



## 'SILENCED VOICES'- THE INTERSECTION OF SEXUALITY AND DISABILITY IN TAGORE'S "DRISHTIDAAN"

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**Abstract:** Rabindranath Tagore's collection of short stories *Golpo Guchcha* (1926), is often credited for being the repository of socio-cultural gems in the form of stories like "Kabuliwala", "The Broken Nest", "Postmaster", "Hungry Stones", "Letter from the Wife" and others. What we find in these stories are tales of human endeavour, perseverance and agency. But interestingly enough, even though Tagore ascribes these heroic qualities to ordinary men and women, he represents them and treats them as 'normal', part of the 'normative' society. Through this paper, attention is being drawn towards a blatant lapse on the part of the Nobel laureate. True that here are stories in the collection that document the lives of the 'disabled' and the 'abnormal' but they are stripped of agency and dignity. What did Tagore's society perceive of the threat of a 'disabled' woman's sexuality and how did it think of containing it? The paper with its focus on sex/sexuality, 'disability' converging on the woman is designed to reveal the power matrix within society that drives 'women with disabilities' into social isolation. With this we evaluate literature generated disability- knowledge, which often functions as the primary manufacturer of meaning of the lives of 'women with disabilities'.

**Keywords** – Disability, Sexuality, Women with disabilities, Bengal Renaissance, Patriarchy

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**Analysis:** Rabindranath Tagore's collection of short stories *Golpo Guchcha* (1926), is often credited for being the repository of socio-cultural gems in the form of stories like 'Kabuliwala', 'The Broken Nest', 'Postmaster', 'Hungry Stones', 'Letter from the Wife' and others. What we find in these stories are tales of human endeavour, perseverance and agency. But interestingly enough, though Tagore ascribes these heroic qualities to ordinary men and women, he represents them and treats them as 'normal', part of the 'normative' society. Through this paper, attention is being drawn towards a blatant lapse on the part of the Nobel laureate. True that here are stories in the collection that document the lives of the 'disabled' and the 'abnormal' but they are stripped of agency and dignity.

If stories like "Subha" (written in 1892) and "Drishtidaan" (written in 1898), have representation of 'women with disabilities', why are they inert, compliant and asexual, far from the imaginative, resourceful and sexually liberated women like Charulata or Mrinal from the other stories? Why, we do question, this lack of agency of Subha and Kumu? Is Tagore then validating the devastating and repressive regimes of the patriarchal and the 'normative', apparently working in complicity with each other? Moreover, such a projection by Tagore at the time of Bengal Renaissance, destroys his authority as a champion of women's rights. As an integral part of the Jorasanko Thakurbari, Tagore had long been accepted as a force, writing against women's oppression.

The story of Rabindranath Tagore under scrutiny here is "Drishtidaan" (written in 1898), set in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The text narrates the story of Kumu, a housewife from Calcutta, gone 'blind' due to medical carelessness. Despite the fact that the century had campaigners for the betterment of women's condition in the society like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and members of the illustrious Tagore family, prescribing new-fangled norms concerning women in society, we discern a near absence in the discourse of the times of issues affecting 'women with disabilities'. The 'normative', patriarchal society typically perceives of the blind woman as a burden, worthless, incapacitated and without sexual urges and privileges. Though belonging to an affluent family, Kumu is denied the basic right to freedom, education and the right to live a fulfilling and happy life.

