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Women on the Margins: A Comparative Reading of Social Defiance in K.V. Raghupathi's *An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Musalmani Galpo*

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative analysis of the portrayal of women's struggles in the multicultural context of India, drawing insights from KV Raghupathi's "An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver" and Rabindranath Tagore's "Musalmani Galpo" (The Story of a Muslim Woman). Both stories offer compelling reflections on the gendered constraints placed on women, exploring how these women negotiate societal expectations, gender roles and cultural norms.

"An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver" illustrates the life of a woman who defies traditional gender roles by working in a male-dominated profession, challenging societal and family norms and asserting her economic independence. Her story highlights the resistance to patriarchal structures through self-reliance and autonomy. In contrast, "Musalmani Galpo" centers on Kamala, a young woman whose journey of survival in a patriarchal society is influenced by her vulnerability, beauty and religious identity. Through Kamala's story, Tagore examines the complexities of gender and spiritual solidarity, portraying how women seek refuge across cultural divides in their quest for respect and dignity.

This study compares these two stories to show how the authors depict agency, identity and resistance, emphasizing the nuanced ways in which Indian women fight oppression. The paper also emphasizes the intersection of gender, religion and socio-economic status in shaping women's experiences in Indian society. Ultimately, this article contends that both Tagore and Raghupathi provide important critiques of patriarchal structures, highlighting the significance of empathy, unity and self-empowerment in the fight for gender equality and autonomy.

Keywords: Gender roles, resistance, multiculturalism, patriarchy, women's agency, self-empowerment, identity, oppression, equality, autonomy.

1. Introduction

In literature, how women are portrayed frequently reflects larger societal attitudes regarding gender roles, expectations and disparities. The Story of a Muslim Woman by Rabindranath Tagore and "An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver" by KV Raghupathi examine the restrictions placed on women by social and cultural norms as well as topics of gender and identity. These two short stories explore how women negotiate, oppose and defy oppressive standards, although they come from different cultural and historical backgrounds.



Raghupathi portrays a contemporary Indian woman in "An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver" who breaks gender stereotypes by excelling in a traditionally male-dominated field. In contrast, "Musalmani Galpo" tells the tale of Kamala, a young woman torn between her family's expectations, the restrictions imposed by her beauty and the comfort she discovers in an interfaith connection. By comparing these two works, we can explore the contrasting methods of resistance employed by women in both stories and analyse how these resistance strategies are shaped by their respective cultural and societal contexts.

2. Methodology

This study employs a comparative literary approach and compares these two stories to show how the authors depict agency, identity and resistance, emphasizing the nuanced ways in which Indian women fight oppression. The paper also emphasizes the intersection of gender, religion, patriarchal norms and socio-economic status in shaping women's experiences in Indian society. Ultimately, this article contends that both Tagore and Raghupathi provide important critiques of patriarchal structures, highlighting the significance of empathy, unity and self-empowerment in the fight for gender equality and autonomy.

Primary texts are analysed to identify thematic patterns, narrative structures and character development. Furthermore, contextualising women's place through sociological frameworks enriches interpretation, providing insight into the complexities of patriarchal structure and family norms. By examining these landscapes, we can better appreciate the interplay between family and external influences in shaping a woman's identity and status.

3. Social Context and Setting

Raghupathi's "An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver" unfolds in a modern Indian city. The protagonist, a female auto-rickshaw driver, defies the strict gender norms that often limit women's roles in the workforce. Traditional values in India, where there is a complicated social hierarchy and gendered expectations, often influence the degree of women's independence. In many Indian communities, women are typically expected to remain within domestic spaces, while careers that require public visibility, such as driving, are traditionally assigned to men. The auto driver's defiance of societal norms powerfully critiques patriarchal values restricting women's autonomy. Raghupathi uses the woman's story to challenge outdated assumptions about women's capabilities and rightful societal roles. By taking on a job traditionally held by men, she asserts her independence and subtly yet powerfully confronts the status quo.

