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Dead Body as a Terrifying Object: Body Politics in Rabindranath Tagore's "Living or Dead?"

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to examine body politics in Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Living or Dead ?" Basically, it tries to answer why people behave differently with a dead and a living body and what is the politics behind it, through the life of Kadambini, the protagonist of the story. The story revolves around the life and death of Kadambini. She is a poor widow. When she is believed to be alive everyone treats her kindly. She is in a way epitome of kindness. She fosters the son of Jamindar. But when she becomes unconscious people think that she is dead. On the way to the burning ground, the Brahmins who take her body engages in other kinds of stuff. At the same moment, she gets her consciousness back but everyone thinks that she is already dead and becomes a ghost and walks away. When she comes back home suddenly she becomes a terrifying object. Everyone frightens with her even her own foster son. So, his paper argues that people behave living and dead bodies differently especially the word "death" itself performs a horror factor in Tagore's "Living or Dead?" Thus, the paper explores how the words living and dead play the role of power dynamics and change people's perceptions about the same body. To elucidate this statement Foucault and Butler's ideas on body politics are used.

Keywords: Body politics, terrifying object, death, living body, death ceremony, power politics, performance

The paper studies Tagore's short story "Kadambini" from the perspective of body politics. It tries to answer why the body performs different role while alive and considered to be dead in the life of Kadambini, the protagonist of the story. The narrative revolves around Kadambini who is a poor widow. When she is believed to be alive, she is a matter of pity and kindness. All of a sudden she becomes unconscious, she becomes a matter of fear. When she becomes unconscious zemindar's family regards her living body

as a dead body and takes her to the burning ground. On the way to the burning ground, her consciousness comes back but the Brahmins who carry her think that her dead body converted into a ghost. Not only people's perspective towards her changed but she herself starts to see her own body like a ghost. Her body becomes both theatre and spectator of her own fears. At last, she falls into the well to prove herself alive. Thus, it argues that death and the living body play different power dynamics in society and even power politics plays an important role both in a living and dead body.

"Kadambini" is the story of a poor widow. She lives in the house of Sadasankar, one of the Jamindars of the village named Ranihat because she is all alone. She fosters the son of Jamindar because his wife is sick for a long time. She loves him like his own son. One day suddenly she becomes unconscious and her heart stops beating. Without giving a single thought the Jamindar's family announces her death. And her dead body is carried away to the burning ground without a ceremony because she is a poor widow. No one thinks that her death is important enough for a ceremony. One the way to burning ground, Jamindar's Brahmin servants forget to carry matches because of that they cannot light their lamp. The burning ground is quite far from their village so there is already dark when they are carrying the body. All of the Brahmins leave Kadambini's body and went back to the village to bring light and cigarette. At the same time, she gains consciousness. In the beginning, she feels surprised and calls sister but no one answers. Her elder sister-in-law is warming some milk when she becomes faint. But all of a sudden she finds no one. Then she realizes maybe she is in the eternal journey of death. She herself becomes quite confused. She wants to come back to Jamindar's home but she realizes nothing worth going thereafter considered to be dead. Later she realizes that she has one best friend she will except her whatever she is and she goes to her house. Her friend welcomes her as a guest. But she is unknown about her past. She thinks that she has no one so she comes to live with her. Latter her friend's husband, Siripati knows that she is already dead but her friend does not believe. Although for her friend she is alive she herself becomes confused and sometimes frightens with her own body. Later Siripati tries to find out the reality and he comes to know that she is already dead. When Kadambini hears that thing from Sripati she leaves his home and goes to Jamindar's home. In Jamindar's home at first, she meets her foster son. She becomes happy to see her and says do leave me, auntie. Again she asks her are you dead? She says yes then suddenly she frightens with her and says leave me, aunty. Also, when Jamindar's wife sees her she also terrifies to see her thinking that she is a ghost. When her foster son says go away auntie she realizes the first time that she is not dead. And to prove that she is not dead she plunges into well then only people realize she was not dead.

