

A GLIMPSE OF INDIAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY DURING EARLY 19TH C. FOUND IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S NOVEL 'THE WRECK'

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ABSTRACT

India is so diverse, with so many different racial, religious and linguistic communities, that it is hardly possible to speak of its culture and society. So it is better to speak of its multiplicity of cultures and societies. The Indian culture, often labelled as a unification of several cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent. India's miscellany has stirred many writers to pen their insights of the country's culture. Among them, Rabindranath Tagore, one of the prominent Indian Writers tried to give factual picture of Indian culture with its peculiar features and brought out the orthodox social traditions, customs and superstitions prevalent during the early 19thC. Bengal through his novels. His novel 'The Wreck' provides many instances of Indian cultural milieu and social customs prevalent during the early 19th C. through the unspoken love between Ramesh and Hemnalini, overturning of boat and exchange of wives. Tagore undertakes the psychological analysis. We can have a glimpse of Indian culture and social norms and traditions through the mindsets of various characters of 'The Wreck' -Ramesh, Hemnalini, Kamala, Dr. Nalinaksha, Braja Mohan, AnnadaBabu, Kshemankari, Haribhabhini, UncleChakrabarti etc.

Keywords: Brahmosamaj, Conventional traditions, Hinduism, orthodox society

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore had a multidimensional Personality as he was a great Poet, a Novelist, a BrahmoSamaj Philosopher, a visual Artist, a Painter etc. Tagore, born in 1861 has remained even today the brightest luminary in the firmament of Indian English Literature. Having won Nobel Prize in 1913, Tagore attracted the attention of the entire world to our extraordinary literary treasure. His moral and aesthetics ideas, his philosophy about life and the world have contributed immensely in moulding the psyche of our people. His extraordinary literary works have made Tagore a cultural icon of the entire humanity. There is a rare aspect of Indian culture and traditions which is untouched by Tagore through his poetry and novels.

If we recognize and evaluate Tagore as an Activist, social reformer who had remained in his entire creative life immensely concerned, tirelessly active and deeply thoughtful about rural material poverty, ignorance, superstitions, social orthodoxy and Indian traditions, it would be a grand tribute to him. It is said,

“Literature is a mirror which reflects
the varied aspects of life lived.”

Literature is the mirror of society while the writer is the oasis of civilization. Tagore’s unique farsightedness, statesmanship and vivid retrospection are especially reflected in his innumerable works of Tagore. Very Few Indian writers can be equaled Tagore’s skills in describing the Indian scene. The traditions, customs and vivid Indian personalities as Tagore has done. ‘The Wreck’ gives us an interesting picture of Indian family life particularly Bengali Hindu life of the 19th C. According to Edward Thomas:

“The Wreck shows how the Hindu family relationships are based not on
human feelings but on conventions and traditions.”

Originally Tagore has written ‘Naukadubi’ (1906) in Bengali Language which is translated in English titled ‘The Wreck’ (1921). It’s one of the full length novels by Tagore and is based on the dilemma of mistaken identity which somehow leads to an exchange of wives. Through this novel, Tagore suggests the rift between the reformist and progressive BrahmoSamaj and traditional conservatism of Hinduism during the early 19th C in Bengal. It also takes on the social conventions and questions the credibility of marriage as an institution.

RESEARCH METHODS USED: Critical, Analytical, descriptive.

THE THEME:

In ‘*The Wreck*’, Tagore professionally undertakes psychological analysis. The incidents in the novel solely responsible for the complexity of the situation that arises at the very beginning are skillfully arranged.

Ramesh, a young Lawyer studying in Calcutta – in love with Hemnalini, a Brahmo is made to marry a girl -Sushila not of his choice by his tradition bound father, Braja Mohan. On the contrary, Kamala, an orphan and dependent girl, was married to Dr.Nalinaksha, by her maternal uncle. They left the village immediately after marriage. Both the Boats were caught in a storm while crossing the river. Due to this cruel blow of fate, both the boats were overturned and wrecked. The senseless body of Ramesh was washed ashore. When he regained consciousness, he saw in the darkness of the night, the inert body of a girl in wedding garments on the sandy bank at a little distance from him. Taking her to be his married wife, he brought her back to life, and she took him to be her husband. When they reached the village home of Ramesh, he came to realize that she was not the girl he had married, but he thought it imprudent to reveal his doubt to anybody. As it was now impossible for him to live with her, he took her to Calcutta and put her in a school hostel. He was trying all the time to find out her husband, but in vain. Ramesh, however, had been engaged to Hemnalini, an educated Brahmo girl of Calcutta, when he was compelled by his father to marry the village girl. Sushila belongs to an orthodox Hindu family. When the school was closed for the vacation, Kamala refused to stay alone in the hostel and came without previous notice to the Calcutta at the house of Ramesh where she was noticed by his rival Akshay for the hand of Hemnalini. Jealousy led him to report his suspicion to Hemnalini’s father and this was confirmed by Ramesh’s request for a postponement of his proposed marriage with his daughter. These complications also revealed an aspect of social life

in Brahma community. In this way, hearts of both Ramesh and Hemnalini are wrecked on the rock of mistrusts and conventional traditions. In order to get out himself from the awkward situation in which Ramesh found himself after Kamala's return from the hostel, he took her on a river-trip to North India in a steamer. At Gazipur he puts her in the custody of the ladies of Dr. Chakrabarti's family. The attraction of Kamala for Ramesh and of Ramesh for Kamala had naturally been increasing all the time, and Kamala who had come to love him as her husband, often wondered at his seeming indifferences and felt miserable. A letter written by Ramesh to Hemnalini explaining his inability to marry her fell into Kamala's hands, and there was a sudden change in her feelings towards Ramesh- Love gave place to disgust; and she left him suddenly. Bitter experiences now darkened her life, and she learnt to cherish the thought of her unknown husband. Fortune eventually smiled at her, and accidentally she found refuge in Benaras in the house of Nalinaksha himself who was broadminded enough to forget her past and welcome her as his lawful wife. It is to be inferred that later Ramesh and Hemamalini also married.

