



THE UNCONSCIOUS DESIRE AND ITS FULFILLMENT IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SHORT STORY 'THE SKELETON'

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to explore the protagonist's (girl) hidden voice reflecting in the narration of the short story—'The Skeleton'(1926), written by Rabindranath Tagore. It focuses on the issue of how a female's individuality is crushed by social conventions. The story explores the tension in a human-life as it takes the readers into inner realm of the girl's unconscious mind where they find her constantly tussling with the existing position with a desire to find her 'Self' and to lead a life full of love and satisfaction with a partner but her life ends with a tragic turn as she commits suicide to unite with her lover (one-sided love) in Infinite, unknown place of Death where no one will curb her desires. So, the story with a powerful narration and a systematically planned way moves and makes a dead character alive, and leaves a memorable impression on readers' minds. This paper intends to reflect on various aspects regarding the theme, characterization, narration and the hidden message.

Key words-- Individuality, ominous, lifeless, throbbing life, traumatic behaviour, narcissism, involvement, social taboos.

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore believed:

"By natural instinct, women are creative and graceful. It is women who make the home, which is no way less valuable or easier than running a business. The motivating force that shapes a home is a woman's love. Love is not merely an emotion of the heart. It is a force like the force of gravitation". (Rabindra Rachanabali, Vol. 10: 546)

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Tagore in his short stories has mostly focused on women's fate and life. In his short story--- 'The Skeleton' (1926), he depicts the unconscious desire of a widow- girl who attempts to fight the decay of her 'Self', caused by the marital relationship. The dead girl holds conversation with a slumbering living student and unfolds the tragic tale of her past life. The story has 'a story within story'. The first story is narrated by the student and the second story is narrated by the girl herself.

The main story begins with the situation that a child- widow who had died many years ago, her body had been donated to a school, which kept her skeleton for classroom study. One night, a young student was sleeping in a room, next to where the skeleton was kept. When he heard something, he entered the room. It was the spirit of the girl, from whom the skeleton had come. She stayed throughout the night there to tell the young man about her past life. She narrates that she had been married as a young child, and after only two months of marriage, her husband died and she became a widow. After looking at many signs, her father-in-law determined that she was, without a doubt, what they called a "poison bride" (biškanyā). She narrates---

"My husband died two months after my marriage, and my friends and relations moaned pathetically on my behalf. My husband's father, after scrutinizing my face with great care, said to my mother-in-law: "Do you not see, she has the evil eye?" (Omnibus III, P—101)

Her parents-in-law expelled the ominous widow from their house and she returned quite happily to her parents' home, too young to understand what had happened to her. There she grew up into a beautiful young woman. Men used to look at her and she at them, and she used to dress up secretly in colourful saris with bracelets on her arms, imagining men admiring and caressing her. Then a doctor, her brother's friend moved into the first floor of their house, and she used to enjoy visiting him for carefree talk about medicines and about how to use poisons to help sick people die. Then, one day, she came to know that the doctor was going to marry to an heiress who would bring to the doctor a large sum of money. The marriage was to be celebrated late at night. Before starting, the doctor and her brother were having a glass of wine together on the terrace as was their daily habit but meanwhile she had gone down to the dispensary and got a little powder that she had dropped unobserved into the doctor's glass. The music struck up. She went into her room and dressed herself in her bridal-ropes of silk and gold, put on her ornaments, put the red mark of wifhood on the parting in her hair. And then, under a tree in the garden, she prepared her bed. She herself had eaten poison and laid down on her bed. She hoped that when people came to find her, they would see her with a smile on her lips as a married woman. She fancied thus :-

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“when people came and found me they would see that smile of mine lingering on my lips like a trace of rose-coloured wine, that when I thus slowly entered my eternal bridal-chamber. I should carry with me this smile, illuminating my face. But alas for the bridal-chamber! Alas for the bridal-robos of silk and gold! When I woke at the sound of a rattling within me, I found three urchins learning osteology from my skeleton. Where in my bosom my joys and griefs used to throb, and the petals of youth to open one by one, there the master with his pointer was busy naming my bones. And as to that last smile, which I had so carefully rehearsed, did you see any sign of that?” (OMNIBUS III, P-107)

When she awoke, she found herself as a skeleton and three urchins practicing osteology from her skeleton. Soon morning light appeared, the soul disappeared but it left in the narrator's mind the joys and grieves of the young woman.

The story illustrates that love is blind. If it can give life, it can also take it. It covers the life-span of a girl before death and even after that. It moves in a dramatic way but seems real because of the effective narrative skill.

The title of the story is suggestive. The writer narrates about the life of the girl. The 'skeleton' which is a boned structure, having no life in it, in the same way, the girl's life was as having no life in it. She was a child widow who after her husband's death was regarded as "poison bride," causing the deaths of the men, she united with, and she was as a lifeless skeleton, with passions and dreams but devoid of means to fulfill them. Initially, it is her existence as a widow that was skeletal : she was a beautiful woman full of dreams and throbbing life, but she was forced to live without love, fulfillment, and the capacity to unite with others. By the story's end, the widow had literally become a hollow skeleton that possessed no signs of life or emotions.

It is very pathetic to see the fate of the girl in relation to her psychology. The writer provides a space for readers for a psychological explanation of her behaviour. She was full of liveliness. She loved everything of material life, flowers, objects, people but had no right to deal with them. She felt bound with social rules that it seemed to her as if her life did not belong to her. She had become captive of family and society. She wanted to fly on wings of desires and live the life up to the full, but found herself helpless bound in parental house. She neurotically reacts and goes through a phase of suffering and soul- searching. The story makes the readers to think on the aspects of suppressed desires, jealousy, her rationality shifted to loss and being subjected to traumatic behaviour, the strategy of her psyche to unite



or win the love, her inner desire for a partner and the need of emotional support from him. She constructs her 'Self' image in such a way that her rejection by a male becomes unbearable for her. Perhaps that strong self-image induces her to kill the lover and commit suicide. The enhancement of her 'Self' image to identify herself with beautiful concepts indicates her growing narcissism that led her to her downfall.