The story has been studied as Tagore's ferocious attempt to give agency to a poor widow. Amiya Kumar Bagchi argues that it is a portrayal of a woman's condition in colonial society. He writes, "This story is a picturesque rendering of the helplessness of widows even in a rich man's family and the superstitious belief which preyed on such helpless women" (44). Bachi explores the story as Tagore's depiction of the human condition, especially oppressive relations. He focuses more on how human being practices their agent and talk about their freedom in his short story including "Kadambini." He concludes: "Tagore's portrayal of the human conditions are intricately

bound up with the complex relations within society, with the state generally as an actor blastering oppressive relations" (45). Thus he maintains that his work on these stories including "Kadambini" is more about portrayal of a human condition fighting with oppressive relations.

Similarly, Nandini Sen gives her view on women and gender in Tagore's short stories. She argues that Tagore's women characters challenge contemporary social norms. As she writes, "It was quite likely that his woman characters were not based on ethnographic observations. However, these characters represented, or rather challenged, contemporary norms of kinship related to gender very distinctively" (100). She gives more focus on how he mastery over the need and issue of lower and middle-class women although he was from a higher class.

Likewise, Somnath Maitra examines some of the distinctive aspects of Tagore's short stories. He argues that in Tagore's story we see Bangal's soul and humanity. Also, he claims that issue of women is also found in Tagore's work especially in short stories. He writes, "There are varieties of this theme in most of the other stories of the time, for the position of women and the disabilities under which they labored had always been for the matter of deep concern and occupied his thoughts almost constantly at this period"(26). Maitra places more emphasis on the central theme of Tagore's shorts stories and claims that among various themes the position of women had been Tagore's central concern.

Similarly, Sucheta M. Choudhuri opines that Tagore's short fictions explore social, political aspects of society. He writes, "Tagore's fiction from this period is characterized by remarkable psychological complexity and awareness of the problems-social, political and familial that the rural society was riddled with" (43). She explains more about the issues of Tagore's short stories.

Mary M. Lago also puts opinion about Tagore's short stories. The writer suggests that Tagore "underestimated the power and appeal of his own short fiction" (107). According to her, Tagore's women characters in his short fictions are liberated and strong enough to speak for their needs. She stresses more on the liberated woman of her short fiction.

Tagore's short stories had been observed from different perspectives mostly as a lyric. A. D Choudhuri explores Tagore's own experience about his short stories. He writes: "Tagore himself was of the opinion that his short stories are a realistic depiction of life as he observed it. In fact, when critics referred to them as lyric in quality he felt hurt" (74). Here he mentions that Tagore himself takes his short stories as the fruits of his experience not as lyric.

Most of the critical reception take the text as a portrayal of a human conditions fighting with oppressive relations, depiction of need of lower middle class women and some regards it as presentations of position of women. However, the body of the female character and the performance and the political nature of it is yet to be explored. That is why this is an attempt to explore the performativity of the female body in the text. So, this paper argues that people behave living and dead bodies differently especially the word "death" itself performs a horror factor in Tagore's story "Living or Dead?"

The body is a political phenomenon for ages. And the politics of the body has

more to do with power dynamics and knowledge. Mostly, we differentiate body and soul and we hardly believe that soul is also a part of the body. Michael Foucault is perhaps among those pioneer theorists of body politics who theorize the political aspects of the body. Similarly, Judith Butler also plays an important role to theorize the body politics of Julia Kristeva who had talked about the politics behind the female body. So in this research paper, we will use both Foucault and Butler's idea of body politics. Especially, it explores the body politic in the story focusing more on the politics behind poor woman's dead and the living body.

