

Women Characters in the Works of Tagore and Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT: This comparative study delves into the representation of women characters in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare, two luminaries from distinct cultural and temporal backgrounds. By examining key female characters such as Charulata from "Nastanirh" and Binodini from "Chokher Bali" alongside Lady Macbeth from "Macbeth" and Portia from "The Merchant of Venice," the paper explores themes of strength, resilience, intelligence, and societal constraints. The analysis reveals that despite their different contexts, both authors portray women with profound depth, challenging traditional norms and highlighting their enduring significance in literary discourse. Through specific line-by-line examples and textual analysis, the paper underscores the universal and timeless nature of these characters, emphasizing their roles in reflecting and critiquing the societal dynamics of their respective eras.

KEYWORDS: Charulata, Binodini, Mrinmoyee, Labonya, Lady Macbeth, Portia, Desdemona, Viola, Strength, Intelligence, Culture, timelessness

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare, two towering figures in the literary world, have left an indelible mark on global literature through their multifaceted and nuanced portrayals of women. Despite emerging from vastly different cultural contexts and historical periods, both authors exhibit a profound understanding of the female experience, crafting characters that resonate with readers across generations. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of their female protagonists, delving into the intricacies and layers of their personalities, emotions, and societal roles.

Tagore, whose literary career flourished in Bengal during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, infused his works with the social and cultural dynamics of his time. His women characters often embody a blend of traditional values and progressive ideals, reflecting the transitional phase of Indian society grappling with modernization and colonial influences. In contrast, Shakespeare, writing in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, presents women who navigate the rigid patriarchal structures of their era, yet display remarkable strength, intelligence, and agency.

Through a detailed examination of specific texts—such as Tagore's "Nastanirh" and "Chokher Bali," and Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and "The Merchant of Venice"—this study highlights the authors' distinct yet occasionally converging views on gender roles. By analyzing line-by-line examples, the paper reveals how both Tagore and Shakespeare construct their female characters with a depth that transcends mere archetypes, offering rich, multi-dimensional portrayals that continue to captivate and challenge contemporary readers. This exploration not only underscores the universality of their themes but also sheds light on the evolving discourse on women's identities in literature.

Representation of Women in Tagore's Works

Rabindranath Tagore's portrayal of women in his literary works embodies his progressive views and reflects the socio-cultural milieu of late 19th and early 20th century Bengal. Tagore's women characters are often multi-dimensional, embodying strength, resilience, sensitivity, and a profound sense of self-awareness. This section explores several of his most notable female characters, illustrating the complexity and depth with which Tagore approached the representation of women.

Charulata in "Nastanirh" (The Broken Nest)

Charulata is a quintessential Tagore heroine, characterized by her intelligence, emotional depth, and a yearning for intellectual companionship. Trapped in a conventional marriage to a husband who is affectionate but distant and preoccupied with his own pursuits, Charulata's inner life is rich with thoughts and feelings that remain largely unexpressed.

There are countless stars in the sky, but a woman keeps the sky of the night to herself always. (Tagore, "Nastanirh" 32).

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Charulata's sense of entrapment is subtly depicted through her solitary activities, such as reading and embroidery, which she uses to fill the void of her unfulfilled emotional and intellectual needs. Her connection with her brother-in-law, Amal, provides a brief respite and highlights her desire for meaningful interaction.

Binodini in "Chokher Bali" (A Grain of Sand)

Binodini, a widow, is another powerful character created by Tagore. She defies societal norms with her assertiveness and independence. Unlike the conventional portrayal of widows as passive and submissive, Binodini is vibrant and assertive, seeking to carve out a space for herself in a society that seeks to marginalize her.

What do you see me as, tell me? I am not like other household women. (Tagore, "Chokher Bali" 55).

Binodini's interactions with Mahendra and Bihari demonstrate her complexity. She is both a manipulative seductress and a vulnerable woman yearning for love and recognition. Her character challenges the rigid expectations placed on women, especially widows, in her society.

