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Psychoanalysis and the Women of Rabindranath Tagore's World : Repression, Desire, and Identity

Suryadeepa Majumdar

College: St Xavier's College (Autonomous)

University of Calcutta, Kolkata

West Bengal, India

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Abstract: The pairing of Rabindranath Tagore and Sigmund Freud remains underexplored in mentions in the context of psychoanalysis and literature. A focused and sustained psychoanalytic study of Tagore's stories through **Freudian criticism** is rare, especially in Indian academic circles. My research involves a deep **interdisciplinary** study that weaves together gender studies, psychology and the history of the women of **Jorasanko**, the Tagore family home. I have attempted to bridge the hidden gap between the women of the Tagore family and the female gaze in Rabindranath Tagore's creative realm. The women in Rabindranath Tagore's stories often echo the silent yet emotionally charged atmosphere of **Jorasanko**, the Tagore family estate. This space was not just a physical home but a psychological terrain where gender roles, repression and creative expression coexisted in tension, particularly for women. This study explores how the suppressed voices of the women in Tagore's domestic world resonate through the female gaze portrayed in his fictional narratives.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Women of Rabindranath Tagore, Repression, Desire, and Identity.

Introduction

Sigmund Freud's contributions to psychology are vast and foundational, primarily around the mind, the **id**, the **ego** and the **superego**. He introduced the psychosexual stages of development and the interpretation of dreams as a method to understand the human psyche. His work significantly impacted our understanding of personality, motivation and mental illness. I shall take this opportunity to reflect on the short stories of Rabindranath Tagore as being harbingers of the Psychoanalytic school of criticism and spreading its impact worldwide. By narrowing our focus towards the study of Tagore's work through the lens of the psychoanalytic school of criticism, opens a vast and rich interdisciplinary realm in Indian literature. The Psycho Analytic school of criticism has exercised a powerful influence on the creative literature of the 20th century, in England and America. **Psychoanalytic school of criticism is a method of literary interpretation that applies the**



principles of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis to understand characters, narratives and symbolic structures in a literary piece. Although this approach is not new, it has been popularised and recognised more commonly in recent years. Freud is the father of this school, and Jung also contributed. I am confident of establishing the merit of the short stories of Rabindranath Tagore as primary and pivotal in normalising this school of criticism in India. Now, if the question regarding the utility of this approach arises, it is evident that Tagore's stories are functional in understanding the mental processes of the human mind, especially the repressed desires of women. Rabindranath Tagore was the first Indian to bring an element of psychological realism to his stories. Sigmund Freud (1856- 1939) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941), as contemporaries, had obviously heard of one another. Moreover, they had common friends in Albert Einstein, Romain Rolland, Thomas Mann and possibly others. But neither Tagore nor Freud appears to have felt the urge to correspond with or meet the other, not even when Tagore was in Vienna in 1920, and not until Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis and his wife Nirmal Kumari Mahalanobis, as Tagore's companions during his tour in Europe in 1926, took the initiative to facilitate a meeting of the two men. Although it is a fact that Rabindranath Tagore's works are not explicitly centred around Freudian psychoanalysis, but many of his stories, particularly those dealing with family dynamics and psychological struggles, can be interpreted through Freudian lens, especially concerning the Oedipal complex, feelings of neglect and the impact of familial favouritism, these stories focus on the unconscious mind, repressed desires, Oedipal conflicts, sexuality, dreams and internal psychological struggle.

The Psychoanalytic Approach and The Female Gaze of Tagore's Fiction

The concept of the female gaze emerges as a necessary counterpoint to Laura Mulvey's influential theory of the male gaze (1975), which argues that women in literature and cinema are traditionally objectified, positioned as passive recipients of the male gaze. By contrast, the female gaze shifts the centre of vision to the woman herself, her subjectivity, her desire, and her mode of seeing the world. In literature, this entails not only how women are represented, but how they perceive themselves and articulate (or fail to articulate) their unconscious longings. Within the framework of psychoanalysis, the female gaze becomes a means of tracing the return of the repressed: women, denied overt expression, often project their inner desires and anxieties through silent observation, longing acts of resistance.



In Tagore's stories, the female gaze is not merely visual but deeply psychological; it captures the tension between repression and expression, between the external demands of patriarchy and the internal stirrings of desire and autonomy. The female gaze in Tagore's fiction, viewed through a Freudian lens, provides a prospective opportunity for rich interdisciplinary study of Indian literature and psychology, mirroring the complexities of the human mind. Sigmund Freud suggested that personality consists largely of three parts: the id, ego and superego. A Freudian reading of some of his stories, like 'Subha' and 'The Postmaster', will portray issues of desire, reason and conscience in women. Though Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their echoes in Indian literature can be traced, often unintentionally, in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore never formally studied Freud, nor did he engage with psychoanalysis in the academic sense. Yet his narratives reveal a deep, intuitive grasp of the unconscious, repression, desire, and identity; concepts central to psychoanalysis. Tagore's sensitivity to the inner lives of women, particularly in a patriarchal Bengali society, mirrors the psychoanalytic project: to give voice to the silenced and to interpret the unspoken. His heroines are often caught between social norms and personal desires, embodying the conflict between the id (instinctual desire), the superego (social morality) and the ego (mediator between the two).

