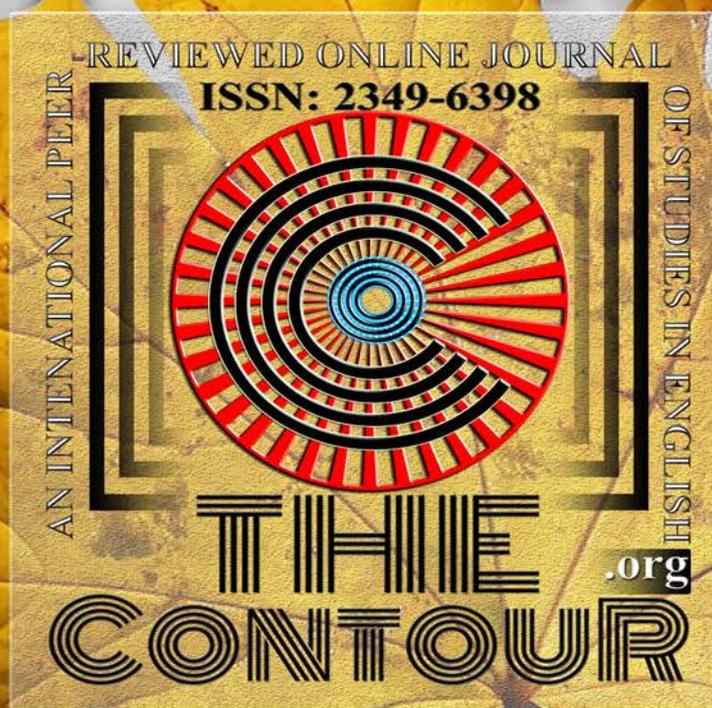


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# Countering Gender Stereotype: A Comparative Study of Tagore's "StreerPatra" and Munro's "The Office"

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## Abstract

*Modern feminists have found gender stereotyping to be one of the commonest traits of literature of all ages and of all culture, especially literature produced by male writers or under strong patriarchal ideology. In spite of accepting this conjecture to be almost true, there are writings, of male writers also, which strongly counter the notion and practice of gender stereotyping, and establish the feminine identity in sharp contradistinction with the male. This paper seeks to make a comparative study of two such texts: Rabindranath Tagore's Streer Patra and Munro's The Office; to show how prominent writers from two completely different cultures use almost similar modes and methods to subvert the attempts of gender stereotyping and female subjugation in their own culture. The study is especially focused to identify the archetypes of the social process of gender oppression and the intricate workings of the hidden power structures determining gender identities.*

**Key Words:** gender stereotype, feminism, female subjugation, archetype, power structure, gender identity.

Every effect has a cause: if feminism is the effect then the cause is the unjust valorization of patriarchy, unjust assignation of power upon male. Feminism which abhors the continuous marginalization of women is the assertion of female identity by breaking the fixed norms of social ideology set for women. Different literary works have captured this discriminatory attitude towards women. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a male writer of India and Alice Munro (1931- ), a female writer of Canada both belong to different historical period but they are identical in the way they represent their women characters. Tagore's 'Streer Patra' and Munro's 'The Office' - both evolve around women characters who try to break the shackles which society has imposed upon them. Mrinal, the protagonist of 'Streer Patra' and the unnamed narrator of 'The Office' both fall to be victims of patriarchal oppression to varying degrees. Though Mrinal's suffering is more poignant than the unnamed narrator of Munro but they are countering the gender stereotype in their own way.

A radical change was taking place when Tagore appeared in the Indian history. Being a revolutionary Tagore always advocated for woman's emancipation and empowerment through his numerous essays, short stories and novels. Through his cosmopolitanism he spread his empathy towards social issues especially against that power structure which incarcerated women in a cocoon. He stated –



Our nature holds together, inseparably linked, a willfully itinerant male, impatient of all bonds, and a shut-in home keeping female being...The one leads us outward, the other draws us back home. (Chaudhuri 2000:22)

In the later part of the nineteenth century a great change was occurring- which we call Bengal Renaissance. Moreover, Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1829) were contemporaries of Tagore- their inspiration culminated in Tagore and we get his kaleidoscopic portrayal of female characters. In spite of being a male writer, he shatters the prejudiced notion which we find in almost every male writer. By perfectly projecting the emboldening, progressive women characters, he initiated the ideology many decades ago what we today call feminism.

