began to write short-stories:

> *To begin with I only wrote poetry-I didn't write stories. One day my father called me and said, 'I want you to take charge of the estates.' I was astonished: I was a poet, a scribbler –What did I know about such matters? But rather said, 'Never mind that-I want you to do it.' What could I do? Father had ordered me, so I had to go. Managing the jamidāri gave me opportunity to mix with various kinds of people, and this was how my story-writing began.[Radice, 1991: 4]*

Later in his life in 1935, in an English interview, Tagore referred to the background of his short stories and how they originated:

It was when I was quite young that I began to write short stories. Being a landlord I had to go to villages, and thus I came in touch with

village people and their simple modes of life. I enjoyed the surrounding scenery and the beauty of rural Bengal. The river system of Bengal, the best part of this province, fascinated me and I used to be quite familiar with those rivers. I got glimpses into the life of the people, which appealed to me very much indeed. At first I was quite unfamiliar with the village life as I was born and brought up in Calcutta and so there was an element of mystery for me. [Radice, 1991: 5]

William Radice in his introduction to the collection of short stories of Tagore argues that "it is of course not true that there was no Bengali prose to speak of before Tagore". Radice refers to Nagendranath Gupta (1861-1940) and Bankimchandra Chatterjee, but later goes on to clarify that Tagore "was the first Bengali writer to think of the short story as a serious art form".[Radice, 1991] Many have argued that his stories and plays have clear influence of British and American literature, but when looked at it closely, 'a taste for the macabre and ghostly had long been fostered in Bengal by folk-tales' and, therefore, like many south Asian authors, Tagore, too, was influenced "by the beauty of rural Bengal". He had a very intimate relationship with the folk literature of Bengal and in 1894 he gave a famous lecture entitled 'Bengali National Literature' and formed a literary society famously called Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, which was formed for the preservation of the Bengali literature, including folklore (Blackburn, 2010:158). Tagore's short stories including 'Skeleton', I argue, have thus the elements of Bengali folk tales. The woman as 'Skeleton' tells her tale in the manner of *Kathakatha* tales popular in Bengal. Only the religious elements of such tales are modified to narrate a life history that resonates with the grim life of the Bengali woman of the period:

> *When I was alive and young there was someone I feared like death. My husband. I felt like a fish caught in a hook. That is, a completely unknown animal had hauled me on a hook, snatched me out of the cool, deep, protective waters of my home, with no chance of escape. Two months after my marriage my husband died. The grief that was expected of me was supplied in full by in-laws. My father-in-law, pointing to numerous signs, told my mother-in-law, that I was what the Shastras called a 'poison-bride'. I remember that distinctly. [Radice, 1991: 85]*

The statements like 'A poison bride', 'I remember that distinctly', record the voice of the woman of the period. Such account of the newlywed bride refers to the rigidity within the conservative orthodox upper-caste

community of the Bengal of the nineteenth century. Only sixteen in her full bloom youthfulness, "she" was wedded to a man whom she used to fear. But after two months of the marriage, the man dies leaving her alone. Her in-laws classify her as 'a poison bride' and she returns back to her home. After some time, she falls in love with a Doctor, who happens to be her brother's friend. However, one day she comes to know that he is about to be married. Full of rage, she kills him and later on, at the age of twenty six, she turns into a 'skeleton'.

In many of his early short-stories, Tagore approaches the woman's question. In *Khata*, he narrates the life of a girl married at the age of five, in *Jibit* or *Mrita* (The Living or Dead, 1892), he describes the condition of Kadambini, whereas in *Denāpāona* (Owed and Owing, 1898), he comments on the "bourgeois greed and cruelty" [Chaudhuri, 2020:136] Supriya Chaudhury argues that "Tagore had witnessed the debate on child marriage, Hindu widowhood, female education (*strishiksha,*) and women's role in public life". She goes on to add that "though his own position is ambivalent on these issues, yet his stories play their part in uncovering the lives of women hidden from history'". [Chaudhuri, 2020: 136]

This ghost narrative has the eerie feeling of village folktales. Tagore had remained for a long time in the Shealdah region looking his father's estate. He veritably enjoyed the region. Soon he mingled with the people and their tales; therefore, many of his stories have the influence of the folk tales of rural Bengal:

A minor detail here: I had, beforehand, gone secretly into the doctor's surgery to collect some powder, and had taken my chance to mix a small part of it into the doctor's glass, unseen by anyone. I had learnt from the doctor which powders were fatal. The doctor swallowed the drink in one gulp, and looking at me piteously said in one gulp, and looking at me piteously said in a slightly choked and husky voice, "I must be off now."

