

SIMILAR YET DISTINCT-ANALOGIES BETWEEN TAGORE'S AND IQBAL'S FEMINISM

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Abstract

This study explores the feminist philosophies of Rabindranath Tagore and Muhammad Iqbal, who were the poet philosophers of the subcontinent in the 19th and 20th centuries. Their acquaintance with western thought and civilization during their higher education led them to question patriarchal domination, male chauvinism, and women's inferiority and despondency in Indian society. They both presented their versions of feminism; Iqbal stood for Islamic feminism with freedom of education. He was in favor of the cautious adaptation of liberalism with a priority on gender roles. Similarly, Tagore explicated the plight of women in great depth and was a torch bearer for giving women freedom over their bodies, education, professions and lives. However, his appraisal of social feminism is not straightforward since it occasionally emitted wafts of hidden patriarchy as he depicted women as well-educated and intelligent; yet the ideal ones were multi-taskers spending their lives in the trivialities of domestic lives. Therefore, this qualitative research with Hermeneutics approach contrasts the stances of feminism regarding the subcontinent's two thought-provoking literary figures. Their feminist ideas are crucial from the historical perspective and should be developed further to strengthen contemporary feminist discourse in South Asia.

Keywords: Tagore, Iqbal, Radical feminism, Patriarchal domination, Islamic feminism, Liberalism, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to comparatively analyze, compare and critique the feminist views of Muhammad Iqbal and Rabindranath Tagore. Specifically, the concepts of freedom and equality are analyzed as found in their writings. Both are key figures in the late 19th and early 20th-century Indian thought.

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They were both poet-philosophers. Their origin was subcontinental yet they acquired their higher education from the West which led to their unique and distinct standpoints and opinions regarding their ideal liberated woman. It had a profound influence on their feminism-related perspective. In their writings, they attempted to articulate various political problems stemming from the processes of colonization and modernization. They do not blindly follow Western ideas and try to develop a critical framework that also incorporates local culture. In their literary works, they analyzed the issues of women's liberation and equality. In this paper, their ideas concerning women's liberation and equality are critically examined. Therefore, the objective of this study is to compare their stance on feminism and equality and understand and critique the subliminal tone in their text to ascertain whether their portrayal of a liberal woman was free from any ideological conceptions and prejudices.

In terms of methodology, this study adopts a qualitative and secondary research design in which hermeneutical approaches are implemented. This research design is suitable to develop a comparative analysis of feminist philosophies of Iqbal and Tagore. Hermeneutic as an art of interpretation is a well-known Qualitative method which helps us to understand the context of the textual analysis and its relevance in the present world. It has been employed by several studies like Schröer (2009) who treated it as sociology of knowledge in order to facilitate intercultural understanding. Then, the comparative analysis of life quality in assessments related to physical/objective and mental or subjective indicators was done by Filippchenkova et al. (2019). Further, Aswad (2018) studied the rhetoric regarding the difference of charisma in terms of leadership between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump in the presidential elections of 2016 through hermeneutics and comparative analysis. Finally, a culture based, comparative research via hermeneutics is also conducted by Rinne (2023) regarding the development of instructor identity differences between the teacher education in Sweden versus Denmark. These studies lend a credible support for the choice of the research methodology of this paper.

IQBAL'S CONCEPT OF FEMINISM

In this section, Allama Iqbal's view of feminism is critically explicated. Iqbal has a peculiar approach to women's liberation. He does not only theorize femininity in a Muslim context but also critically evaluates prevailing Western feminist movements of his time. In his various lectures, papers, speeches, and poetry like 'Ramooz-e-Bekhudi', 'Zareb-e-Kaleem', and

‘Javed Nama’, he discusses the role of women in modern Muslim societies and criticizes Western attitude toward women. Iqbal understands feminism as a social-political movement that seeks equality of women with men in all spheres of human life including political, social, and educational aspects. Like other major feminist thinkers, Iqbal situates this movement in the 18-century European modernization. Iqbal’s view of feminism and his critique of Western feminist movements stem from Islamic teachings and tradition. That is to say, he conceptualizes the very concept of femininity by using both the teachings of Islam and Western modernist discourse (Iqbal, 1953).

