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## **Gender Marginalisation in Indian Society: Inequalities and Cultural Exclusion of Indian Women as Depicted in Indian Fiction in English**

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### **Abstract**

Indian fiction in English prominently demonstrates the imposing presence of marginalisation founded upon gender. Gender Marginalisation is an extensively recognized social concern, accentuating the anguish of gender discrimination, oppression and subordination in all societies. For this research, two short stories by eminent Indian stalwart writers have been selected. Amrita Pritam (1919- 2005) is regarded as one of the forerunners of Indian women writers of the twentieth century. Her works asserting her identity in society have established her as a chief proponent of feminist writing. Her celebrated story “270 Crore Heartbeats” illustrates several gender marginalities that weigh down upon our society even today. In contrast to Pritam, Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941) also theorises through his literature some of the crucial gender-marginal concerns of his day that were governed by rigid social conditioning and are still prevalent in the present day. His short story, “Profit and Loss” demonstrates the hideous repercussions that spell havoc in the lives of people who that coerced to follow the male-dominated norms of society. Both these authors have been versatile visionary thinkers in their own right. Yet, their critique of social malpractices makes a strong statement in theorizing gender marginalities of society. This paper evaluates and contrasts how both these writers have flagrantly critiqued the social institution of marriage and how the marginalization based on gender can gnaw at the foundation of any society and destroy is cultural values of solidarity.

**Keywords:** Female Consciousness, gender inequality, social malpractices, social oppression, transformation.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

## Introduction

Gender marginalisation is powerfully depicted in contemporary Indian writing in English literature M. R Anand, Munshi Premchand, Kamala Das, Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016), Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) Anita Desai (1937-) and Arundhati Roy among others. To describe the influential representation of the gender marginalisation in contemporary Indian writing two legendary writers have been selected for this research – Rabindranath Tagore and Amrita Pritam. Both writers have been revolutionary writers and torchbearers of their respective times. It is pathetic to observe that the social malpractices that infested the society during Tagore’s time, have thrived maliciously during the time of Amrita Pritam.

One can observe the piteous plight of women even to this day, despite the incredible progress human beings have made in the field of science and technology and all other walks of life. Gender marginalisation causes isolation and uprootedness, among other devastating drawbacks, and it brings about numerous degrees of social closure. Social closure is the process of subjugation in which a group of oppressors, seizes all privileges while depriving the group of victims of even the right to basic sustenance. It is aptly observed,

The male and the female in the patriarchy-shaped consciousness are representative of such a relationship, in which the woman is “the other,” who frequently assumes marginalized status. This marginality is closely associated with a strong sense of difference resulting from the decidedly androcentric perception of gender. (Gilarek 221)

A couple of representative short stories written by these authors have been identified for this research that best demonstrate gender inequity. Rabindranath Tagore's short story, "Profit and Loss" has been compared with Amrita Pritam's celebrated story "270 Crore Heartbeats" in this paper. Through the scope of this comparison, the paper aims to reflect upon gendered marginalizations and



contemporary interpretations that may be justly applied to the contexts of these stories and current society.

Both these authors have been radical visionary intellectuals in their respective times and domains. Yet, their evaluation of social derelictions makes a firm assertion in theorizing gender issues in society. This paper analyses and contrasts how these writers have vehemently criticized the social institution of marriage and how it adversely affects the female consciousness.

### **Gendered Marginalities**

Much of the study of the gendered marginalities has its foundations in feminist criticism or feminist reading or interpretation. Commenting on the ideological mode of feminist criticism, Elaine Showalter comments:

It is concerned with the feminist as a reader, and it offers feminist readings of texts which consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-as-sign in semiotic systems. This is not all feminist reading can do; it can be a liberating intellectual act. (Showalter 327)

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir proposes her most important thesis:

Women are not born feminine but femininity is constructed, explaining that no biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in society. Instead, she argues, it is civilization that has created this feminine creature, whom she considers intermediate between male and eunuch. (McCann 205)

Moreover, a feminist theory is formed exactly where social norms about gender are disputed. (Radtke 359) The stories discussed below, which portray women with their sense of aporia, vulnerability, dependence and stoicism, justly illustrate this point.



