

# The Restoration of Feminist Subjectivity in Henrik Ibsen and Rabindranath Tagore

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**Abstract:** Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) focuses, among other issues, on the individuality in his play *A Doll's House*. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), in some of his short stories, depicts the struggle by women to assert their individuality in the patriarchal social structure of the Indian subcontinent. Ibsen and Tagore are from different cultures, but still they have much in common regarding feminist subjectivity. They reveal the anguish of the women of their times and their treatment by the elements of the society. What unites these two writers is that women in society not only become the victims of oppression but also find a way out of that oppression, and try to establish themselves as individuals. Such struggle attributes universality to the subject-matter in the writings of these two authors. This paper aims at finding the thread that binds together the writings of Ibsen and Tagore from the feminist point of view, and how their female characters fight to assert their individuality in an adverse environment.

Women are considered subservient in many societies. They are regarded and treated as inferior to their male counterparts. For establishing their rights, the feminist movement originated in the first quarter of the twentieth century. But much earlier than this, women's condition was projected and deplored in the writings of different writers, beginning as early as with Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century in Britain. Since then, many writers have echoed the tension of Wollstonecraft in their own writings, not only in Britain but also in Europe, Asia and America. Writers have raised their voices against oppression on the female community in a patriarchal society and tried to find out a way to stop it. Through their efforts, subjectivity of women has become a foregrounded issue. History shows that the concept of feminist subjectivity has been belated because at first women failed to understand the nature of femininity as a result of their vulnerability to numerous familial and social demands and oppressions, and secondly, once they come to the point of encounter, they either dissolve in it unwillingly or go away without facing it properly. Subjectivity, Donald Hall explains in the "Introduction" to his book *Subjectivity*, "implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity, at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity" (3). Thus subjectivity can include the

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concept of subject and object in the same person, who realizes it at a later and crucial moment of life.

Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Aporichita" ("Woman Unknown") can be viewed as a story that points at feminist subjectivity. The first person narrative describes the failed marriage proposal of a young man in the contemporary Kolkata. It happens owing to the greedy maternal uncle, who wants to test whether the ornaments of the would-be bride are pure gold. But the father of the bride sarcastically protests against the idea and the groom's party has to evacuate the bride's residence. Later on, the narrator-groom, along with his mother on a train journey, incidentally meets that would-be bride, whom they had not seen earlier. They recognize her after hearing the name Kalyani, who later says to him who wants to propose her once again, "I'm not going to marry" (Chaudhury 230). Kalyani's rejection is not rooted in the previous embarrassment; rather it is due to her self-realization that has given rise to her sense of other responsibilities to perform than this one. She wants to rise above the social bondage, which will definitely tie her up to norms and traditions, destroying the self with which she can now reject a proposal that the patriarchal society wants to impose upon her. Tagore defends the position of the narrator as he also plans to remain unmarried in a society where marriage for both an adult man and a girl is seen as an inevitability of life. The narrator, by following the decision of Kalyani, shows that there are other realities in life than marriage itself, and these realities are not averse to achieving humanity in its true sense. (Bisi, 65)

Tagore has his own conception of femininity. It is not limited to social demands. The way society treats women is deplorable because society deprives them of their individuality and ornamentalizes them and thus restricts the freedom of femininity. In a lecture, he says ruefully, "At the present stage of history civilization has become primarily masculine, a civilization of power in which woman from her captivity spends her surplus wealth of emotion in merely decorative purposes of society" (Das 3: 676). Stories like "Hoimonti" and "Subha" are the two proper reflections of such observations of Tagore. Both Hoimonti and Subha fall in the trap of masculine society, as they are made doubly inferior. Hoimonti is made silent, and Subha, though a dumb girl, has not been allowed even to cry out her feelings. "Hoimonti" is the story of a girl who grows up in a liberal family where she learns to be true to one's self, but finds herself through her marriage posited in a family where she is merely a wife and not a person. She is recommended to conceal her real age. She is made what she is not. Elaine Showalter defines women who have been deprived of their truthfulness, to be "Both muted and dominant groups [who] generate beliefs or order ideas of social reality at the unconscious level, but dominant groups control the forms or structures in which consciousness can be articulated. Thus muted groups must mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures" (quoted in Lodge and Wood, 323). Apu, the husband of Hoimonti,



