

Gender Inequality and Femicide in Rabindranath Tagore's "Shasti" and "Haimanti": Reading through a Feminist Lens

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Abstract

The Bengali Nobel-laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) portrayed the helplessness of women in the hands of patriarchy in his famous short stories. "Shasti" (1893) and "Haimanti"(1914) are two of them. "Shasti" first appeared in Sadhana, and the monthly magazine Sabuj Patra first published "Haimanti" in 1914. Later, Galpaguchchha included it. In these works, the prominent writer is concerned with gender inequality and femicide of his time, which still exist globally. There has been evident progress of women in the education and health sectors, and they have also achieved more rights over the years. Still, they are undervalued even in developed countries. In these masterpieces, the protagonist Chandara and Haimanti, who depict mass women, suffer miserably, become innocent victims of femicide in patriarchy. When Chandara received an order for her hanging in the presence of her husband, he did not consider this loss as a stigma in a patriarchal culture. His sexist mindset dismisses and normalizes the verdict of her execution. In Haimanti's case, no one killed her, but she was pushed to death through continuous humiliations by her in-laws and neighbors, which she could not tolerate. Chandara and Haimanti show that all women are vulnerable to patriarchy no matter what their social positions or roots are. In this paper, I will examine gender inequality and femicide through two appealing women characters Chandara and Haimanti. Through the depiction of their predicaments, I will also show men's attitudes towards these global issues.

Keywords: gender inequality, patriarchy, feminism, femicide

As a literary genre, the short story developed in the 19th century and by the end of the 20th century got recognition as one of the significant literary forms. Rabindranath Tagore, highly acknowledged for his short stories, tried very successfully to portray both strong and oppressed women and their psychology in his short stories and was worried about gender suppression. He wrote his first short story, "Bhikharini," in 1877 at sixteen. Many of his renowned short stories and novels deal with gender issues. In this regard, Indranath Choudhury says, "Tagore's discourse on women is not a limiting factor but an expanding one-holistic, eclectic, trans-specific, and encompassing diverse stirrings; and, hence, his notion of the feminine is based not only on the totalized oppression of women but also a display of great hope—that in our country when Indian women would move from their artificial, liberated self to the attainment of the glory of the perfect human self, only then would men achieve" (150).

Tagore's short stories ". . . are highly reflective of the sociocultural climate of his times" (Datta 1). "Shasti" and "Haimanti" validate this statement. "Shasti" is about oppressed women who mirror the actual positions of Tagore's time of Colonial Bengal and is "one of the most anthologized stories, and is available in at least three different translations" (Marsh 213). Many works are available on the strong women characters in Tagore's short stories who have tried "to establish their voices and identities against backgrounds utterly hostile for them (Mamun 2). Sohini of "Laboratory" or Mrinal of "Strir Patra" is a defiant woman in patriarchy. But Chandara and Haimanti are sacrificing images of women oppressed by different persons, situations, and ultimately they all give up leaving this masculine world. These women suffer from varied issues like dowry, superstitions, poverty, the domination of patriarchal society,

femicide, etc., and are victims of societal norms, law, and culture. Patriarchy teaches them to suffer or to surrender. This paper will focus on the gender inequality and femicide of the short stories "Shashti" and "Haimanti" through a feminist lens. It will also examine how two innocent women can be pushed to femicide by their husband, family, and law in patriarchy.

Feminism and Femicide are two significant parts of the title of my paper. Nowadays, feminism is a widely used literary theory that started for the women who did not get equal rights or could not speak for their rights in the patriarchal society. Regarding the positions of women in feminism, Beauvoir states, "They stay in the realm of inferiority, as though it is truly their place in society. She challenges this kind of behavior. To make oneself an object, to make oneself passive, is a very different thing from being an object" (2). Beauvoir wants men to give women their actual positions in society and not treat them as secondary creatures. Today feminist critics and many Bengali writers have represented feminism in their works and various activities. Tagore was also one of the feminist writers, who was also willing to emancipate Bengali women from male oppression, voiced his concern about gender inequality and femicide through many of his works. He started his feminist writing with *Chokher Bali* and *Nasto Nir*. His renowned short stories "Shasti" and "Haimanti" are also about social concerns much ahead of the commencement of the feminist movement as Tagore was very displeased with the prevailing patriarchal system, which did not think about the human rights of a woman.