## **Rabindranath Tagore**

Rabindranath Tagore (1861- 1941) was a writer, poet, playwright, artist, painter, composer, visionary and social reformer. The vast corpus of his literature has inspired and influenced the literature and culture of India for generations, even long after his death. As the only recipient from India of the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1913) so far, his work *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), the prose translation of a collection of his Bengali poems is ever more relevant today. Tagore and his family have played an important role in the Bengali Renaissance.

Rabindranath Tagore often critiques the social oppression of women in his literature. The woman characters of his stories are modelled on the lives of the real women of colonial India. Their approach to life has been stoical and futuristic. They were ahead of their times in their brave encounters against the gendered marginalities and narrow-minded beliefs that exist in society in the present day. Women challenge concerns of sexuality, chastity, self-identity and domesticity.

The heroines of his stories are advocates of liberty, individuality, justice, freedom, dignity, rights and power. As a mouthpiece for Tagore, they often confront patriarchy through their unexpectedly radical actions. His fiction is filled with brave women.

## **An Analysis of Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Profit and Loss"**

Rabindranath Tagore theorises through his literature some of the crucial aspects gendered marginalities of his day that were governed by rigid social conditioning and are still prevalent in the present day. His short story, "Profit and Loss" demonstrates the hideous repercussions that spell havoc in the lives of people who that coerced to follow the male-dominated norms of society.



The story traces the adversities that Ramsundar Mitra faces as a result of getting his daughter, Nirupama married into a family that demands a heavy dowry that he is unable to pay. The aftermath of this inability drags Ramsundar and Nirupama to drastic and irreversible consequences. The story opens with Tagore's acerbic observations about the institution of marriage through the description of a pathetic situation. He writes:

The question of Nirupama's marriage now arose. Her father, Ramsundar Mitra searched and searched without finding a groom he liked; but in the end, he procured the only son of a grand *Raybahadur*. The ancestral wealth of this *Raybahadur* had diminished considerably but the family was certainly noble. They asked for a dowry of 10,000 rupees, and many additional gifts. Ramsundar agreed without a thought – such a groom should not be allowed to slip through one's fingers. (Tagore 64)

After a frantic search, Ramsundar Mitra finds a suitable match for Nirupama. Tagore mocks the behaviour of the 'noble' *Raybahadur* (or *Rai Bahadur*: a title conferred to Indian patrons during the British Rule) family that demands a dowry as they have run out of their ancestral wealth. The high-handedness of the patriarchal family is evident here. Just because the prospective groom is the "only son of a grand *Raybahadur*", the value of such a suitor is high among those aspiring to get their daughters married. (Tagore 4). Ramsundar is determined and desperate to pay the required dowry. He hopes to secure his daughter's future with this alliance and the dowry among other gifts is a pre-requisite for the same. Tagore insists that even such a heavy price may not ensure his daughter's happiness in such a conservative family.

Social malpractices like the dowry system and domestic abuse that were rampant during Tagore's time are still persistent in the contemporary age. Tagore bitterly criticizes such accepted norms of moth-eaten morality through the high-flown expectations of the *Raybahadur* family and the helplessness of Ramsundar. For



instance, being anxious about losing such a good match for his daughter, Mitra hurriedly agrees to pay the dowry. After selling and forfeiting a significant share of his property, he still owed about six or seven thousand rupees. Gender-based marginality is not limited to severe material hardship or social isolation which Mitra fears for his daughter if she is not married on time. The notion of womanhood, perceived through overt patriarchal norms, elevates coerced denial and deprivation to a venerable level. A distorted discourse in favour of men, expressed through a persuasive jargon undermines women's empowerment in most communities of India.