For Iqbal, a woman’s most primordial and significant role in society is that of a mother. In his book ‘Ramooz-e-Bekhudi’ (Mysteries of Selflessness), he links motherhood to prophethood:

*“Motherhood is mercy, being linked by close affinity to
Prophethood/And her compassion is the Prophet’s own/For
mothers shape the way that men shall go/Maturer, by the grace
of Motherhood/The character of nations is; the lines/That score
that brow determine our estate.”*

The above lines clearly indicate that Iqbal conceives the concept of mothering as an integral part of femininity. Iqbal is highly critical of both the equality and freedom of women. He says, “I openly acknowledge with reference to Quranic verse ‘men are protectors of women’ therefore, I can never be a supporter of equality between men and women (Mueene, 1963). Iqbal criticizes the principle of equality because he thinks natural responsibilities and perceived roles of men and women are different in society. It means that, for Iqbal, one should not use the same scale (equality) to gauge the difference between men and women. That is not to say that he is totally against the principle of equality. He contends that men and women are equal because they are both human beings. In Ramooz-e-Bekhudee, Iqbal says:

*“Poshish’a uryani’a mardan zan ast Husan’a dilju ishq ra
parahan ast”*

This verse refers to a Quranic verse that ‘the wives are the dress of their husbands and they are the dress of their wives’. Iqbal is against the objectification of women and argues against the commodification of women in modern societies. According to Iqbal, feminist movements aim to attain to objectives:

Equal Rights 2- Freedom

Iqbal reinterprets these two concepts with reference to cultural and religious differences. Women, according to Iqbal are equal to men with respect to their peculiar roles. These roles, he argues, are embedded in the very natural makeup of being human. Iqbal contends that women should not be used and exploited in order to meet the demands of the modern socio-economic system. Moreover, in the name of revolution, Iqbal says that sometimes feminist movements try to commodify women in order to serve capitalist interests. Moreover, Iqbal attempts to develop an Islamic feminist framework in order to deal with the problematic stance on femininity and its various dimensions.

Iqbal thinks that problems faced by Muslim women are different from the problems faced by European women. That's why he incorporates both Islam and local tradition in developing his concept of feminism. Miriam Cooke states, "Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning movement (Cooke, 2001). Unlike Western feminist movements, Islamic feminism does not attempt to strike for feminist struggle rather it articulates idiosyncrasies of Muslim women due to the processes of modernization, colonization, and industrialization: "as with other feminist struggles, Islamic feminism movements did not always start as feminist struggles but instead struggles against oppression of any kind- patriarchy, colonialism, and war. Like their sisters from other or no faith backgrounds. Islamic feminists simply set out to contextualize the experiences of women (Sariya, 2001). Iqbal also acknowledges the differences between men and women and thinks that these differences add to the beauty of life and should not be the basis of any kind of discrimination between men and women. That is to say, these differences should not construe one gender as inferior/superior to the other. He narrates his visit to Italy: "I went to Italy and came across a gentleman called Prince Caeteni who was fond of Islamic history. I asked him why he was interested in it, and he replied- Islam turned women to men- (i.e. Islamic faith instilled great faith and enthusiasm in the hearts of its womenfolk that they became equal to men)."

Like equality, Iqbal also critically evaluates the concept of freedom in feminist discourse. Iqbal argues that women should not be granted complete freedom because it undermines the natural roles which they are supposed to play in society. For him, freedom is a trap and illusion created by capitalist societies to exploit women which deprived them of their true identity.

Similar to equality, this critique of freedom is also stemming from Islamic teachings. Islam, according to Iqbal's interpretation does not sanction complete freedom to both men and women. In the name of freedom, Iqbal argues, Western women have been deviated from their natural roles that results in various social-moral crisis. In Javed Nama, Iqbal says:

“Nations which give women more freedom than is necessary regret their mistake at one time or another. Nature has imposed such important responsibilities on a woman that if she tries to discharge them fully, she cannot find the leisure to do any other work. Taking her away from her real duties and giving her work which can be performed by a man would certainly be wrong. For instance, making a woman into a typist or clerk is not only a violation of the laws of nature but a regrettable attempt to turn human society topsy-turvy”.

