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Agonies of the Women in Rabindranath Tagore's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the multifaceted portrayal of women's suffering in Rabindranath Tagore's short stories, focusing on the intersection of patriarchal oppression, colonial modernity, and women's agency in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal. Through a close analysis of stories such as "Streer Patra" (The Wife's Letter), "Subha," "Haimanti," "Shasti" (Punishment), and "Laboratory," this study demonstrates how Tagore depicted women's psychological, emotional, and physical agonies while simultaneously presenting them as agents of resistance and transformation. Drawing on feminist literary criticism and contemporary scholarly discourse, the paper argues that Tagore's female characters navigate complex social structures marked by forced marriages, dowry violence, silencing of voices, and denial of autonomy. The research demonstrates that while Tagore exposed the dehumanizing effects of patriarchal systems, he also envisioned progressive female identities that challenged traditional norms, making his work a significant contribution to early feminist discourse in Indian literature.

Keywords: *women's suffering, patriarchy, Bengali literature, feminist criticism, colonial India, women's agency, dowry violence*

FULL PAPER**INTRODUCTION**

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel laureate and a towering figure of the Bengal Renaissance, occupies a distinctive position in world literature not merely as a poet and philosopher but as a progressive voice for women's emancipation. While his poetry earned him international acclaim, his short stories reveal a deeper engagement with the lived realities of women in colonial Bengal, particularly their suffering under entrenched patriarchal structures. Written between 1880 and 1941, Tagore's short stories chronicle the evolution of Bengali society during a period of intense social transformation, in which traditional Hindu customs collided with colonial modernity and an emerging nationalist consciousness. Within this tumultuous context, women bore the brunt of multiple oppressions, serving as what one scholar describes as the site where "the uproar of spiritual and intellectual tension between Bengali Renaissance and tradition" played out most visibly (Banerjee 272).

The agonies of women in Tagore's short stories manifest in various forms, including forced marriages, dowry-related violence, silencing of feminine voices, denial of education and autonomy, and psychological trauma inflicted by rigid social norms. However, these stories resist simple categorization as narratives of victimhood. As Patil observes, Tagore's female protagonists occupy a complex position, displaying both suffering and resistance, submission and rebellion (441). This duality makes Tagore's portrayal of women particularly significant for understanding early-twentieth-century discourse on gender, modernity, and social reform in India. Unlike many of his contemporaries who either idealized women as embodiments of tradition or dismissed their struggles as inevitable, Tagore created multidimensional female characters whose agonies expose systemic injustices while their agency points toward transformative possibilities.

This research paper examines the multiple dimensions of women's suffering in Tagore's short stories through a feminist literary lens, analyzing how these narratives critique patriarchal structures while simultaneously presenting women as agents capable of resistance and self-determination. By engaging with contemporary scholarly discourse on Tagore's feminist vision, this study demonstrates that the agonies depicted in these stories serve not merely as documentation of historical oppression but as powerful indictments of social systems that continue to resonate in contemporary contexts.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Tagore's portrayal of women has expanded significantly in recent decades, with critics approaching his work through various theoretical frameworks, including feminist criticism, subaltern studies, and postcolonial theory. Banerjee's influential analysis positions Tagore as a pioneering feminist whose female characters "championed the

cause of women's emancipation from the clutches" of patriarchal oppression (272). This interpretation is supported by multiple studies that identify Tagore as ahead of his time in recognizing women's autonomy and in challenging traditional gender norms.

The theme of women's silence and voicelessness has attracted particular scholarly attention. Islam's feminist analysis of "Shasti" examines how Chandara's character "enacts her agency in a hostile situation which creates her a rebel against the unfair treatment of women" (2). This interpretation complicates traditional readings that focus solely on victimhood, instead highlighting the subtle forms of resistance embedded in even the most oppressive narratives. Similarly, research on "Subha" has explored how the protagonist's muteness serves as a powerful metaphor for the silencing of women's voices in patriarchal society, with her "lack of agency symbolizing the broader suppression of female voices".

The dowry system emerges as a recurring theme in Tagore scholarship. Moslehuddin and Mahbub-ul-Alam's comparative study of "Haimanti" and "Aparichita" demonstrates how these stories address "traditional dowry and marriage system, which had been the major hindrances to women's emancipation and reasons for domestic violence" (1). This work builds on broader historical scholarship examining marriage and modernity in colonial Bengal, particularly the escalation of dowry demands in the early twentieth-century "marriage market" (Majumdar cited in Walsh). The infamous 1914 suicide of Snehalata Mukhopadhyay, a young woman who killed herself to save her father from dowry-related financial ruin, serves as historical context for understanding Tagore's treatment of this theme.

