

# Feminism and Colonialism in Tagore's *Relationships*

Krishma

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kalinga University, Raipur

## Abstract

*Relationships can be studied as a novel of post colonialism and feminism. Marriage in this novel becomes the focal point to study marriage as an institution of colonialism. Just as in colonialisation the colonizer attempts to usurp and appropriate the native's mind and body, so in marriage the husband tries to conquer and control the mind, body and soul of his wife. Madhusudhan's marriage with Kumudini is a strong reminder of the fact that the natives are subjected into submission and defeat by the sheer use of force. Tagore focuses on these colonization tendencies in this novel. The role and significance of education is also given very important space in the novel. Education leads to the decolonization of mind.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Post colonialism, Colonialism, Education, Patriarchy, Soul, Body, Decolonisation, Exploitation, Subjugation.

## Discussion

*Relationships*, chronologically published after *The Home and The Word* in 1929, is comparatively a much less discussed novel of Tagore. Contextualized in the decline of the feudal order and rise of new entrepreneurial class, the novel depicts a conjugal relationship based on force rather than consent. It offers scope for investigation into how woman and nation have been equated in the critique of patriarchy and colonization.

It tells the story of two feudal families (The Ghosals and the Chatterjees) over a period of three generations. The surroundings where the action takes place may no longer exist but the analysis of human relations and personalities are of lasting importance. Tagore depicts the plight and ultimate demise of women trapped in pregnancy, duty, family honor and Bengali's putrescent landed gentry

(Mukherjee 32). Hence the novel offers a critique of the society at the intersection of feminism and post colonialism. Madhusudhan Ghosal, from the impoverished Ghosal family, becomes a wealthy man and a director of a prosperous company with his own efforts. He sends a marriage proposal to the last unmarried daughter (Kumudini, the sister of Biprodas) of the zamindar Chatterjees, who are now reeling under financial debt. The marriage tie is used as an instrument by Madhusudhan to impress and insult the Chatterjees. Besides focusing on the frustration of domesticity, the novel is an evaluation of the rising Bengali bourgeoisie. Tagore's own emotional and ideological investments are critically involved and contrasted with a decaying aristocracy in this novel. *Relationships* represents a society which existed some hundred years ago and tells the story of how patriarchal order treated women as colonial subjects and their bodies as colonial sites. Tagore's message here is that men like Madhusudhan treat women simply as chattel to be kept and used. Women have particular

sensibilities and they need to be wooed, not just claimed through force. The idea of wife as captive under patriarchal system is presented in a discourse which establishes Tagore as a severe critic of patriarchal exploitation of women. Women's body is appropriated and subjugated for production.

The author has portrayed Madhusudan's behavior before and after his marriage in a manner that puts him in the category of the colonialist. The colonial aggression within marriage is also poignantly presented through Kumu's reactions. The use of pigeon and hawk imagery is highly suggestive. The defeat of Kumu at the hands of her lustful husband is questioned by the author. The husband's occupation of woman's body is symbolic of colonization in which the colonizer can appropriate the land/body but cannot vanquish the spirit/soul of the native. Hence though the feudalist order declined, the domination-subordination equation continued even under the new capitalist order that emerged in the post-colonial India. The novel,

therefore, presents pluralistic nature of colonization. *Relationships* is a powerful feminist text despite the fact that it ends with a woman's defeat (Mukherjee 18). The plot contrasts the social fortunes of a decaying aristocracy (Chatterjees) with those of a rising post colonial capitalist (Ghoshals), while focusing on the sexual and moral frustrations of domesticity.

The advent of colonial rule and subsequent acculturation of the colonized brings forth the importance of ideas like 'romantic love'. But the eventual rise in prostitution in Kolkata as a result of mercantile bourgeois capitalism – often treated as 'signs' of moral degeneration of the 'modern' times – necessitated the additional emphasis on the virtue of 'Chaste devotion' (paatibrotya) to be strictly observed by Indian wives. Kumudini, the heroine of the novel *Relationships*, is as much a product of colonial modernity as Madhusudan but it has a completely different impact upon her. She had been educated at home and lived in the twilight between two

ages, and two worlds. Her native countryside culture creates a shadowy world in which she was born and brought up. It was ruled over by *Siddheswari, Gandheshwari, Ghentu, Shashthi*, the goddesses of women's household rites. Contrasted with her countryside is the metropolitan culture of Kolkata where she is brought by her positivist intellectual brother, Biprodas. She is given such kind of education which would make a *Bhandramhila* out of her. Reading *Relationships* in the new millennium, it is difficult to ignore a historically situated reomanticism that volarized soul over body.

Tagore focuses on the colonization tendencies of the rising capitalist order in his presentation of Biprodas's character. The manners and pragmatism of the new capitalists is juxtaposed with the compassionate, artistic liberal character of the old order. Tagore portrays Biprodas's character in a manner that instead of blaming Biprodas for not managing his property better, we are expected to praise his sainthood. One also notices a grief for the disappearing landed gentry who were supposed

to have been the guardians of art and refinement, and an unconcealed contempt for the rawness of new money. The present generation might question this crypto-feudal perspective but it is necessary to recognize the inevitability that shaped this attitude at the beginning of the twentieth century, given the class composition of the literary community of that time.

