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MAJOR THEMES IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore has presented a wide variety of themes in his novels as well as in his short stories. His stories include both stark realism as well as poetic idealism, conflict between the modern and the traditional, cruelty and sensibility, solitude and crowd, male and female. His stories showcase his reflections upon his surroundings, fashionable ideas of today and are associated with exuberance of vitality and spontaneity. They transcend regional and cultural barriers and have universal appeal. Through this paper I have tried to attempt a few iconic stories of the Nobel laureate, to get a brief insight of subtle human concern.

INTRODUCTION

Tagore's short stories present a humanistic concern of Indian sensibility. His stories often focus on the spirit of psychological and social realism of women, the underprivileged and the downtrodden, with concrete human situations and therefore, provide a searching analysis of their position obtaining in Indian society, Through the depiction of tensions, conflicts, contradictions, frustrations and embarrassments, marital relationships and various forms of estrangements in wedded life; stemming from the polarities of tradition and modernity, past and present, orthodoxy and radicalism, idealism and opportunism. Tagore idealizes himself on the two principles of rationalism and reformation. He has sought realistic models of presentation by avoiding romantic postulating or attitudinizing.

"His short stories project a humanism born of an acute awareness of the betrayal of human personality engineered by the powers of stagnation

and rigid orthodoxy. His short stories stress the need for promotion of Catholicism in human relations and dealings and prevention of erosion of human dignity. While creating conditions for the realization of self-actualization; if not self-fulfillment" (Raj G.V.).

Tagore has presented the twin aspects of human personality with equal zeal. V.S. Naravane Comments on Tagore as a story writer:

"Tagore the short story writer and novelist, like Tagore the philosopher, recognizes that man has in him an Infinite as well as a Finite element; and that nobility, love and calmness are as 'real' as depravity, hatred and tensions. He, therefore, creates people who have the same passion, foibles and frailties that we have, but who can surprise us by clashes of profound wisdom or by acts of supreme self-sacrifice."

This is specially achieved through his women characters struggling against their dehumanization in the name of tradition; Tagore assigns a central place to women in his short stories. Moreover, their role is crucial to any transformation of Indian ethos. A wave of social reformers too gave birth to the emancipation and freedom in the psyche of the 19th century women. The contribution of social reformers like Kesab Sen's Brahmo Samaj, Derozio's Young Bengal and intellectuals like Ishwarchand Vidya Sagar, Raja Dakshinranjan Mukhopadhyay, Ram Gopal Ghosh, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar gave birth for the emancipation and education of women.

In the present paper I have selected the short stories:

"The Wife's Letter" (Stirr Patra), "Profit and Loss", which depict the predicament of women characters. The short stories "Kabuliwala (The fruit seller from Kabul), "The Postmaster" present the themes of separation, longing, and self-realization. The short story "The Parrot's Training" focuses on the contemporary education system. I have tried to highlight some of the major themes that Tagore has vigorously presented in his novels and short stories.

STORIES

In the story, "The Wife's Letter" (Stirr Patra), through the presentation of three women characters — Mrinal (The heroine), her sister-in-law and her orphaned sister Bindu; Tagore presents the two polarities of tradition and modernism. The heroine Mrinal stands for courage, radicalism, intelligence, boldness and yearning for freedom. On the other hand, her sister-in-law represents the traditional outlook. She is an epitome of the ideal Hindu Wife. She lacks courage to show her love openly to her own orphaned sister Bindu. The story has been narrated in the form of a letter. Through the letter, Mrinal narrates many injustices inflicted upon her during 15 years of married life by her husband and his family. She recalls in her flashbacks that animals were her true friends in the urban in-law's family, "when I first entered your house, those two cows and three calves seemed to me as my only

familiar relatives ... my in-laws on jesting terms with me to express doubts about my lineage" (Chaudhuri Sukanta, p. 208).

She further recalls her fearlessness in the delivery room, when she faces a near death situation and experiences courage in her near death situation. "... death came and stood at my head, yet I felt no fear at all." (Chaudhuri Sukanta, p. 208). She profoundly believes in the dignity of life.

"A Bengali woman speaks of dying in every second utterance. But where is the glory in such death?" (Chaudhuri Sukanta, p. 209)⁶

The letter also details her courage, her endurance and pettiness of life. The story encompasses her deprivation at all levels — as a daughter, as a wife and as a mother. She recalls an event of typhoid of which she and her brother were suffering in childhood. Her brother could not sustain the disease and died unfortunately but she survived. She was cursed as a daughter in her own family to remain alive: "... Mrinal lived because she is a girl; if she'd been a boy, would she have been spared?" (Chaudhuri Sukanta, p. 205).

Her patriarchal husband misuses her and never loves her. She fails to share her vital feelings and desires with him. She gives birth to a daughter who brings transitory happiness to her but dies unfortunately. She narrates her agonized feelings for her daughter: "My daughter was like the evening star, appearing briefly only to fade away." (Chaudhuri Sukanta, p. 209).