Kumu, the visually impaired woman of "Drishtidaan", was a child-bride, married at eight but she too is not shown to have got any access to education. Her husband, Abhinash, though is found

to be studying for a degree in medicine and her brother in pursuit of the degree of Bachelor of Law. Often in Tagore's fiction we find instances too of women who transcend 'the stereotypes of their sex, caste and race to participate in a broader social vision, becoming role models for a new generation of Bengali women' ii. "Such characters as Lolita, Sucharita and Anandamayee are shown in the process of shaping new identities and personal autonomy as they developed alternate ways of interaction with men and society," iii argues Kathleen M. O'Connell in her essay, "Rabindranath's Role in Women's Emancipation." Tagore, as early as, in 1901 had wanted to include girls in his ashram at Santiniketan and, between 1908 and 1909, six girls were in fact inducted into the ashram, who joined boys in "classes, sports and mandir services." iv In his fundamental essay, "The Education of Women" (1915), Tagore goes on to claim equality between the sexes when it comes to education, wherein men and women are both imbued with "the desire to know which is the law of human nature". v Now, within that percentage of women having the 'privilege' of education, do we find the representation of 'women with disabilities', the like of Kumu? Why is she not invited to partake in this grand project of female education, radiant with the "new light" coming from "the arena of literature?" vi For 'women with disabilities', there is a fundamental curtailing of rights, privileges and roles. Being 'disabled', and being a woman render Kumu almost invisible in the social radar. They cease to exist as 'normal' people with any 'ability' to perform 'normal' functions. Tagore's female agent Charulata, in "Nastanir", also a child bride, can grow up and mature into a beautiful, intelligent and desirable woman, who can channelize the domestic and sexual frustrations within marriage by having her creative writing published in contemporary newspapers, and indulge in a sexual liaison with Amal her cousin-in-law. But not Kumu. Shanaaz Majiet, disability theorist and activist, writes of "debilitating stereotypes behind which disabled women lose their individual identities. For example, when she loses the ability to walk, she is also robbed of her sexuality, her intellect and her sense of self vii." Thus, Kumu's sudden blindness renders her incapable of performing all those activities that she was habitually performing since her marriage at the age of eight.

With the word woman, 'normal' society associates "heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships, work and motherhood. These terms ... [are] almost entirely missing from the associations with the words "disabled woman" viii "It is also stigma, that is a negative evaluation, which places the person

with a "disability" outside some socially acceptable standard for human attributes and performance" xiii. Thus, a woman with breast cancer becomes less desirable as the disease itself is perceived as life threatening and because it affects the breast, one of the potent symbols of female sexuality.

Patriarchy, operative within 'normal' society, determines the parameters of female beauty and sexuality, and thus regards women with visible/invisible 'disabilities', undesirable and incapable of possessing sexual desires. Kumu is considered by the contemporary society as imperfect, unwanted and undesirable which results in the punishment of sexual rejection. Rothrock and D'Amore, in their 1992 study of the impact of chronic pain on sufferers, wrote: "the two most common causes for decreased sexual activity...are disinterest and fear of pain ix." In "Drishtidaan" we have Kumu acutely suffering from pain in the period leading up to her blindness. We are not informed whether this pain becomes constant and chronic or it stops after she goes completely blind. Pain or no pain there is definitely decreased sexual activity in Kumu's life after she goes 'blind'. We are made aware how at the age of fourteen, Kumu had given birth to a stillborn. But from then onwards there is a complete silence on the functional aspect of Kumu's female body. If "the institution of marriage in the Brahminical culture is meant to achieve one specific purpose above all else: "putrarthekriyate bharyaxv," then how come Abinash does not get Kumu to produce a son? Before her blindness, Kumu had almost experienced a happy marriage, a gratifying conjugal relationship but then after the onset of blindness there is an eerie absence of intimacy and sexual passion between the married couple. We find Abinash, labouring for the love and attention of Hemangini, a beautiful and nubile virgin, brought into the household in the pretext of helping the 'blind' wife. Besides, there are references to Avinash's sexual exploits in the town of Hashimpur, as he finally emerges as a successful, rich but unscrupulous doctor. The husband's penchant for satiation of sexual desires outside marriage was not that scandalous in the age and culture that even proscribed certain norms for the true *bhadralok*. Visiting prostitutes or keeping concubines was definitely one among many such indicators. One who aspired to become a *babu* in the nineteenth century Bengal had to be indulging in the following -"khushi" (pleasure); "khanki" (whore); "khana" (lavish meals); and "khairat" (charity, the euphuism used to persuade the *babu* to spend all his wealth on his hangers-on) x." But what about the wife's sexual desires? Her natural cravings for satiation? Why is Tagore's Kumu