The Ghoshals lose their fortunes and estates and move away; the Chatterjee's continue as 'zamindars' of Nurnagar. Generations later, Madhusudan Ghosal, brought up with the bitter taste of poverty in his mouth, makes his mark, entirely by his own efforts as a man of extraordinary energy and financial acumen. Ultimately he received the title of Raja Sahab and Rai Bahadur. Powerful enough, now he first buys up the Chatterjee's debts (since the family has fallen on hard times) and then sends a proposal of marriage to the daughter of the Chatterjee family, Kumudini. For Ghosal, this relationship with Chatterjee is an instrument to be used equally

to impress and to insult them. For Kumudini, the marital relation soon becomes one of intolerable oppression as elder brother Biprodas suffer. Biprodas possesses the spirit of a liberalist and a true feminist who is subjected to repeated humiliation and anxiety on his sister's behalf. Since Tagore had intended to carry this story forward to at least the saga of Kumu's son, Abinash Ghosal, the novel opens on Abinash's thirty – second birthday, though readers hear nothing more of him in the text's course. There is just a reference to him at the end of the her return to Ghosal household.

After being subjected to subordination and subjugation by her husband and her consequent rescue by her brother, Kumudini on learning of her pregnancy, returns to her oppressor. She is forced to choose this option despite her high education and fine sensibility. Kumudini returns to her husband's home despite all the sufferings and miseries at the hands of her husband has been seen as author's failure by a number of critics. In the novel,

Kumu's failure shows that Tagore seeks to contract not the western model of a person in whom identity and history ideally coincide, but a struggling, obstinate conviction of self-worth in the knowledge of a deep mistaking of identity. This also shows how the oppressed having internalized his/her inferiority lacks or finds it extremely difficult to win back self worth and self agency to revolt and overthrow the hegemonic control.

At another level, Kumu's rejection of her husband is incorporated in the series of wrongs and slights that marks the historical relationship of the Chatterjee and Ghosals. The incompatibility of Madhusudan and Kumu reflects the class and property focalized through them and represented through the description of their manners, values, domestic interiors, material attachments, appearances, and tastes. The narrative places Madhusudan at moral disadvantage because of his crude display of wealth and power. It highlights the difference between Madhusudan's crude values and Kumu's high values.

The final entrapment, unsatisfactory though it may seem as a narrative resolution, return us to marriage itself as the novel's problematic theme. The marriage is a sexual and psychological encounter between two persons as it is a contractual negotiation between two persons and two families.

It is through Kumu that this examination of marriage is conducted. Kumudini is not simply the representative of an individual in history but she is also the locus where a conflict of class and subject position takes place. The history of Madhusudan demands far more complex treatment than the romanticized personal lives of Biprodas and Kumu.

There is an intricate dialogical interplay between the 'dominant', 'emergent', 'modern' and the 'residual' elements of the nineteenth century discourse on women observed through the portrayal of the triangular relationship positioned in 'Madhusudan-Kumu-Biprodas' relationship. The disclosure furthers

heteroglossic possibilities through the presentation of the ‘pragmatic’ point of consciousness while Nistarini’s Moti’s mother provides an opinion separate from those in the love triangle. Whether the husband is good or bad, the compulsions of that household must be recognized. She shows great signs of sensitivity as she identifies the true nature of the incompatibility in Madhusudan-Kumudani marriage. It lies neither in their obvious age-differences, nor in the differences in their class position or in the dilemma between the modern and the traditional but in the domination-subordination bipolar which is just a typical colonial equation. Marriage as the union of two souls renders her unable to satisfy Madhusudan’s raw sexual needs Nevertheless the writer investigates the impact of education in decolonizing the mind, though education alone does not serve the purpose of complete decolonization. Within the private spheres the writer portrays the stereotypes that impinge on the object’s minds, their inferiority as female

sex, and by implication forces them to accept the authority of men.

While Kumu represents the native innocence and vulnerability, Madhusudan represents the colonizing agenda. The element of love that generally validates marriage between a man and a woman is nearly absent in her marriage. In marital love looks, character, body and mind are all bound up. In this hallowed institution of marriage clash both Kumu’s intense religiosity. Her devotion to the ‘Radha-Krishna’ ideal as she ‘sought to veil her husband under the image of her deity and Madhusudan’s clash in her marriage. The liminality of the discursive parameters of societal resolution of the ‘woman question’ in a colonial setting, where ‘postcolonial modernity’ is causing a split with the ‘traditional gets exposed. Kumu comments; “I was certain then that whatever one’s husband is, good or bad, he’s just an occasion for proving the glory of the wife’s chaste devotion” and at another time she says, “What



kind of men are they whose wives are their servants ?” (252).

## REFERENCE

- [1]. Dutta, K and A Robinson. *Rabindranath Tagore. The Myraid Minded Man*. New York. Saint Martins Press, 1995.
- [2]. Sen, A. “*Tagore and His India*”. The New York Review of Book. Web. Nov.1, 2017.
- [3]. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Relationships*. Delhi : OUP, 2006.
- [4]. Thomson, E. *Rabindranath Tagore : Poet and Dramatist*. Las Vegas. Pierides, 1926.