

Intersection of Gender, Disability and Isolation in Tagore's "Subha"

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore's "Subha" is a poignant story of a dumb girl who is unheard and isolated in the patriarchal society. The story draws our attention towards social exclusion and gendered isolation faced by Subha. Subha cannot communicate verbally due to lack of speech but her large expressive eyes speak everything though no one understands it. In fact, it is not the muteness of Subha that hurts her emotions, rather, it is the mute attitude of the society towards her that makes her feel emotionally isolated. In fact, the social exclusion of persons with disability forces them to lead them an isolated and lonely life. Subha does not get the same treatment as her sisters get from family and friends. Her father shares an affectionate bond but her mother considers her as a stain on her body. Due to her mother's attitude towards her, Subha finds solace and relief in the company of nature and animals. She spends time with her cows, trees, river, birds, and so on. She feels closer connection with nature and animals as they silently accept her without any complaint and do not judge her on the basis of physical appearance or ability. The story points out the role of family, friends and community in the development and growth of persons with disability. The silence of Subha symbolizes disability as well as the social silencing of women in the patriarchal society. The story not only reflects gendered isolation but it also projects the gendered oppression of women. Tagore candidly presents that often women do not get a choice to take decision about their life. Before a girl's marriage, the decision about her life is taken by the father and after her marriage, it is taken by her husband. Marriage plays an important role in the lives of women. Subha is not aware of the arrangement of her marriage by her parents. She is neither asked nor informed about it. The irony is that Subha was married off by her parents against her wish and later, she was left alone by her husband and in-laws against her consent. So, she is not given any choice to take decision about her own life. In the story, Subha's marriage not only displaces her from her home but also uproots her from her emotional belonging. Therefore, in the life of Subha, marriage does not prove to be a social security, rather it becomes a complete displacement and alienation for her. The story presents the fact that Subha feels hurt not because she cannot speak but because she is not heard by the community. The author points out that an effective communication not only depends on speech but on empathy and understanding. This paper analyses the story "Subha" by Rabindranath Tagore and focuses on how the speech impairment of a girl, although a physical condition, is misunderstood as an intellectual disability leading her to suffer in terms of gender discrimination, social exclusion and emotional isolation.

Index Terms- Gender, isolation, disability, muteness, marriage, nature.

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, playwright, author, painter, social worker and a prominent figure of Bengal Renaissance. He played a crucial role in shaping the culture of Bengal. He was the first non-European and the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize in literature. Another significant contribution was his composition of national anthems of India and Bangladesh. His writing style is lyrical and musical. He has composed various songs and his compositions came to be known as Rabindra Sangeet. Some of his remarkable works are *Gitanjali*, *Dak Ghar*, *Choker Bali*, *Gora*, and short stories such as "Kabuliwala", "Subha" and so on. He himself has translated some of his works written in Bengali into English. His writings are aesthetically beautiful with deep social and philosophical insights. His short stories are widely considered as most creative and reflective prose works having thematic depth and social consciousness. He is known for perfecting and giving new dimensions to the Bengali short story. Tagore is credited for establishing the Indian modern short story where he has blended the poetic sensibility and psychological depth through his keen observation of everyday life. The prominent themes of his short stories are related to nature, isolation, human psyche, women's plight, social consciousness and human virtues. This research paper analyses the story, "Subha", where the plight, the isolation, and lack of communication of a dumb girl, Subha, is projected.

The story, "Subha", was originally written in Bengali in the year 1982 and was also translated into English. It is a poignant story of a dumb girl, Subha, who lacks speech and therefore, cannot communicate with the community. Subha, the youngest daughter of Banikantha, was born in the village of Chandipur. She had two elder sisters, Sukeshini and Suhasini, who got married with the expected usual expenses and some difficulty. Banikantha decided to give the name Subhashini, meaning one who speaks eloquently, to the youngest daughter so that it rhymes with her elder sisters. But unfortunately, the girl could not speak and so she was nicknamed Subha. Her lack of speech becomes the reason for her social exclusion and so, she finds solace in the company of nature, that is silent like her and does not require speech to communicate. She is very close to her household cows who do not judge her and accept her with love and affection. She also feels close to Pratap, who enjoys sitting silent with her but does not understand her emotional loneliness. Her father loves her more than the other two daughters. Though the mother daughter relationship is always special that shares a beautiful bond, but, Subha could not find that support and love from her mother who considers her a source of shame and deformity in her own self. Subha's family and community feel that no one will marry her because of her speech impairment. Thus, she is treated as a responsibility and a burden rather than an individual. Her parents fix her marriage hiding her muteness. When her husband and in-laws discover that she could not speak, they break her marriage. Her husband initially perceives her silence as a quality but after knowing the truth, leaves her and marries a girl who can speak. Thus, Tagore does not focus as much on the muteness of Subha, as the muteness of family and society towards the feelings and emotions of the disabled persons.

