

# Unveiling The Humanism and Feminism in Rabindranath Tagore's "Woman Unknown"

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## Abstract

*Humanism according to Oxford Dictionary means a system of thought that regards human as capable of using their intelligence to live their lives rather than relying on religious belief. Humanism as a literary and philosophical movement originated from Europe in the fourteenth century. The famous Greek philosopher Protagoras dictum is Men is the measure of all things is a philosophy which recognizes the value and dignity of men (Singh 26). "Renaissance humanism experience and enjoyed by Greeks and Romans led their attention to questions of how best man could make his earthly life a joyful life instead of the problem of what might become of him after death (Singh 27). Concisely, the central concern of humanism is the man. Its aim is the achievement of man's happiness by recognizing rec the dignity of man as man. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Humanism consists of his fight against the barbaric aspects of Hinduism which treats woman inhumanly by the practices like Sati, child marriage, and child widowhood.*

**Key Words:** Empowerment, Identity, Equality, Liberation, Dignity and Resilience

## Literature Review

Rabindranath Tagore, a luminary in Indian literature, is known for his profound humanistic and feminist perspectives. "Woman Unknown" ("Strir Patra") is a notable work where these themes are intricately woven. This literature review explores the scholarly discourse surrounding Tagore's portrayal of humanism and feminism in "Woman Unknown."

## **Humanism in "Woman Unknown"**

### **Tagore's Humanistic Philosophy**

Scholars frequently highlight Tagore's overarching humanism, which underscores the intrinsic worth and dignity of individuals. His works often depict a compassionate vision of humanity that transcends social and cultural boundaries (Sarkar, 2016).

### **Emancipation and Self-Realization**

In "Woman Unknown," the protagonist, Mrinal, represents the struggle for self-realization and emancipation. Through her letter, she articulates her desire to break free from patriarchal constraints, emphasizing humanistic values of personal freedom and self-expression (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

### **Critique of Social Norms**

Tagore critiques the rigid social norms and the dehumanizing aspects of tradition. He portrays Mrinal's journey as a quest for a more humane existence, free from the shackles of societal expectations (Sen, 2017).

## **Feminism in "Woman Unknown"**

### **Mrinal as a Feminist Icon**

Mrinal's character is a feminist icon, embodying resistance against patriarchal oppression. Her decision to leave her marital home signifies a radical break from traditional roles assigned to women, asserting her autonomy (Chakraborty, 2018).

### **Gender Inequality and Patriarchy**

Tagore exposes the systemic gender inequality and the oppressive structures of patriarchy. The narrative delves into the everyday injustices faced by women, making a compelling case for gender equality and women's rights (Das, 2014).

### **Intersectionality**

Tagore's feminist approach is also intersectional, considering not just gender but also class and social status. Mrinal's empathy towards Bindu, a lower-caste girl, highlights the intersectional nature of oppression and the need for a comprehensive feminist approach (Ray, 2019).

## **Comparative Perspectives**

### **Tagore vs. Contemporary Feminists**

Comparative studies often place Tagore alongside contemporary feminist writers, noting how his portrayal of women's issues was ahead of his time. His nuanced understanding of gender dynamics prefigures modern feminist thought (Gupta, 2020).

### **Cross-Cultural Analysis**

Tagore's feminist and humanistic ideas resonate across cultures. Comparative literature often examines the universality of his themes, connecting them with global feminist movements and humanistic traditions (Mukherjee, 2021).

## **Theme**

Tagore's father Maharishi Debendranath was one of the founders of Brahma samaj along with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and was a true Brahma till the end. Tagore has been very much influenced by the personality of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Kakoli Basak also remarks: Tagore's humanism resembles the humanism of the thinkers of the European Renaissance period like Tetrach, Erasmus, in the sense that like them Tagore also believes that God and man are true and real. The Renaissance humanists did not discuss who is more real between

the two. In Tagore's, we see, he in general accepts the reality of the two, but for him man is great, because God is present in him. For Tagore humanity is a necessary factor in the perfection of the divine truth. Richard Church an English writer and critic has called Tagore as a "Universal Man" (Chunder 37). Khan also remarks; "Tagore's humanism flowed with equal force like through his poetry, literary and philosophical works which continuously challenged religious practices and reinforced Universal Humanism" (113). Tagore, the universal man, sends out his message of sympathy and sorrow to oppressed humanity all over the world and raises his voice of protests against the wrong done to them in all his creative works.