In "Musalmani Galpo," set in colonial Bengal, Tagore portrays Kamala, a young Brahmin woman whose attractiveness draws unwanted attention, putting her in a precarious social situation. Unable to protect her, Kamala's family marries her off to a wealthy man who does not genuinely value her. The wealthy man who marries Kamala though he had a wife already embodies arrogance and a shallow desire for display rather than genuine affection. His pride and concern with status are exposed during the journey to his home when brigands attack their party. Instead of protecting Kamala, he and his men abandon her in fear, leaving her vulnerable and defenceless. Terrified, Kamala hides behind a bush, her helpless position underscoring both her physical and social vulnerability. It is at this critical moment that Habir Khan and his men arrive, rescuing her from imminent danger from the brigands. This incident not only reveals the cowardice of Kamala's husband but also highlights the contrast between empty social prestige and true courage. The intersection of gender, religion and societal expectations shapes her journey from marriage to finding refuge in a Muslim household.

In the colonial context, Kamala's situation is shaped by strict religious and social divisions. Tagore examines how these cultural divides intersect with gender roles, particularly focusing on how women's lives are often influenced by their relationships with men and their adherence



to societal expectations. Kamala's resilience in dealing with these limitations, finding refuge across religious borders and finding solidarity in another community demonstrates the possibility of transcendence via empathy, human connection, and solidarity.

4. Portrayal of Women's Struggles

The woman auto driver in Raghupathi's story is depicted as a contemporary person who challenges conventional gender norms by pursuing a profession in a male-dominated field. Her defiance may not be outwardly radical but stems from daily life and labour outside traditional female roles.

In many parts of India, working women are often limited to teaching, nursing or administrative work, which are viewed as extensions of women's nurturing and supportive nature. When the protagonist drives the auto, she challenges gender boundaries in the workforce, asserting her economic independence. Her story underscores a major challenge facing Indian women: pursuing financial freedom and professional recognition in a society that often considers women's contributions secondary to those of men.

Conversely, the societal perspective of women's beauty and morality is strongly connected to Kamala's challenges in "Musalmanni Galpo." Her beauty becomes both a source of admiration and a threat, attracting unwanted attention from men. Her marriage to a man who devalues her, along with his family's indifference to her well-being, places her in a vulnerable position. Kamala's struggle extends beyond physical survival; it also involves the fight to maintain her dignity in a society that reduces women to mere objects of possession and sexual desire.

Tagore's story critiques the commodification of women's bodies in patriarchal societies. Kamala's struggles represent broader issues faced by women, particularly in conservative, patriarchal communities where a woman's worth is often reduced to her marital status, beauty and ability to fulfil family roles. The fact that Kamala eventually finds sanctuary in Habir Khan's Muslim home, where she is treated with respect as a human being, demonstrates that women may find the safety and support they are denied in their communities through solidarity across religious and cultural boundaries.

5. Identity and the Question of Agency

The protagonist, Vanaja, later changed to Farida Begum after marriage, in "An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver" gains a sense of agency through her economic independence after her husband deserted her. "I am a Brahmin woman, he a Muslim. We fell in love and married against my parents' wishes. My name was changed from Vanaja to Farrida Begum after marriage." (11) The issue for their separation is not due to differences in their religious beliefs and conversion, but not having a son even after having three daughters successively. In the beginning, she believed him and trusted him. Slowly, she realized his true colours. "The real crocodile was out. I was trapped. By him, I have three daughters. He never liked that. He wanted to have a son. Slowly, I realized what he meant he was. The differences arose and the differences merged in violence. He started humiliating me and eating me. For eight years he was all right. We had a happy married life. we never had quarrels. The issue here is not conversion but having or not having a son." (13) As her husband wanted to have a son to fulfil his parents' wishes, he married another woman from his Muslim community. She was paid a meagre alimony, and as her parents disowned her because of pollution, she has been forced to take to driving an auto to feed her three daughters. "I am a deserted woman. But I have to make a living, feed my daughters and educate them. So, I have taken this auto driving." (14)

Her decision to become an auto-rickshaw driver directly challenges the gendered division of labour. The fact that she occupies a public space typically reserved for men is a form of



defiance. Unlike Kamala, who is largely defined by her beauty and marriage, the woman's auto driver's identity is primarily shaped by her profession and ability to support herself.