reduced to merely a vegetative state? Why does she wear the garb of a devout, passionless wife devoted to preserving the sanctity and purity of her home, when we encounter Bimala's sexual agency in Ghare Baire as "she moves from the *andarmahal* of her stately bedroom to the *bahir* of her opulent drawing room, from her gentle, genteel zamindar husband Nikhilesh to her passionate unscrupulous activist lover Sandip xi? Tagore has almost de-sexualised the relationship of Kumu and Abinash, and we question why? Kumu surrenders her sexuality, (though not her love), her sexual being, which is, "an irrevocable form of expression of every individual, whether he or she seeks to express it or not. It is endorsed in his or her unique 'chemistry' and thus response- of attraction repulsion or neutrality- to every other individual". xii The 'chemistry' between the husband and wife vanishes suddenly and we cannot but surmise that it was the woman's 'disability' that might have played the crucial role in extinguishing it.

The crucial point of understanding sought by 'disability' theorists is the difference between 'disability' and 'handicap': "Disabled people are not handicapped in all circumstances or in everything they do. Disability should, in no way, be seen as inability, disability may be permanent when someone loses a leg in an accident: this disabling condition will remain throughout the person's lifetime. It may be a handicap in, for example, walking or riding a bicycle, but not while playing cards, games, cooking a meal or making love xiii." It emerges in the domain of 'disability' studies that 'disability' is the "disadvantage or restriction of any activity caused by our contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have impairments or perceived impairments of physical difference and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities xiv." Kumu thus remains unhappy, without the love and sexual passion that would be naturally within herself. She remains passive and never asserts her sexual needs to Abhinash, her legally wedded husband. She does not even walk out of the marriage as Mrinal does, after fifteen years of marriage, in Streer Patra. How does Kumu survive without that which is as basic and as natural as eating, drinking, breathing, sleeping and excreting as well?

While Kumu's husband harbors thoughts of marrying Hemangini, we reflect whether being 'blind' entails the loss of the 'ability' to lead a 'normal' sexual life? The writings of the nineteenth century witnessed a general tendency to devalue conjugal love, to underplay the significance of marital attraction at least in sophisticated *bhadralok* families. In one of his literary essays,

Tagore records "Uma's initial failure to win the love of Siva when she appeared as an enchantress because such pleasure-oriented love was not conducive to the welfare of all xv." If such norms regulated the behavioural practices of married couples in *bhadralok* families, where does it leave 'women with disabilities' and their sexual desires, when it comes to their precarious position within the institution of marriage and the Hindu family? If the husband was peripheral to the daily existence of an 'able' bodied, beautiful, desirable and young bride, he would be virtually absent from the lives of our Kumu.

'Women with disabilities', of the kind of Kumu, seen to inaugurate another category of woman, beside that of the wife, the co-wife (sateen) and the widow, within the fold of the nineteenth century Bengali Hindu family. The words of Rassundari Dasi, writing the first woman's autobiography in the nineteenth century, draws on the fulfilling life of the Hindu woman, playing the role of the wife and mother: "I have spent my life happily and in great joy surrounded by husband, sons, daughter-in-law, other members of the family and neighbours xvi", an existence we know mediated through back breaking drudgery of domestic life. Though not desirable, widowhood too entailed certain compensations. Again, Rassundari Dasi evokes this compensatory aspect when she claims, "Now my name is Mother xvii." Besides, some widows had recourse to re-marriages or could undertake spiritual quests at Banaras or Brindaban, devoting their entire lives to spiritual salvation.