Mitra is expected to pay this dowry by the wedding day. This was a common practice in Tagore's day when a wedding would be completed only if the demanded amount of dowry had been paid. A creditor had agreed to lend Mitra the rest of the sum at an exorbitant rate of interest but he could not turn up on that day with the money. This prompts a choleric outburst of rage at the venue of the wedding.

Ramsundar implores the *Raybahadur*, pleading "not to bring bad luck by breaking off the ceremony," (Tagore 64) and assures that he will pay the remaining money to the *Raybahadur* soon. Tagore describes this commotion as:

The women of the house wept and wailed at this disastrous upset. The root cause of it sat mutely in her silk wedding dress and ornaments, her forehead decorated with sandal paste. It cannot be said that she felt much love or respect for her prospective husband's family. (Tagore 64)

The ceremony would have been typically aborted if the groom had not protested against his father's decision. The groom wishes to marry Nirupama even without the dowry. Tagore further satirizes the *Raybahadur*'s inability to accommodate a novel point of view even when it is his son who resists the unpleasant social customs like dowry: "The *Raybahadur* sat despondent at seeing the poisonous fruits of modern education in his own son." (Tagore 65) While the men of the house, like the *Raybahadur*



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingua  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

and his son voice their opinions, the women of the household including Nirupama are left to silently accept their decisions. The dire situation of gender marginalization is starkly depicted here. It can be agreed that:

gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and the very language we speak. Making women and men equal, therefore, necessitates social and not individual solutions. (Lorber 8)

However, this is only the beginning of Nirupama's painful conjugal journey. Her agonizing predicament aggravates when soon after their wedding, Nirupama's husband has to report for duty as Deputy Magistrate in another part of the country. He is compelled to leave his newly wedded bride behind to commence his service. Nirupama's in-laws bear a grudge since their expected dowry is still only partially paid. In sheer vengeance, their demeanour is ruthless and insensitive towards Nirupama. Their sense of misogyny is brazenly and ostentatiously displayed to Nirupama and her father who face constant subjugation. This is also another form of exclusion and marginalization. Nirupama's in-laws seize every occasion to upset and degrade Nirupama with their scathing remarks so that she silently bears subservience to all their tantrums.

Ramsundar often goes to see his daughter but is faced with humiliation in his son-in-law's house by even the servants. Sometimes he sees his daughter for five minutes in a separate outer room of the house; sometimes he is not allowed to see her at all.

The family of the *Raybahadur* condemns Mitra, Nirupama's father, as an absconding defaulter and insolvent debtor. He finds this disgrace unbearable. Nirupama is neither permitted to visit her father's house nor is he allowed to meet



her. Mitra feels hurt by this indignity. Out of sheer desperation, he sells his house, without informing his sons, to gather money to pay the outstanding dowry amount to Nirupama's in-laws. Assimilation or the urge to fit into the norms of society has been a strategy for survival and this urge can be fulfilled at a high cost both for a woman and her parents or guardians.

But now Nirupama takes a firm stance and forbids her father from paying her greedy in-laws any more. Mitra returns with the money that he had brought with him to give to Nirupama's in-laws. A servant of the *Raybahadur's* household eavesdrops on this conversation between Mitra and Nirupama and reports it to the mother-in-law. Unnerved at the loss of the money, she treats Nirupama mercilessly. This also proves how gendered marginalities are sometimes caused by women who are socially privileged.