Femicide as "enforced killing of women are dominant themes of "Shasti" and "Haimanti." Femicide "is a sex-based hate crime term, broadly defined as "the intentional killing of women or girls because they are female", though definitions vary depending on its cultural context" (COST Action 1206 -

Femicide").

"Diana E. H. Russell was the first person to define and disseminate this term in modern times, in 1976. She defines the word as the killing of females by males because they are female." (Corradi et al., 2016). Other feminists emphasize the intention or purpose of the act being directed at females, specifically because they are female.

On the other hand, the two authors take a different approach by viewing the definition of femicide as "the intentional killing of females by males." These feminists require that femicide always be intentional, unlike the inclusion of covert femicide in Diana Russell's definition" (Ellis and Walter 1996). There are several reasons which cause femicide around the world. Ownership of guns by men, dowry, involvement of women in extra-marital affairs, disobedience to husbands, protestation against wrong doings of husbands, to save the family honor, mental instability, unemployment, depression, refusal to have physical intimacy, etc. are a few of them. In the undertaken short stories, the husbands are not directly related to the killing of their wives. They pave the way for their femicide to safeguarding brother or to circumstances. In this regard, Patel et., al state: "Murders of women 'to save family honor are among the most tragic consequences explicit illustration of embedded and culturally accepted discrimination against women and girls. They are often committed with impunity owing to widespread acceptance of the practice and legal and judicial statutes that protect the murderer" (17). In some cases, the murder may be encouraged or even motivated by the wishes of other family members, including women (14). These happen with the fictional characters Chandara and Haimanti.

"Shasti" and "Haimanti" have similar themes-untold sufferings of women and their submissions to patriarchy. The middle-class Haimanti and the poor Chandara came to their new

homes for happiness but stayed in loveless relationships. At the end of these short stories, the two women experience the same fate - femicide. Chandara meets with execution for accepting the murder of her brother-in-law. Poor Haimanti gets ill and dies due to neglect, superstition, and insults given by the surrounding people.

"Shasti" is the tale of the helplessness of a woman in a masculine world where a lie can quickly take the life of a woman. Tagore wrote it during his decade-long stay at Shelidah as manager of his family estate. Although many of his major novels are about middle-class Bengalese, this one has drawn characters from poor peasants and villagers. The story shows how an impulsive and fatal murder can shake the foundation of so-called married life. Although Chandara's husband Chidam's lie disgraces his wife, he is unaffected by the whole affair. Gender inequality and femicide are key themes here.

Chandara, the protagonist of "Shasti," lives with her husband, brother-in-law, and family. Brothers Dukhiram Rui and Chidam Rui work on the same land and also live together. Chandara is the younger of the sisters-in-law. The young Chandara enjoys gossiping with her neighbors. In stature, she is short, slim with a round cheerful face, sturdy, and expressive. Her dark, sparkling eyes find everything interesting along the way. She had an arranged marriage to Chidam. At "a very young age," the dusky, round-faced girl leaves her "childhood dolls in her father's house and comes to her in-laws' house (Tagore 167). Her father, on his deathbed, had happily reflected that at least he had made proper arrangement for his daughter"(166-7).

The marriage of Chandara with Chidam is not blissful. She is an atypical wife who sometimes challenges her husband's authority. The couple is good-looking and jealous of each other. When he goes on business trips, she feels he sees someone, and

she goes near the ghat and flirts with men nearby. His effort to tame her fails as she defies traditional values. From this event, we can understand the feelings as well as thoughts of the couple. He cannot trust her flighty spirit and warns her, "If I ever hear that you've been to the ghat on your own, I'll break every bone in your body." (163). Later on, "he grabbed her by the hair, dragged her back to the room, and locked her in (ibid) due to his patriarchal mindset. Sometimes she escapes from home to the house of her uncle. She does not return home till he pleads against her. Chidam hated Chandara because sometimes he could not control her and was worried about her untamable nature. Before the incident, "Chidam felt that a wife as nimble and sharp as Chandara could not be wholly trusted, and Chandara felt that her husband had roving eyes - that if she didn't keep him on a tight rein, he might go astray" (ibid).

