

# Sisterhood in A Wife's Letter: Tagore's Visionary Outlook on Feminist Causes in Contemporary Bengali Patriarchal Society

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the efficacy of 'sisterhood' or "female bonding" between the two female characters, Mrinal and Bindu, in *Streer Patra* (1914) or, *A Wife's Letter*, a short story of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore envisioned sisterhood as a 'Family Model' in *A Wife's Letter*, a tool to combat patriarchy, long before second-wave feminists adopted sisterhood in the 1960s. Using close reading and viewing *A Wife's Letter* through the lens of "sisterhood" theory of the American feminist bell hooks (1986) in her seminal work *From Margin to Center*, the study observes the worth of sisterhood in the lives of Mrinal and Bindu as a source of solace, support, and solidarity in a patriarchal family, and as a means of establishing female voice, identity, and emancipation. Thus, the study endeavours to provide food for thought for conscious and concerned readers, encouraging them to make use of sisterhood to support and express solidarity for feminist causes through scholarly writings, literary works, and real-life scenarios.

**Keywords:** emancipation, feminism, identity, patriarchy, sisterhood

## Introduction

Tagore's short story, *A Wife's Letter* (1914) explores the harmful effects of contemporary Bengali patriarchal society on women. The context of the story relates to the suicide of a poor Hindu girl who set herself on fire in Calcutta in 1914 to relieve her family from the unjust and heavy burden of dowry demanded from the groom's family. Tagore was deeply moved by the incident and, out of empathy, wrote this short story, which he published in the literary magazine 'Sabuj Patra' (Chakraborty, 2018, p. 235). In *Radical Rabindranath: Nation, Family and Gender in Tagore's Fiction and Films*, Gupta (2013) quotes Tagore as, "It's my short story, *Streer Patra*, that I supported the women's cause for the first time" (p. 122). Tagore adopted the non-biological "sisterhood" between two female characters, Mrinal and Bindu, as a way of supporting their feminist causes. The main focus of this story is the protagonist, Mrinal, and her sisterly emotional support for Bindu. Bindu is Mrinal's elder sister-in-law's sister. In the story, the emotional and empathetic attachment starts between Mri-

nal and Bindu when Bindu comes to their house to take shelter with her sister after her "widowed mother's death" and being "mistreated" by her cousins. This is the turning point of the story, which Mrinal terms as the "crack" in her contemporary traditional life as a housewife in a middle-class, economically well-off patriarchal family. Mrinal relates this incident as the context of her writing a letter to her husband, saying, "Life would have passed, slipping on in that way to the end, and today there would have been no need to write you this letter" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 113).

It is remarkable that in this story, Tagore, being a male, expresses his empathy for feminist causes and gives voice to the female protagonist and uses the concept of "sisterhood" in a family or sisterly collaboration as a tool to depict the intense emotional sisterly bond and support between Mrinal and Bindu with respect to shelter, ill-treatment, child marriage, and death in the patriarchal family environment and emancipation through Bindu's death and Mrinal's departure from the house. The greatest contribution of sisterhood in *A Wife's Letter* is that it helps Mri-



nal discover her identity and attain emancipation from the patriarchal boundary of life. However, Ahmad notes that sisterhood was a key feature of second-wave feminism (Ahmad, Anil, Sadaf, & Sameena, 2023, p. 415). In this respect, Tagore, being a male, became a visionary literary figure as a sympathizer of contemporary feminist causes, envisioning sisterhood in a family model as a tool in *Streer Patra* in 1914 to support women's causes, long before second-wave feminism, which conceptualized sisterhood in the early 1960s.

In this context, this paper endeavours to re-read *A Wife's Letter* from the feminist perspective of "sisterhood," as the story reflects feminist concerns in its setting, characters, and actions to address the harmful effects of patriarchy and pave the way for women's emancipation. In doing so, the paper uses the translation of *Streer Patra, A Wife's Letter*, by Prosenjit Ranjan Gupta.