'The Postmaster' profoundly explores themes of love, separation and loneliness. The decision of the Postmaster to return home becomes equivalent to the extent of emotional desertion of Ratan. Ratan, as an adolescent, finds it difficult to control her feelings. The Postmaster suppresses his feelings for Ratan, denying any emotional attachment, possibly out of fear of social judgment or inner conflict. The use of rationalisation, overexpression of his deep, intense feelings mirrors the function of the **ego**, which, in Freud's theory, operates with the **reality principle**. It takes into account external conditions and the consequences of various actions and directs behaviour so as to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. The ego strikes a balance between the primitive urges (id) and our learned moral constraints (the superego). In the story, Ratan is devastated by the firm decision of the Postmaster to return to Kolkata without Ratan. So here Ratan's id is functional in her expression of grief and fear of loneliness. However, in the case of the Postmaster, it is his ego that helps him in taking a mature decision.. ,The use of rationalisation over expression of deep, intense feelings suggests the use of **Repression**. Repression is one of the central concepts in Sigmund

Freud's psychoanalytic theory is also one of the most important tools for analysing literature psychologically. Freud defines repression as the unconscious exclusion of painful or socially unacceptable desires, fears or conflicts from consciousness. Tagore's story 'Subha' primarily revolves around the forced repression of the desires of voiceless Subha. Subha, a young girl born into a conservative Bengali household, is mute. Though physically beautiful and sensitive, her silence makes her a burden to her parents. She finds comfort only in nature and her animal companions, until marriage becomes inevitable. She is eventually married off, and her tragedy culminates in the symbolic obliteration of her identity and agency – absorbed into silence once again. Subha's dumbness is not a physical disability alone; it represents the **psychic repression of womanhood itself**. Freud says repressed desires return in disguised forms. In 'Subha', her love for nature and her closeness to animals are substitute attachments — what Freud calls sublimation — ways of channelling forbidden or repressed emotions into non-threatening outlets. Her longing for Pratāp, though never vocalised, becomes evident in her emotional expressions and body language. These are non-verbal signs of repressed Eros — desire and attachment. According to Freud and later Lacan, the lack of voice is akin to castration — Subha lacks access to symbolic language, the domain of power and social control. Her muteness thus situates her outside the symbolic order — a non-entity, both as a woman and a subject. .Even in marriage, she cannot escape the silent role assigned to her. Her new household's disillusionment when they learn she is mute mirrors how society rejects the unspoken female truth. Her mute identity is reaffirmed, showing how repression, once institutionalised (through marriage), perpetuates trauma rather than resolving it.

Many women in the Tagore household were highly intelligent and emotionally complex, yet were discouraged from writing, speaking, or publishing. Subha thus becomes a fictional echo of real lives — like **Kadambari Devi, Swarnakumari, or Soudamini**, who lived in emotional and creative containment. The stories become a metaphor for suppressed female creativity and eroticism, especially when it's not channelled into socially sanctioned roles (wife, mother).

Married into the Tagore family at around 9 or 10 years old to Jyotirindranath Tagore (Rabindranath's elder brother), Kadambari Devi entered the highly cultured but intensely hierarchical Jorasanko household. As a child-bride, she was socially bound to the domestic sphere, with little agency over her life decisions. Kadambari was only a few years older than Rabindranath, and they formed a deep emotional bond. She was



one of his earliest literary muses, inspiring many poems and characters. Within the conservative social framework of Jorasanko, their closeness may have been emotionally complex — a blend of affection, mutual admiration, and unspoken tensions. She was educated, artistic, and imaginative, yet her identity was confined to being a wife and sister-in-law, with no recognised outlet for her talents. The nature of her repression includes Creative repression — despite her intellectual abilities, she had no real social platform to write, paint, or create. Emotional isolation — her husband was busy with public life, leaving her without companionship. Social restrictions — she lived in a patriarchal household where her voice carried little weight in decisions.

Romantic repression — any emotional attachment outside marriage, even platonic, was taboo; her bond with Rabindranath may have been one of her only emotional lifelines. The Psychological Build-up Lack of purpose: Her role as a wife in a childless marriage left her with a limited identity beyond being part of the Tagore household. Jealousies and household politics: Jorasanko was filled with strong personalities; emotional rivalries and tensions were common. Possible depressive tendencies: Her letters and remembered behaviour suggest long periods of sadness and withdrawal. Abrupt rupture: When Rabindranath married Mrinalini Devi in 1883, Kadambari's emotional world might have been shaken — she lost her closest companion's undivided attention. Just four months after Rabindranath's wedding, on April 21, 1884, Kadambari Devi died by suicide at the age of 25. No official reason was recorded — in that era, such matters were shrouded in silence. Scholars and biographers suggest a mix of emotional neglect, loneliness, loss of companionship, and lack of self-actualisation may have contributed. In Freudian terms, this could be seen as: Repression of desire and self-expression. Melancholia from unacknowledged grief and loss, the death drive (Thanatos) impulse arising from prolonged psychological suffering. Kadambari's repression and eventual suicide could be examined as an extreme case of the same psychic wounds found in Tagore's fictional women. Many of Tagore's heroines — lonely, sensitive, confined by social roles — seem to carry echoes of Kadambari. **Her story exemplifies how patriarchal domestic structures could cause severe mental health crises in women.**

