

Strong Women in Rabindranath Tagore's "Laboratory" and "Mussulmanir Galpa"

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Abstract: *The paper examines two strong women characters in Rabindranath Tagore's late short stories: "Laboratory" and "Mussulmanir Galpa." In the former story, Tagore portrays an unconventional woman, very different from his earlier fictional heroines, while in the latter he portrays a Hindu woman who, because of circumstances, takes the decision to convert to Islam. Both the stories reveal a changing world, unconventional in one, violent in the other. Through the strong women of these two stories, Tagore suggests that women cannot merely accept changes but must attempt to act to find positive solutions.*

Rabindranath Tagore's first short story, "Bhikarini," was published in the Sraban/Bhadra issue of *Bharati*, that is, in August/September 1877. His last short story, dictated in June 1941, shortly before his death in August that year, was "*Mussulmanir Galpa*"—which appeared posthumously in *Ritupatra* in Asharh 1362 (June 1955). This story has been labelled "a *khasra*," a draft, in the composite *Galpaguchha*, consisting of all four volumes (879). However, though the story is extremely short, it has the structure of a completed short story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end—surprising, but also in keeping with poetic justice. Tagore's last story, written in his own hand and not dictated, was "Laboratory," which was published in the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 15 Ashwin 1347 (September 1940), a few months before Tagore passed away.

Both "Laboratory" and "Mussulmanir Galpa" are very different from Tagore's earlier stories. As Tagore himself said in an interview with *Forward* in 1936, his early stories were based on his contact with villagers, who "seemed to belong to quite another world so different from that of Calcutta" (851). He went on to say that these stories had "the freshness of youth" (851). His later stories, he regretted, "haven't got that freshness, that tenderness of earlier stories" (852). However, he believed that these later stories "have greater psychological value and they deal with problems" (b53). When he was young he did not have these social or political problems in his focus. He pointed out that a writer does not stay static but changes with time and different experiences. In his words, "All of us have different incarnations in this very life. We are born again and again in this very life. When we come out of one period, we are as if born again. So we have our literary incarnations also" (853).

In both "Mussulmanir Galpa" and "Laboratory," Tagore discusses psychological and social issues that he had not dealt with earlier. Since both these stories focus on women characters, it would be good to examine a number of Tagore's earlier short stories which focus on women characters. In "Jibito O Mrito" (Living and Dead), published in *Shadhona* in Sraban 1299, that is July 1892, Tagore narrates the story of Kadambini, who everyone thinks is a ghost. Kadambini had been taken to the cremation grounds to be burned after she was supposedly dead. However, the rain starts

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and the men given the task of burning her leave the place. Kadambini revives. When she realizes she is alive, she tries to return to her family. However, she is shunned. Finally, Kadambini has to die in order to prove that she had not died earlier. As Tagore puts it, "*Kadambini moriya proman korilo she more nai*" (91).

In "*Streer Potra*" (The Wife's Letter), published in *Sabujpotra* in Sraban 1321 (July 1914), Tagore writes what might well be considered a feminist story. In this epistolary short story, Mrinal, a typical Bengali housewife, leaves home after the suicide of Bindu, purportedly to travel to Hindu holy sites. She writes the letter to her husband, narrating the story of Bindu and ending with the bold statement that though she will not commit suicide like Bindu, she will not return to her husband's patriarchal home: "*Ami aar tomader shei satash number makhan baraler galite phirbo na. Ami Bindu ke dekhechhi. Sangsharer majkhane meyemanusher parichayta je ki ta ami peyechhi. Aar amar darkar nei*" [I will not return to number twenty-seven, Makhan Baral Lane. I have seen what happened to Bindu. I have learned what the place of women is in the world. I do not need that any more] (575).

No, she assures her husband, she is not going to commit suicide. She reminds her husband of Mira Bai. Mira Bai did not kill herself, and neither will she:

Tumi bhabchho aami morte jachhi – bhoy nei. Omon purano thatta tomader shonge aami korbo na. Mira Bai o to amari moto meyemanush chhilo – taar shikol o to kom bhari chhilo na. take to banchbar jonye morte hoy ni. Mira Bai tar gane bolechhilo "Chharuk Baba, chharuk Ma, chharuk je jekhane achhe, Mira kintu legei roilo, prabhu – tate tar ja hobar ta hok." Ei lege thakai to benche thaka. Aamio banchbo. Aami banchlum. (576)

[You think I am going to commit suicide. Don't worry. I will not play that old joke on you. Mira Bai too was a woman like me. Her shackles were no heavier than mine. She did not commit suicide in order to live. Mira Bai said in one of her songs, "Let my father forsake me, let my mother forsake me, let who will forsake me. Mira will continue to survive, Lord – let whatever will happen to her happen." This continuing to survive is living.