Feminism itself stands on the premises that women are inhumanly treated by man and pushed to the secondary position. An ardent admirer of Rajaramohan Roy and as a humanist to the core, Tagore was pained to see how the womenfolk the other half of the human being was made to suffer in the name of tradition and patriarchal oppression. As a man with a feminist consciousness, Tagore never failed to attack the social injustices of his day by portraying oppressed Indian women all through his writing. This paper attempts to analyse how Tagore picturises the evils of dowry given to the bridegroom at the time of marriage, robbing the sacramental bond of marriage of all its decency and dignity in his short story *The Woman Unknown* (1914). In this story the bride and her father are humiliated by the maternal uncle of the bridegroom who checks the weight and purity of the gold ornaments given to the bride by way of dowry and they thwart the act of humiliation in almost humane way of rejecting the marriage itself. The story is narrated by Anupam, the would - be groom of the protagonist, Kalyani.

Anupam was brought up by his mother and his maternal uncle. His lawyer father had died when he was a child leaving him wealthy. He is a post graduate, an obedient son and an eligible bachelor. He thinks, "...the mirage of the eternal feminine loomed large for me" (220). By the efforts taken by Anupam's friend Harish, his engagement to the daughter of a doctor Sambunath Babu of Kanpur is fixed. The cash and quantum of gold ornaments to be given to the bridegroom's family by way of dowry is also settled, to the satisfaction of the bridegroom's maternal uncle, a shrewd man. Anupam says; "My uncle wanted as my bride a girl whose father would not be wealthy but who could be imposed upon to provide some cash. In short, someone who could be squeezed but need not be respected" (220). The mean-minded nature of Anupam's uncle is revealed here.

The bride's party has come to Calcutta from Kanpur for the wedding, as per the wish of Anupam's uncle who has thus been saved the expense and trouble of going to Kanpur. His uncle boasts of his family wealth. As soon as he enters the marriage hall, he is dissatisfied with the arrangement which in his opinion is not lavish. The bride's father Sampunath's welcome is also very cold. Anupam's uncle next told Kalyani's father to bring all his daughter's gold ornaments to be given by way of dowry so as to verify its weight and purity by a goldsmith. Sampunath Babu called for Anupam, and tells him that his uncle wants to check all the gold jewellery before the marriage ceremony begins and asks for his opinion. Anupam has nothing to say as he is under the control of his uncle. Sampunath just brings the pile of jewellery and places it before the uncle.

The goldsmith certifies that they are all of pure gold. Then Anupam's uncle makes an inventory of the items. Sampunath then asks the goldsmith to verify the purity of the pair of earrings which is gifted to the bride by the bridegroom. It is found to be cheap imported stuff containing very little gold. Anupam's uncle feels humiliated. But after the dinner is over, the bride's father Sampunath Babu tells the uncle, "I cannot give my daughter in marriage to a family that considers me capable of stealing her gold" (224). The engagement is broken off. By refusing to give his daughter in marriage to a member of the dowry gluttonous family, the father of the bride has asserted his self-dignity. And made up for humiliation. Tagore the humanist reveals his concern for the bride's father by this bold construct. Here Tagore tries to suggest that to eradicate dowry menace the first step should be initiated within the family itself.

Initially Anupam wants to take revenge on the girl's father Sampunath Babu. He feels an endearment for the girl: "My heart had gone out to the unknown girl: I could not call in Back. She remained behind the wall I could not cross her forehead patterned with sandal paste, her figure draped in the red wedding sari, a blush on her face and her heart rimming with emotions. I would never know.... She was just one step away from me- at suddenly the distance stretched out into infinity" (225).

One year has passed; Anupam is travelling in a train, accompanied by his mother on a visit to Kanpur. When the train stops at a station, he hears a girl's voice in Bengali saying, "Hurry up, there's room here in this carriage" (227). He is very much impressed with the voice. He tries to know the person to whom the voice belonged but in vain. "There's room in this carriage' is the refrain of the song that fills his heart.

Next morning they have to change trains at a big junction station. When he is searching for a comfortable compartment, there is a call in the same voice heard by him during the night, which asks his mother "Why don't you come here? There's room 228). It is a sudden surprise for him to hear the same voice. He and his mother boom the Jame compartment. The girl is surrounded by two or three girls younger to her, playing games. The girl then reads a story in her magical voice from an illustrated children's book which the little girls enjoy.

When the train stops at another junction, the station master approaches Anupam with a request to vacate the compartment since some English men has already reserved berths in that compartment. Anupam is about to oblige, but he is stopped by Kalyani. She argues in English with the station master, saying that it is not a reserved compartment at the boarding point and it is not necessary to vacate. An extra coach is added to accommodate the uniformed English officials. Anupam cannot but admire the courage of the girl. At last, they reach Kanpur. His mother who till that time did not speak to Kalyani, asks her name. Only then did Anupam recognises that she was the woman with whom his engagement was broken off.

