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## Locating woman's scripting in Rabindranath Tagore's Nastaneer

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### Abstract

This paper explores Tagore's depiction of individual scripting by women in his short story, *The Broken Home (Nastaneer)*, and also how such scripting endures social opposition. In each story, the individual scripting struggles hard to maintain its sustenance. Since it becomes very difficult to assert as to whose scripting goes upper hand (Individual or social), the paper only depicts how they interact with each other in interesting ways.

**Keywords:** Scripting, desire, self, assertion

### Introduction

In 1878, Tagore made his first trip to England at the age of seventeen. The freedom cherished by the British women motivated young Tagore to concentrate upon the confinements of Bengali women. After attending a party where British men and women mixed freely, Tagore wrote a letter condemning women's imprisonment, strictly observed in Bengal:

It is only natural that men and women should seek amusement together. Women are a part of the human race and God has created them as part of society. To consider the enjoyment of free mixing between people to be a cardinal sin, to be unsociable and to turn it into a sensational matter is not only abnormal, it is unsocial, and therefore in a sense uncivilized. Men are engrossed in all manner of amusement in the outside world, while women are like their privately owned tamed animals, chained docilely to the walls of the innermost chambers of the houses. (Tagore, *Letters* 88)

Tagore toiled hard to posit the surge of women emancipation within the cultural context of India. Consequently, his effort encountered innumerable oppositions of the orthodox upholders of rigid patriarchal norms. Even his brother Dwijendranath could not embrace Tagore's reformist ideals. The Tagore household advocated the ideas of the emancipation of Bengali women, the necessity of female education, yet, it could not altogether sever its ties with the custom of *purdah*, the *sadar-andar* compartmentalization or the tradition of *palki*. Thus, Tagore was posited somewhere between tradition and modernity, social dictates and individual assertions, that is to say, between social scripting and individual scripting. This paper will locate individual scripting and its tragic predicament in Tagore's short story, "The Broken Nest" ("Nastaneer", 1901)

The need to minimize the plight of women was felt by a number of intellectuals like Kesab Sen, Derozio, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Dakshinananjan Mukhopadhyay, Ramgopal Ghosh, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar. This initial stir in the thought of a plethora of intellectuals accelerated the advent of liberty to enlighten the domain of female existence. Despite tremendous opposition, the Bethune School was established in 1849.

The realm of female education was dominated by two schools of ideas. While Kesab Chandra Sen and his supporters introduced an education system with divinity as its fountainhead, Shibnath Shastri voted for a secular mode of learning. His interactive sessions with his students like Radharani Lahiri, Rajlakshmi Sen, Saudamini Khastagir aggravated their suppressed interests in science and, therefore, facilitated their pursuit of science in the academia. The other witness of the climactic shift in women's temperament, their gradual acceptance of the varied strands of the emerging discourses of modernity and their implied

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desire to explore the realm of creativity was the journal *Bamabodhini*. Thus, unlike the conservative mothers, the mother in the article *Kanyar Prati Matar Upadesh*, published in 1865 in the *Bamabodhini*, voices something unusual. Illuminating the positive aspects of education, the mother tells her daughter: “Thanks to the mercy of the Lord, you are born in very beautiful times. You see the spread of knowledge everywhere these days... so far, ignorant and cruel men had deprived them (Women) from such a rare and pleasurable gem, that is education...” (qtd. In Dasgupta 122). Apart from *Bamabodhini*, a host of literary journals allotted space for proper nurturing of women’s creativity. Besides contributing articles, women also tried their hands in editing magazines. Tagore’s sister-in-law Jnanadanandini Devi collected all the young children and brought out a magazine called *Balak*. She was also the editor of the magazine. Between 1875 and 1900, at least, twenty-six women editors appeared. The first woman’s magazine with Thakamoni Dasi as the editor came out in 1875. About two years later, *Bharati* was brought by the Tagore family. Swanakumari Devi took up the responsibility of editing the magazine after Kadambari Devi’s premature demise. Swarnakumari enjoyed almost eleven years as an editor. Later, her tie with the magazine was severed by her physical ailments. Her daughters Sarala and Hiranmayi, then, took up the charge. *Bharati* bears testimony to the literary acumen of Barnakumari, Maharshi’s youngest daughter, Jnanada Devi, Swarnakumari herself. Protiva and Indira, Maharshi’s granddaughters also jointly edited *Ananda Sangeet* which was published for eight years.