Tagore presents how Subha, a disabled girl, does not get support either from her family or community and faces exclusion on different levels. Firstly, being a girl, she faces strict patriarchal norms with gendered discriminations and is treated as a burden by her family, for whom finding a groom for her marriage is a daunting task. This gendered discrimination reminds us of what Peter Barry mentioned in his *Beginning Theory* about the statement made by Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*, “One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman” (Barry 125). Secondly, she struggles to make her identity in the world of so-called abled people. Since, Subha lacks speech, so, everyone thinks that she lacks feelings as well. This perception encourages people to talk about her future and their anxiety in front of her without realizing that it hurts her emotions because she can understand everything like others. The irony is that everyone talked about her but not to her. Subha understood from her childhood that God had sent her as a curse to her father’s house. Therefore, she withdrew herself from people and started living a lonely life. She finds solace in the company of nature and animals as they do not judge her. Tagore has beautifully brought out a comparison between the silent nature and silent Subha. The author mentions, “when the great busy world paused in its toil and became suddenly a lonely, awful giant, then beneath the vast impressive heavens there were only dumb Nature and a dumb girl sitting very silently, - one under the spreading sunlight, the other where a small tree cast its shadow” (53). Subha’s muteness is a medical problem but she is made disabled by the cultural attitude of the society. According to the medical model of disability, Subha could not be considered normal because she cannot speak and express her emotions verbally. But it is the social model of disability that projects how the medical impairment of Subha makes her disabled socially, and so, more than a medical impairment, it becomes a social impairment. The author very well presents that communication does not depend solely on the verbal speech through the deep connection of Subha with nature and animals. Thus, it becomes clear that disability is a social construct rather than a medical problem.

Tagore convincingly asserts the notion that a person’s impairment does not make a person feel disabled, rather the attitude of the society forces him to feel disabled. Though the girl “lacked speech, she did not lack a pair of large dark eyes, shaded with long lashes; and her lips trembled like a leaf in response to any thought that rose in her mind” (52). Subha had a heart like others, so she too felt and understood everything. Her eyes expressed her emotions clearly but no one bothered to understand her feelings. It is said that the eyes are the mirror of the soul, and this is clearly evident in the case of this girl, Subha. Let us consider how the author draws our attention towards this fact and explains it in the story:

When we express our thoughts in words, the medium is not found easily. There must be a process of translation, which is often inexact, and then we fall into error. But black eyes need no translating; the mind itself throws a shadow upon them. In them thought opens or shuts, shines forth or goes out in darkness, hangs steadfast like the setting moon or like the swift and restless lightning illumines all quarters of the sky. They who from birth have had no other speech than the trembling of their lips learn a language of the eyes, endless in expression, deep as the sea, clear as the heavens, wherein play dawn and sunset, light and shadow. (52)

Thus, it becomes clear that the girl cannot communicate through her speech but can do so through her large, expressive eyes. But, due to her speech impairment, her family treats her as a burden and the community does not understand her inner heart. No one talks to her including the children who dread her and never want to play with her. As a result, she is forced to live in the world of loneliness and isolation. People with such impairment try to be a part of the society but in turn, do not get acceptance and have to lead a lonely life. This kind of denial of acceptance and support by the society lands the people with impairments into the world of loneliness and alienation. It is indeed ironical that the persons with disability seek support from the society, though their efforts go in vain. In fact, persons with disability need more support than the others to be a part of the mainstream. They face discrimination in their day-to-day life. They face exclusion, humiliation and negative attitude of society. In fact, as we know that disability is a social construct not a medical term, we need to create a kind of an environment where the persons with disability can feel themselves included into the society rather than excluded.