'Flute-music began to play. I put on a Benares sari, and all the ornaments from my jewellery-chest; and I smeared vermilion liberally into my parting. Then I spread out my bedding under my favourite bakul tree. It was a beautiful night...

'How did you find my story?'
'Hilarious,' I replied.
The first crow cawed. 'Are you still there?' I asked.
There was no reply. Dawn-light was entering the room. [90]

Amazed by the silence in the room, the narrator suddenly asks "Are you still there?' What he receives in response is silence: "There was no reply". The condition of the nineteenth-century upper-caste Bengali woman was thus embedded within the norms of prohibition that restricted them to express themselves. The urge to "speak", therefore, is recurrent within the narrative. The narrator is amused to hear the voice of a 'naked woman'; he passionately listens to her tale. The woman, though, "disappears", leaving behind the history of subjugation and oppression of woman beyond the curtain. Santanu Das, in his "The Singing Subaltern", clearly shows how the unlettered Punjabi woman whose sons and husband have gone to war record their protest through songs. [Das, 2012, 10] He argues that such songs "point to a tantalizing area of subaltern female protest against the war recruitment". [Das, 2012, 10] Here, too, the woman is "silenced" by caste taboos, yet she speaks. Like Rashsundari, she narrates her life history to a young listener. In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak", Gayatri Chakravarthy Spivak examines the passionate lament of Bhubaneswari Devi and pronounces that "the female as a subaltern cannot be heard or read". [Spivak, 1988:306] Rajeswari Sunderrajan though argues that Bhubaneswari "serves as the figural example of the subaltern who cannot but, in fact, does speak", however, through "a coded message via her body". [Sunderrajan, 2010:112]. Here, too, the "skeleton" speaks but through a coded message via her body. Like Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, too, has recorded the voice of a peasant woman, Phalini in his short story, "Lullaby". Through her songs, Anand has portrayed the marginalisation of the women workers. Like Phalini of the Anand's Lullaby, the "skeleton" of Tagore is the figural example of "gendered subaltern" who "speaks" loudly through her body, "but submits to the violence of social system". [Amar, 2019: 15] Similarly many 'other' authors like Tagore gave voice to the woman of their period. However, some of them like Begum Rokeya 'disrupted the norms', by simply protesting against any form of seclusion. Begum Rokeya voice out loudly for the woman of her period through her texts. I will now look at her *Sultana's dream* (1905) in order to decode the idea of free woman.

3. Begum Rokeya and her *Sultana's Dream*

Born in 1880, Begum Rokeya Hossain is popularly known by the name "honorific Begum Rokeya". She is widely recognized in South Asia

as a pioneer in educator, feminist, activist and writer. She lived and worked in the part of the South Asian region today known as Bangladesh. December the 9th is celebrated every year in Bangladesh in order to remember her contribution to the formation of the idea nation and nationhood that led to the rise of 'Bangladesh'. Begum Rokeya grew up in a traditional Muslim family where strict prohibition was practiced. With the help of her brother, she was, though, able to learn English and later, with the help of her sister, she became well-versed in Bangla. Later, her husband Sakhawat Hossain encouraged her to pursue her progressive views and in 1905 she published her first short story entitled 'The Sultana's Dream' in *The India Ladies Magazine*. Edited by Kamala Sattahianadhan, it was the first of its kind of Indian periodical that targeted Indian Womanhood. Though it tended to shy away from publishing the kind of overtly anti-imperialist, it nevertheless led to publication of the works of popular feminists and activists such Cornelia Sorabji, Annie Beasant and Pandita Ramabai. Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* ended up being the popular piece, but later, she adopted 'Bangla' as the language of her speech to advocate Women's right to education. Her influential works written in Bangla include *Motichur*, a collection of feminist essays in two volumes, and *Padmarag,* the "Essence of Lotus". Although published twenty years after the publication of Sultana's Dream, "it reprises many of that story's themes, focusing on the injustices of gender disparities, on utopian female community, and on women's education" (Agathocleous, 2005:xi).

In the "Sultana's Dream" (1905), the protagonist, a Muslim woman, falls asleep and wakes up in a utopian world where women are the rulers.