It seems that Tagore's society ascribed certain definite and rigid roles to women, and could venerate only the wife, the mother and the widow (as repository of household knowledge), as they served the composite interest of the Hindu family. Because of her 'disability', Kumu could have been perceived as being incapable of performing the duties and roles ascribed to her gender. And Kumu is desperate to continue her household chores at any cost, knowing fully well that that could only ensure her presence within the household. There is no explanation given by Tagore of how Kumu manages to perform the mundane and routine the household duties irrespective of her visual impairment. If she had failed in performing her domestic 'duties' she would not have been accommodated in Abinash's house. and therefore, couldn't have been housed within the system. She would have been discarded. Her disability could have altered and truncated her gendered destiny. There is a tangible risk because the intimate areas of experience within the *andarmahal* are subject to alteration and curtailment because of the 'disability'. Bertha Mason, in *Jane Eyre* (1847),

dies in a mysterious fire, relieved from the agony of suffering from an undefined, unspecific mental disorder or madness and a loveless marriage. Tagore's Kumu is not even allowed the contemplation of such a release.

Kumu's husband Abinash has an unexplained, almost miraculous turnaround as he suddenly comes to realize the value of his 'blind' wife and her contribution to his household. We have Kumu, the literally 'blind' woman granting the gift of vision or *drishti* to the metaphorically 'blind' Abinash. Had this change not transpired what would have been the fate of Kumu? Tapan Raychaudhuri, in his essay, "Love in a Colonial Climate", informs us how the *bratas* performed by the women of that age had sought various forms of deliverances. One primary form of deliverance was from having a polygamous husband. Kumu would definitely have got a sateen and would be living with a constant knowledge of her insufficiency as a 'blind' woman. Given up by the parents and rejected by the husband, the woman with 'disability' would also enter a profession that would exploit her sexually and force her into further indignity. "... several local studies in the early 1900s showed that many prostitutes came into the profession not as their mothers' heirs, but after traumatic experiences as widows, maltreated wives and persecuted daughter-in-law xviii." These studies don't recognize the presence of 'women with disabilities' in the composition of that segment of the population that came "at the bottom of the social and ritual hierarchy; they were ranked with sweepers or leather workers xix." Is it possible to question how 'disability' would facilitate or hinder the survival of a 'woman with disability' in the flesh trade?

Disability theorists might find issues with Tagore's depiction of 'disability' through the character of Kumu because, she is depicted almost as a 'Super cripp' xx; gallantly fighting to overcome insurmountable odds. Such attitudes, according to Majiet, "display a bizarre two-tiered mindset xxi." And these images do damage to the 'disabled' people by robbing them of their 'sense of reality' xxii. We acknowledge how Tagore brings into his ambit, the issue of 'disability', but as one who strangely felt the need to work for emancipation of various oppressed sections of the society, he is strangely non-committal towards the issues of suppression, exploitation and exclusion of 'women with disabilities' from the mainstream. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), decades before Tagore, in a novel like *Rajani* (1877) articulates strong views about the damaging stereotypes of 'disability'. *Rajani* the eponymous heroine, though 'blind', is strangely confident and

comfortable with her 'different' existence, bemoaning not her loss of vision but revelling in her heightened sense of sound and smell. Moreover, Tagore seems to be reinforcing the idea that the sexuality and sexual urge of a 'disabled' woman is dispensable and needed not be addressed.

**Conclusion:** But how could it be so? The basic arguments for the debate on widow remarriage "evoked the age-old belief in the greater lust of women- allegedly eight times as intense as that of men." How then not to quantify the lust of 'women with disabilities'? Are they less or more lustful than 'normal' women? Is there a complete erasure of lust from the body and psyche of such 'imperfect' and incomplete women, as desired by Tagore? What did Tagore's society perceive of the threat of a 'disabled' woman's sexuality and how did it think of containing it? The paper with its focus on sex/sexuality, 'disability' on the gendered other is designed to reveal the power matrix within society that drove 'disabled' women into social isolation. With this, we critique literature generated disability- knowledge, which often functions as the primary manufacturer of meaning of the lives of 'women with disabilities'.

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