Recent scholarship has also examined the psychological dimensions of women's suffering in Tagore's work. Studies comparing Tagore with Western feminist writers highlight how his narratives explore "the emotional and psychological trauma inflicted upon women in forced marital unions". This psychological realism distinguishes Tagore's approach from both traditional Indian literature and contemporary reform writing, creating what scholars describe as unprecedented insight into female subjectivity.

Scholars have also mapped the evolution of Tagore's female characters across his career. Research indicates that from 1881 to 1897, Tagore focused on social injustices against women; from 1893 to 1913, he portrayed educated urban women fighting for rights; and from 1914 to 1941, his heroines "openly challenged the societal and religious oppression against women" (The Academic 1). This periodization helps contextualize individual stories within Tagore's broader feminist vision while recognizing shifts in his approach to representing women's agency.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, examining selected short stories by Rabindranath Tagore through the lens of

feminist literary criticism. The stories selected for analysis include "Streer Patra" (The Wife's Letter), "Subha," "Haimanti," "Shasti" (Punishment), "Aparichita" (The Unfamiliar Woman), and "Laboratory." These texts were selected for their explicit engagement with themes of women's suffering, patriarchal oppression, and female agency, as well as their prominence in the scholarly discourse.

The analytical framework draws primarily on feminist literary theory, particularly the works of Simone de Beauvoir and contemporary feminist critics who have examined gender dynamics in colonial and postcolonial literature. The research also draws on insights from subaltern studies, noting that Tagore's female characters often occupy marginalized positions within both colonial and indigenous power structures. By combining close textual reading with engagement with secondary scholarly sources, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Tagore portrayed women's agonies while simultaneously imagining possibilities for their liberation.

The Agony of Silence: Voicelessness and Marginalization

One of the most profound agonies experienced by women in Tagore's short stories is the forced silence imposed upon them by patriarchal society. This silencing operates both literally and metaphorically, denying women the ability to articulate their experiences, desires, and grievances. The story "Subha" presents perhaps the most explicit treatment of this theme through its protagonist, a young woman born mute who becomes a symbol for all women whose voices are systematically suppressed.

Subha's muteness is not merely a physical condition but also represents what scholars identify as "the voicelessness of women in patriarchal societies," in which women's inability to speak signifies their broader lack of agency. Her parents, ashamed of her disability, arrange her marriage to a man who neither understands nor appreciates her. The story reveals how society treats disabled women with particular cruelty, viewing them as burdens to be disposed of through marriage, regardless of their wellbeing. As research on this story notes, Subha's life becomes "grounded in societal expectations and familial pressures" that render her completely powerless.

The agony of silence extends beyond physical muteness to encompass the systematic denial of women's right to self-expression. In "Drishtidan," the character Kumu represents women who suppress their voices "for the sake of marital bliss and patriarchy" (ResearchGate). Her story demonstrates how women internalize oppression, learning from birth to view themselves as weak and powerless. The research indicates that "their passivity, powerlessness, lack of self-esteem, and self-confidence compel them to be voiceless and sightless" (ResearchGate). This learned helplessness constitutes a particularly insidious form of agony, as women become complicit in their own silencing.

Tagore's genius lies in his recognition that silence itself can become a form of resistance. While Subha cannot speak, her emotional depth and capacity for love create a powerful indictment of a society that values women only for their utility in marriage and childbearing. Her suffering exposes the cruelty of social systems that marginalize those who fail to conform to narrow definitions of normalcy and usefulness.

The Dowry System and Economic Exploitation

The practice of dowry emerges as one of the most devastating sources of women's agony in Tagore's short stories, transforming marriage from a social institution into an economic transaction that commodifies women. Historical research reveals that during the colonial period, Bengal experienced a transformation in marriage practices, with "escalating dowry demands" becoming characteristic of what contemporaries called "the modern marriage market" (Majumdar cited in Walsh). Within this context, Tagore's stories document the human cost of treating women as economic assets.