Chandara is strikingly opposite to her lazy, disorganized sister-in-law Radha, who can not take proper care of anything. Every day, in the absence of their husbands, both the women quarrel loudly with each other, and the whole village hears their screaming. "But the people nearby were as used to the uproar as they were to other customary, natural sounds. Their husbands Dukhiram and Chidam, are unaffected by their quarrels. Radha and Chandara, who represent gender inequality, have to depend on their husbands for their decision and get un fair treatment from them. One day, the famished, exhausted Dukhiram returns home from work and demands food from his wife Radha, who provokes him: "Where is the food? Did you give me anything to cook? Must I walk the streets to earn it" (159). Burning with hunger, the exasperated husband found his wife's scathing response intolerable, and he "without thinking, plunged his knife into her head and in minutes she was dead"(ibid). Radha collapsed in to her sister-in-law's lap. Chidam, Chandara's husband, is unaware that "Violence against women is one of the

leading causes of death for women through murder or suicide" (Cheung et., al, 12).

Chandara's clothes got blood-soaked, and she questioned her brother-in-law, "What have you done?" (159). Husband Chidam tried to silence her by putting his hand over her mouth. Meantime, the dumb founded Dukhram dropped the blade and fell to the ground. He hid his face in his hands as he had not supplied her with anything to cook him. Chidam tells Ram lochan, advisor for the village in legal matters and the landlord of the brothers, that his wife Chandara killed Radha during one of their fights. After some thought, Ramlochan said, "I think I know a way. Run to the police station: say that your brother Dukhi returned in the evening wanting his food, and because it wasn't ready, he struck his wife on the head with his knife. I'm sure that if you say that, she'll get off" (161). Born and brought up in such a society which made him undervalue women, he says, 'Thakur, if I lose my wife I can get another, but if my brother is hanged, how can I replace him?' (ibid).

Earlier, Chidam had no thought about the punishment of his wife when he had blamed her as his reaction was instinct, but now he is thinking about a justification to support his position. After hearing the news of the murder, Ramlochan hurried away, and the story of Chandara's quarrel with Radha had spread throughout the village. According to the instruction of Ramlochan, Chidam had coached his wife to accept the murder. Chidam got instructions on the main points and all the supporting details from Ramlochan.

When the police questioned her, she said, "Yes, I killed her" (165) and opted for hanging, than continuing to live a disgraceful, loveless life with her inhumane husband. She realized that he had no other way except to follow the path he

had planned for himself. Everyone was amazed by her answers. The distraught Chidam said, "She isn't telling the truth" (ibid). But Chandara refused to testify that her sister-in-law had ever abused her. The stubborn wife Chandara was determined to go to the gallows. She seemed to be saying to her husband: "I'm abandoning you and offering my youth to the gallows-that's my last tie with this life." The once fun-loving Chandara is now a prisoner. She accepts the stigma to escape the "devilish clutches"(ibid) of her so-called husband. On the other hand, he "wants to escape from the terrible truth- he forgot that a lie can be even more terrible"(161).

At Chandara's trial, her husband and brother-in-law Dhkhirum changed their minds and confessed the truth to the judge. The court understood that their new plans were to protect the innocent wife due to the statements given by Ramlochan to the judge. On the other hand, Chandara confesses that she murdered Radha, and the judges consider it the truth. The two experienced lawyers got defeated to save her because of her stubbornness to deny the falsity of her husband's statement that she killed her sister-in-law.

Chandara is shocked to hear about the type of her punishment but stays quiet. 'It is death by the hanging' (167). 'Then please, please give it to me, sir,' said Chandara. "I shall give my youth to the gallows instead of you (165)," she replied and unquestionably accepted the patriarchal system realizing that women have no freedom or value in an oppressive society that considers them inferior to men. Before her femicide, she slowly goes to the gallows. 'Shall I call your husband?' asked the doctor at the gallows. 'He wants to see you'(168). She says, "To hell with him!"(ibid).