effeminately surrenders to the pressure of the family and does not give much importance to his wife, who, it is hinted, is suffering from disillusionment. He, all of a sudden, comes across a glimpse of the tormented wife sitting by the wall, her hands folded on her leg, her uncovered hair hanging on her chest across her shoulder (Tagore, 555). This creates the essence of the emptiness that Hoimonti suffers from, as she becomes a victim of the patriarchal society. The free Hoimonti becomes ill both physically and psychologically after coming to the in-law's family, yet the patriarchy finds it difficult to acknowledge it. They extend their torture on Hoimonti as they expect to get another wife for Apu, who must "recognize and acknowledge the male brutality that motivated the woman's response" (Goodman, 196), and try to save the wife, if not the woman. Tagore further illustrates the diminishing individuality of the female in the helplessness of Apu as he regrets ironically, "If I do not thrust the truth towards superficiality, if I am not able to immolate my adored person to my house, why then do I carry the lesson of ages in my blood?" (Tagore 556 – my translation). Tagore stood against all types of oppression he encountered in his contemporary society; he condemned the society for its dehumanizing attitude to women. The failure of Apu's family is that none has been able to treat Hoimonti as a human being; she has been obliterated.

Hoimonti's subordinate position is equated with that of Subha in "Subha," another short story that reveals further abasement of femininity in disguise of marriage, which, as Simone de Beauvoir says, "is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. . . . The young girl's freedom of choice has always been much restricted; . . . marriage is her only means of support and the sole justification of her existence" (445-6). Her parents marry her to a man, who remarries after finding out her physical disability despite her beauty and simplicity. Tagore was much concerned about the lowly position of women of his period. He expresses his resentment against this tradition in the self-sacrifice of Kadambini, the tragic heroine of the story "Jibito O Mrito" ("The Living and the Dead"). The story narrates a mishap in her life, but she survives only to be further humiliated by her near and dear ones. She is believed to be a deceiver, or a ghost, but not a human being. The accusers have no true complaint against her, yet they do not believe in what she has to say. Her desperate cry, "I did not die, I did not die, I did not die" (Radice, 41) reaches no one, and so for proving herself alive she has to die finally by jumping into a tank in the inner courtyard of the house. Kadambini's fault is that she tries to assert herself in a society which is dominated by men like Sharadashankar and Shripati, who are more interested in appearance than in reality. She may have died, but the way she has attempted to prove her *self* is a leading path towards establishing the subjectivity that women deserve.

However, the issue of subjectivity is not properly realized as much as it is done through the proclamation of one's choice. Like Kalyani, Charulata in "Nosto

Nir” (“The Broken Nest”) is another voice to assert herself despite her husband Vupoti’s request to her to accompany him. It is another male dominated family where the wife remains neglected, and later she is forced to create a new realm for herself through the cooperation of her husband. In this realm she holds Amal as a way of escape from her caged psyche. Through Amal, Charu wants to establish her femininity. Amal, her brother-in-law, begins to sprout himself at Charu’s discretion. But he gradually shows himself as a product of the masculine society where Charu must continue to live. So, she hits back at Amal at first, then at Vupoti. De Beauvoir explains such a situation:

The woman who is shut up in immanence endeavours to hold man in that prison also; thus the prison will become interchangeable with the world, and woman will no longer suffer from being confined there: . . . Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male’s superiority. She sets about mutilating, dominating man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and his values. But in doing so she is only defending herself; . . . The existent who is regarded as inessential cannot fail to demand the reestablishment of her sovereignty. (726)

Amal leaves for England and later Vupoti plans to go to Mysore, without understanding Charu’s emotion. But Charu tries to defend her as she also wants to go with Vupoti, who rejects her request. This refusal from her husband fills her with the realization that she needs to find herself, she needs to learn a lot about herself. This gives rise to her sense of individuality as she finally declares to Vupoti’s urge to go with him, “No; I won’t” (Tagore, 318) – my translation). The apparent pique is dissolved in the consciousness of the unconscious self.