"Haimanti" stands as Tagore's most potent indictment of dowry-related violence. The story chronicles the suffering of a young bride whose in-laws treat her with kindness only as long as they believe her father is wealthy. When they discover that "her father is not that rich, they start to maltreat her as if she were supposed to be" nothing more than a source of wealth (ResearchGate 3). The story reveals how dowry transforms women into objects whose value depends entirely on the money and property they bring to marriage. Haimanti's husband Apu recognizes her suffering, confessing that "every moment, bit by bit, Haimanti was dying inside," yet he remains powerless to save her from a system larger than individual compassion (ResearchGate 3).

The agony inflicted by dowry extends beyond individual marriages to shape women's entire life trajectories. Scholarly analysis notes that dowry demands "led the women to face discrimination" and created what amounts to "untold oppression towards women from the male-dominated society" (StudioCu 1). "Aparichita" presents an alternative narrative where Kalyani's father breaks off her marriage "on the wedding day due to the demands of dowry from the spouse's uncle" (JETIR 3). While this action spares Kalyani from an exploitative marriage, it also demonstrates how women's lives remain subject to male decision-making, even when that decision-making is protective.

Tagore's treatment of dowry connects individual suffering to broader patterns of social injustice. The research on "Haimanti" emphasizes how the story illustrates "how dowry can affect someone's life" while recognizing that "the dowry has the power to manipulate any family of any society" (StudioCu 1). By focusing on the psychological and physical toll of dowry on women like Haimanti, Tagore humanizes what might otherwise remain an abstract social problem, forcing readers to confront the real agonies experienced by women trapped in marriages predicated on economic exchange.

Forced Marriage and Denial of Autonomy

The institution of arranged marriage, particularly when imposed without the woman's consent, constitutes another primary source of agony in Tagore's narratives. These marriages deny women the fundamental right to choose their life partners, reducing them to pawns in family strategies for social advancement or economic gain. Feminist analysis of Tagore's work emphasizes how his stories explore "the emotional and psychological consequences that women suffer in forced marriages" while "underlin[ing] the systemic oppression engineered by patriarchal norms".

"The Conclusion" (Samapti) presents the agony of a young woman whose "individuality undergoes transformation owing to repeated social interventions" until her "maturity in a way, implies a loss of freedom and a sort of self-confinement" (IJRAR 2). Mrinmayi possesses enough courage to resist initially, telling her husband, "No, I will never love you," and demanding, "Why did you marry me?" (IJRAR 2). Her story illustrates how even strong-willed women face relentless pressure to conform to marital expectations, with resistance gradually eroded by the combined weight of familial and social demands.

The agony of forced marriage intensifies when women are married at very young ages, before they can comprehend the implications of this life-altering commitment. Research on "Haimanti" notes that the bride's family allegedly "decreased the age of Haimanti" to make her appear more marriageable, while the groom's father "hurries for the wedding just to take a bit more dowry" (ResearchGate 2-3). This combination of age manipulation and financial exploitation demonstrates how multiple forms of oppression intersect in women's experiences.

Perhaps most tragically, forced marriages often result in profound emotional and psychological trauma. "Subha" depicts how the protagonist is married off despite her parents' knowledge that she will likely face rejection and cruelty. The story emphasizes that forced marriages are "bereft of their autonomy as performed purely out of patriarchal considerations rather than concern for women's wellbeing. This denial of autonomy—the inability to control one's own body, future, and relationships—represents a fundamental violation that shapes every aspect of these women's lives.

Violence and Femicide: The Ultimate Agony

The most extreme manifestation of women's agony in Tagore's stories appears in narratives of violence and femicide. "Shasti" (Punishment) presents a particularly harrowing examination of how patriarchal systems sacrifice women to preserve male honor and status. The story centers on Chandara, who becomes "an innocent victim to protect a man in patriarchy" (ResearchGate Gender Inequality 1). When her brother-in-law murders his wife in a fit of rage, Chandara is coerced into falsely confessing to the crime to save him from punishment.

Chandara's story reveals the expendability of women's lives within patriarchal structures. Scholarly analysis emphasizes that she "suffers miserably, becomes an innocent victim to protect a man in patriarchy" (ResearchGate Gender Inequality 1). Her willingness to accept execution for a crime she did not commit demonstrates the internalization of beliefs that position women's lives as less valuable than men's. However, beneath traditional interpretations of victimhood, feminist readings identify Chandara's agency in choosing her own death rather than accepting rescue from men who betrayed her. Islam's analysis argues that her character "enacts her agency in a hostile situation which creates her a rebel against the unfair treatment of women by the society" (2).