By refusing to vacate the railway compartment as requested by the station master which may cause inconvenience and insult to the fellow passengers, Kalyani has proved that she is a woman of self-dignity and assertion. Anupam feels inferior before her because of his inability to argue with the station master and is about to vacate the compartment just before Kalyani stops him. Moreover, he feels that Kalyani has recognized him as she has seen his photograph before the broken engagement ceremony whereas, he has not seen her photo. In spite of her recognition, she is magnanimous by not showing any aversion for him. Anupam is very much impressed with the humanistic approach of Kalyani.

After returning to Calcutta, Anupam goes to Kanpur without the consent of his mother and his uncle. He repents for the insult caused to Kalyani's family, because of the broken engagement and asks earnestly for the hand of the girl in marriage. Sampunath Babu does not object but Kalyani turns down his request as she wants to remain a lifelong spinster, by dedicating herself to the cause of women's education. But Anupam who has given his heart to Kalyani, on his part decides to remain a bachelor, singing the song of which the refrain is 'There's room here'. Through the character of Anupam, Tagore wishes to convey the message to the men folk that "Nevertheless, neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man, in the Lord" (Denny 95).

Most of the men like Anupam think that by accepting to marry a girl they are doing her a favour. Tagore wants to make the men to remove such wrong notion from their mind. Here Tagore the man gives voice to the woman. Anupam, a highly educated man, realizes that "In a full heart there is room for everything and in any empty heart there is room for nothing" (Prochia 1498). Anupam recognizes that people like Sampunath Babu and Kalyani have a full heart for which there is a room for any kind of people, whereas people like his uncle has an empty heart in which affection for other people is missing.

That is why Anupam gives him up at the end of the story, Kalyani has got a room in heart and he decides to live his life throughout with thoughts of her. Tagore makes character Anupam repent for his action and turn him humane. From the feminine perspective, a man should get to know the mind of his woman then only would he be able to treat her equally. This is emphasized by Rabindranath Tagore. Unless and until a man understands his wife, will she be an unknown woman forever like Kalyani is to Anupam in this story. Through Kalyani's character Tagore emphasized the necessity of education for women. Her decision to remain a lifelong spinster was one way of solving the dowry menace.

Celibacy was important to the feminists because it attempted to set up an alternative role for women apart from the traditional female sphere of marriage and motherhood an alternative, indeed, that was followed from choice by many of the pioneers. It enabled them to avoid the sexual and economic subordination of marriage, while at the same time pursuing for them an interesting and challenging career. (Banus 97)

Radical Feminist theory holds that, "Since marriage is a primary formalization of the persecution of women, they consider the rejection of this institution of marriage, both in theory and in practice is a primary work of the radical feminist" (Tandon 45). That Tagore has reflected the same in this short story Woman Unknown even three decades before Radical Feministic theory itself evolved goes to prove that Tagore is a visionary of feministic thought far ahead of his time.

## Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's "Woman Unknown" serves as a profound testament to his advocacy for humanism and feminism. Through the narrative, Tagore intricately explores themes of empowerment and identity, illustrating the inherent dignity and resilience of women. His portrayal of the protagonist's journey underscores the necessity of equality and liberation, challenging societal norms and advocating for a more inclusive, compassionate world. Tagore's work not only reflects the societal issues of his time but also resonates with contemporary audiences, emphasizing the timeless relevance of his message. Ultimately, "Woman Unknown" is a powerful narrative that champions the cause of women's rights and human dignity, solidifying Tagore's legacy as a pioneering advocate for social reform. The protagonist, having navigated the complexities of her identity and societal constraints, emerges as a symbol of empowerment and resilience. Her journey, marked by self-discovery and defiance of traditional roles, underscores the core themes of humanism and feminism that permeate Tagore's work. The story culminates in her asserting her dignity and autonomy, challenging the patriarchal norms that sought to define her. Through her transformation, Tagore eloquently advocates for the liberation and equality of women, leaving readers with a powerful message about the importance of recognizing and respecting the individuality and strength of every woman. This poignant conclusion reaffirms Tagore's enduring commitment to social justice and his profound understanding of human nature.

The exemplary humanism shown by the both daughter and her father even under the worst kind of humiliation, cannot but elevate the reader's mind. The picturisation of feminism and humanism commingled in the short story Woman Unknown is a special treat for the Tagore readers.

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