The question of feminist subjectivity comes to a focal point in stories like “Strir Potro” (“The Wife’s Letter”) and “Poyla Nombor” (“House Number One”) by Tagore. Thematically, these two stories are considered as seminal in the establishment of the individual identity of a woman not only as female but also as conscience. Mrinal in “Strir Potro” and Anila in “Poyla Nombor” echo what is reflected in Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*. “Strir Potro” is the story of a rebellious housewife who finds it extremely difficult to tolerate the injustices in the guise of masculinity practised in her in-law’s house. She becomes the mother of a baby girl, who dies at the time of her birth. This incomplete motherhood torments her. Things become even worse as Bindu, a floating, shelterless girl takes refuge in the family. She is a distant cousin of the elder housewife of the family. Yet, she fails to provide Bindu the proper care, because she finds it next to impossible to do anything for her in an environment where “women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, and instead must seek to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them” (quoted in Moi 57). Mrinal, feeling sympathy for both the cousins, takes charge



of Bindu despite opposition from every quarter of the family. As it is the trend of the society, Bindu is forcefully married to a deranged man from whose grip she runs away at first, and finally commits suicide. After the death, Mrinal goes on a pilgrimage. She suffers from the “struggle between individual freedom and social responsibility in self-creation” (Hall, 73). All these she describes in a letter to her husband. She bursts out in disgust at the way domestic life treats a woman, “I have learnt what it means to be a woman in this domestic world. I need no more of it” (Chaudhury, 217). She is sure to lose her individuality if she stays there any longer. The only way to save her *self* is to give her *self* a let go. Once free from such bonds, she can look at her *self* reasonably and understandably. She does not mention where she is going, but she ascertains that to return is not for her. Such withdrawal is not the withdrawal from the self, rather a return to the very self. Mrinal feels grateful to Bindu for her own realization. This is a freedom for her to find out what she really is. Certainly she is after her other self, which is not that of a wife, or a mother, or a sister. It is her individuality she must look for now.

Like Mrinal, Anila of “Poyla Nombor” is another character who looks for her place in society. But she is not oppressed the way Mrinal is. Anila leads the life of a caring housewife, whose husband Adwaitacharan – the first person narrator of the story – is engaged in literary activities and creates an air of intellectuality and nobility around him, except for the fact that he is quite ignorant of the affairs in his domestic life. His seclusion from and Anila’s extravagant attachment with the domesticity have set them, without their realizing this poles apart, from where they cannot reach each other, though each of them is aware of the mere existence of the other. Two incidents occur in the family, which provide the ultimate twist. The first is the arrival of Sitangshu in the neighbourhood, and the other is the suicide of Anila’s brother Saroj. Adwaitacharan’s male ego prevents him from being touched by either of the incidents, though the first one apparently shortens the list of his literary discussants. On the other hand, the same incidents give Anila a new life, a new perspective about herself. She stealthily leaves the house of her husband. As she leaves, she takes the conch-shell bracelets and iron bangles with her. She leaves a piece of paper, where she has written, as her last word to her husband, “I am leaving. Don’t try to find me. You won’t succeed even if you try” (Chaudhury, 241). The masculinity converts into jealousy as Adwaitacharan erringly thinks that she has eloped with Sitangshu, for he discovers nearly 50 letters of Sitangshu sent to Anila. But his wrong assumption is soon corrected when the later asks him about her whereabouts. Sitangshu shows him a letter, rather a copy of the letter that Anila left at the time of her departure. The narrator-husband confesses that he had never considered Anila as a human being. He realizes his mistake and regrets it, but does not go in search of her. The vanity of masculinity is smashed by Anila’s realization that is reflected partially in the letters of Sitangshu. Tagore, Mukhopaddhay says, brilliantly and

gallantly brings Anila out of her domestic life, yet preserves her from being spoilt in the face of the reality of life (2: 599). Both Mrinal and Anila depart with the social identity of married women, yet take it as a challenge to defy that society which tries to objectify them.