## Sisterhood and Patriarchy: A Conflict in Feminism

Sisterhood and patriarchy are two opposing forces in the struggle to achieve feminist demands. (Singh & Deepshikha, 2024) cites (Hooks, 1986), who opines, "Patriarchy as a social and political framework that seeks to uphold men's dominance over women and permits men to exploit women through the unfair and ambiguous exercise of power and violence, whereas Hooks suggests that sisterhood serves as a means for women to resist male oppression" (p. 43). Thus, sisterhood provides a means of uniting women to combat patriarchy.

Mentionable, the concept of sisterhood was introduced by Robin Morgan, an American feminist, in her seminal feminist work *Sisterhood is Powerful*, published in 1970, where Morgan asserts, "Sisterhood must be very powerful for us to have even survived" (Ahmad et al., 2023, p. 415). According to Sebastian (2016), "Sisterhood is camaraderie among non-related women. The awareness of women, irrespective of their position or behaviour, against the oppression of women inspired strong feelings of solidarity among women, referred to as 'sisterhood'" (Abrisketa & Marian, 2020, p. 932). Thus, Ahmad quotes that as an essential component of feminism, sisterhood becomes an "anti-hierarchical horizontality

generated and egalitarian" movement of women. "Sisterhood is powerful" was also a slogan in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s and "was a key feature of second-wave feminism" (Ahmad et al., 2023, p. 415). Ahmad further argues that "women exposed to the oppressive role of the family adopt the sisterhood model to encourage solidarity among women and which urged women to recognize their oppression and organize a movement for women's liberation" (p. 935).

On the other hand, (Wollstonecraft, 2016) recognizes envy among women as a root of both individual and communal failure in society (p. 297). As such, horizontal sisterhood is viewed as "a powerful tool to move forward the causes of feminism".

From a feminist perspective, Tagore, as a visionary literary figure, recognised the power of sisterhood and applied it as a family model in his *A Wife's Letter* in 1914, well ahead of its adoption as a tool of feminism in the 1960s.

## Mrinal's Sisterhood in Sheltering Bindu and Empathy for Her Sister-in-Law

Sisterhood in *A Wife's Letter* begins between Mrinal and Bindu, when Bindu, after the death of her widowed mother and after being mistreated by her cousins, comes to seek refuge with her sister in her father-in-law's house (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 113). In Bindu's father's house, "her cousin had not even given her a corner in which an unwanted object might lie" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 114). The family members of Bindu's father-in-law's house also considered Bindu's arrival as "a misfortune on their doorstep" and became "angry at her". On the other hand, Bindu's sister brought her "out of great compassion" to provide shelter in her distress, but, observing her "husband's annoyance", started pretending as if Bindu's presence in their house was also disliked by her and she would also prefer to get rid of her. As a very "devoted wife" in the patriarchal family, she was not courageous enough to show her fondness publicly for her orphaned sister.

From the point of sisterly empathy, Mrinal is also moved by her elder sister-in-law's helpless attempts to keep Bindu in their house, even at the cost of ill-treatment in matters of food, clothing, and household work, tirelessly "with the minimum cost," like a housemaid. Observing the

same, Mrinal's sisterly soul "was not only sad but also ashamed" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 113). She was not comfortable with her elder sister-in-law's humble submission to the family. Mrinal, with her sisterly affection, could realize the "indignity" of seeking refuge in another's house against that family's wishes while in great distress. Tagore expresses his philosophical thought on a person's need for shelter in distress through the voice of Mrinal in *A Wife's Letter*:

". . . it is most difficult to give shelter to the world's most wretched. Whoever needs the greatest shelter also faces the greatest obstacles to gaining it" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 115)

Thus, Mrinal's heart supported the defenceless girl, Bindu, and decided to stand by her at any cost. Therefore, she takes responsibility for Bindu out of great sisterly sympathy; Mrinal gives her shelter in her room. Observing this, her elder sister-in-law pretended to be displeased and said:

"The girl comes from a simple home, and Mejo-Bou is going to spoil her" . . . . But I am sure that deep inside she was greatly relieved. Now the responsibility was mine. She had displayed that affection towards her sister that she could not herself show, and her heart was lightened by it" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 114)

Mrinal's sisterly mind was also saddened at the non-cooperation, "reluctance and cold behavior of the maidservants" of the family with Bindu and their objection to "doing the slightest work for Bindu". So, she "engaged a special maid for her". Moreover, as a protest against the family's maidservants, Mrinal refused their service because of their unwillingness to help Bindu. The family members were "incensed" observing the standard of clothes Mrinal gave Bindu to wear. When her husband cut off her spending money because of Bindu, Mrinal sacrifices her own allotted money for Bindu and, from the very next day, Mrinal "began to wear coarse, unbleached, mill-made, ten-anna dhutis" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 116).

Thus, Mrinal shows a great deal of sisterly sympathy and empathy toward both Bindu and her sister, providing moral strength and courage to help

the sisters in distress and supporting women's causes.

## Mrinal's Sisterhood for Bindu During Illness and Suspicions of Theft and Police Informing

Mrinal's sisterly feelings for Bindu encourage her to strongly support Bindu in her illness. Bindu's illness is assumed to be "prickly heat" but is suspected to be "smallpox" by the family members, as Mrinal reacts, "After all, it was Bindu!". However, Mrinal, out of sisterly affection, firmly stands beside Bindu in her illness, and expresses her difficulty:

But my room wasn't mine alone. So my task wasn't easy. And after only a few days she suffered a red rash on her skin (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 115).

However, Mrinal decides:

I don't care if it's smallpox, I'll stay with her in the confinement room, no one else will have to do anything (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 117).

On hearing this, the family members were extremely upset at Mrinal's blind affection for Bindu. Thus, Mrinal's "care and attention for a girl like Bindu struck all the members of the family as beyond the limits of propriety. And so there was no end to petty scolding and peevishness" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 117). On the other hand, "Bindu's sister, feigning extreme displeasure, proposed sending her to the hospital" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 117). But, soon, Bindu's "rash faded away completely".

Mrinal, out of sisterly confidence, also did not like blaming Bindu by her husband and says:

"When one day an armlet was stolen from my room, you felt no shame in hinting that Bindu must have had something to do with the theft" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 116)

Mrinal's sisterly mind did not support her husband in suspecting Bindu as a "police informer" during the Swadeshi Movement. Mrinal expresses her discontentment to her husband in support of Bindu, as follows:

“When, during the Swadeshi Movement, the police began to search people’s houses, you came very easily to the conclusion that Bindu was a police informer. There was no other proof of that, only this: she was Bindu” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 116)

## Bindu’s Reciprocal Sisterly Love towards Mrinal

Mrinal’s sisterly support for Bindu reciprocally infused intense sisterly love into Bindu for Mrinal, as Mrinal says:

“She began to love me so much that it brought fear into my heart. I have never seen such an embodiment of love in real life; I’ve read of it in books, of this kind of intense attachment, and there too between women” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 115)

Bindu becomes obsessed with Mrinal’s beauty, which causes Mrinal to see a true image of herself, as Mrinal says:

“Not for many years had I had occasion to remember that I was beautiful; that long-forgotten beauty had charmed this plain-looking girl. She’d stare at my face, and the hope and trust in her eyes would grow” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 115).

Bindu rediscovers Mrinal, saying:

"Didi, no one but me has seen this face of yours." She'd become upset when I tied my hair myself. She liked to play with my hair, arranging it this way and that. Apart from the occasional invitation, there was really no need for me to dress up. But Bindu was eager, and every day she would adorn me one way or another. She grew besotted with me" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 115)

Bindu’s sisterly relationship with Mrinal brings a sense of contentment in Bindu’s life, “her heart and soul filling up with colour” and with “a spring breeze of her inner world as well”, a breeze that

came from some distant heaven, not from the corner of the alley” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 115).

