

Portrayal of Different Shades of Marital Life in *The Lost Jewels* and *Lamb to the Slaughter*: A thematic study

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Abstract:

*Venturing in a discussion on marriage is actually like pulling out a colossus of valid estimations and observations on the issues that have not been only evaluated and profoundly discussed in immeasurable articles and books but often argued in lengths and breadths. Apparently, it has been really difficult to define a successful marriage because it involves the complex dynamics of man-woman relationship. Everyone seems to agree that there is no grantee of success in marriage. In fact philosophers and creative writers have given radically contradicting opinions about marriage. The paper primarily focuses on the portrayal of the different shades of marital life in two stories written in two different times and set two different cultures. In spite of the differences, both the stories have unsuccessful marriage as their central theme and the paper tries to conduct a thematic comparison of central theme. The paper examines in detail the disturbed married life and eventual betrayal by one of the partners leading to death of one betrays. The stories under thematic comparison are Rabindranath Tagore's *The Lost Jewels* and Roald Dahl's story *Lamb to the Slaughter*.*

Key words: Marriage in Eastern-Western Culture, Expectations in Marriage, Balance in Relation, Dissatisfaction, Trauma, Distress, Betrayal, Loyalty, Extra-marital, Escape, Adaptability and Adjustment, Understanding

Disturbed marriage is the central theme of both the short stories under thematic comparison namely *The Lost Jewels* by a preeminent polymath of the 19th century Bengal and the first non-European Noble Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore and *Lamb to the Slaughter* by one of the world's best-selling authors that appealed both the kids as well as the adults alike, a British Novelist Roald Dahl story. Dahl is generally known as the author of Children's literature but he has also written quite popular stories and novels for adults and *Lamb to the Slaughter* is one of them.

According to Charles McGrath sometimes we see marriage is not *ecstatic*, but a shifting arrangement of trade-offs. Marriage happens to be a focus of conflict today. Recent scholarship on the history of marriage has unsettled many of the assumptions that once governed discussions of early modern marriage and its representation. It is no longer safe to assume we know what early modern marriage meant, how it felt, or what it achieved or required. However, one is forced to think on these questions as to: Is marriage a happy ending? Is it an ending at all?

Bhushan Saha and Mani in Tagore's short story *The Lost Jewels* (1898) and Mrs. Mary Maloney and Mr. Patrick in *Lamb to the Slaughter* (1953) by Roald Dahl are depicted as couples with disturbed marriages resulting in the disloyalty and eventual death of the deceitful. There are many similarities in both the stories with minor variation in the plot. For instance both the couples depicted in respective stories are from of upper-middle-class of the society. The stories have no exceptions to the unhappy marriage rule, as we get to watch the characters evolve, they surprise not only themselves but to the readers as well. Blond, clever, charming, witty, Mrs. Mary Maloney and Mani is easily the most beguiling of heroines portrayed by the two stalwarts of short writing. It clearly appears that both the heroines are more in love with themselves. Both the stories have one spouse who is ardently in

the love with other. For instance Bushan is madly in love with Mary and cares for every needs and desires of Mani. Similarly Mary is deeply in love with Patrick and she does everything within her capacity to make him happy. Ironically both the loving partners i.e. Bhusan and Mary are betrayed by their beloved for no obvious reason to do so. Paradoxically their only crime was they were too noble, gentle and loving to be loved by their counterparts. Both the disloyal spouses die unexpectedly as a consequence of their treachery. Moreover, their disloyalty was largely due to their greed for more. Mani wanted more wealth and Patrick Probably wanted more love. Finally, the stories are written in simple, flattened-out prose the stories are both funny and heartbreaking, a chronicle of awkwardness and missed opportunities of people who don't even recognize their own worth.

Tagore's short stories depict "hope and aspirations, disappointments and frustrations, joys and sorrows of life rather than dealing with the incidents in life" (Dominic, n. pag.). He also has a tendency to glorify the lower middle class and the female characters of these stories. The major themes in his stories are the problems of the joint-family system, social criticism in a wider sense, love passionate or placid, outside marriage ties or born of conjugal bonds, and love in its waywardness and eccentricities. (Dominic, n. pag.) Tagore was apprehensive of the modernization sweeping across the lengths and breadths of the nation then because of the British. He seems to suggest that more we progress the more we are moving away from human selves. Tagore fears that it has affected the man and women relationship. He says, "Under the spell of modern civilization men has lost his God given power of his barbaric nature which has loosened the conjugal ties" (Tagore, 4). Such is the protagonist of the story of 'Lost Jewels' an absolutely misfit to his era. In Rabindranath's early thinking, women had two principal roles – mother and lover (Pal, 237). Here Mani is portrayed an unsatisfied lover.