The above passage clearly indicates Iqbal's approach towards women liberation which is highly controversial both in Islamic and Western feminist discourses. Similarly, Iqbal says that:

“Egotism and uneven competition have promulgated peculiar economic conditions in the west. I think that women freedom, experienced in western societies, causes complications and proved to be a failure rather success (Eijaz & Ahmed, 2011).

Iqbal being a Muslim philosopher attempts to formulate a perspective of women liberation that is grounded in Islamic teachings and local traditions of South Asia. Therefore, he rules out the possibility of complete freedom and emancipation of women and promotes the concept of relative freedom that is compatible with both Islam and local culture.

Hence, for a poet-philosopher like Muhammad Iqbal, Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, instead, it is reliant on contexts and is a movement that is determined strategically. Further, instead of supporting the cause of equality and uninhibited freedom, he supports the idea of relativity and equity between men and women. Iqbal understood and appreciated the differences between the two genders on the basis of their biology, psychology, need perceptions, and their unique purposes. He acknowledged that absolute or complete equality is counterintuitive and sabotages diversity in society and creates imbalances along with unrealistic demands from women. Absolute equality is also a form of discrimination against women; in the quest for liberation from the natural or biological role, they suffer disrespect, mistreatment, ageism, and sexism. On the contrary, Iqbal's stance

on feminism elevates women and they are required to be revered in all ages, irrespective of their class and caste. His perspective is based on religion since Islam proposes the division of labor to prevent women from assuming both gender roles and consequently suffer from unfair demand and exhaustion. The religion considers family as the foundation of a healthy and prosperous nation and places women as mothers, sisters and wives on the center stage. The man is responsible to fulfill familial fiscal needs whereas woman has the right to maintenance from husband, inheritance and property from the family, right to do business and finally, freedom to acquire education. However, Iqbal is against the western education, since, in his opinion, their teachings have a potential of incitement towards contravening their realm and sabotaging the sanctity and privileges offered by Islam as depicted in “Zarb-e-Kaleem” where he calls western education as a de-womanizing tool and a death of womanhood. He made a case for women to make intelligent decisions to reap benefits in personal, social, legal and political sphere and keep themselves close to Islamic feminist philosophy to maintain the balance between home and social life instead of blindly following western radical feminism (Gupta, 2015).

Tagore's Liberated Woman- an ambiguous narrative

The dual foci of Tagore's narratives spanning between 1903 and 1934, are ‘gender’ and ‘modernity’. Additionally, the discourse played in the backdrop of the social conflicts brewing in Bengal which shaped the predominant notions concerning feminism and masculinity. Tagore did not majorly consider the binary oppositions and hierarchies, for instance, imperialism versus nationalism, or universalism among others. His writings were considered to be experimental in nature and portrayed the complex consciousness of Indians, particularly, Bengali woman who was educated and exuded class. Despite her being a pupil of liberal education, she was the torch bearer of conservative traditions owing to her malleable nature. Tagore chiseled a woman who was bejeweled with modernism but her true loyalty and commitment was tied to her traditions and cultural values, thereby he maintained the aspects of romance, fantasy and historical fiction.

Tagore had a sensitive outlook to women's aspirations, desires and struggles in a traditional and closed society and hence he highlighted the same in his female characters including *Damini or Ela*, *Labanya or Kumudini*, *Sucharita or Lalita*. Here it was shown how these women's aspirations and hopes were thwarted by social constraints, yet his writings sought to reconcile these external and internal conflicts posed by gender, class, community, and caste passively instead of actually liberating them to choose a side that was their

true calling. His textual journey and characterization, to the most part attempted to defy the categorization of reductive nature by shedding light on themes like identity versus belongingness and being and consciousness, among others. Tagore's writings are fascinating and inspiring and to this day, they are open to re-interpreting whereby he became the pioneer to explore the caviars of human psychology before the work of Sigmund Freud. Hence, he delved into taboo and stigmatized topics like child bride, the plight of widows in Indian society, infidelity, modernity and women education- in short he brought to forefront Hindu orthodoxy and Brahman liberalism dichotomies and these themes formed gender concerns of his work.