Tagore wrote 'Streer Patra' (wife's letter) in 1913 and in a letter on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1941 he expressed, "It's in my short story 'Streer Patra' that I supported the women's cause for the first time..." (Das Gupta 122)

The story is unfolded in the form of a letter written by the protagonist, Mrinal to her husband. The first word Mrinal uses is "Shricharankamaleshu", "your revered lotus feet", and then her poignant tone continues. Mrinal as a detached observer recalls her past, she has spent fifteen years in her husband's household but no necessity has arisen to write a letter to her husband. She is married at the age of twelve; her mother-in-law chooses her as she is beautiful. When she enters the household the elder woman examines her minutely and admits that she is beautiful. Her beauty doesn't bother anyone but her intellect always pricks everyone. As a woman she cannot be allowed to possess intellect. She states-

It did not take long for you to forget that I had beauty-but you were forced to remember that I had brains. This intelligence is so much part of my nature that it has survived even fifteen years in your household. (Chaudhuri 2000:207)

Alan Massie exemplifies it as 'a matter of power politics' (Massie 1991, 38). This is the basic reason why Mrinal, the 'mejo-bou' of the household cannot be fitted in the fixed hierarchy with her sharp intellect. The roots of the patriarchal oppression are so deep and unyielding that it has made other women characters merely a prop or a tool. Mrinal remembers how much anxious her mother is as she articulates-

My mother was always very troubled by my intelligence; for a woman it's an affliction. If she whose life is guided by boundaries seeks a life guided by intelligence, she'll run into so many walls that she'll shatter her forehead and her future. (Translation by Prasenjit Gupta)

Mrinal creates her own space, she is capable enough to write poetry; by only this means she can feel her existence. Gradually the pungent tone becomes more severe. Mrinal asseverates how she watches death from a very close distance when her new-born child dies and how the English doctor objugates them for the filthy situation of the so called 'atur-ghor'. The irony lies here. There are enough decorations in the whole house but the 'atur-ghor' seems to be an entirely



segregated place where there is no place for wind and light. This kind of neglect does not stir women as it's not unnatural for them. Mrinal inscribes-

Women felt ashamed even to feel sad...if it was the destiny of women to suffer at the hands of society, then it was better to let them wallow in neglect ; love or caring merely increased the pain caused by neglect.(Tagore, p.639 My Translation)

The story reaches to its climax when Tagore ushers another woman character- Bindu, in whom Mrinal sees her untethered self-

The unbearable impetus of Bindu's love began to agitate me. Once in a while I admit, I used to be angry at her but through her love I saw a side of myself that I'd never seen before. It was my true self, my free self (Translation by Prasenjit Gupta)

Bindu is Mrinal's elder sister-in-law's sister. After the death of their widowed mother, Bindu is treated badly at the hand of her cousin so she hastaken shelter in her sister's house. Everyone in the house, even Bindu's own sister grudges at the presence of the unbidden girl always, they treats her shabbily. Here Mrinal retorts that as her elder sister-in-law neither possesses money nor good looks, she is unworthy of being a wife of that so-called wealthy household. But after her sister-in-law's father's persistent request she gets the opportunity to be a wife of that house. Being conscience-stricken she can't express her own wish; she always tries to negate her own identity. Therefore she dauntingly tries to give an exhibition that she is enough dutiful as a wife and she doesn't feel any sororal kindness by defying her husband's wish. But Mrinal is diametrically opposed to her sister-in-law. She can't accept total submissiveness and she can't make her existence so diminutive. She takes a different vantage point regarding Bindu. She gives her shelter in her own room in spite of bitter criticism, severe hostility.

At one point Mrinal gives vent to the extreme injustice meted out on Bindu by saying that Bindu was kept aside like a weed but all her cousins continued to vaunt their existence. This was the fate of a girl child, Vrinda Nabar remarks in her 'Caste as Woman', "There is a sense of the 'other' when referring to the girl child. One also finds a clear discrimination between the rights and privileges of a daughter/girl and a son/boy..." (Nabar, p.65.)