I too will live. I am living.]

Like Ibsen's Nora, Mrinal leaves home and husband, rejecting strictures placed on women by a patriarchal society. However, in his two late short stories, "Laboratory" and "Mussulmanir Galpa," Tagore portrayed two strong women characters who did not leave home unlike Mrinal – or Ibsen's Nora. Of course, in "Mussulmanir Galpa," circumstances compel Kalpana to leave home twice – the first time when she gets married and has to leave for her husband's house and the second time when she is rejected because she has been abducted and dwelt in a Muslim's home. Kalpana returns to the home of the old Muslim who rescued her and gave her shelter. She does not, however, just come to terms with her situation but makes a decision which derives from the new knowledge that her experiences have imparted to her. Moreover, she is not a passive victim at the end of the story, but a strong woman who acts when the time comes. Neither Sohini in "Laboratory" nor Kalpana in "Mussulmanir Galpa" believes that the answer to the problems is leaving home. The answer is acting.

Tagore's interest in science is reflected in "Laboratory," which is very different from Tagore's other short stories in its portrayal of Sohini, whose values are very different from that of Tagore's earlier heroines. Tagore had to face adverse comments

about this story. In *Kabi-Katha*, Prashantachandra Mahalanbish describes the poet's asking him how people had reacted to "Laboratory." Has everyone condemned it, Tagore asked. Are people saying that the eighty-year-old poet has gone mad? Are they saying he shouldn't have written it? But, Tagore went on to say, "*Aami ichha korei to korechhi. Sohini manushta ki rokom, taar moner jor, taar loyalty, ei holo ashole boro kotha – taar deher kahini taar kachhe tuchho*" [I wrote it deliberately. The kind of person that Sohini is, her determination, her loyalty – these are the essential parts of the story, not what she does with her body] (865).

Bharati Ray in her essay, "'New Woman' in Rabindranath Tagore's Short Stories: An Interrogation of 'Laboratory,'" has discussed the feminist perspective of the story, calling Sohini a "New Woman." And, indeed, Sohini is a strong woman. However, apart from Sohini, there are two other strong women in the story: an older woman – the *pishima*, the paternal aunt, of the young scientist that Sohini selects to look after her late husband's laboratory, and Nila, her daughter. My reading of the story is that Tagore gives us three strong women in the story who influence the men in their lives and who conflict with each other, with Tagore suggesting that it is women like Sohini who can continue the work started by men.

Nila is apparently more of a "New Woman" than is Sohini. Nila smokes cigarettes and even cigars, she wears a silk nightdress, she makes the first overtures to Reboti. However, Nila's influence is negative, detrimental to the young scientist's dedication to his work. Pishima's influence is also detrimental to both Reboti the boy and the man. She hovers suffocatingly over him like a mother. And, at the end, when he is about to get married to Nila, Pishima breaks off the marriage and leaves, followed meekly by Reboti.

The strong woman who works for good is Sohini. Interestingly, Tagore did not make her a Bengali but a Punjabi. She comes to Nanda Kishore, a scientist, asking him to rescue her and her Aima who brought her up. Aima needs seven thousand rupees to save her property. If Nanda Kishore rescues them from their predicament, Sohini will marry him and never leave – though she makes it quite clear to him that there have been other men in her life. When Nanda Kishore dies, carrying out an experiment, Sohini decides she will look after the laboratory and hires Reboti. Initially, she thinks that Reboti will be a good match for Nila, but eventually realizes that Reboti, who has never been exposed to young women, will suffer from this relationship. She forbids the two to meet, but when she has to leave to attend to her Aima who is ill, Nila tempts Reboti. Under Nila's influence, Reboti leaves the laboratory to become the president of a society and to attend parties. He agrees to marry Nila.