Literary women have left their mark upon the path of reminiscences too. The urge to unearth the lost days has instigated many to inscribe autobiographies and memoirs. It is this genre of autobiographical writing that has facilitated the self-assertions of both educated and scarcely literate women. While the memoirs of Jnanadanandini Devi (*Puratani*), Indira Devi (*Smriti Samput, Jeevan Katha*) probe deeper into the lifestyle, customs and traditions of the Tagore household, those of Rassundari Devi (*Amar Jiban*), Saralabala Devi (*Smritikatha*), Sudakshina Devi (*Jibansmriti*) recount their depravity amidst social inhibitions as well as their solitary endeavor to transcend all impediments. Published in 1876, Rassundari’s *Amar Jiban*, the first existing Bengali woman’s autobiography, echoes the indomitable spirit of this rural lady. Her yearning to taste the flavor of *Chaitanya Bhagabat* stimulated her to go through the challenging process of self-education. Her memoir encompasses her concealed effort to educate herself. Lamenting the exclusion of women from the realms of education during her girlhood, Rassundari writes, “older women used to show a great deal of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hands of a woman. So that ruled out my chances of getting any education. But somehow I could not accept this. I was very keen to learn the alphabet” (Chatterjee 361). Thus society’s reproach could not curb the spirit of Rassundari, Rokeya, Kusumkumari Das or Mankumari Basu. The more it tended to sketch their lives, the more they deviated from its pre-determined norms, scripting their own existence, abnegating all hindrances. While the radiant countenance of the ‘New Woman’ bedecked the appearance of Rokeya, Sunity Deves<sup>8</sup>, Abala Basu, Swarnakumari, Kadambari or Indira, the *Prachina* (Conservative Woman) served as an anti-polar contrast to the emerging *Navina* (New Woman). Thus, the literate

*Prachina* like Hemnalini Basu, Hemantakumari Devi or Monica Roy reiterated the same patriarchal admonitions in their articles like *Narir Kartavya*, *Streer Kartavya*, *Banga Badhu* and so on. Tagore’s *Nabinas*, however, script their own text and such scripting foregrounds their muted rebuke at their conservative counterparts. The story, explored here, deals with the scripting of the *Navina* posited as stark contrasts to the feeble spirited *Prachina*. Charu in *The Broken Nest* imbibes a certain assertiveness that sharply distinguishes her from the *Prachina*, Manda.

*The Broken Home* depicts the trial and tribulations of Charulata, the woman who seeks to inscribe a tale of her own desire. Her husband, Bhupati’s engrossment in the affairs of his newspaper leaves Charu alone. The involvements that could efface her desolation- *antahpur* (Inner realm of the house) that had its own cultural life and a child- are denied to Charu. Her nuclear family only houses herself and her husband. Charu’s loneliness is echoed in the narrator’s assertion: “In her opulent home Charulata had nothing to do, neither did she lack for anything. As a consequence all she did was to blossom into full bloom, with no effort and apparently to no purpose, just as a flower does automatically regardless of whether anyone admires it or not” (Tagore, *Three Novellas* 4). Thus Charu remains unobserved, unexplored. But Charulata (‘Charulata’, in Bengali, refers to well-trimmed climber) cannot prosper without support. The hidden talents in her only find expression with Amal’s assistance. Amal, Bhupati’s cousin, arrives to acquire a nook in this nuclear household. Soon, he finds a secured realm in Charu’s camaraderie. Amal begins to accompany Charu in her literary pursuits but in return pesters her with his unreasonable demands. Charu, however, senses Amal’s dependence on her and begins to cherish his frequent naggings: “*Bouthan*, a college mate of mine... comes to class showing off a pair of hard-knitted carpet boots...I want similar carpet boots for me” (Tagore, *Three Novellas* 5). Soon this dependence paves the way for a companionship- one that flourishes secretly along with their secret plans to design a garden in the backyard of their house. The garden becomes symbolic of freedom, a space devoid of all inhibitions. The location in the backyard hints at the unobserved space of camaraderie, shared by Charu and Amal. Unfortunately, their elegant scheme surpasses the proposed estimate. As a result, the garden remains their exclusive dream project. Like their undefined relationship, the garden, too, never attains its desired mould.