Everyone in Mrinal's in-law's house condones Bindu. None of them allows a single inch for her, and they take no time to blame Bindu if anything goes missing. As Bindu is growing older, she should be married as soon as possible. Mrinal's family uses this reason as a weapon to get rid of this uninvited girl. Mrinal knows that she can't help Bindu, but she consoles her saying that she will always be on her side. Just after three days of her marriage, Bindu flees from her husband and Mrinal comes to know that Bindu's husband is mad. Being infuriated she wants to keep Bindu in her room, but Bindu can feel the predicament which Mrinal has to bear if she stays. So she left Mrinal's in-laws 'house. In the meantime Mrinal arranges in her own way to get connected with Bindu but she doesn't need any arrangement as she finds her peace in death, by putting her clothes on fire and departs from this world.



Ultimately Bindu achieves peace; even this earns criticism from people, and Mrinal got enough fortitude to leave her house. She continues, “The dark veil of your custom cloaked me completely, but for an instant Bindu came and touched me through a gap in the veil; and by her own death she tore that awful veil to shreds.”(A Translation by Prasenjit Gupta)

Mrinal does not waste a single moment to decide that she’ll not return to Number 27, Makhon Boral Lane. She has unraveled the true worth of a woman in society in whose cocoon like shell she’ll not stay. She breaks all the chains which society has imposed upon her for being a ‘mejo-bou’. Now Mrinal has known that she is not only a ‘mejo- bou’, but she has another identity. She has the same equality to enjoy the world which god has created so craftily.

Tagore creates Mrinal truly for subverting the gender stereotype which is recurrent in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Mrinal’s sister-in-law is also presented before us to show how much rebel Mrinal is. She is assertive and to re-search her identity she abandons her house without thinking a second time. She realizes the true condition of a woman which is a paralyzed one and becomes thirsty to despoil the customary rules and regulations.

Like Tagore, Alice Munro in one way or the other knocks against that stereotype imposed by society upon women-

Society reinforces a binary split between these constructs by associating women with nature and passivity, and man with action and culture (Moi 104).

The heteronormative gender system which is rooted in the asymmetrical power-play between male and female is vehemently called into question through the women characters of Munro. The disruption of identity in male hegemony which is conspicuous in the character of Mrinal’s sister-in-law gets shape through the unnamed narrator of Munro; not the female subjugation but the attempt to defy that subjugation is the content of the story ‘the office’.

The story is based on an autobiographical incident which happened to Munro in 1960 or 1961 in Vancouver. The narrator is not a shy housewife, instead a woman who understands her own situation and is eager to pursue her own space which is dialectically opposed from her husband. Very ironically she points out-

A house is all right for a man to work in. he brings his work into the house, a place is cleared for it...so a house is not the same for a woman...she is the house; there is no separation possible (Dance 44)

The problem arises when the static situation of a house i.e. a commodity is equated with a woman, in a more precise way a woman is commoditized. Her husband is absent throughout the story but his sense of superiority, masculine identity looms large. When the narrator tells him that she needs her own office for her creative work, he doesn’t interfere but accepts that she can rent an office of a cheap quality; again his masculine superiority prevails as he does not need any explanations.

‘Hegemonic masculinity’ coined by Raewyn Connell suggesting “as a strategy for male domination over woman” (77) underlines the conflict in this story. Tagore in his ‘Streer Patra’



dethrones male superiority, and through Mrinal female emancipation comes into force. Munro treads on the same path; the unnamed narrator threatens the recurrent power structure and the masculine superiority of Mr. Malley. She affirms her independence from the clutch of the specific construction of gender roles.

The protagonist finds her office in the apartment of Mr. Malley but the landlord himself begins to interrupt her with his own preconceived notions and patronizing manner. Mr. Malley always tries to emerge as a disciplinarian patriarch, depending not only on gender conventions but also on socio-economic factors and he is confronted again and again by the protagonist of the story. In other works like 'Lives of Girls and Woman' and 'Who Do You Think You Are', Munro's child protagonists always get castrated by the father figure, upholder of the continuous gender hierarchy. Here Mr. Malley seems to feel more at ease to define him like those benign father figures. His wife is shown as the embodiment of all the feminine attractiveness and is satisfied to conserve the social and gender status-quo by playing the role imposed on her i.e. self-fashioning as an elegant middle-class house-wife. The narrator's critique of male hegemony is very clearly pointed out towards Mr. Malley who is always very conscious about what should be the female role in society. Masculinity is not essentially connected to biological bodies but cultural conditioning which compels him to decorate his room to put on display his masculine dignity. The omnipresent male hand can be traced everywhere –