But Sohini is determined to save her laboratory. Earlier, she had told Reboti's teacher with whom she had become friendly, "*Ami Punjaber meye, amar hate chhuri khele shahaje. Aami khun korte pari ta she amar nijer meye hok, amar jami-pader umedar hok*" [I am a Punjabi woman. I can wield a knife skillfully. I can kill anyone, whether it is my own daughter or whether it is my son-in-law] (722). When Sohini returns to find that not only has Nila succeeded in distracting Reboti from his work, but is also consulting lawyers about how to get a share of Nanda Kishore's property, Sohini reveals her secret. Nila is not her husband's daughter. Nanda Kishore had known that; she had hidden nothing from him. However, she gave him his due and she would continue to look after his legacy. Dr. Chowdhury suggests that when Reboti's infatuation is over, he will return to his work. No, says, Sohini, he will not come near

her laboratory. However, as the marriage is going ahead, Pishima enters and calls Reboti. Reboti leaves immediately. He doesn't look behind even once.

Finally then, Sohini is left alone with her laboratory. Tagore does not tell us what will happen to her laboratory. But, in telling the story of how Sohini acquired the laboratory and how she attempted to preserve it, we get Tagore's picture of what a strong woman can do. Unlike Tagore's other women, she not only confesses in private to being a bad woman, she also gives birth to an illegitimate child and, when she is about to lose her husband's legacy, discloses in public the truth about Nila's parenthood. After her husband's death, she does not become a proper widow. She tells the professor, "*Amar boyosher bidhoba meyera thakur-devatar dalalder dalali diye porokaler dorja phank kore nite chay. Apni shune hoyto raag korben, aami o shab kichui bishwas kori ne*" [Widows of my age frequent holy places and meet priests who aver they can open the doors to the after-life. You may be angry when you hear this, but I do not believe any of this] (698).

Sohini is attracted to Dr. Chowdhury and kisses him once the first time, twice the second time so that the professor jokes with her, asking her whether the kisses will increase exponentially. When Sohini wants Reboti to become interested in Nila, she powders her own hair so that she will look older, dresses Nila in an attractive manner and even points out how attractive she looks. She prepares special delicacies for Reboti – *badamer takti, pistar barfi, chandrapuli, khirer chhanch, malaiyer barfi, bhapa doi* – and says that Nila has prepared these dishes herself. Afterwards, of course, she tries actively to prevent their marriage. The marriage does not take place, but not because of Sohini but because of an older strong woman.

In the story, Tagore has the professor discuss matriarchal society with Sohini. In Bengal, Dr. Chowdhury says, there was matriarchal society in the past. But that is not so today, responds Sohini. It still is, says the professor. Is there any other country in the world where men cry out to the mother? (699). Was "Laboratory" Tagore's attempt to show what matriarchal society would be like? In *Sultana's Dream* (1905),¹ Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein had shown a matriarchal society where women were scientists and teachers. In Tagore's story, men are scientists and teachers; women are caregivers and preservers of men's legacy. It is not enough.

In "Laboratory," Tagore introduces a Punjabi woman; in "Mussulmanir Galpa," he introduces a Muslim woman. Tagore has few Muslim characters in his writings, the most outstanding, of course, being the Kabuliwallah in the eponymous short story.² "Mussulmanir Galpa" is unique for two reasons. In the eponymous novel *Gora*, Tagore had analyzed what it means to be a Hindu, Christian or Brahmo. Gora believes in the purity of caste until he finally learns the truth about his race and religion. In "Mussulmanir Galpa," where a Hindu woman becomes a Muslim and marries a Muslim, Tagore seems to suggest through her that one can believe in both religions: Hinduism and Islam. This short story is also perhaps unique in that not only does the

¹ "Sultana's Dream" was written in English and published in *Indian Ladies Magazine* (Madras) in 1905. Three years later, the story came out in book form from S.K. Lahiri and Co., Calcutta.

² The Bangla original, "Kabuliwallah" (1892), is anthologized in Rabindranath Tagore's *Galpaguchha* (Calcutta: Vishwabharati, 2010), 110-115. The first English translation in 1912 by Sister Nivedita is available online at a number of sites. Accessed January 22, 2012. Other online sites edit the word "Cabuliwallah" to "Kabuliwallah."

female protagonist not die, she is also able to save another woman – Mrinal had failed to save Bindu.

Apart from the earlier “Kabuliwallah,” Muslims appear as minor characters in Tagore’s stories. And even in this short story, Tagore plays upon the racial prejudices and fears that Bengalis have of Kabuliwallahs: they are none too clean, they are violent and hot-tempered, and they kidnap little children and put them in their ubiquitous bags. Thus, when the stranger first appears, his appearance is not very pleasant: “He wore the loose soiled clothing of his people, with a tall turban; there was a bag on his back, and he carried boxes of grapes in his hand.”