Her deprivation as a mother is intensified in her utterance. "My daughter died almost immediately after she was born She would have brought to my life whatever is great and true: from being the second daughter-in-law, I would then have become a mother. A mother, even within the confines of her own family, belongs to the family of the world." (Chaudhuri Sukanta, p. 208). Through the letter Mrinal interrogates the falsification everywhere circumscribing her existence. Her yearning to taste freedom is aggravated by two supposed women: her elder sister-in-law and her orphaned sister Bindu. She firmly supports and protects Bindu.

Bindu develops a bond of love with Mrinal. Mrinal has not seen such embodiments of love in real life. Their attachment brings hope, and trust in Bindu's life too. Through Bindu Mrinal could realize her true and free self. Through the narration of Bindu's sufferings and her predicament being orphaned, poor, helpless and wedded to an insane person, Tagore presents the dehumanization, utter helplessness of life and sensibility of poverty stricken, orphan girls and widows of underprivileged Indian society who are subjected to suicide like Bindu does at the end of the story. Mrinal is self-assertive. She represents Tagore's sensitive evolution of contemporary women and their radicalism.

Finally her bold declaration at the end of the story not to return to her husband's home as a *majo Bao* (Second daughter-in-law) is a bold assertion for freedom and emancipation. Marriage confines Mrinal in the chains of a narrow world. She refuses to obey her husband's dignity or self proud and declares the death of *Majo-Bou*.

The story "Profit and Loss" presents the plight and agony of the parents who are not able to pay the agreed upon dowry. The story is very relevant in today's circumstances because one can still hear about dowry deaths in India. The story seems to be straight out of daily newspaper headlines. Tagore has presented two polarities of characters: cruel and heart stricken, rich and poor. Nirupama's father Ramsundar Mitra stands for heartbroken, poor, helpless, agonized, humble, father. He procures the only son of a rich Raybahadur as a groom for his daughter Nirupama for 10,000 rupees as dowry and additional gifts. But he fails to arrange the amount even at an extortionate rate of interest. He is not allowed to meet his daughter and is looked down upon even by the servants of Raybahadur's family. He faces unbearable disgrace and feels guilty and heartbroken at the plight of his daughter. Nirupama urges "Father take me home for a while." (Radice William, p. 50).

But Nirupama's father leaves without Nirupama with tears in his eyes and heartbroken. On the other hand Raybahadur has been presented as a

cruel, greedy and rich father-in-law, who believes in pomp and show. Towards the end of the story, the narration of Nirupama's cremation and funeral rites performed by Rajbahadur is indicative of his artificial, inhuman, cruel nature. In the character of Nirupama and her mother-in-law again, Tagore has presented two polarities of emotional innocence and cruelty. Through Nirupama's plight, her spiteful treatment and assaults inflicted upon her by her vicious and cruel mother-in-law; Tagore presents societal issues and a deep human insight of human nature. He sounds a feminist for his time. He seems to find a way ahead of the thinking of his time with a visionary mission with regard to women, religion and caste etc. He has presented a woman's plight and the women characters assert themselves. Nirupama's death in an oppressive society is an example of supreme self-sacrifice and surprises us beyond limits. She loses interest in life, she abandons food, and she grows dependent on the exploitations of the servants, indicating Tagore's stressing the need for catholicism in human relations and dealing and prevention of erosion of dignity while creating conditions for the realization of self actualization.

However, much has changed since Tagore had written this story in last Hundred years in terms of women's issues, many of them are still relevant today — child marriages, preference of son over daughter, female — infanticide, dowry deaths, societal attitude towards widows etc. Through the depiction of Nirupama's sufferings, Tagore has tried to bring social reform. He has presented a visionary and thought provoking story of loss and human concern. Even after a hundred years our society is slowly struggling to achieve these social reforms.

Some of Tagore's short stories focus on longing, separation, companionship, solitude, love, and bonding in human relationships. The story "The Postmaster" presents a poignant human relationship between a young orphaned girl Ratan who is employed in the post office in a remote village and the postmaster. She regards him as a surrogate father. The postmaster longs to return to his family in Calcutta from where he has been transferred to a remote village.

Throughout the course of the story a bond of companionship and dependency develops between the girl and the postmaster. They share food, jokes and entertain each other. The postmaster tells the stories of his relatives to the girl, she starts loving them and making them her own relatives in her own imagination. She (Ratan) becomes dependent on the postmaster. The girl has no family but the postmaster has a big family. Once the postmaster falls sick in a shock of solitude the girl takes care of him and after recovery he resigns and decides to return to his family. The girl also requests him to accompany her with him but he hesitates and rejects the offer. The postmaster leaves Ratan standing outside the post office with tears stemming from her eyes. Being separated from her only bond she longs for him to return. Disappointment at the end of the story becomes too hard for Ratan to handle. The postmaster consoles himself that attachment and separation are the essential parts of life. He separates himself from the girl. This story presents the ups and downs of human life. In it Tagore exploits human aspirations and desires in its most innocent and natural form. Indeed the story presents psychological and social realism. Scholars praise Tagore's short stories for the deeply human quality of characters and relationships. B.C. Chakraborty says of "The Postmaster", "The story itself is hopelessly uninteresting. But it acquires immense interest on account of the passage of lyrical grandeur which gives a poetic expression to the feelings of the orphan girl or those of the postmaster."