Charu-Amal’s exclusive realm, however, develops encompassing their shared interests in literature. Neither Bhupati nor the conservative Manda finds opportunity to peep in. Charu, herself, begins to enjoy this exclusive domain inhabited by Amal, the writer and Charu, the reader. Thus, whenever Manda attempts her intrusion into Charu-Amal’s privacy, their joint endeavor manages to thwart her effort and each successful venture meets its celebration in their laughter. However, the realization of such exclusivity only occupies Charu. Amal appears to be less enthusiastic in preserving the privacy. Therefore, the initial violation of the much desired privacy comes from Amal himself. He proposes to publish his articles in a monthly magazine, *Saroruha*. With the publication of his articles, the only testimonial of their budding relationship is publicized resulting in a complete disruption of the earlier, carefully maintained privacy. Now, even the incompetent Manda succeeds to secure her place as an admirer of Amal’s

writings. With Manda's display of the possibility of an alternative space of her companionship with Amal, Charu's scripting of her relationship with Amal suffers interruption. The narrator probes deeper into her mindscape: "The root of her unhappiness stemmed from her belief that Amal's writings were something that just belonged to the two of them, something that were entirely in their private domain... Privacy was its main merit, and it was this privacy that had been breached with Amal's writings now being available to many to read and appreciate. She felt aggrieved, but could not understand why should be so affected" (Tagore, *Three Novellas* 12-13).

Charu's first endeavor *Shravaner Megh (Clouds in Shravan)* reflects her dependence on Amal's rhetoric. She, herself, discovers that her article resembles Amal's *Ashadher Chand (The Moon in Ashadh)*. But Charu resolves to tread her path alone. Her independent scribbling takes recourse to the genre of memoir. Charu's autobiography, *Kalitala*, unintentionally reflects her anxiety, an uncanny feeling that one experiences on entering into the premises of forbidden desire. The forbidden desire not only encompasses the realm of Charu-Amal's unusual friendship but it also hints at Charu's attempt at independent scripting. However, contrary to the expected response of the then patriarchal society, *Biswabandhu* bestows high praise on Charu. The recognition carves a separate niche for her literary self but Charu loses Amal's companionship forever. Her emerging self as a writer is compelled to endure her mentor's nonchalance. It is true that unlike the rigid upholders of patriarchal norms, Amal acknowledges the necessity of female education and even toils harder to explore Charu's aesthetic qualities. Yet, at the same time he cherishes her dependence upon him. Thus, the moment Charu begins to taste her freedom, Amal turns his face away from her and seeks an uncritical readership in Manda. Unlike Charu, Manda lacks the ability to script her own text. With her uncouth narration, she only continues to provide necessary materials for Amal's writings. While Manda continues to preside over the domain of passivity, her passivity ensures her position as Amal's reader. Probably, Charu could anticipate the bitter consequence of her empowerment. Therefore, for some uncanny reasons, a feeling of guilt continues to prick her conscience. "The first acknowledged praise in print for her writing, though most agreeable, caused her some unease. Somehow she did not feel elated, and the seductive cup of heady accolade kept slipping from her lips" (Tagore, *Three Novellas* 26). Now the question remains as to what may be the cause of her uneasiness. Does it indicate Charu's passive approval of male supremacy? Or, is it a prologue to her desperate endeavor to defend her scripting – the scripting of her relationship with Amal, one which acquires more importance than her literary scripting. Charu, immediately, retreats and cocoons herself again under Amal's influence. The narrator marks, "In imitation of Amal she already had planned an essay. By now Charu had grasped the truth that Amal did not quite approve of her own style of writing" (Tagore, *Three Novellas* 34). But such an attempt, too, fails to sustain the severe blow of predicament. With Amal's conscious decision to set sail abroad after marriage, Charu's scripting of her tale of desire meets its demise. Amal's parting words attempt to consolidate Charu's role as a wife, fully dedicated to her husband. Thus, Amal's admonition only sounds as another patriarchal strategy to include women in rigid stereotypical roles.

Amal's departure forces Charu to ruminate her desertion. Even much considerate Bhupati fails to comprehend her throes. Although, he attempts to read her wife's subtle scripting of her desire in a different way, his resolution to embark upon a new project in Mysore leaving Charu behind, in a way, clarifies his contribution in curbing Charu's independence too. By denying any possibility of Charu's escape from "a house that was ablaze with the agony of her separation with Amal", Bhupati attempts to determine her future, forlorn and grief-stricken. Here, too, an enigma remains as to upon whose assertion the narrator showers prominence (Tagore, *Three Novellas* 56). Is it really Bhupati who designs Charu's destiny? Or, is Charu herself the arbiter of her own fate? Tagore's implied support is perceived in Charu's final assertion. Thus, Bhupati finally softens and asks Charu to accompany him and the author furnishes Charu with the ultimate opportunity of self-assertion. A note of protest bedecks the story's climactic moment that resounds with Charu's mild assertion: "No, let it be" (Tagore, *Three Novellas* 57).

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