On the contrary, Mrinal also rediscovers herself because of Bindu’s sisterly love, as Mrinal says:

“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” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 116)

Thus, sisterly feelings and support between Mrinal and Bindu bring about a change in their lives under the patriarchal structure of society, with a sense of fulfillment and a rediscovery of their female selves.

## Mrinal’s Sisterhood in Respect of Bindu’s Marriage and Death

Mrinal’s sisterhood played the most vital role around the marriage and death of Bindu. Bindu was “no less than fourteen”, but her sister “always tried to leave a few years off Bindu’s age”. Her looks were so plain that if she were to fall and crack her head against the floor, people would first concern themselves about the floor (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 114). Nobody took an interest in arranging the orphaned Bindu’s marriage, and “besides, how many people would have the strength of their convictions to marry someone who looked like her!” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 114).

Mrinal noticed the family members’ anger over Bindu’s increasing age. One thing surprised Mrinal: why did they not force Bindu to leave their house? Mrinal realises now that “deep inside” they were “all afraid of her” and that they had to respect the intelligence God had given her (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 116). Thus, Mrinal’s intelligence and sisterly affection prevented others from driving Bindu away from their house. However, they had to seek “the shelter of the gods of matrimony” to “make Bindu leave” the house and “Bindu’s wedding was arranged” against Bindu’s will.

Mrinal’s sisterly soul could feel Bindu’s pain at this stage. However, Mrinal, for the first time,

surrendered herself helplessly to the social tradition of marriage, as she says, "In that world I had fought many battles on her behalf, but I didn't have the courage to say that her wedding should be called off" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 117) and she was more concerned about Bindu's future: "What would become of her if I were to die?" and "What would become of her if she is not married?" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 117). Out of sisterly duty, "Mrinal secretly gave Bindu some of her jewellery and made her wear it before she left after marriage" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 117). Before leaving, Bindu threw her arms around Mrinal. "So, after all, Didi, you are abandoning me completely?" Mrinal assures Bindu as a sister, "No, Bindu, no matter what your condition may be, I'll never abandon you in the end" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 117).

But, Bindu returned to their house the next day and fell at Mrinal's feet and began to cry and informed her that her husband was insane (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 118). Bindu also informed that her father-in-law was not in favour of this marriage, but he was mortally afraid of his wife. He went off to Kashi before the wedding (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 118). Bindu further informed that her mother-in-law "insisted on getting her son married!" Mrinal was greatly hurt by her mother-in-law's attitude to a woman as a woman, having no compassion for women. It seemed as if Bindu was "nothing more than a woman. The groom may be insane, but he's a man" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 118). Bindu's mother-in-law argued that her husband hadn't done anything to hurt Bindu. She further argued that there were plenty of terrible husbands in the world, "Compared to them, her son was a jewel, a diamond" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 119). So, Mrinal burned with contempt and anger over the fraud committed against Bindu and said to Bindu, "A marriage based on such a deception is not a marriage at all. Bindu, stay with me the way you did before, let's see who dares to take you away" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 118).

Other members were blaming "Bindu's lying" about her husband, but Mrinal's sisterly mind was sure that Bindu had the faith that Bindu "never lied in her life" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 118). So, Mrinal decided to go to the police and court to get justice for the fraudulent marriage with a madman to save Bindu against the