Through the story "Kabuliwala" (the fruit seller from Kabul), Tagore presents a tale of a father's love for his daughter and his transfer of love to another girl Mini. It is a kind of love that transcends the barriers of race, religion and language. The story highlights multiculturalism, separation, longing and self-realization. Rahman — the fruit seller finds the reflection of his own daughter in Mini. In her first meeting with the fruit seller, Mini, finds him a stranger and fears him but Rahman overcomes Mini's fears by gifting her raisins and almonds. Sudden arrest of Rahman on charge of murderous assault, separates him from Mini. After being released, Rahman visits Mini's father. He does

not recognize Rehman and hesitates in allowing him to meet Mini on her auspicious wedding day because after being released he was labeled as a criminal in the eyes of the society. Through this story Tagore stresses the need for Catholicism in human relations and dealings and prevention of erosion of human dignity while creating conditions for the realization of self actualization. Father's love for his daughter and longing to return is highlighted in the story when Rahman realizes after meeting grown-up-Mini, who does not recognize him after a gap of long years. At this point he realizes that his own daughter too must have grown up like Mini and may not realize him and he longs for return. The happy reunion of Rahman and Mini arouses a thought in the mind of Mini's own father for Rahman as a father that in a distant land a long-lost father would meet his only child.

This story presents contrasts. Rahman appears brusque. Crude and violent to the extent of a criminal in social terms but, the same man has vital feelings of love and so the bird's education is complete. Since the bird no longer flies, hops or sings, the story ends with the king poking at the bird's body and hears only the sound of rustling papers.

The story makes a fervent appeal for an education system that nurtures creativity and freedom to think one's own thoughts. Tagore's belief that the conventional model of schooling encloses students in a cage of memorized knowledge not wisdom acquired through experience has also been highlighted in the story. As a reformationist, Tagore experimented in education. He emphasised on creative freedom and self knowledge which can be acquired through arts and craft, music, painting, dramatics, and other cultural activities. He advocated scientific as well as a global approach in the learning process. The Vishva Bharati University at Shantiniketan is the outcome of Tagore's visionary and reformative ideas.

Some short stories of Tagore contain an element of supernatural and weird tales and can be placed with fantastic tales of Edgar Allan Poe. Through these stories Tagore presents a picture of Indian sensibility. Our belief in the supernatural is

antenatal (since birth there is a willingness to accept the supernatural).

The story "The Hungry Stone" is about a man 'staying in an old palace who becomes enchanted by invisible ghosts.

In the story "Living or Dead" a woman thought to be dead, regains consciousness during her funeral only to be regarded by her family as a phantom and to prove that she is truly alive, she drowns herself and dies. "The Skeleton" portrays a man who engages in a dialogue with the ghost of a skeleton used in classroom demonstration. Many of his short stories have been adapted for movies by Satyajit Ray like Gopi Gayan Baga Bine. Charulata is based on "The Broken Nest".

In 1977 Vishwanath S. Naravane observed that "The modern short story is Rabindranath Tagore's gift to Indian Culture," Naravane viewed that of Tagore's "two hundred short stories twenty are pearls of the purest variety."

Tagore is widely regarded as the inventor of the modern Bengali short story. He has introduced colloquial speech into Bengali literature, Tagore can be placed with the pioneers of short story form like Edgar Aijlan Poe, Anton Chekhov and Guy de Manpassant. His stories generally set in rural Bengali villages are based on the under-privileged sectors of Indian society which reflect his commitment to social realism.

CONCLUSION

Whatever else Tagore might have been, he was above everything else a great humanist and Universalist — a true citizen of the world. He believed in one world and in the eternal vision of man evolving into All-man, Vishva-Manav. He felt that the West and the East had much to teach each other. An eminent critic K.R.S. Iyenger aptly comments: "Human values were essentially the same in the West and the East. Human values were more to him than power values, 'the spirit of man' more than the power of the glory of the nation."

Thus Tagore looks at man both from within and from without (outside). As the great species of creation, he thinks that the great power within man

ignites him to play his role for emancipation of himself through emancipation of the whole 'mankind. He introspects that the way of freedom, for man is that of the feeling of the divine presence of God who makes him, to him, the true concept of the nature of man is the realization of steadfastness of truth and cultivation of courtesy, simplicity and other virtues that mirror the true culture of man as a social being. The dehumanization of man as seen in all ugliness in all affairs of life has pained Tagore. The best of man as Tagore rightly thinks suffers terribly because the best of his thoughts die unborn and unexpressed. For a man "to be a man", his role of taking part in eternity by means of his uniqueness is infinite. Tagore wants to give freedom to have a significant role in the concept of man — the flesh and the spirit, human and the divine, love of life and love of God, joy in duty and punishment of truth, social obligation and individual life, respect for tradition and the freedom to experiment, love of one's people and faith in the unity of mankind. These opposite feelings can and must be reconciled, not by tentative compromises and timid vacillation but by building a true harmony out of the apparent discordance.

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