In "Shasti," women are always under the power of men

and have no control of their own lives. Hence, Chandara must accept the verdict of the court for her. She is not in a position to revolt against the men and societal oppression towards women. When the police were taking her to court, "the women of the village, her friends and companions -some of them peering through their veils, some from their doorsteps, some from behind trees - watched the police leading her away and shuddered with embarrassment, fear, and contempt" (165) as they are habituated to injustice to women. They also know that their voices will be unheard. In this short story, Tagore did not write about "new woman" like who have strong personalities. Through Chandara's character, "Tagore talks about the disgraceful condition of women, who have been the perpetual victims of gender violence, and exclusion. The whole story reflects how women in India are getting victimized by the male members in their day-to-day life. Through this story, Tagore is questioning the uneven social structure, customs, and husband-wife relation" (Mukherjee 25). The reader will find almost similar substances in another Tagore short story, "Haimanti."

The pathetic short story "Haimanti" is about Haimanti or Haimo, who is the center character. Tagore portrayed a girl who had an early marriage and suffered in her critical, orthodox joint family. Haimanti is a seventeen- year old lively girl whose low-income family considered her a burden to them. In the time of Tagore, "the family structure of the middle-class clung to the custom of marrying off daughters at an early age . . ." (Khanum 397). Haimanti was not an exception. As she passed her marriageable age, surrounding persons criticized her, which her parents could not bear. At that time, early marriage for girls with a huge amount of dowry was the societal norm. The famous story starts with the following sentence, "Father could have waited, but the father of the groom didn't want to" (Tagore 647). This line reveals that the marriage of a young girl depends not

only on her father but also on her father-in-law. The parents of Haimanti had arranged marriage without asking for her opinion as marrying off daughters without prior discussion with them was not the norm. Parents only thought of homes for their daughters, and the welfare of the women never mattered to parents.

Post marriage, Haimanti becomes a victim of mental and physical harassment, superstitions, etc. She was once a bright girl in her family. According to her husband Apu, "this 17-year-girl has got all the graces of youth yet she is not awakened from the embrace of the adolescence."(648). But her in-laws never appreciated her. Earlier, they treated her like their own daughter as they came to her father's connection with the King's palace. Her father-in-law assures Haimanti's father of her happiness in her new home: "Sir, don't worry. May be your daughter has left your house, but she has got new father and mother over here" (650). But later when they got her to know that her father works as a principal of a school, they started neglecting her and revealed their true color to Haimanti and her paternal family. One day during her visit to an old neighbor a woman satirically says: "Alas! My bad luck. Granddaughter has lost me with her age!" (653). She swallows the insult and becomes a subject of constant criticism to her in-law's family. Her teacher father, Gauri Shankar, was terrified of the intrigues of the society and the neighbors. As "The age of the daughter has crossed the limit unruly" (647), the ratio of dowry is still higher than her age.

In Haimanti's society, the social and financial standings of the parent's side of the bride determine where the daughter will be married. Daughters of the poor class family could not think of sending their daughters to well-established families. The profession of a bride's father also matters. "Haimanti" has highlighted these matters realistically. Apu says, "My father-in-

law works at the king's palace. There has been a rumor about his bank savings in the society, no rumor is compromising" (647). Apu's family has expected more dowries from Haimanti's family and are dissatisfied with-15000-taka advance and the gold of 5000 takas, although the amount was huge according to their society. When they came to know the profession of Haimanti's father as a school principal, they showed disinterest in her opinion. To the greedy parents of Apu, working under a king is better than teaching. The superstitious family does not believe in education as they have faith in the horoscope. The elderly women get suspicious about Haimanti's age and say: "Bride's side must have decreased the age of Haimanti" (653).

In Hindu patriarchal society, a bride is expected to follow all the religious norms strictly. She has to be a devotee to God. But when Haimanti asks to teach her how to arrange "puja," everyone goes against her: "Oh my God! She is an atheist. God has stopped blessing on this family." Consequently, she gets depressed. It impacts her mind and health. In the words of Apu, "Haimo was dying from the inside in every moment. I can give her everything but can't give her freedom" (654). She is going through turmoil, still, is unable to unburden herself to anyone.

At the end of the story, Haimanti goes to her father's home permanently. She suffered from broken health and mind. From the inclusive ending, the reader is not sure if Haimanti died or not. But Apu's statement, "After this, I haven't seen the smiling face of Haimo for a single day" (654), makes us think of her tragic end. After the departure of Haimanti, Apu says: "Mother is looking for a bride" (652). He will somehow agree to the order of his mother, and Haimanti will go into oblivion in a society where women have machine-like existence.