Tagore attempted to customize western writings' conventions by experimenting with Indian epic tradition and discussing the incipient shade of modernity. However, history, social constraints and gender is inter-woven with abstinence instead of indulgence or freedom. He did not attempt to assimilate traditionalism and modernity in a decisive manner in which the reader can make a clear stance towards a truly liberated and opinionated women, free of traditional roles-related shackles (Mishra, 2020).

Tagore placed women at the center of his work, his stance on feminism was strong in comparison to his literary contemporaries like Bankim and Sharat Chandra and he surpassed them through his non-conformist attitude by writing for women's emancipation, rights, and dignity. So feminism and women's education and advancement in Tagore's work is a persistent underlying theme that makes his writings distinct and futuristic⁹.

Next, Mary M. Lago's study titled 'Tagore's Liberated Women' is summarized and critically examined which is based on Rabindranath Tagore's short fiction, his portrayal of strong female characters in his stories, and his failure in projecting those characters on to an international platform (Lago, 1977).

Mary M. Lago begins by a brief commentary on Tagore's 1916-1917 lecture tour to America. This lecture tour coincided with the publication of Tagore's selected works in English that were aimed for a foreign audience. Given the timing of his lecture tour, it would have been appropriate if the subject of his public lectures and his works selected for translation and publication abroad were connected in any manner, but this is certainly not the case.

A review of his works selected for translation and publication abroad, and of the content of his public lectures in America reveal that the essential coordination between the subject of his addresses and the themes of his work

is nowhere to be found. The first collection of his short stories was published in the West in 1916, and as Tagore himself revealed, the selection and translation of stories was done by a lot of people, which contributed to the quality of this first volume being compromised.

A fundamental problem with the first volume of Tagore's works published in the West is that it does not contain any of his works that exude an impression of his strong personality and opinions concerning the issue of women's liberation. Tagore had produced a number of short stories with strong female protagonists before 1916 which could provide a comprehensive introduction to the idea of liberated women as envisioned by him. The volume of his works published in the West unfortunately contains stories that show women characters as hapless beings trapped in the miseries of their life, and unable to chalk their way out of it.

Not a single story in that volume speaks of a strong woman's endeavors to discover and refine her innate talents and capabilities as idealized by Tagore. Given the content of the first collection of Tagore's short stories published abroad, if we look at the subject of his public lectures, a stark difference and incoherence is obvious. Speaking on women's liberation during his lecture tour in America, Tagore iterates the feminist argument which places the origin of wars and instability in the masculine conduct of politics and global affairs. He speaks of women as being gentle and sagacious creatures, who possess an innate capacity to delve into the depths of any situation against all odds. He also says that a strong reflection of sympathy which women are endowed with is essential in the conduct of world affairs if we are to achieve a peaceful society, and that women will fail to achieve fulfilling lives if they embark on the masculine way of doing things.

On one hand, Tagore's short stories depict miserable women who are somehow the victims of oppressive social structures that they are born into, and on the other hand, through his public lectures, he charts out the importance and efficacy of feminine qualities in bringing about a lasting, positive change in the conduct of world affairs. This dichotomy between the subject of his public lectures and the content of his first collection for a foreign audience raises some important questions. Tagore's reluctance, rather an inability to launch his pre-1916 powerful female protagonists in the West (where an active feminist movement was already reeling) is perplexing. Not only that, the way he portrays the strength of a woman is also problematic at various instances. For instance, in the text, *The Home and the World*, Tagore attempted to discuss in favor of equality, freedom and women's well-being. However, his patriarchal thought peered through his

text perhaps on account of his origin from the traditional society. The woman protagonist, Bimala is bold, liberated, and revolutionary yet the outcome of her independent personality and decisions led to her dissatisfaction and regret in the future. Her adventures in the outside world formed failed to truly liberate her and she could only be redeemed when she accepted that her well-being was only guaranteed inside her home. It is one of the pieces of evidence of his confused mentality toward women emancipation and showed that his writings were not fully devoid of patriarchal hegemony (Stephen, 1962).