It is not possible to know where Mrinal or Anila has gone, but one can guess that wherever they have gone, they will not return. Or if they ever do, that will be a new Mrinal or Anila who will be quite a stranger to the husband. Tagore hints that they have gone away so that they can assert their subjectivity previously denied them. As Tagore notes, "women cannot be pushed back for good into the superficial region of the merely decorative by man's aggressive athleticism" (Das 3: 678). The procedure in the journey to self-discovery is inevitable for women, and Mrinal and Anila reflect that spirit of a subjective movement.

John Stuart Mill observes, regarding the male treatment of the females, "All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others" (18). Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a play that reflects what Mill claims in his essay. This play "is the Norwegian version of the great theme of later nineteenth century literature throughout Europe, the sufferings of women in a masculine world . . . concerned with the deeper aspects of conflict between two worlds – the woman's world of personal relationships and human values against the man's world of legal rights and duties . . ." (Bradbrook, 81). Nora is treated by her husband Torvald as a pet, a skylark, a squirrel, and sometimes a spendthrift. Nora accepts all these love-names from her husband, and never objects to any. At a later part of the play she admits that her father also treated her like a doll. Furthermore, she is regarded by Torvald as a good housewife and a good mother despite being a little careless about the family expenditures.

The play does not give the name of Nora's father; there is no way to know her original name either. As the trend in the Western society, Nora becomes Nora Helmer after her marriage with Torvald Helmer. Naming in this way deprives the female of her own identity in a society which is patriarchal, and attributes to her an identity to which she is alien. Torvald, a lawyer, offers, as the custom of the society, legal death to Nora's *self*, as she becomes Nora Helmer. As attorney Kristian Miccio explains, "Upon marriage, a woman experienced a legal death. The first step in this process was the surrender of her name. This loss was more than a symbolic act; it was the initial step toward utter suspension of her legal existence" (quoted in Kesselman, 167). Thus, the masculine environment starts wiping who Nora is, who she might be. Nora, as the play develops, reveals her life as it was before her marriage, particularly how she was treated by her father in the family, and compares the situation with the treatment she receives from her husband. It is granted, de Beauvoir interprets, for a woman to be brought up by



her father before marriage, and to be taken care of by the husband, after the marriage. In both the cases, she finds herself confined in a masculine world. She is believed to be inferior, dependent, without any lessons of violence. She is shut up in her flesh, in her house, and she finds herself a passive character before these males who set goals and establish values for her (609).

Nora has other roles to play in the house. She is the wife, and the bedfellow of Torvald. But the male society expects more from Nora's attitude. Dr. Rank, the friend of the Helmer family, is voyeuristic as he views Nora getting dressed for the Tarantella party. The sexuality in Nora has two different types of consumers: one legal, the other pseudo as the society sets the trend. Rank's attitude is, to some extent, of that type which is presented in *Ghosts* by Ibsen in the characters of the late Mr. Alving and his son Oswald. Torvald becomes sexually excited as he enjoys the wild dance of Nora, and cannot suppress the passion of being with her. Nora, therefore, is bestowed with another identity. Overall, she has been made an object of satisfaction for Torvald. Nora becomes, Goodman says, a mechanical doll for both the men. Femininity has to play a series of roles, which require disguising of the self and the wearing of a costume, which is designed by men (219), and in case of Nora, Torvald takes the pleasure of preparing that costume – figuratively and literally. Neither Torvald nor Dr. Rank realizes that she may have other realities in her life, that she may have dreamt of something that they cannot even imagine. Rather, they enjoy every bit of moment of the rehearsal for the party and then the party itself, where she is forced to play the role of an erotic object. In this way she becomes the victim of male desire. The objectification of Nora takes away from her the thoughts that she has a real self, a true individuality. Her *self* is a deceiving one, and deceived at the same time.