Kabuliwallahs were reputed to be kidnappers and Mini is initially terrified of him: “overcome by terror, she fled to her mother’s protection, and disappeared. She had a blind belief that inside the bag, which the big man carried, there were perhaps two or three other children like herself.” Between the narrator and the Kabuliwallah, Mini manages to overcome her fears. Mini’s mother is not as easily convinced that the man is harmless. She rebukes her husband for allowing the Kabuliwallah to mix with their daughter and begs her husband to keep a watchful eye on him.

I tried to laugh her fear gently away, but then she would turn round on meseriously, and ask me solemn questions.

Were children never kidnapped?

Was it, then, not true that there was slavery in Kabul?

Was it so very absurd that this big man should be able to carry off a tiny child?

In the course of the story, the little Bengali girl and the bearded Afghan become friends, and the narrator is surprised to find Mini laughing and talking with the Kabuliwallah. Eventually, however, Mini’s mother’s fears come true. The Afghan is a violent man. When a customer does not pay him for a shawl he has bought, the Kabuliwallah stabs him to death and is marched off to prison. When the Kabuliwallah returns eight years later, Mini is about to get married. Her father, who had almost completely forgotten about the Afghan, is unhappy at the appearance of this jailbird on his daughter’s wedding day. It is inauspicious, he thinks. However, by the end of the story, Tagore shows how even this violent man can have a soft side to him. The man had left behind a daughter, who would be the same age as Mini. The reference to this daughter makes the narrator empathize with the Kabuliwallah. Unable to do much to help him earlier – there had been no attempt to intercede for him with the police – or now, he curtails on the marriage celebrations so that Rahmat³ can go to visit his daughter who, like his own, must have grown up as well.

It is significant that the Afghan is referred to by the term “Kabuliwallah.” The term was pejorative. What Tagore was attempting to do was break down racial prejudices and show the human side of an outsider. There is no reference to the man’s religion, but we may read into the story both race and religion – concerns that Tagore brought up in *Gora* (1910). It was not, however, till the end of his life that Tagore took up the theme of religion again in his fiction.

In “Mussulmanir Galpa,” Tagore has two Muslim characters: Hobir Khan, an elderly Muslim, who married a Hindu woman, and Kamala, who is Hindu but becomes

³ The name in the Bangla original is Rahmat, but Sister Nivedita used the name Rahman.

a Muslim. In the story, Kamala gets married and leaves home for her new home. On the way, the bridal party is attacked by dacoits. Kamala manages to escape and is given shelter by Hobir Khan. Hobir Khan takes Kamala to his home and tells her that she can pray according to her religion without fear of pollution. There is a Hindu prayer room in the house – where Hobir Khan’s Hindu wife would pray. But Kamala does not want to stay in Hobir Khan’s house and pleads with him to take her back to her uncle’s place. But when she reaches her uncle’s house, she is rejected as inauspicious and polluted. She has been widowed and she has stayed in a Muslim household.

Kamala returns with Hobir Khan to his house. Though Hobir Khan has told Kamala that she can keep her own religion, she tells him that her own religion had rejected her, the god of that religion had rejected her, dishonored her. She first got the affection she wanted in Hobir Khan’s household. Her god is therefore neither Hindu nor Muslim. But she has fallen in love with Hobir Khan’s second son and asks to be converted: “*Tumi mussulman kore nao amake, tate amar apatti hobe na – amar nahoy dui dharma i thakuk*” [Convert me to Islam. I have no objection. Let me then belong to both religions] (747). By choosing to convert to Islam, Kamala could remarry. Unlike Hindu widows, Muslim widows could marry again. There was no religious stricture against widow remarriage in Islam – Bibi Khadija, the Prophet’s wife, was a widow when he married her.

In the twist that readers have come to expect at the end of short stories, the uncle and aunt who had rejected Kamala now suffer the same fate through their daughter, Sarala. Sarala, like Kamala, gets married and the bridal party sets off for the bridegroom’s home. On the way, the bridal party has once again to pass through a dacoit-infested region. Dacoits set upon the bridal party. This time, however, it is not Hobir Khan who rescues the new bride, but Kamala – now renamed Meherjaan. Meherjaan returns Sarala to her aunt and uncle. She tells her uncle that they can take Sarala back: she has not been polluted. She tells her cousin, “*Amar bon jodi kokhono dukhe pore tobe mone thake jeno tar mussulman didi ache, take raksha korar jonye*” [If my sister is ever in trouble, she should remember that she has a Muslim sister to rescue her] (748).