This form of agency questions the traditional notion that a woman's primary role is wife and mother. The narrative suggests that women can carve out spaces for themselves in public life and be recognized as caretakers and independent individuals who contribute to society in ways that extend beyond conventional roles. A woman's agency is particularly significant in a multicultural context, where women's economic contributions are often overlooked or undervalued.

Kamala's identity in Musalmani Galpo is complex, shaped by her gender, beauty, marital status, and the religious divide between her and her eventual protector, Habir Khan. While Kamala does not overtly defy gender roles like the woman auto driver, she resists the patriarchal constraints placed upon her by seeking refuge in another community, one that offers her respect and sanctuary instead of exploitation.

Kamala's identity is shaped by the intersection of her gender and religion. Her journey from an oppressed woman to someone who finds acceptance in a Muslim household highlights the challenges women face in a multicultural, multi-religious society. In this sense, Kamala's agency is subtler but no less significant. Kamala's agency is more nuanced in this regard, yet it is no less important. She proves the strength of solidarity among marginalized groups by taking shelter in a community beyond religious divisions and her survival in this environment validates her autonomy and independence.

Kamala, who embraced Islam and took the name Meherjan, stands as the narrative's central character. She lived under the protection of Habir Khan at the *Rajputani Mahal*. History tells us that a Nawab from Habir Khan's family once brought a *Rajasthani* woman into his household. Unlike many others, she was permitted to live according to the traditions of her own caste. Habir Khan, being the son of that *Rajasthani* woman, grew up with deep respect for her customs and values. Out of this heritage, he treated Kamala with kindness and dignity.

Thus, the *Rajputani Mahal* became more than a residence; it was a refuge. It sheltered many deserted Hindu wives, women uprooted by circumstances yet allowed to preserve their culture and customs within its protective walls. Kamala embodies the experience of these women, both past and present. Her life symbolizes survival, adaptation, and dignity amidst forced change. She also takes on the role of protector, safeguarding her sister Sarala, who faced a similar ordeal when threatened by brigands.

6. Comparative Analysis of Resistance

Both tales demonstrate that, in India, women's resistance is not always expressed through open rebellion. In "An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver," the female auto driver challenges societal conventions through her professional choice, while Kamala in "Musalmani Galpo" defies social expectations by finding safety outside of her cultural and familial bounds. In their respective situations, both characters defy the social norms that define their roles, either by breaking into a field that is dominated by men or by overcoming the cultural and religious barriers that restrict women's independence.

But their resistance takes a different form. Driven by the desire for financial independence and social acceptance, the women auto drivers' resistance is practical disobedience. Through her agency, she resists the economic barriers placed on women, and her struggle serves as a criticism of these restrictions. On the other hand, Kamala's resistance is more passive, depending on the kindness of others; her trip seeks refuge and protection rather than openly asserting her independence. In a patriarchal society, a woman's independence is frequently



contingent upon the sympathy of others, as shown by Kamala's survival, which is contingent upon the kindness and respect she receives in Habir Khan's home.

7. Conclusion

Both "An Encounter with a Woman Auto Driver" and "Musalmāni Galpo" offer important insights into women's challenges in Indian culture. While Tagore's tale presents a more complex resistance, highlighting the necessity of empathy and solidarity across religious and cultural barriers, Raghupathi's narrative shows how a modern woman challenges gender roles through economic autonomy, social discrimination, and caste and family values. Both stories emphasize the significance of women's agency in a multicultural environment, where societal norms and patriarchal systems frequently constrain their independence.

Understanding the bigger problems that women in India encounter requires the resistance shown in both tales. Although the methods of opposition may vary, both narratives emphasize that the fight for gender equality and autonomy necessitates defying accepted norms and fostering unity across differences. In these tales, Tagore and Raghupathi provide fascinating glimpses into the lives of Indian women, their hardships, and their fortitude in the face of social and cultural barriers.

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