> *One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But, as far I remember, I was wide awake. I saw the moonlit sky sparkling with thousands of diamonds-like stars, very distinctly*

Often distinguished for its Utopianism, the story is remembered for its satirical elements. The Utopian tradition spans from Plato's *Republic* (375 BC) and Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516) to Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). Most of these Utopian dramas are based on feminist imaginings and Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) like Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* is centred on woman and advocates as Rokeya

does, for female education. While describing the Utopian world of Rokeya, Tanya Agathocleous suggests:

> *Generally, both utopias and dystopias are associated with future; "Sultana's dream" seems like futuristic sci-fi because of its visionary space-age details. But according to the Queen of Ladyland, her country exists alongside India, which she refers to as "your country" when addressing Sultana. Sultana's dream world, then, is a parallel world that might be accessed, the story suggests, via female education, since this the key reform the Queen instituted that allowed for the radical transformation of society*. (Agathocleaous, 2005: xvii)

Geraldine Forbes and many other historians argue that in the nineteenth century, the women's question loomed large. This was not a question she enumerates of "what do women want"? but rather "how can they be modernized. Essentially, enamoured with "civilizing mission", it became necessary for the bourgeois elites to sanitise their space by reforming the ritual, practices and tradition condemned by the influential British writers. James Mill, in his condemnation of the status of Indian woman, argues in his *History of British India,* first published in 1826, that women's position can be used as an indicator of society's advancement. Having learned about Hindu society through reading Halhed's *Code of Gentoo Laws, translation of the Code of Manu*, some religious works, and accounts written by travellers and missionaries, he concludes: 'nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women…They are held, accordingly, in extreme degradation.' (Mill, 1968: 309-10). Similarly, Reverend E. Storrow who came to India in 1848 pronounced that the disunity in India is consequence of the low status of woman" (Forbes, 1996: 13). The British, thus, linked the military strength to the status of women, and concluded that "the British domination of India was natural and inevitable" (Hutchins, 1967). Begum Rokeya, in her *Sultana's Dream* (1905) dissociates herself from any missionary zeal to reform Indian woman and presents a strong protest against this formation of the image of Indian woman as 'pure' and 'sacred', but advocates for female education. She draws from the oral/folkloric world of Bengal to rebuke men for their disciplining discourse:

> *"As a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose, and the*

innocent women shut up in the Zenana! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?"

"We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the Zenana."

"Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?"

"Because it cannot be helped, as they are stronger than women."

"A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests."

"But my dear Sister Sara, if we do everything by ourselves, What will men do then?"

"They should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana?" (Begum Rokeya, 1905;2005, 6).

The social reform in Bengal beginning with abolition of sati in 1829 led to the popular discourse on gender relationship openly based on marriage tradition. It created a hierarchy between the 'high literature' of the emerging *bhadralok* and a variety of lowbrow tracts such as battala farces known for their sharp satirical commentary that often lead 'rebuke' and ridicule of upper-caste Brahmin norms. Begum Rokeya draws, I argue, from such farces to create a utopian world where women are free of subordination and are "capable of creating social order". She sharply rebukes the empire's project to reform woman by bringing them into class through education. The idea of the "Indian Womanhood" is at the centre of such language of protest and uniquely satirises *bhadralok* men for creating an "an amorphous urban culture" where women's world are sanitized and thereby shaped according to the Victorian morality norms. The collusion of feudal patriarch and British monarchs is, therefore, ridiculed as they are classified as "nothing"; as somebody who should be put into *zenana*.

Conclusion

Woman and her condition in the writings of the Rabindranath Tagore and Begum Rokeya, are, thus, represented with the finesse. They both are immersed and embedded into their local cultural tradition and hence they voice out loudly against the vilification, marginalisation and silencing of the woman. Born in an era when the idea to reform the woman

was necessitated by the colonial adaministrators and the Christian missionaries, they understood the effect of such reform on the women's body, Tagore depiction of womanly desire embodies within itself the urgency of the *bhadralok* community of Bengal to reform themselves. Begum Rokeya, though, voices out loudly for the idea of 'free woman' who have enough power to express their desire by putting men into zenana. Such liberal ideas was considered rather too bold by the feminist of the period, but was greeted warmly by the literati. Her contribution has inverted the image of south asian womanhood.

Notes

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