Crestfallen and dejected at this inclemency, Nirupama intentionally exposes herself to the bitter cold winds of the season and occasionally goes hungry. She contracts a serious illness and requests her mother-in-law to allow her to meet her father and brothers—just once. The mother-in-law assumes that it was one of Nirupama's ruses to visit her father's house. For Mann,

Feminism is 'incipiently theoretical' to the extent that it understands the plights of individual women as connected with each other, as instances of systemic subordination rather than as the results of individual, accidental, or coincidental misfortune''. (Mann)

Nirupama's relationship with her mother-in-law demonstrates this idea. Nirupama dies soon after the doctor comes to see her for the first time. After her death, the in-laws lavish great pomp and show on her expensive funeral. They perhaps get into debt but earn praise for the sandalwood pyre that was made for their daughter-in-law's cremation. Unaware of all these occurrences, soon after Nirupama's death, her husband writes to his family to send her to him as he has made all the necessary





MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

arrangements to stay with his wife. In reply, his mother asks him to take leave from work and return home soon. They secure another bride for him. This time the dowry is twenty thousand rupees – cash down.

Since the transgression of demanding a dowry for a wedding is not punished in any way nor fulfilled from the *Raybahadur's* point of view, it is easy for the family to demand a heavier dowry for the second wedding of their son.

### **Amrita Pritam**

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) has been one of the leading women writers of the twentieth century. She has been a radical feminist woman writer in India. During the Partition of British India, she migrated with her father from Lahore to New Delhi. She braved the challenges of the concurrent trauma and violence of the Partition and also suffered the colossal of restoring her life as a refugee. Over six decades of her successful penmanship, Pritam essayed a wide range of literary genres including novels, prose, anthologies of poetry and short stories. Her works have been highly acclaimed by readers across the world. As a four-year-old child, Amrita Pritam was committed to being married to Pritam Singh. She married him in 1936 when she was seventeen. They had two children. The marriage proved disastrous and she separated from her husband in 1960. This episode of her life has inspired several stories written by her. Pritam's literature reveals her fervent quest for identity and individuality. She bitterly critiques how society commoditises the identity of women and strips them of all personal dignity. *Raseedi Ticket* (Revenue Stamp, 1976), her autobiography, chronicles the misfortunes, and the distress that Pritam had to suffer as a woman writer in a male-dominated society. Her stories, reinstating her identity as an assertive woman in society, have established her as a foremost exponent of feminist writing.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

## An Analysis of Amrita Pritam's Short Story "270 Crore Heartbeats"

Like Tagore's story, her renowned story "270 Crore Heartbeats" exemplifies several instances of gender marginalisation that prevail in Indian society even today. "270 Crore Heartbeats" describes, Surekha's journey from emotional vulnerability to individual independence and resilience. Some parts of the story are narrated through the protagonist's retrospection of the crucial parts of her life. It evinces Surekha's competence to introspect about the challenges of her life and make informed decisions for her future.

Conventionally in some parts of India, a husband gifts a *mangalsutra* (a Sanskrit word, that means "auspicious thread") to his wife at the time of or after their wedding. The *mangalsutra* is typically a chain of black beads that a woman wears around her neck to indicate that she is married. On the one hand, this *mangalsutra* is recognized as a symbol of conjugal bliss and on the other, it represents her husband's support for her sustenance. But the story depicts how the *mangalsutra* is epitomised as a motif of domestic unrest and betrayal. Finally, by putting on her *mangalsutra* Surekha ushers her autonomy and liberty from the emotional captivity contained in marriage.

Surekha, the protagonist, is a Konkani girl, who marries Raj, a Maharashtrian, against her father's desires. Raj is jobless. Surekha buys a *mangalsutra* for herself. Typically, this is bought by a husband for his wife, but since Raj is penniless, Surekha ungrudgingly buys it for herself, having complete faith in her affection. She tells Raj, "Only the souls meet. It is not a meeting of castes and regions. But from my mother's mother and her mother I have inherited a deep-rooted custom and to honour it you must put a *mangalsutra* around my neck." (Pritam 64)

Though she can afford only a cheap one, she thus demonstrates her trust in the *mangalsutra* and all that it customarily symbolises. When her father accepts her marriage after the birth of her first child, Surekha requests him to give her the *mangalsutra* of her long-departed



mother. She says, "I don't want anything but my heart will be at peace if you give me my mother's *mangalsutra*. My mother did not die a widow and I too would like to die similarly." (Pritam 65)

This episode brings out a painful reality that every married woman dreads even today: that of becoming a widow. A widow lives a life of social, physical and emotional deprivation from the time of her husband's death till the end of her life. Despite the advances in social life, the social attitude of exclusion towards a widow is still agonizing unless she is sufficiently fortunate to get married again.