Although the story dwells upon the performative aspect of the dead and living body and power dynamics behind it the writer introduces the story by implicitly stating that the story is about the female body. Tagore implicitly acknowledges Kadambini's body as female by connecting her with maternity. Judith Butler quotes Julia Kristeva's concept of the maternal body as the female body (113). Kadambini's body is taken as a female body in the story by making her the foster mother of Jamindar's son. Tagore explains it in this way,

The child of her brother-in-law Saradasankar was her darling. For a long time after his birth, his mother had been very ill, and the widow, Kadambini had fostered him. If a woman fosters another's child, her love for him is all the stronger because she has no claim upon him. (79)

Here how the writer tells about not having a claim of her towards him, it connects Kristeva's idea as maternal instinct as the center of every female body and it has been subjugated and had been in the role of others for ages. Tagore starts the story with the introduction of Kadambini and her maternal instinct is to state her body as a female body. Then, he explores the performative aspects of it.

Eventually, the story unfolds the power dynamics of Kadambini's body in relation to life and death. At first, Tagore explains Kadambini as a poor widow who is living in the favor of Jamindar. But gradually he enters into the power dynamics of life and death of the female body. Tagore mentions that she dies suddenly and Jamindar's family gives the reason that her heart stopped beating. This kind of expression indicates that she is not even important enough to tell the reason of her death or her body is not important enough. Tagore further writes, "Lest they should be harassed by the police, four of the zemindar's Brahmin servants took away the body, without ceremony, to be burned" (79). Similarly, when we came to know that her dead body is taken without ceremony it makes us clear that her existence in society. And how power politics plays an important role even in a dead body also. Regarding this Foucault writes,

One should be concerned with the body politics, as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and support for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them the object of knowledge. (27)

The power dynamics of that body plays an important role also after death. Because she is a poor widow even she doesn't get any ceremony after death and people subjugate her dead body. It shows the role of power dynamics towards the dead body.

Similarly, Tagore renders the power politics of death rituals in relation to the political aspects of the body. Jamindar's family does not perform the proper death ritual

of Kadambini and sends her body with Brahmins towards burning ground thinking that she is a poor widow and her dead body is not valuable enough. Power politics of body not only exist when we leave but it continues also after her death. Foucault writes, "But the body is also directly involved in a political field, power relations have an immediate hold upon it, train it, torture it, force it, to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies to emit signs" (25). And the impression of power politics we see towards Kadambini's dead body. And four Brahmins participate for the final rites of Kadambini, who fosters Jamindar's son like her own mother. It shows the power politics behind dead bodies after death also which indicates the political nature of the body. Even after death, people do not forget his/her when that person was living. Her status as a poor widow continues when everyone thinks that she is dead.

Tagore not only depicts power politics behind death rituals but also picturizes people's perception towards the dead body. Although Kadambini becomes only unconscious she is not dead everyone believes that she is dead. So, Jamindar's family sends four Brahmins to carry her body towards burning- ground to burn. When the Brahmins were about to perform her last rituals they are unable to light a lamp. After that two Brahmins move towards the village to bring wood. They also leave Kadambini's body and move from there. After that Kadambini gets her consciousness back she feels a little bit awkward finding herself in that condition. Eventually, when those four Brahmins come back they do not see the dead body. They think that Jamindar do not believe in a ghost story and they decide to say that they already burnt her body because they realize that a dead body is not a valuable property anyone to steal it. It shows how the same body becomes valuable to invaluable after the declaration of death. It shows performative aspects of the body after death because suddenly it becomes valuable to invaluable.

Similarly, the writer explores death as a culturally constructed performative act by depicting Kadambini's fear although she knows that she is alive. Kadambini finds her body different and fearful. She sees her own body differently when she finds herself in the death bed. And that unhappened death performs fear factor not only to her but the people she also meets. Suddenly her loyal and kind image turns into a fearful image. Like Butler's idea, "gender performance as repetition" (131). Kadambini herself reacts in a fearful manner. Tagore explains that manner in this way, "I am dead. How can I return home? That would bring disaster on them. I have left the kingdom of the living; I am my own ghost" (82). She herself considers herself ghost which resembles Butler's idea of culturally constructed performance. It indirectly indicates that without dying her body performs like a dead body which is affected by culturally constructed body politics because people think that after death human soul converted into the ghost. But Foucault disagrees with it. Butler explains: "In Foucault's term, the soul is not imprisoned by or within the body, as same Christian imaginary suggest that, but "the soul is the prison of the body" (184). Body appears as a central theme, not a soul which shows that the writer is also in a way near to Foucault's idea on the relationship between body and soul.