The theme of femicide extends beyond "Shasti" to encompass various forms of violence against women. In "The Wife's Letter," Mrinal describes how Bindu, her sister-in-law's younger sister, commits suicide by "setting their saris on fire," a method of self-immolation that Mrinal notes had "become a fashion with women" (The Academic 2). This casual reference to women's deaths by burning exposes a social crisis where female suicide becomes normalized rather than recognized as evidence of systemic failure.

Tagore's treatment of violence against women connects individual tragedies to broader patterns of gender inequality. Research examining "Shasti" and "Haimanti" together emphasizes how these stories address "gender inequality and femicide" while showing that "all women are vulnerable to patriarchy no matter what their social positions or roots are" (ResearchGate Gender Inequality Abstract). By depicting violence across different social contexts and circumstances, Tagore demonstrates that women's vulnerability stems from structural rather than individual factors.

Resistance and Agency: Beyond Pure Victimhood

While Tagore's stories document severe agonies inflicted upon women, they resist presenting women as purely passive victims. Instead, his narratives consistently depict female characters who exercise agency even within severely constrained circumstances, finding ways to resist, rebel, or reimagine their lives. This dimension of Tagore's work makes it particularly significant for understanding early feminist consciousness in colonial India.

"Streer Patra" (The Wife's Letter) represents Tagore's most explicit articulation of female resistance. Mrinal's decision to write to her husband after fifteen years of marriage and then leave permanently constitutes what scholars describe as a "protest story—a protest, against traditional orthodox patriarchal system, which is deeply rooted in Indian society" (JETIR Streer Patra 2). Written during a period when "colonial Bengal believed that if a woman writes, her widowhood is evident in the near future," Mrinal's letter represents a radical assertion of selfhood (The Academic 2). She declares her autonomous existence: "I too shall live. I am living" (Sharma cited in JETIR Streer Patra 3).

The agony Mrinal experiences—years of being treated as “Mejo-bou (second daughter-in-law)” rather than as an individual with her own identity (JETIR Streer Patra 3)—becomes the catalyst for her transformation. Her letter exposes how marriage functions to erase women’s individuality, replacing names with relational titles and reducing persons to functions. However, rather than succumbing to this erasure, Mrinal reclaims her agency through writing and departure. Scholarly analysis emphasizes that through Mrinal’s character, “Tagore has foreseen the new age of liberated women that is to emerge in the next few decades” (JETIR Streer Patra 3).

“Aparichita” presents another model of female resistance through Kalyani’s rejection of Anupam’s second marriage proposal. After her father breaks off their initial engagement due to dowry demands, Kalyani devotes herself to education and social work. When Anupam later proposes marriage again, Kalyani refuses, choosing celibacy and social service over marriage. Research on her character notes that this decision represents “protest against the dowry system”. At the same time, her “blooming persona is perhaps a reflection of Tagore’s vision of the emerging modern woman in India” (ResearchGate WOMEN’S SUFFERER 5). Kalyani’s agency lies in her ability to construct an identity and purpose independent of marriage, challenging the assumption that marriage represents women’s only meaningful life path.

Even in stories centered on tragedy, Tagore depicts moments of resistance that complicate narratives of pure victimhood. Chandara, in “Shasti,” exercises agency by choosing death on her own terms rather than accepting rescue from men who have failed her. While this agency operates within severely limited options, it nevertheless represents a form of resistance against patriarchal expectations. As Islam argues, Chandara’s decision demonstrates her “sheer will power against patriarchy” and establishes her as a figure of “resistance and resilience” (Abstract).

“Laboratory,” written near the end of Tagore’s life, presents perhaps his most optimistic vision of female agency. Sohini, the protagonist, manages her husband’s laboratory after his death despite a scandal surrounding her past. The story demonstrates how women can transcend society’s judgments to create meaningful contributions to public life. Research on this character emphasizes that “through Sohini’s character, Tagore envisioned a new age where men would initiate women’s education, and women would contribute their might in social service” (ResearchGate Emancipated 4). Her assertion that she might be “impure in body, but pure in mind” challenges patriarchal obsessions with female sexual purity while asserting alternative bases for evaluating women’s worth (ResearchGate Emancipated 4).