The room where I waited was evidently a combination of living room and office. The first things I noticed were models of ships – galleons... what are sometimes called 'masculine ornaments'- china deer heads, bronze horses... (Dance 46)

But this bragging of masculine suavity is complete when the narrator continues-

But the room was really dominated by a portrait, with its own light and a gilded frame; it was of a good-looking, fair-haired man in middle age...wearing a business suit... (Dance 46)

Through all these self-presentations he tries to maintain the superiority of being a male. He obviously possesses a keen sense about how a woman should decorate her room and by his malleable nature he endeavors to embellish the narrator's barren room. He takes the responsibility to overhaul "an awfully uncomfortable place for a lady" (Dance 64) into the kind of feminine solace which the narrator abhors as she is more comfortable –

On the barrenness of my walls, the cheap dignity of my essential furnishings, the remarkable lack of things to dust, wash or polish (Dance 47)

Mr. Malley's presumptuous affirmation of hegemonic masculinity is threatened by the protagonist through her tranquil rejection. She degraded Mr. Malley into a snob who deflates his own male superiority which is according to W. R. Martin, "an engaging outrageous spectacle, bordering on the farcical" (54)

In spite of the narrator's extreme disgust he continues to irritate her by offering her the plant or teapot. He tries to help her not only through these material things but to represent his male



supremacy he proffers materials for her writing also. For this purpose he mentions the story of a chiropractor, his former tenant; Mr. Malley also thinks that his own life should be an inspiration for the protagonist.

Gradually the situation becomes graver as the protagonist learns to ignore her landlord and the consequence was the uncorroborated accusations. The chauvinistic male ego justifies the behavior of the narrator by distorting the reality-

His accusations grew more specific. He had heard voices in my room. My behavior was disturbing his wife when she tried to take her afternoon nap... he had found a whisky bottle in the garbage. (Dance 51)

But Munro's portrait of the landlord is degraded gradually. In the very beginning when he is described as in his photograph, a sense of masculine pride pours in but the final image is one of ridicule. He is emasculated and has become the subject of the narrator not as a representative of male hegemony but –

with his rags and brushes and pail of soapy water, scrubbing in his clumsy way, at the toilet walls, stooping with difficulty breathing sorrowfully, arranging in his mind the bizarre but somehow never quite satisfactory narrative of yet another betrayal of trust (Dance 47)

The power play is over and the protagonist has won ultimately as she has found the way to get rid of him “on a symbolic level” (Nischik ‘Multiple Challenges’ 48). In both the stories the female protagonists reassert their identity thwarting the notions set up by society which always privilege male over female. Tagore wrote *Streer Patra* in the 19th century Bengal while Munro wrote ‘The Office’ in the 21st century Canada, but the representation of masculinity unveils the same gender based hierarchies which is the result of a continuous process. Through the characters of Mrinal and the unnamed narrator, Tagore and Munro both promulgate, “Masculinity and femininity are stratified in relation to each other as well as intrinsically along the line of difference within.” (Yekani)

The ultimate gain is the subjective individuality and integrity. Both Mrinal and the protagonist of Munro countering gender stereotype but the way they are doing it is subtly different from one another. Anxiety, misery which always tend to be one kind of oppression can be traced through Mrinal and the unnamed narrator. Tagore pictures it in a very straightforward way but Munro presents it through subtle irony. Though Tagore's mode of presentation is very blatant, direct but Munro is acerbic throughout. As Tagore is a male writer, he represents Mrinal in a way which is different from Munro's presentation of the unnamed narrator. Munro herself is a woman, a housewife, mother of three children and she assimilates this experience as a writer. As a result, her subversion of gender stereotype is more stinging than Tagore. Mrinal defies in an imposing manner but the unnamed protagonist defies in a more modest way. However both Tagore and Munro belong to two different cultures and different historical period but they almost use similar mode and methods to supplant the attempts of gender stereotyping in their own culture.



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