However, financial constraints compel her to pawn even her mother's *mangalsutra*. She becomes the bread-earner and provides for her husband and their two children. Raj takes to drinking and gradually dies of consumption. By this time, Surekha accumulates sufficient money but she does not redeem the *mangalsutra* from the pawnbroker. She rationalises that after her husband's death, there was nobody to put it around her neck.

Surekha's fear of becoming a widow turns into the bitter reality of her life. However, she refuses to give in to the pressures of the society and follows her will. After several years a widower appears in Surekha's life with his two children. Proposing to her for marriage, he says "I have two small wailing babies who have no mother. Can you be a mother to them? And you have two children who need a father." (Pritam 66) The proposal also adheres to the norms of personal and social fulfilment. It subscribes to the notion that a woman becomes complete only after attaining motherhood. It is only when a woman bestows motherly affection upon children who are not her own that her powers of personal sacrifice and claims to social approval are recognized.

The widower gifts her a heavy, golden *mangalsutra*, which belonged to his late wife. It had been repaired at three places. The repairs in this piece of jewellery signify the imperfections of any given relationship. Surekha realises that "life was to be lived



in bits and pieces.” (Pritam 66) Though initially hesitant, she accepts this relationship along with the new *mangalsutra*. But the man turns out to be a swindler and hypocrite. He is neither her husband nor the father of her children. He appropriates all of her hard-earned money. This recalls what a historian of science called Margaret Rossiter (1993) had identified as the “Matilda effect,” which occurs when women’s belongings or contributions are ignored or usurped. (Signorella 13)

Being utterly disappointed and frustrated, Surekha returns the *mangalsutra* to the man. While getting rid of it from her neck, she recalls the words of a Tibetan Lama: a star beats about 270 crore times and then it dies. Surekha feels that her heart has throbbed 270 crore times after which her heart 'would stop with the next breath.

With time, a distinct self-realization dawns on Surekha. She regains confidence from the idea that the spark for a new star emerges from the ashes of the dead one. Like a newborn star, she feels emancipated from all the past years of grief and misery in her life. It is time she turns over a new leaf. The next morning, she buys herself a new *mangalsutra* and wears it. She cannot be divorced or widowed now; she tells herself. From her painful experiences, Surekha emerged as an independent woman. The *mangalsutra* for her is no longer a symbol of marital bliss but her confidence in self-dependence. It has been rightly observed that "Feminism also sought to transform each militant into a unique liberated woman." (Valcárcel 26) The *mangalsutra* becomes a motif of this liberation for Surekha. It is no longer a chain of dependence for her. Surekha braves the dual stigma of not only becoming a widow but also a woman who separates from her husband. She refuses to endure the pangs of her husband’s betrayal.

The protagonist of the story “270 Crore Heartbeats”, Surekha shares many similarities with the life of the author, Amrita Pritam. In this sense, this is an autobiographical story. The trials and tribulations of Pritam’s life and reflected in that of Surekha. The story illustrates how amid personal adversities in society, it is only by



taking complete control of her own life. Surekha resolves to live life on her terms, instead of being anxiously mindful of social conventions and expectations. She learns from all the lessons that life has taught her. Marriage is an obligatory social convention she liberates herself from, thereby, asserting her own individual identity. She embodies, in the words of Hannah More,

Our intellectual ore must shine,  
Not slumber idly in the mine.  
Let education's moral mint  
The noblest images imprint. (McCann 38)