The Colonial Context: Modernity and Tradition

Women’s agonies in Tagore’s stories cannot be understood without reference to the colonial context in which they occur. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed intense debates about women’s status, with colonial authorities, indigenous reformers, and traditionalists all

claiming to represent women's interests while frequently ignoring women's own voices. Tagore's stories intervene in these debates by centering women's experiences and exposing how both traditional practices and colonial modernity often intensified rather than alleviated women's suffering.

Historical research reveals that colonial rule transformed marriage practices in Bengal, leading to what scholars describe as the emergence of a "marriage market" characterized by "escalating dowry demands" (Majumdar cited in Walsh). Rather than liberating women, colonial legal and economic structures often exacerbated existing inequalities. The dowry system intensified as education and employment became "monetized dowry equivalents," with families expected to pay more for grooms with university degrees or professional positions (Majumdar cited in Walsh). This colonial modernity created new forms of oppression layered atop traditional patriarchal structures.

Tagore's stories reflect this complex intersection of tradition and modernity. Characters such as Mrinal in "The Wife's Letter" represent educated women who encounter new ideas about individual rights and autonomy, yet remain trapped within traditional family structures. The agony they experience stems partly from this clash between modern aspirations and traditional constraints. Scholarly analysis emphasizes that Tagore's writings "portray the problems within Hindu custom and patriarchy, the uproar of spiritual and intellectual tension between Bengali Renaissance and tradition" (Academia Scripting Women 1).

The colonial context also shapes how Tagore imagines women's liberation. Unlike some reformers who advocated wholesale adoption of Western values, Tagore's vision centers on indigenous transformation. His female characters seek education, autonomy, and recognition of their humanity, but they do so within distinctly Bengali cultural contexts. This approach acknowledges the validity of indigenous culture while insisting on its evolution to accommodate women's full participation and recognition.

Conclusion

The agonies of women in Rabindranath Tagore's short stories encompass multiple dimensions of suffering, including silencing, economic exploitation through dowry, forced marriage, denial of autonomy, and violence extending to femicide. These stories document the systematic dehumanization of women under patriarchal structures that treated them as property to be exchanged, voices to be suppressed, and lives to be sacrificed for male honor and family status. Tagore's genius lies in his ability to portray these agonies with unflinching honesty while simultaneously imagining possibilities for resistance and transformation.

Through characters such as Mrinal, Kalyani, Sohini, and Chandara, Tagore presents women not merely as victims but as agents capable of challenging oppressive structures. His stories demonstrate what scholars

identify as the “transformative potential of women’s agency in resisting systemic oppression. This dual focus on agony and agency distinguishes Tagore’s work from both traditional literature that ignored women’s suffering and reform writing that reduced women to objects of male benevolence.

The significance of Tagore’s portrayal of women extends beyond its historical context. His stories remain relevant today because the structures that produced women’s agonies in colonial Bengal—patriarchal family systems, economic exploitation of women, denial of autonomy, and violence—continue to operate in contemporary societies. As research emphasizes, Tagore wrote about issues that “still exist globally” (ResearchGate Gender Inequality Abstract). His unflinching examination of women’s suffering, combined with his vision of female empowerment, offers resources for contemporary feminist struggles.

Moreover, Tagore’s approach demonstrates the power of literature to expose injustice while imagining alternatives. By creating complex female characters who embody both suffering and strength, vulnerability and courage, he challenges readers to recognize women’s full humanity. His stories insist that women are not merely daughters, wives, and mothers defined by their relationships to men, but individuals deserving of autonomy, respect, and the freedom to shape their own lives.

The agonies depicted in Tagore’s short stories serve multiple functions: they document historical realities of women’s oppression in colonial Bengal, they critique patriarchal structures that dehumanize women, and they imagine possibilities for female agency and empowerment. This combination of realistic portrayal, social critique, and visionary imagination establishes Tagore as what scholars rightly identify as “a harbinger of Feminism far ahead of his time” (ResearchGate Emancipated 5). His stories continue to offer insights into the nature of gender oppression and the possibilities for resistance, making them essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the intersection of gender, power, and social change.

The research demonstrates that while women in Tagore’s stories experience profound agonies, they are never reduced to mere victims. Instead, they emerge as complex individuals navigating impossible situations, finding ways to assert their humanity even within severely constrained circumstances. This portrayal honors their suffering while recognizing their agency, creating narratives that remain powerful more than a century after they were written. As contemporary scholarship continues to engage with Tagore’s feminist vision, his stories offer enduring testimony to both the agonies women have endured and the transformative potential of their resistance.

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