The Lost Jewels, the title is suggestive of some loss of jewels that occur in the course of the story. Being a psycho-thriller the title instills in the reader a sense of thrill and brings the element of suspense. The loss as in the layman's language would refer to some material loss and jewels would awaken a symbol of wealth. Bhushan Saha the heir of Durga Saha's property was an affluent gentleman refined and polished in every aspect that one could imagine. "But he was modern. He spoke faultless English and actually entered the sahib's offices with his shoes on. In addition to that he grew a beard. There was so much of material abundance that he called the physician at his home (Tagore, 3). Only very rich people could afford such luxury on those days.

Bhushan's wife Mani was the most parsimonious lady that ever trod on earth. She was excessively obsessed with her jewelry. All that mattered to her was her wealth, neither her husband, nor her children. She didn't feed any religious mendicant and always saved every penny. The most striking attribute of Mani was that she seemed to have stuck at the age of 16. "Not an atom of her youthful beauty was lost. Perhaps beauty is best preserved in a heart that is an ice-box"(Tagore, 5). Tagore's sardonic tone here is worth noting. Mani considered her husband nothing more than an ATM machine which would infallible serve her 24x7."She used to get her caresses and Decca Muslin Saaris and bangles without being able to pride herself over victory!" (Tagore, 4) So perfect was the love of Bhushan for Mani but ironically unrequited. Bhushan was a man of *'fine spun ideals.'* To him, 'to give was the way to get.' Bhusan was too simple for Mani. Traditionally, it is believed that women preferred a strong-man to a gentleman and Bhusan was too simple and gentle to win the love of Mani. Like most of the heroes of Tagore Bhusan has been portrayed as the victim. (Dominic, n. pag.)

The only blotch on the part of Bhushan was his obsession for Mani. Impeccable in every moral sense but

obsessed with Mani, who in turn was held in the shackles of Money, failed utterly in both business and in the personal life alike. Bhushan once suffered a dip in his business and needed money to compensate for the loss. Even in such a plight the hostile Mani refused to lend her jewelry. Instead she fled to her father's place with her equally sloppy and malicious brother Modhu. Bhushan had then to secure a loan from Calcutta which he successfully did. But upon returning didn't find Mani. His evanescent rage withered against love and a mad ransacking in and around the town only led to the conclusion that Mani and Modhu might have drowned in the floods. Thus we see that the entire inconsequential chronicle revolves about these two characters and jewelry. On the surface we see that the jewelry must have been at the abyss, and hence lost.

From a wider perspective, a man such as Bhushan is difficult to find even in the 21st century. He simply lost all the bloom of his life, and was an utter failure. Thus the loss that he suffers on the emotional plane and the psychological trauma that he goes through is a greater loss. On the other hand this story points at the importance of a balanced relation that the frequency of the tuner and that which is broadcasted must match or there is crass cacophony! The meeting of incompatible characters is a loss for both Mani and Bhushan. Another theme touched upon is avarice. A materialistic fool such as Mani at the end of her life went empty handed just as Alexander did! She 'lost her jewels' including her husband.

And lastly we see that only a well-balanced, inert mechanism can survive. Bhushan too was lopsided in being extremely pliable. Alloys are always enhanced versions of their constituent metals and similarly the mix of the sour and sweet and the balance of Yin and Yan is a must. The jewels were destined to be lost for none stood in the middle. In *The Lost Jewels* except for Bhushan Saha's tremendous fortune there's nothing lovable between the couple. All that Mani cares for is her wealth that she has accumulated since her marriage with

Bhushan Saha- gifts given again by Bhushan. In *The Lost Jewels* it is a marriage: not knowing one's wife but constantly relearning her, not possessing her but rediscovering her. It ideally should be like a continuous journey to find a new beloved within the already familiar spouse. However, Bhushan fails to understand Mani and in the process the two precious Jewels are lost.

The other story under consideration is *Lamb to the Slaughter* is a detective story unlike the *The Lost Jewels* which is a psycho-thriller. *Lamb to the Slaughter* appears to be strange story and acquires humorous overtones towards the end. 'Lamb' is a symbolic word wittily used by Road Dahl. The very word 'lamb' creates an image of a poor, helpless, lame creature, or character.