Kadambini becomes both an artist and a spectator of her death. Her body performers like a dead body although she is alive. Like others, she also takes her own body fearful. In the story Tagore writes about it in this way, "Those who fear ghosts fear those who are behind them: wherever they cannot see there is fear. But Kadambini's chief

terror lay in herself, for she dreaded nothing external" (84). Her life becomes a drama, drama which is about death and her body performs her death and she both becomes both an actor and a spectator. Her body reacts like an audience of that drama so she starts taking herself fearful object. For instance, "At the dead of night, when alone in her room, she screamed; in the evening when she saw her shadow in the lamplight, her whole body shook. Watching her fearfulness, the rest of the house fell into a sort of terror. The servants and Jogmaya herself began to see ghost" (84). It shows the visceral reaction of her own body by seeing her own body. So, her body becomes a theatre and spectator both.

Not only Kadambini's body becomes theatre and spectator but she turns out a fearful object. Before she considered being dead she was a poor widow who can only give love to others but later she becomes a terrifying thing. Even her own best friend suspects on her start believing that she is ghost even though she says her she is not dead. When she leaves the house of her friend she goes to the house of Jamindar which is actually her own home. Even her own foster son frightens with her. He says leave him, "She stood like a pillar of wood, unable to flee or speak. Seeing all this, the child, too, become terrified and burst out weeping: "Go away, Auntie, 'he said, 'go away!" (88). When she listens that she realizes or insure herself she is not dead. Seeing her, Jamindar's wife falls into a faint. When she sees all these things and transformation of her own image to helpful to frightening ghosts. She proves herself she is alive by dying. Tagore writes, "Then Kadambini shouting 'I am not dead, I am not dead, ' went down the steps to the zenana well, and plunged in, from the upper story Saradasankar heard splash" (88). So, her body becomes a central theme of this story because all the things happen just declaring her dead. She is alive but people consider her dead and frighten with her. Even her own body reacts in a similar way. She frightens with her own body. However, at the end of the story, she proves herself that she was alive by plunging into a well which makes us clear that the body is the political thing and everything changes with the body.

Moreover, Tagore explores the political nature of the body in the story "Kadambini". He beautifully depicts Foucault's idea of body politics by showing how Kadambini's body is a political phenomenon. He starts the story by making the reader that the protagonist's body is a female body incorporating Julia Kristeva's notion of maternal instinct is the center of the female body just making her foster mother of Jamindar's son. Similarly, the story unfolds the power dynamics of life and death and how the body becomes a political thing also after death. Likewise, Tagore also renders the power politics of death rituals by not giving proper death rituals to Kadambini. Furthermore, he depicts the culturally constructed idea of death which makes Kadambini herself victims and starts frightening with her own body. In the same manner, he picturizes performative nature of death in a human body and how Kadambini's body becomes both theatre and spectator. At the end of the story, he shows how the same body transformed into helpful to a terrifying object just because she considered dead. In this way, Tagore elucidates the political nature of the body in his short story, "Living or Dead?" Tagore depicts the Foucauldian idea of power dynamics of the body through the medium of his fictional work. Kadambini's body becomes the central theme of the story, which shows the power dynamics engaged with it. Not only he portrays the power

dynamic of the body also explores that dynamics which play an important role to perform death ritual. So, Tagore in his story, "Living or Dead?," presents the body's political nature and its power dynamic by showing the dichotomy between the living and the dead body. The performance of power plays important role in the human body. It applies as the matter of domination, especially in a subjugated body. People's perception of Kadambini changes because the power politics transforms it from kind to terrifying. So, the dead and living body performs differently and power dynamics plays important role in the performance.

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