Sometimes, some incidents happen, some revelations take place, which, all of a sudden, fill the mind with acute pain, yet floods the concerned person, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "with a cold, sea-sharp wash of relief. Often such truths come by accident or from strangers" (quoted in Gelpi and Gelpi, 203). Mrinal faces the accident of Bindu, Anila faces the stranger Sitangshu and the accident of Saroj. In case of Nora, it is the disaster that is brought by Krogstad and Linde. Linde chooses the traditional role of wife and mother. She remains submissive. But as Nora's secret is revealed to Torvald, he reacts harshly because he is afraid that the male face that he has is about to be destroyed. He falls short of realizing the fact that he owes his very existence to Nora. She comes to her realization – as does Mrinal – when Torvald wants to prove his manliness to his wife, but ironically misses the opportunity. In the twinkling of an eye, Nora reaches her conclusion – the way Anila does – about herself that she needs to find out her true self, "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are – or at least I'm going to try to be" (Ibsen, 82). Her deceived self needs enlightenment. Nora is able to redefine her identity, to reclaim her subjectivity. She chooses to go away from the house, anticipating Mrinal and Anila, but

declares where she is going, unlike the two characters in Tagore. The similarity is that all of them choose outright to abandon their former lodging. These three characters achieve universality as they deliberately choose their destiny by refusing the appeal of their husbands – who are mere strangers for them –, and the society. They are emotionally awestruck, but have overcome the situation. Their past life is metamorphosed by the unique reality of the present to such an extent that it has become something new, which puzzle their husbands. They are now ready for emancipation. As Emily Dickinson writes:

The Soul selects her own Society –  
 Then – shuts the Door –  
 To her divine Majority –  
 Present no more –

Unmoved – she notes the Chariots – pausing –  
 At her low Gate –  
 Unmoved – an Emperor be kneeling  
 Upon her Mat –

I've known her – from an ample nation –  
 Choose One –  
 Then – close the Valves of her attention –  
 Like Stone – (poem# 303)

Selecting a society is not easy; it comes through the commotion and sometimes with the violation of the set norms. The transformation from object to subject is a laborious process. But once it is accomplished, an attachment towards self-respect rises in the mind, which then acts in its newly found reality. Here the mind is the queen, and the realm works according to the demand – not whim – of that self-declared queen. It then realizes its own weight; it then can have the strength of standing in front of all with a vertical head, which cannot be lowered by any force whatsoever, all because of the force within. The horizontal body is trampled. Mrinal, Anila and Nora have selected their own society, where they can exercise their true selves, where they can remain unmoved by any pressure or appeal from anyone, but most importantly, where they can taste their subjectivity without ever feeling inferior or subordinate to anyone. The husbands, with the novelty in their outlook, are pathetically mesmerized. For each of the husbands, the wife has become so possessive that he himself is subjugated by the wife. But the wife is practically pushed to this situation, where she “stands before man not as a subject but as an object paradoxically endued with subjectivity; she takes herself simultaneously as self and as other, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences” (de Beauvoir, 727). It is such a great shock that Mrinal's husband



or Adwaitacharan or Torvald humiliatingly confess their offence and bow down to their wives.

Society, especially when it is masculine or patriarchal, nurtures manifold forms of oppression, which deprives women of their freedom. Their freedom can be ensured only when they are conscious of their subjectivity. They need, the way the above characters have done through sufferings and pride, to transcend themselves into liberty. Various “forms of oppression and domination vary with time and from society to society” (Freedman, 92). This has been exemplified above. Feminism has done many things for women’s emancipation. For restoring that goal what women need is a united stand against oppression and they have to join hands together to accomplish it. Only then Kadambini, Hoimonti, Subha and Linde can find themselves as themselves.

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