Tagore's strong women are intelligent, with a highly developed passion for reading and writing. They are conscious of their independent identities. They are also homely, sympathetic, and gentle, not losing their actual sense of self and calmness even when highly pressed either by societal customs, patronizing husbands, or by demeaning in-laws. In a way, Tagore's strong women are an embodiment of perfection that resides in the minds of a lot of literate men (like Tagore himself) as far as the image of a woman is concerned. The problem with Tagore's liberated women as shown in his stories is that the image of all these ladies is itself created by a man, and has the influence of his fancies and whims as far as the exemplary woman is concerned. How can a woman pursue her passionate interest to read good literature when she is emotionally suffering at the hands of her most intimate relationships, has to take good care of the house, and almost walks on egg shells so as not to offend anyone through her intelligence? Tagore does not hint at how does his strong female characters balance their domestic responsibilities and their intellectual cravings, nor does he talk about if it is humanly possible to assume the charge of maintaining an entire household and the rigorous pursuit of one's literary interests simultaneously.

Moreover, a lot of Tagore's female characters' intelligence is non-utilitarian. They do not pursue their literary interests in order to utilize it for their professional growth. They stay back at their respective homes, and the only good they achieve from their love of reading is self-realization, personal fulfilment, and an escape from the torments of their routine lives. The characters' longing for literacy through reading transcends them into oblivions of sorts where they find calmness, but it does not materialize into something concrete like enabling those women to break free of shackles that have kept them encaged. In this context, it is safe to state that although Tagore's depiction of a strong woman in the traditional Indian society of late 19th and early 20th centuries was revolutionary, it was not entirely flawless.

The strong women characters that Tagore introduces his perusers to are nevertheless the creation of a man's mind, and bear strong impressions of his

patriarchal preferences and whims as far as the 'complete' woman is concerned. The intelligence of a woman is of no importance if she is unable to utilize it to change her life and society for better. Tagore's female characters are empowered and sagacious to only that extent where they do not threaten the patriarchal status quo which places women in the 'safe' and 'domestic' confines of their respective households. This raises a very pertinent question and that is if we should call Tagore a creator of 'liberated women', because there is nothing more painful for a human being to be aware of his/her potential and not being able to realize it. In this sense, what Tagore introduces us to are not liberated women but women for whom freedom is a far cry, and liberation merely an illusion.

CONCLUSION

The feminist views of Iqbal and Tagore are shaped by their peculiar educational, social and political background. This comparative analysis helps us to understand the status of feminist discourse in South Asian context. Their feminist thought is a kind of intellectual response to modernization and colonization of the Indian sub-continent.

Iqbal, being a Muslim and spiritual philosopher does not accept complete freedom and absolute equality of men and women. This clearly limits his views of feminism. Rather than talking about all women of India, he merely explicates the problems of Muslim women. His views are primarily drawn from Islamic teachings, therefore, may be considered prejudiced and inadequate in voicing the concerns for general women population of India who belong to a plethora of different religions, caste, creeds or class. So lack of universal applicability is a constraint posed to his teachings reflected through his writings. His perspective can be properly understood in the context of Islamic feminism. Similarly, Tagore, concept of liberated women is also a great contribution in South Asian feminist discourse. His depiction of strong woman in the late 19th and early 20th century is revolutionary. Since, it is the creation of man's mind, therefore, it still bears the impressions of his patriarchal preferences. The feminist ideas of Iqbal and Tagore are very important from the historical perspective and should be developed further in order to strengthen contemporary feminist discourse in South Asia.

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