“New Woman” in Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories: An Interrogation of “Laboratory”

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ABSTRACT This article investigates Rabindranath Tagore's perspectives on women as seen through his short stories. While his poems primarily describe beauty, nature and his search for what is beyond mundane life, his short stories deal with the lives of ordinary people. Women's struggles and sufferings are particularly highlighted. This article argues that while on one hand Tagore reveals the unequal social structure that oppresses women, on another, he creates courageous women who challenge tradition. His short story “Laboratory,” written a few months before his death, expresses his latest views on women and gives shape to the “new woman,” whom he perceives as arriving in India in the near future. In so doing, Tagore urges women to find an identity of their own, and realise that wifehood and motherhood are but fractions of their whole being.

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Bharati Ray served as Professor of History at Calcutta University, India and as the University's Pro-Vice Chancellor. She is currently the Vice President of Indian Council for Cultural Relations. A bilingual author, Ray has published several authored/edited books including From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women, Early Feminists in Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Women of India: Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods and Different Types of History. She has compiled and edited two volumes of articles published in the earliest women’s journal in Bengal, Bamabodhini Patrika (1863-1922).
Tagore's short stories are on a variety of themes: love, nature, supernatural events, social issues, psychological relationships etc. His short story anthologies include Nabakatha (New Words), Sodaxi Galpavjali (The Offering of Stories), Galpabithi (The Garden of Stories), Gahanar Baksa (The Jewellery Box), Hatax Premik O Anyanya Galpa (The Star-Crossed Lover and Other Stories) etc. Although many of his works depict the common life of the Bengalis, he also wrote several humorous stories. The double entendre in the title of Lucia Berlin's new short story collection is a lot like the one in “To Serve Man,” Damon Knight's science fiction short story made famous by an episode of The Twilight Zone. As in that classic example, it's possible to interpret A Manual for Cleaning Women syntactically with “cleaning” as a verb, and “women” as its object, and there would be a bounty of evidence to support this reading: A Manual for Cleaning Women is full of women getting clean, women being cleaned up, women being cleaned up after. But the titular story in the book is not about the act of cl We all like very funny short stories, irrespective of our age and education level. Those stories are interesting as well as entertaining. For all these reasons, we take time to read those stories. There are innumerable people around the world who spend certain part of every day for reading the funny stories. This is the best way to enliven the child in us. Many psychologists have suggested that every one should read books in order to improve our thinking capacity. Reading short stories is such a move to sharpen our thinking skills. So, never hesitate to take up the opportunity to read short st...