"How can I ever make you believe that those two cavernous hollows contained the brightest of dark, languishing eyes? And that the smile which was revealed by those ruby lips had no resemblance whatever to the grinning teeth which you used to see? The mere attempt to convey to you some idea of the grace, the charm, the soft, firm, dimpled curves, which in the fullness of youth were growing and blossoming over those dry old bones makes me smile".(Omnibus III,P-101)

Though she seems freaky but her character-analysis reflects that she is suppressed with restrictions of society that becomes the reason for her strange behaviour. If she had been given freedom, her life would have taken shape in a different way. She dies because of not able to get love. After her death, she describes her previous situation-

"I had no girl-companions,' went on the voice. 'My only brother had made up his mind not to marry. In the zenana I was alone. Alone I used to sit in the garden under the shade of the trees, and dream that the whole world was in love with me; that the wind was languishing in sighs as on some pretext or other it brushed past me; and that the lawn on which my feet rested, had it been conscious, would have lost consciousness against their touch. It seemed to me that all the young men in the world were as blades of grass at my feet; and my heart, I know not why, used to grow sad".(Omnibus III,P—102)

The story is as a voice of protest against societal conventions. It integrates the theme of gap between emotional need and social bounds. The girl reflects her neurotic grapple with the difficulties imposed upon her by adverse circumstances. She feels so deeply depressed that she thinks that if she cannot achieve her love in this physical world, at least she can make her love eternal by dying. The aloneness is brought out with vivid dramatic force.

It is very interesting to examine the description of the story. The story has a very situational opening, a student in his dream meets a woman who narrates the story of her life to him. The writer with his narration fully reveals the psyche of a girl. No where it seems that this story has been written by a male but it looks as if it is being narrated to the readers (as to the student)by the girl herself. This is the superb skill of Tagore's narrative art that a reader (as



well as student) wants to know more about her life. The spirit appears as a living being as if returned to life again. The story is a rewind.. This pattern—the woman as a poison bride causing her husband’s death and then turning into a skeletal widow—is repeated twice. First the girl is a real bride who is perceived to have caused her husband’s death by her nature as a poison bride, and next she is dressed as a bride who indeed does administer poison to a departing groom. At the end of each sequence, after causing her groom’s death, she becomes a skeleton.

The story is in the form of make believe story. The narrative technique of the story makes it very interesting. The story is based on Coleridge’s theory- “Willing Suspension of Disbelief” The student willingly suspends the disbelief in spirits and listens to the inner feelings of the girl. In the morning, he searches for her, making belief on her story and her existence. The story has a supernatural touch with the study of an agonized conscience. Taking the form of a supernatural story, she narrates the story to a young student--

“Said the Voice” :- But I fancy you are lonely. All rights; I’ll sit down a while, and we will have a little chat. Years ago I used to sit by men and talk to them. But during the last thirty five years I have only moaned in the wind in the burning places of the dead. I would talk once more with a man as in the old times.” (Omnibus III, P-100,).

The story shows her involvement with a young male. After her death, she becomes a spirit but the yearning for fulfillment in love still lurks in her. The story is an attack on the social conventions and narrow mentality of people of early nineteenth century. It also hints at the denial of human rights. The writer puts a situation in the knitted theme of a story but at some point raises the current issue of society. A writer, being a sensitive human being, always raises a voice of protest against inhuman obstacles on the part of family and society. The story is a reflection on the decline and deterioration of human values and violation of human rights. It is based on the environment of the nineteenth century but it is also concerned with the present times. Still today, if a girl loves someone and wants to marry him, she has to pass through many obstacles – family objections, caste system, sometimes to break with her family or to break the relationship with the lover and marrying someone another, suppressing her own love feelings and to be prepared to live according to the wishes of her parents and social restrictions. She has to act according to the dignity of the family in the society. She becomes only a plaything in the hands of her family, having no “self” existence of her. The story is built around the theme of incongruity arising out of the conflicting demands between a girl’s inner self and the society’s demand. She articulates her desire, need and demand as an individual (Self) and as a unit of society (Social Self).Through her characterization, the reader can probe how the psychological instincts influence the human behavior.



Tagore is superb in blending poetic lyricism with social realism. His unearthly tales maintain psychological realism within an atmosphere of supernatural occurrences. In the story, supernaturalism is infused with human emotions of love for life and hate for society that is conveyed through the dramatic situation. The tragic tale ends abruptly when at first cock-crow, the morning light enters the narrator's room. The story can be seen in terms of postmodernism. As a postmodernist, Tagore takes interest in "mini-narratives" stories that explain small practices, local events rather than large-scale universal or global concepts. He deals with many polemical issues like conflict in traditional and modernity, internal and external, male-female conflicts. In the story, he resorts to personality fragmentation technique to make the girl's character. Her love for the doctor was one sided and her behaviour appears as an act of madness.

The character's portrayal and her behaviour though appears as an act of madness but somewhere, the story seems to convey that each one of human beings despite of physical growth longs to be understood. The story has a hidden message. The writer attacks on the social taboos for widowhood and the social restraints and codes of conduct for widow women. He expresses the theme of the feminine lot in the thematic representation but inwardly with a robust desire for a change in society's outlook for widows' life and treating them as equals, not isolating from the life –pleasures.

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