The story presents the oppression of women through various issues such as patriarchy, forced marriage and disability. The basic gender discrimination lies in the treatment of a girl’s marriage, without giving her right to choose her life partner or even decide whether she wants to get married or stay unmarried. The social set-up of a patriarchal society imposes various barriers and does not let women reach their true potential. So, if we probe deeper, we realise that gender inequality persists in our society due to social structures, economic situations and historical constructs. Subha is neither asked or informed by her parents before finding a suitable match for her. In fact, “the thought of her marriage filled her parents with an anxious care. People blamed them and even talked of making them outcasts” (55). Her father, Banikantha went away for a few days and after returning said: “We must go to Calcutta” (55). Though they started getting ready to go to this strange place, but Subha’s heart was heavy with tears. She approached her parents, with fear in her mind, and tried to read the mind of her parents. “With her large eyes wide open, she scanned their faces as though she wished to learn something. But not a word did they vouchsafe” (55). She comes to know about her matrimonial alliance through her friend, Pratap, who tells her that her parents have found a bridegroom for her. She feels broken and bursts into tears in front of her father. Subha was closer to her father than mother. Her loneliness had drawn her more close to nature and animals. So, feeling depressed and lonely, Subha went to bid farewell to her childhood friends, the two cows, whom she addressed as Sarbbashi and Panguli, with tears in her eyes. After this, she left her room and went to the river she was closed to. It seemed as if she wanted to say something to her mother Earth who was silent just like her. It was as if she wanted to embrace her strong silent mother Earth and tried to say: “Do not let me leave you, mother. Put your arms about me, as I have put mine about you, and hold me fast” (55). Within ten days after her marriage, everyone comes to know that the newly wed bride is a dumb girl. Though she did not deceive anyone as her eyes told everything about her but no one understood her. The author has presented the poignant truth that Subha’s matrimonial alliance was fixed without her consent or wish and later, it breaks without her wish. So, a girl’s marriage is fixed by her family without taking her consent and sometimes it is broken by her husband and in-laws without her wish and the girl remains silent. The author puts it candidly in the story that the problem of Subha is not as much due to her muteness but the attitude of society towards her as it is a society that denies to recognize her emotions, intelligence and right to choose. Further, in the patriarchal set up, Subha, being a female, is initially considered the responsibility of her father, and after her marriage, she will be the responsibility of her husband. This is the plight of a girl who is treated as a responsibility rather than a support in the patriarchal society. That’s the reason why parents of a girl child become concerned for the marriage of their daughters from the time they are born. Subhashini’s family is more concerned about her marriage rather than realizing her emotional needs. Therefore, transformation is needed at the level of society, community, family and individual to accept gender equality.

Subha's inability to speak gives an impression to people that she has little to say or feel. Though her large expressive eyes communicate, but people fail to understand. This becomes the reason for her silent communication with the nature and animals where she finds more acceptance than human beings. Since Subha cannot meet the conventional expectations of socialization, speech and marriage, so she becomes marginalized in her community and family. This reveals isolation not only due to disability but due to gender as well. This gendered isolation is more intensified in the story after the marriage of Subha when she is distanced from her village, her friends, family and nature. Her muteness makes her feel socially excluded but her marriage makes her feel emotionally isolated. The author has drawn our attention to the very fact how the institution of marriage, in spite of providing social and emotional security to a woman, leaves her unheard and alienated. Therefore, Subha's isolation is not only personal but structural as well.

The author in the story not only presents Subha's tragedy due to her muteness, but also points out how the patriarchal and ableist society fails or rather, refuses to hear a woman who has a different way of communication. Through the story, the author has drawn our attention to some pertinent and relevant factors related to the problems of persons with disability as well as the isolation of women. Deprivation and rejection of any kind by the family and community, for reasons like gender, poverty or any disability in the child affect the physical, psychological growth and development of the child. Nature and nurture of the family play a vital role in the development of a child. Family is the first base of a child that provides him support and protection. In fact, family does not mean only mother and father, rather it includes the siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc. Since man is a social animal and so every individual develops a relationship with family and community. Children or persons with disabilities require special care as they have special needs. In fact, if the family understands and accepts the disability of the child and provides him proper support, the child can develop as a normal person. Guidance and counseling of family members by the professionals can help in educating and motivating the family members about the importance of their roles in the healthy development and progress of their child. Acceptance of such persons by community and family provides them tremendous support and boosts their confidence level helping them face the challenges with greater self-confidence and awareness.

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