A lamb is a small, cuddly, loving and innocent animal. It is docile and allows its caretaker to lead him or her anywhere and everywhere. The lamb is quite trusting and does not fight back. That is why lambs must be protected from wild animals. When an individual is innocent, trusting and has no clue that another is trying to take advantage of him or her, that is like leading a lamb to the slaughter. The character of Mary has been portrayed as lamb. Similarly, Patrick, Mary, Sam, Jack Noonan and the other detectives as the characters of this story have been at a time or the other personified as lambs.

At the beginning of the story, we find out that Mrs. Mary Maloney is a very loving wife. She had even mastered the art of rejoicing in silence and lauding the company of her beloved husband. So sublime was her love for Patrick that "She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel - almost as a sunbather feels the sun- that male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together (Dahl, 21). It looks like a perfect marriage in the beginning of the story and Dahl intentionally doesn't give any clue readers about what will follow as the story progresses. Mrs. Mary Maloney is portrayed a peace loving and cool-headed lady. She cared for Patrick but

was also cautious enough not to dominate or possess him. She loved flowers only in the soil of freedom, watered by trust and illuminated with the torch of understanding. "But darling, you must eat! I'll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like!" (Dahl, 22)

On the surface, Mary Maloney, the story's protagonist, is a typical 1950s housewife: attentive, respectful, pleasant, and kind, but never too flashy or outspoken. Little do the readers know, however, about the murderer who lurks beneath this matronly exterior. Of course, such a thing would've never crossed Mary's mind if she hadn't completely lost it for a second.

Dahl with all his mastery over diction and plot construction is of creative writer, is gradually building the plot with gripping narrative which hooks the readers. As the story progresses Patrick upon returning from his office usually seems to be troubled by some unknown reason. He is portrayed as stressed as if something very disturbing was bothering him. There was an air of defiance around him, and drank more and stronger than usual. Patrick was obviously kind, loving and caring but remained entangled in the maze of 'external influences'. He was not a man who was exclusively submissive to his sentiments. "This is going to be a shock to you, I'm afraid, he said. But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is to tell you right away." And further, "Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there needn't really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job." (Dahl, 23)

The above given sequence of sentences, especially at a time when a lady is pregnant suggests that the husband wanted a divorce. The reader also see Patrick as 'self-centered' person who cold blooded betrays his wife and yet he thinks of his reputation and job before considering the plight of the poor lady. Although he could have been barbarous and charged her wife to wade her way through the vast world but he didn't,

instead he was considerate and made the requisite arrangements for her.

This startling revelation came as a shock to Mary and for a moment she was no more in control of herself, some unconscious force seemed to have pervaded every single pore of hers. And how could she have kept cool especially when she was in her sixth month of pregnancy. In this trauma she rode on a rampage of bitter feelings which she somehow wanted to get rid of. She was just about to cook the foot of a lamb which she used to hit Patrick. A loving wife such as Mary couldn't kill her husband but the spontaneous influx of raging emotions, which is utterly natural, caused her to behave in the way she did. As she comes back to her senses she is reminded of her child. "It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child?" (Dahl, 25). This shows the selfless love of a mother. Though there was no motive to left to strive for in her life she instantaneously, just in order to save her child, she braves the situations, the docile, meek Mary metamorphoses into a lioness which is ready to anything for saving her child leaving behind the coat of the lamb.

The great challenge was to save her child. She thinks of flawless alibi used by criminal to appear innocent. The criminal tries to prove he/she was somewhere else when the crime was committed. She succeeds in preparing a treacherous trap for the detectives and the policeman. She acts as if she was innocent and benign, arranges for a witness - the vegetable vendor (Sam) and bewilders all the cops. It was deduced that Patrick died due to a blow received at the back of the head. On that they had known that the elf that played the mischief - the Grecian club - was the one they gobbled down their tummies! This inventive homicide and the 'hilarity' that ensues as a result make this story a black comedy - a humorous portrayal of otherwise shocking, horrific, or morbid situations - which anyone who has read Dahl's *Matilda*, for instance, knows he's a fan of. However Dahl turns the dark theme of unsuspected

suspects in 'Lamb to the Slaughter' into something to smile about. Through their descriptions or behaviors, Dahl turns his characters into objects to be made fun of. Being a great fan of black humour, Dahl often uses it to relay certain messages. (McCray, n. pag.)

The end of the story is particularly the most interesting part where one could not help laughing out loud. Thus we see that in course of time all the major characters of the story *Lamb to the Slaughter* assumed the role of a lamb. The prime aspect of the story revolved around betrayal. "As one sows so one reaps." Patrick paid heavily for his deeds. All the actions have equal and opposite reaction said Newton, and what is more a, spontaneous one! In the last word the story reflects emotions and turmoil (the internal conflict) at its pinnacle and charms the readers kindling in them a sense of sympathy.