will of the family members and against the challenge of Bindu's brother-in-law, who came to take Bindu back with him. Mrinal even decided to sell her jewellery to provide legal support to Bindu. However, due to strong opposition from family members, Mrinal had to abandon the plan of "going to a lawyer". In the meantime, during these deliberations, Bindu surrendered to her brother-in-law and returned to her mad husband to prevent Mrinal from further embarrassment. Thus, Mrinal's heart burst for Bindu; for them, she felt boundless shame (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 119). She knew for sure that Bindu would not return to her house even if she had to die (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 119). Thus, the patriarchal society deprives women of getting justice for the injustice done to them. As a reaction to the patriarchal society, Mrinal planned to accompany her husband's aunt, leaving for "Srikhetro on a pilgrimage". In her last effort to save Bindu from the patriarchal family, Mrinal decided to take Bindu with her and asked her younger brother, Shorot, for help. However, on returning from Bindu's husband's house, Shorot informed Mrinal, "Last night she set fire to her clothes and killed herself. I talked to her nephew - the one I was in touch with - and he said that she'd left a letter for you. But they destroyed the letter" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 121).

Thus, the patriarchal society deprived Mrinal of receiving Bindu's final message. People who heard about her suicide were enraged and considered her suicide "a kind of fashion for women to set fire to their clothes and kill themselves", and termed such pathetic incidents as "dramatics!" Mrinal's sisterly protest on behalf of women against the patriarchal society for terming Bindu's suicide as drama was:

"But shouldn't we ask why the dramatics take place only with Bengali women's sarees and not with the so-brave Bengali men's dhutis?" (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 121).

### **Sisterhood in A Wife's Letter: A Way of Women's Self-Discovery and Emancipation**

Bindu's death acted like a wake-up call for Mrinal's soul to go beyond her "allotted and confined space" of her husband's house and look for endur-

ing freedom outside the influences of patriarchal society. Mrinal “didn’t suffer what people would normally call grief. In her husband’s house, there was no lack of food or clothing”, but her soul was deprived of rights and privileges as a woman. Thus, after fifteen years of her conjugal life, Mrinal left for Puri forever as a protest against a society where women like Bindu are neglected, abused, oppressed, and driven to death. However, Mrinal takes Bindu’s suicide as a protest against patriarchal oppression and going beyond patriarchal influences, where, through her death:

“Bindu has become great; she’s not a mere Bengali girl anymore, no more just a female cousin of her father’s nephews, no longer only a lunatic stranger’s deceived wife. Now, she is without limits, without end” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 122)

Moreover, Bindu’s death paved the way for Mrinal’s emancipation. Mrinal says to herself, “Oh Mejo-Bou, you have nothing to fear!” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 122) and so the identity of “Mejo-Bou dies” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 123). Thereby, she removes herself from the “Auspicious Lotus Feet” of her husband and rediscovers her free identity of “Mrinal” from “Mejo-Bou”. Now, Mrinal enjoys her freedom as a consequence of her sisterhood bond with Bindu. So, Mrinal decides:

“But I will not go back to your Number Twenty-Seven Makhon Boral Lane. I’ve seen Bindu. I’ve seen the more worth of a woman in this world. I don’t need anymore.” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 122)

Mrinal does not want to kill herself like Bindu; she wants to liberate herself through living beyond the shackles of patriarchy and cites the example of “Meera Bai, who was a woman, like her; her chains, too, were no less heavy; and she didn’t have to die to be saved” (Tagore & Prasenjit, 2001, p. 123). Mrinal is saved through the power of sisterhood developed between her and Bindu.

## Conclusion

Sisterhood beyond blood relations in Tagore’s *A Wife’s Letter*, therefore, reminds us of its im-

portance in shielding women in crisis in patriarchal society and calls for a more inclusive society in which women are empathetic toward each other for feminist causes. Thus, sisterhood unites women and empowers them to overcome the odds of patriarchal influences in their lives. At the same time, the story serves as a cautionary tale against the patriarchal notion of society that perpetuates injustice against women and appeals for social change, advocating a better world for the peaceful coexistence of both men and women. More research and scholarly study on sisterhood may lead to further progress in recognizing its importance as a tenet of the pro-feminist movement.

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