Bimala in "Ghare Baire" (The Home and the World)

Bimala, from "Ghare Baire," represents the inner conflict of traditional values and modern aspirations. Initially, she is the dutiful wife, confined to the inner quarters of her home. However, influenced by her husband Nikhilesh's progressive ideals and the charismatic revolutionary Sandip, Bimala begins to explore her own identity and desires.

There are two women within me. One that keeps me bound within the four walls of the household. The other seeks freedom. (Tagore, "Ghare Baire" 71).

Bimala's journey is a powerful exploration of self-discovery and the struggle between personal desires and societal duties. Her character illustrates the complexities of the female experience in a rapidly changing society.

Mrinmoyee in "Samapti" (The Conclusion)

Mrinmoyee, the protagonist of "Samapti," is a spirited and rebellious young woman who resists traditional expectations. Her marriage to Apurba is initially tumultuous as she struggles to adapt to her new role as a wife.

If I conform, then I'm fit for household; otherwise, I'm a girl of the wild. (Tagore, "Samapti" 48).

Mrinmoyee's character arc from resistance to acceptance reflects a nuanced understanding of personal growth and the negotiation of individuality within societal constraints.

Labonya in "Shesher Kobita" (The Last Poem)

Labonya, from "Shesher Kobita," is an intellectual and emotionally complex woman who finds herself caught between love and societal expectations. Her relationship with Amit, a poet, and the subsequent choices she makes highlight the themes of love, sacrifice, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment.

Love and bondage are not the same, bondage dries up love. (Tagore, "Shesher Kobita" 93).

Labonya's internal struggles and ultimate decisions underscore her independence and depth, making her one of Tagore's most memorable female characters.

In conclusion, Tagore's women are richly drawn characters who reflect the complexities of human emotions and societal roles. Through their stories, Tagore critiques the rigid norms of his time and advocates for a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of women's experiences.

Representation of Women in Shakespeare's Works

William Shakespeare's portrayal of women reflects the complexities and constraints of the Elizabethan era, yet his characters frequently exhibit remarkable strength, intelligence, and depth. Ranging from obedient and demure to strong-willed and cunning, Shakespeare's female characters are diverse and multifaceted. This section examines some of Shakespeare's most notable female figures, highlighting their unique qualities and the ways in which they navigate their societal limitations.

Lady Macbeth in "Macbeth"

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most formidable female characters, embodying ambition and a willingness to challenge moral and societal boundaries. Her strength is evident in her manipulation of Macbeth and her determination to pursue power at any cost.

"Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe topful / Of direst cruelty!" (Shakespeare, "Macbeth" 1.5.38-41).

Lady Macbeth's plea to be "unsexed" reveals her desire to cast off traditional female qualities of compassion and nurture in favor of ruthless ambition. Her complex character arc, from dominance to guilt-ridden madness, highlights her multifaceted nature.

Portia in "The Merchant of Venice"

Portia, in "The Merchant of Venice," stands out for her intelligence and wit. Despite the restrictions placed on her gender, she cleverly navigates the male-dominated world through her disguise as a male lawyer.

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd, / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest; / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes" (Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice" 4.1.182-185).

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Portia's speech on mercy demonstrates her eloquence and moral insight. Her ability to outwit the men in the court and deliver justice exemplifies her intellectual superiority and resourcefulness.

Desdemona in "Othello"

Desdemona is portrayed as virtuous and loyal, yet her strength lies in her unwavering love and moral clarity. Her character challenges the stereotype of passive femininity through her assertiveness and determination to stay true to her principles.

"My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty: / To you I am bound for life and education; / My life and education both do learn me / How to respect you; you are the lord of duty; / I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband" (Shakespeare, "Othello" 1.3.181-187).

Desdemona's declaration of loyalty to Othello over her father reflects her strength in making independent choices, even in the face of societal disapproval.