"Shasti" and "Haimanti" portray the silent sufferings of

Indian women with no financial stability, freedom of speech, actions, social standings, and security of lives. The underlying themes of the literary pieces are powerful where poverty, lack of experience about the cruel masculine world rather than malice predispose activities of the women. In patriarchy, if the situation is unfavorable to men, femicide can be given to innocent women to save male victims under the rule of their husbands. Chandara's decision to go to the gallows symbolizes the miserable conditions of women who can not protest against helpless women.

Chandara received punishment although she did not commit any crime. She exists after man and lacks freedom and meaningful existence. Hence, she sacrifices her life before her husband in a society that wants to wipe away any woman to protect a man. Tagore depicts a society that never questions any man about his wrong actions. Ultimately by sacrificing her life, Chandara gave a bitter lesson to her husband, who will live a life of guilt for the rest of his life. She silently criticized a society that undervalues women as mere objects. Her suffering shows that something is wrong somewhere in an oppressive society where "When a man is threatened with violence, he will shrink back to defend himself. When a woman is threatened with violence she stumbles forward to embrace it" (Miles 120).

In the time of Tagore, if women fought back against any male, they were either beaten or killed. Chandara experienced death as her punishment for raising her voice against Dukhram. She had to obey orders set by men who forced her to admit a crime she did not commit. Chandara willingly accepts the killing of her sister-in-law punish husband Chidam, who requests her to tell a lie to save his brother's crime. At the end of the short story, both the brothers lose their wives. Thus, they also received their punishments of having to live the rest of their lives with a guilty conscience for telling lies to Chandara. She knows if she refuses

to hang, living is not possible in her home.

Chandara and Haimanti faced patriarchy in their families where their men considered them soulless and their property in marriage. They showed strictness toward wives, who experienced different types of abuse. Their society also discriminates and compels them never to have freedom of speech and actions. Being disgusted, Chandara and Haimanti had acquired the realization that, in patriarchy, they are dangerously marginal figures meant for doing domestic chores, pujas, and raising babies. They were never the spiritual and romantic companions of their husbands, who fail to understand their agonies. In a masculine society, the shoulders of Chidam and Apu are not for the wives to weep on.

In these short stories, the middle-class Haimanti and the poor Chandara came to their new homes for happiness. The ends of these two characters remain the same. Chandara meets with execution for accepting the murder of her brother-in-law. Haimanti gets ill and dies due to neglect and insult given by family and society. Throughout the two stories, we get pictures of the hypocrisy of married life and the sufferings of women in patriarchy who can be subjects to femicide. By accepting femicide, both Chandara and Haimanti embrace a world free of gender inequality, humiliation, perpetual evil, physical abuse, subjugation, sufferings, orthodoxy, and become free birds who will never be caged by any men. They denounce the selfish, loveless, hostile world. Unfortunately, Chandara and Haimanti could not speak against the age-old oppression towards women. Their expected roles were to preserve the home and to cook for the family. Their husbands are also not the images of true love and support to the wives. Bharati Ray states, "marriage, under customary Hindu law, was an indissoluble sacrament, but whereas a man could marry as many women as he wanted and could desert his wife, a woman had no similar rights. For a Hindu girl, marriage was not an option; it was

the only destination of life; its fulfillment lay in begetting a son for the family. She was married by her parents as part of their religious obligations, along with a dowry" (15) as the dowry system was prevalent in 19th and 20th century India.

Thus, Tagore's classic short stories "Shasti" and "Haimanti" are storehouses of feminist issues from the perspectives of British India where wives had lifeless, loveless, hypocritical marriage relationships. The story "Shasti" shows how women got ready to sacrifice food, clothes, daily necessities, and happiness, ability to do their actions according to their wish for family, society, or sometimes for freedom. Haimanti represents the defeat of a progressive, educated woman in a prejudiced patriarchal society where her husband fails to protect her from a conservative society.

Notes: All quotations of "Shasti" are from Tagore, Rabindranath. Trans. William Radice. Penguin Books, London: 1992. The quotations of "Haimanti" are my translations from Galpaguchcha. Kolkata: Vishwavarati, 1962.

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