Dahl and Tagore through these stories suggest that the values system and ethical codes of marriage as institution are shared throughout the world cutting across cultures. A healthy marriage heavily relies on the mutual understanding and ability to adapt. Both the couples seem to be lacking these qualities which lead to failure. These stories portray a simple relationship issue that almost every household experience today. Feminist criticism would argue Patrick's intention of leaving Mary. Being a senior officer probably means he is in the marriage for quite some time and having to leave her or at least to mention about leaving when she is pregnant is just ironical, nonsensical and tragic. Thus, what Mary reacts upon is out of her rationality. Even though she tries to ignore the truth, it is what it is hence she snaps. Her subconscious mind decides to vent her raging anger by hitting him with something. In such volcanic eruption of anger naturally, she instantaneously picks up anything closer at that moment and the leg of the frozen lamb was just as close. Only after that she realized what she has done when it is said, "She might just as well have hit him

with a steel club". (Dahl, 24) She just realized that she had killed her husband by expressing anger to that range.

There is an interesting paradox if the betrayal if the both the stories are taken in to consideration. In *The Lost Jewel* Mani betrays Bhushan considering him to be too simple and gentle to be loved on the other hand in *Lamb of the Slaughter* Patrick betrays Mary probably because she is as simple and gentle as Bhushan. What is paradoxically ironic is that both Bhushan and Mary suffers in marriage because they simple, gentle and loving. Does this mean being simple and gentle in marriage is crime? Both the stories raise this question and leave it on the readers to find their answers.

The theme in these stories happen to be treading on a similar tone; the betrayal of Patrick in *Lamb to the Slaughter* and the unfaithful Mani in 'Lost Jewels' leads to loss in both of these stories. Like for example, when Patrick discloses the fact that he was leaving her, "And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most, and she stays very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word." (Dahl, 23) Similarly when, Bhushan Saha was under a massive financial stress and needed Mani's help the most, he told Mani and He did broach (introduce) the subject to his wife at last, but with such extreme delicacy that it only excited her opposition without bending it to his own purpose. When Mani set her face hard, and said nothing, he was deeply hurt, yet he was incapable of returning the hurt back to her."(Tagore,7)

Death is dealt wisely by both of these writers. Dahl maximizes the use of black humour by describing the moment of Patrick death as "... and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five second, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet." (Dahl, 24) Similarly when Bhushan Saha follows the bejeweled skeleton considering it to be Mani he simply follows it, "The skeleton descended to the river, and Bhusan, following it, placed one foot in the water.

The moment he touched the water he woke with a start. His guide was no longer to be seen. Only the trees on the opposite bank of the river were standing still and silent, and overhead the half moon was staring as if astonished. Starting from head to foot, Bhushan slipped and fell headlong into the river. Although he knew how to swim, he was powerless to do so, for his limbs were not under his control. From the midst of dreams he had stepped, for a moment only, into the borderland of waking life--the next moment to be plunged into eternal sleep.' (Tagore, 9)

To conclude it can be said that although both the stories represent two different times and cultures, they primarily deal with issues related to marriage as main theme. The couples Bhushan and Mani and Patrick and Mary in the both stories are not happy and satisfied with each other. On one side Bhushan is so much in love with Mani that he does everything possible to keep her happy. He takes care of all her needs and buys her very expensive jewelry as gift, on the other Mary leaves no stone unturned to ensure that Patrick is happy. She prepares food according his liking, keeps everything ready before Patrick comes and she glows in his presence when they are alone. Both Mani and Patrick have very loving and caring spouses. There is no space for dissatisfaction and unhappiness. It is very shocking for the reader to witness the betrayal of Patrick and Mani to their loving counterparts. It is very Ironic because there is no obvious reason for Patrick and Mani to betray. The irony is further intensified in consequential deaths of both the betrayers. In the stories the reason for unhappy marriage leading to disloyalty and consequential death of the betrayer has one single cause and it is greed for more. In Mani's case it was greed for more and more wealth and in case Patrick it is probably more love. Tagore very categorical depicts the greed through the character of Mani whereas Dahl subtly hint at it through the character of Patrick. All in all both *The Lost Jewels* and *Lamb of Slaughter* make an interesting

reading for the kind of thematic similarity they offer especially when they are written by writers representing the East and the West, set in different times and cultures.

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