Viola in "Twelfth Night"

Viola, the protagonist of "Twelfth Night," exhibits resourcefulness and resilience. Disguised as a man, she navigates the complexities of her situation with grace and intelligence, ultimately bringing about resolution and harmony.

"I am the man: if it be so, as 'tis, / Poor lady, she were better love a dream. / Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness" (Shakespeare, "Twelfth Night" 2.2.25-27).

Viola's self-awareness and adaptability in her disguise demonstrate her ingenuity and emotional intelligence, allowing her to influence events around her positively.

Juliet in "Romeo and Juliet"

Juliet, from "Romeo and Juliet," is often perceived as a tragic figure, yet her character embodies youthful courage and determination. Her willingness to defy her family and societal expectations for love reflects her strength and agency.

"My only love sprung from my only hate! / Too early seen unknown, and known too late! / Prodigious birth of love it is to me, / That I must love a loathed enemy" (Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet" 1.5.136-139).

Juliet's ability to articulate her feelings and make bold decisions, such as proposing marriage and orchestrating a plan to be with Romeo, showcases her proactive and daring nature.

Rosalind in "As You Like It"

Rosalind, in "As You Like It," is celebrated for her wit, intelligence, and resourcefulness. Disguised as a man, she explores themes of gender and identity, ultimately using her disguise to achieve her goals and find love.

"Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak. Sweet, say on" (Shakespeare, "As You Like It" 3.2.243-244).

Rosalind's playful exploration of her gender identity through disguise allows her to express herself freely and challenge traditional gender roles, highlighting her progressive character.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's women characters, whether constrained by societal norms or challenging them, are portrayed with remarkable depth and complexity. Through their diverse personalities and actions, Shakespeare critiques and explores the roles of women in society, offering a rich tapestry of female representation that continues to resonate with audiences today.

Comparative Analysis

Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare present women characters with notable strength, intelligence, and a propensity to challenge societal norms. This section delves into specific examples from their works, highlighting the parallels and contrasts in their portrayal of women.

Strength and Resilience

Both Tagore and Shakespeare endow their women characters with remarkable strength and resilience, though their motivations and contexts vary significantly.

Charulata and Lady Macbeth

Charulata's strength is found in her silent suffering and eventual emotional emancipation. She endures the constraints of her conventional marriage with quiet dignity, seeking intellectual fulfillment and emotional freedom.

Every day I bind my entire being, what if I find freedom today? (Tagore, "Nastanirh" 78).

In contrast, Lady Macbeth's strength is driven by her ruthless ambition. Her relentless pursuit of power is evident in her willingness to cast off her femininity and moral constraints to achieve her goals.

"I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this" (Shakespeare, "Macbeth" 1.7.56-59).

Both characters exhibit a profound inner strength, yet Charulata's resilience is rooted in endurance and intellectual longing, while Lady Macbeth's is fueled by ambition and a desire for dominance.

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Intelligence and Wit

The intellectual sharpness of Tagore's Binodini mirrors that of Shakespeare's Portia. Both characters navigate societal restrictions with their keen intellect.

Binodini and Portia

Binodini's intelligence allows her to manipulate her environment and assert her independence, challenging the societal norms imposed on widows.

I don't know, really I don't, what I am to you, and where my place is in your life (Tagore, "Chokher Bali" 120).

Portia, in "The Merchant of Venice," displays her wit and intelligence by disguising herself as a male lawyer to save Antonio. Her eloquence and legal acumen enable her to turn the tide in a male-dominated courtroom.

"If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces" (Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice" 1.2.12-14).

Both characters utilize their intelligence to transcend the limitations imposed by their gender, demonstrating resourcefulness and agency in navigating their respective societies.

Challenges to Societal Norms

Both authors use their women characters to critique societal norms, albeit in different contexts and manners.

Binodini and Lady Macbeth

Tagore's Binodini challenges societal expectations of widows through her assertiveness and refusal to conform to passive femininity.