But it is only Rabindranath Tagore, who dared to subvert the male gaze and celebrate the female gaze through principal women characters like Binodini (*Chokher Bali*) and Bimala (*Ghare Baire*), who demonstrated considerable courage to cross the threshold of sanctity, prescribed by society.



Bimala begins the novel confined within the “inner quarters” (*ghare*)- a symbol of traditional domesticity and patriarchal control. Freud’s theory of repression helps in understanding her inner passivity: her individuality, her desires, and voice are silenced by the social expectation that a wife exists only within the home. But when Sandip enters her life, he becomes a manifestation of her repressed desires- both sexual and intellectual. He speaks of passion, nationalism, and freedom, embodying what her unconscious has long craved for but suppressed. According to Freud, in the chapter on resistance and suppression he asserts “ When we undertake to cure a patient, to free him from the symptoms of his malady, he confronts us with a vigorous tenacious resistance that lasts during the whole time of the treatment.” (Freud, applying this psychoanalytic observation to the multiple dimensions of femininity, it can be deduced that women (both in real and in fiction) are patients of the social malady of objectification, who either suppress their desires to confirm to societal norms, or react with resistance. Bimala shifts from being gazed upon (by her husband Nikhilesh and Sandip) to realising her own gaze – she evaluates them, compares their own ideologies, and chooses where to direct her loyalty/ desire. The novel’s title itself can be read psychoanalytically: the *home* (*ghare*) is the unconscious space of repression, silence, and tradition, while the world (*baire*) represents the conscious realm of desire, recognition and liberation.

However, the steady liberation of women in the Jorasanko household answers the steady and dynamic flow of admirable characterisation of women in Tagore’s stories.

Binodini from Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* is a complex, intelligent, and passionate young widow who defies patriarchal norms by embracing her desires, leading to a tumultuous inner and outer life. She is a contradictory figure, torn between social constraints and personal desires, yet ultimately emerges as an agent of independence who prioritizes inner peace and self-respect over societal expectations, making her one of Tagore's most profound and realistic female characters.

The women of Jorasanko, particularly those from the Tagore family, were pioneers of women's emancipation and empowerment in Bengal through their pursuit of education, creative endeavours, and independent lifestyles. Figures like Jnanadanandini Devi, who travelled to England and introduced modern saree styles, and Swarnakumari Devi, a pioneering female writer, exemplified this spirit. They also played



crucial roles in introducing modern art and culture into their household and the wider society, challenging traditional norms and paving the way for other women.

Conclusion

Though Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories emerged in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their echoes in Indian literature can be traced, often unintentionally, in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore never formally studied Freud, nor did he directly engage with psychoanalysis in the academic sense. Yet, his narratives reveal a deep, intuitive grasp of the unconscious, repression, desire, and identity — concepts central to Freudian thought. Tagore's sensitivity to the inner lives of women, particularly in a patriarchal Bengali society, mirrors the psychoanalytic project: to give voice to the silenced and to interpret the unspoken. His heroines — often caught between societal norms and personal longing — embody the conflict between the id (instinctual desires), the superego (social morality), and the ego (mediator between the two). In portraying the internal psychological landscapes of his characters, Tagore anticipated the very terrain Freud was mapping in Europe. Tagore's heroines, through their predicaments, echo the vulnerability of women in nineteenth-century Bengal. Having occupied the lowest position in the social hierarchy, they expose the social, political and psychological oppression of women. While social and political issues regarding women have been largely explored and brought to attention by authors, educationalists, liberals, teachers, politicians, the psychological suppression of the female sex receives very little to no attention, which as a result invites grave dangers to the mental health of women- repressed sexuality (Binodini from *Chokher Bali*), silenced identity and the female gaze intertwine- reflecting both fictional imagination and living truth. It is actually *Chokher Bali* that gained the recognition of an 'analytical project'. With the advent of modernity, women have been liberated through education and the spreading awareness, both socially and economically. My study attempts a deep psychological inquiry into the complexities of women's desires both in fiction and reality. Be it **Charulata** (*Nashtanir/The Broken Nest*), the gifted but lonely wife whose emotional world remains starved in a loveless marriage or **Bimala** (*Ghare Baire/ Home and the World*), torn between loyalty and desire, trapped by social morality, they portray deep sensitivity and intellect, which shape them into admirable characters. The female gaze as portrayed by Tagore educates readers that silence, withdrawal or



defiance in women can be signs of emotional distress, encourage empathy instead of judgement for women battling with social taboos and mental health crises.

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