REFLECTION OF CULTURAL PECULIARITIES AND RIGID SOCIAL TRADITIONS:

During the early 19th C. Society, people observe the class distinctions strictly. In Chapter-I, when Braja Mohan, Ramesh's father has arrived to meet Ramesh at Calcutta, Hemnalini said to Jogendra, 'we can offer him a cup of tea.' At that time Akshay said, 'The old gentleman might object to taking anything here'. He observed in allusion to the fact that AnnadaBabu was a rigidBrahmo and Ramesh's father, an orthodox hindu. Class and caste differences were prominent in the society which can also be visible even today in some of the societies.

During that time, the sons and daughters have no right to select or see their bride and bridegroom respectively as can be seen in some of the Indian societies even today. And they follow them as an obedient sons and daughter as in case of Ramesh and Hemnalini in the novel. Actually Ramesh is half in love with Hemnalini, his neighbour but both have never exchanged words or promises other than through glances and mutually felt warmth towards each other. The parents decide the future of their children by selecting life partners for them which can be observed in the conversation between Ramesh and his father, Braja Mohan in Chapter- 2:

Ramesh: Father, I really can't marry this girl, I'm bound by a promise to someone else

Braja Mohan: you don't say so! Has there been a regular betrothal?

Ramesh: no not exactly but.....”

Braja Mohan: Have you spoken to the girl's people? Is it all settled?

Ramesh: I haven't actually spoken about it, but.....

Braja Mohan: oh you haven't? Well as you've said nothing so far you may as well keep quite

a little longer.

Ramesh: I should be doing her a wrong if I married any other girl.

Braja Mohan: you would be doing a still grater wrong if you refused to marry the bride whom I have chosen for you.

When Ramesh reached home, he found that a bride had been chosen for him and a day has been fixed for his marriage. In youth when Braja Mohan had fallen upon evil days and he owed his subsequent prosperity to a pleader named Ishan, a friend of him. So he promised him to marry his daughter with Ramesh

After the overturning of boat, when Ramesh and Kamala reached at Ramesh's village, he found the dead bodies of his father, his mother in law and several of his relatives were laid in

front of you. Ramesh's grandmother met her grandson and his bride with loud lamentation. There were no cries of greeting to the couple. No one greeted the bride. In fact, they seemed to shun her as people in the village took bridegroom responsible for this tragic incident.

Indian wives generally do not eat until their husbands have finished following role of Indian ideal wives during early 19th C. It can also be visible in some of the Indian societies today. As we see in Chap-7,

Ramesh said to Kamal, "Won't you have some, Kamala?"

Kamala replied: you must have some first."

Here she seemed to take naturally the role of the wife who may not eat until her husband has finished. She also enjoyed in serving her husband. The same cultural phenomena referring to ideal Indian wife is perceptible in Chapter – 9 in which Kamala gave kedgerie in the flat lid of the cooking pot to Ramesh. When Ramesh finished, Kamala gave her a large share without thinking about her share and also eat in the same lid used by Ramesh:

Ramesh: wait! Have you left enough for yourself?

Kamala: oh, there's plenty left.

Ramesh: what are you going to use for a plate?

Kamala: why, the lid of course, taking it for granted that as his wife she would naturally use this plate."

Indian wives do not call their husbands by their names. As we can see in Chapter-10, Ramesh heard the sounds of a bunch of keys against the wood of the door and he turned his head to see Kamala coming out of the cabin:

Ramesh: so that's your way of calling me, is it?

Kamala: I couldn't think of any other way.

Ramesh: well, why not call out 'Ramesh Babu' if you want me anything?

Kamala's cheeks burned in the darkness. As though a Hindu wife would call her husband by his name?

During that time, dowry system was prevalent as can be seen in some of the societies today also. In Chapter-14, Haribhabhini, Uncle Chakrabarti's wife, an embodiment of orthodox Indian woman asked a series of questions to Kamala:

Let me see your bangles, dear? The gold isn't very good, is it? Didn't your father give you any jewels when you were married? Oh, you've no father? But you should have some things, all that same. Bidhu's husband gives her some sort of trinkets every two months or so!"

One of the universal cultural value – 'work is worship' can be seen in Chapter-16, Ramesh said to Kamala "kamala, you mustn't do that!"

Kamala replied:

"Why Ramesh Babu! What is the harm in honest work? You people with foreign education talk about equality; yet if you think, sweeping is degrading, why do you let a servant do it?"

Ramesh and Dr. Nalinaksha are presented as the epitome of cultural values. Ramesh sacrificed his love for the sake of Kamala and Dr. Nalinaksha accepted Kamala even after she lived with Ramesh.

CONCLUSION:

In short, The Wreck contains a sensitive story, which was well woven around the lives of four people and kept us intertwined throughout. Set in the Bengali background of 1920s the novel is based on the philosophy of true love, eternal loyalty and patience. Tagore reveals the peculiarities of Indian Culture and rigid social customs and thus aimed at eradication of social evils. Braja Mohan, Ramesh's father, Kshemankari, Haribhabhini are presented as the embodiment of strict observers of rigid social customs. Ramesh, Kamala, Hemnalini and Uncle Chakrabarti represent cultural values.

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