Why did Tagore, almost fifty years after he wrote “Kabuliwallah,” write another story where the protagonist is a Muslim, and a Muslim woman at that? Perhaps, Tagore, who was always conscious of what was happening around him, was responding to the Hindu-Muslim tensions at the time. In 1905, when Bengal had been partitioned along religious lines, he had protested; in 1911, he had written “Jana Gana Mana,” celebrating the end of that partition and celebrating the multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-religious society that was India. However, as the years passed, the tensions between Muslims and Hindus became more acute. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the leader of Indian Muslims, had, during the first two decades of the 20th century, advocated Hindu-Muslim unity and helped to shape the 1916 Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the All-India Muslim League. In tribute to his mediating role, Sarojini Naidu called Jinnah “the best ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity” (Quoted Noorani).⁴ However,

⁴ In a biographical note on Jinnah in *Mohomed Ali Jinnah: An Ambassador of Unity*, published by Ganesh & Sons, Madras, in 1918, Sarojini Naidu said, “He has true stuff in him and that freedom from all sectarian prejudice which will make him the best ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity.” Ian Bryant Wells draws upon Sarojini Naidu’s comment for the title of his book: *Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity: Jinnah’s Early Politics*.

when the Indian National Congress agreed to follow Mohandas Gandhi's campaign of *satyagraha* or non-violent resistance, Jinnah resigned from the Congress. The Congress and the Muslim League drifted further apart.

Serious proposals started being made for a separate state for Muslims in India. The growing division between Muslims and Hindus may be noticed in the Urdu poet, Muhammad Iqbal, who changed from patriotic Indian to pan-Islamist Muslim and later to one of the early advocates of a Muslim state. In 1904, Iqbal wrote the song "*Tarana-e-Hindi*," the opening lines of which are "*Sare jahan se accha hai hindostan hamara/hum bulbulein hain iski ye gulistan hamara*" [India is better than all the rest of the world. We are its nightingales, it is our garden]. However, in 1910, Iqbal changed the wordings of this poem so that it became "*Tarana-e-Milli*," a song for Muslims. The opening lines of the song become "*Chin-o-arab hamara, hindostan hamara/muslim hain ham, vatan hai sara jahan hamara*" [China and Arabia are ours, Hindustan is ours/We are Muslims, the whole world is our homeland]. In a speech given at a Muslim League session at Allahabad in 1930, Iqbal called for a state for Muslims in India. In 1933, Choudhary Rahmat Ali published a pamphlet advocating the creation of a new state which he named "Pakistan," comprising "the Muslim-majority areas of India, the five Northern units of India viz: Punjab, North-West Frontier Province (Afghan Province), Kashmir, Sind, and Baluchistan." The name of the state, meaning "the pure land," was composed of the initial letters of Punjab, Afghanistan, and Kashmir, with the suffix "istan" taken from Baluchistan – the provinces that would form the new state.⁵ By 1940, Jinnah had come to believe that Indian Muslims should have their own state. In March that year, the Muslim League, led by Jinnah, passed the Lahore Resolution⁶ demanding a separate nation.

These Hindu-Muslim tensions also undoubtedly affected Tagore. It is possible that in his last short story, he attempted to stress that Hindus and Muslims could live together from the example of Hobir Khan – who had a Hindu wife – and Kamala, who converts to Islam but stresses that she will be faithful to both religions. As Tagore had noted in an interview published in *Forward*, he did not have social or political problems before him when he was young. It is quite clear that in "*Mussulmanir Galpa*," the political problems and schisms of the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century were bothering Tagore. Perhaps he chose as his protagonist a woman rather than a man because a woman was deemed to be more vulnerable, perhaps because a woman was not concerned with political problems but was affected by both social and political problems, perhaps because, earlier in *Gora*, he had analyzed the situation of a man brought up as a Hindu but whose parents were Christians. Thus, both "*Laboratory*" and "*Mussulmanir Galpa*" are significant stories of a changing world – and in the latter, a more violent world – and in both of which Tagore attempts through his created characters not to come to terms with it but to find positive solutions through strong women.

⁵ Bengal did not figure in Choudhary Rahmat Ali's scheme – though Bengal was most active in the struggle for Pakistan.

⁶ The resolution was tabled by A.K. Fazlul Haq.

This is an expanded version of a talk given at a discussion of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories on the occasion of the Nobel laureate's birth anniversary, organized by The Reading Circle and the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, Dhaka, in May 2012.

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