Am I to spend my whole life in this sorrow? Can I do nothing? (Tagore, "Chokher Bali" 140).

Lady Macbeth also defies societal norms by rejecting traditional female virtues in favor of ambition and power. Her famous soliloquy reveals her willingness to abandon her womanly compassion to pursue her goals.

"Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness" (Shakespeare, "Macbeth" 1.5.15-16).

While Binodini's rebellion is against the passive role imposed on widows, Lady Macbeth's defiance is directed at the limitations of female virtue and compassion. Both characters embody a critique of the restrictive norms that constrain women in their societies.

Bimala and Desdemona

Bimala in "Ghare Baire" represents the conflict between traditional values and modern aspirations, paralleling Desdemona's challenge to societal norms in "Othello." Bimala's journey from a dutiful wife to a woman seeking her own identity mirrors Desdemona's assertion of loyalty to Othello despite societal disapproval.

Bimala: There are two women within me. One that keeps me bound within the four walls of the household. The other seeks freedom (Tagore, "Ghare Baire" 71).

Desdemona: "My noble father, / I do perceive here a divided duty: / To you I am bound for life and education; / My life and education both do learn me / How to respect you; you are the lord of duty; / I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband" (Shakespeare, "Othello" 1.3.181-187).

Both characters navigate their roles within their marriages and societies, revealing the tension between personal desire and societal expectations.

Mrinmoyee and Viola

Mrinmoyee in "Samapti" resists traditional expectations and eventually finds a balance between her individuality and her role as a wife. Similarly, Viola in "Twelfth Night" uses her disguise to navigate societal constraints and assert her identity.

Mrinmoyee: If I conform, then I'm fit for household; otherwise, I'm a girl of the wild. (Tagore, "Samapti" 48).

Viola: "I am the man: if it be so, as 'tis, / Poor lady, she were better love a dream. / Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness" (Shakespeare, "Twelfth Night" 2.2.25-27).

Both characters explore themes of identity and self-discovery, ultimately challenging and redefining their societal roles.

In conclusion, the women characters in the works of Tagore and Shakespeare exhibit remarkable strength, intelligence, and a propensity to challenge societal norms. Through their diverse experiences and actions, these characters highlight the complexities of the female experience and the authors' critiques of the societies in which they lived.

CONCLUSION

The women characters in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare are profound embodiments of the authors' insights into gender dynamics and societal norms. Tagore's women, such as Charulata, Binodini, and Bimala, often encapsulate a synthesis of traditional values intertwined with progressive ideals. These characters navigate the intricate landscape of late 19th and early 20th century Bengal, highlighting the tensions between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Their stories reflect the transitional nature of Indian society during this period, grappling with the influences of modernization and colonial rule.

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In contrast, Shakespeare's women, like Lady Macbeth, Portia, and Desdemona, operate within the rigid structures of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Despite these constraints, Shakespeare's female characters exhibit a remarkable range from obedience and demureness to strength and cunning. Characters like Lady Macbeth challenge traditional gender roles through their ambition and moral complexity, while Portia uses her intelligence and wit to subvert the limitations placed on her gender.

This comparative analysis underscores the universality and timelessness of the themes explored by both authors. Tagore and Shakespeare, though separated by time and culture, delve deeply into the complexities of women's roles, presenting characters that continue to resonate with contemporary audiences. Their works provide a rich tapestry for understanding the multifaceted nature of female identity and the ongoing discourse on gender and societal norms.

Through the lens of strength, resilience, intelligence, and the challenge to societal norms, the women of Tagore and Shakespeare reflect a shared humanity and a diverse range of female experiences. These characters not only illuminate the specific cultural contexts of their times but also transcend them, offering insights into the evolving roles of women across different eras and societies. Their enduring relevance lies in their ability to speak to the complexities of human nature and the perennial struggle for personal and social liberation.

Certainly! The "Works Cited" section for the paper can be formatted according to the MLA style-sheet as follows:

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