The story does not define how much Surekha earns and what is the source of her livelihood. Yet, it can be inferred that a family can be:

a source of women's oppression and exploitation. If a woman works for her family in the home, she has to be supported, and so she is economically dependent on the "man of the house," like her children. If she works outside the home, she is still expected to fulfil her domestic duties, and so she ends up working twice as hard as a man, and usually for a lot less pay. (Lorber 11)

Several parallels can be seen in the protagonists of these stories. The biological mothers of both heroines are absent. To make matters worse, Surekha's conversations with her father are rudely intercepted by her newly arrived stepmother. This probably leaves both protagonists to brave the challenges of life and gender marginalisation on their own. Neither of the husbands of the women has been assigned a name. The reader knows the name of neither Nirupama's husband (or the *Raybahadur's* son) nor Surekha's second husband who is a widower. Perhaps their names would have lent a greater individuality to the characters who is not the focus of the stories. Both women attempt to assert their identity in their own ways and shed away their "aporia."



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingua  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

(Vrablikova 359) While Nirupama prevents her father from paying her remaining dowry, Surekha marries a man she loves against the wishes of her father.

Responding to the feminist strategy of the day, both Tagore and Pritam evince through their literature, the feminist movements in India as well as the Western countries of their time:

Liberal feminists since the nineteenth century have sought to free contemporaneous society from residual, pre-modern, patriarchal throwbacks in law and culture, investing in legal, educational and media strategies as a form of a feminist civilising process as well as lobbying the state for formal equality within the public sphere. (Motta, Fominaya and Eschle 1)

When Pritam was writing about some of the most radical developments had been taking place, in the 1980s it became clear that in the world's social image, the masculine side continued to connote power, authority and prestige, and that the reforms achieved to date had not made a significant impact on this inertia. Thus, the objective became visible. (Valcárcel 26) Studies have further proved that “previously the social visibility of women had been interrupted because there was no place for their new skills and positions in the explicit or legally established authority. (Ibid. 27)

In the case of Nirupama, her only salvation from her daily dose of oppression was self-annihilation. On the other hand, Surekha strives to achieve this social visibility by becoming not only financially independent but also through emotional autonomy and social independence. She no longer experiences the pressing obligation to comply with the social norms and expectations. Lorber further proposes that Radical, lesbian, and psychoanalytic feminist theories of women's oppression converge in standpoint feminism, which turns from resistance to confrontation with the dominant sources of knowledge and values. The main idea among all the gender-



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingua  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

resistant feminisms is that women's and women's perspectives should be central to knowledge, culture, and politics, not invisible or marginal. (Lorber 21) Historically the multifaceted and mercurial nature of Feminism as a movement has survived despite the discomfort with the term. Feminism “is continuously redefined to address mutating forms of social oppression.” (Hoskin, Jenson and Blair 16) Several modern artists have observed, "Recent feminists of colour reiterate problems seldom discussed in electronic media theory: universalism, marginalization, stereotyping, strategies of silencing, and rendering invisible. These practices, controversial in the 1970S and 1980s, are still with us." (Schor, Amos and Bee 16) It has been argued that “culture should not be confused with patriarchy.” (Sokoloff and Dupont 47) The social practices that uphold patriarchal values, but undervalue, exploit or marginalize women should be obliterated. The position of a woman’s status in the society reflects the power of social justice in a nation. Although India's constitution gives men and women equal rights, gender discrepancies in favour of men still persist.

Although Tagore is a male writer, his sensitivity towards the oppression of women and rigid societal norms is remarkable. He flagrantly critiques the narrowminded beliefs, social taboos and social malpractices that can destroy the life of a woman through gender subjugation and social isolation. Both writers voice their protests through these stories about women being objectified in male-dominant society in the name of upholding cultural values and ethos. It is disheartening to note that many of the issues concerning social oppression and material deprivation which victimize women still persist in the present day and hence the study on gender marginalization has become ever more pertinent in contemporary society. Such research which has a greater potential than just critiquing, should help to mobilise social transformations and reformation.



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingua  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

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MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

*Rivista Multilingue  
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali*

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