



## A NUANCED WRITER'S TIMELESS APPEAL: A STUDY OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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### ABSTRACT

Stories hold sway over us all. Poignant truths can be conveyed in a well spun tale better than through lengthy expostulations. A short story poses a challenge to the writer for he must convey his message in a compact manner. He must etch vivid character portrayals without the benefit of lengthy delineation. A master short story writer must have within his grasp the art of brevity and compression if he is to effectively communicate and reach out to the reader and compel him to return again and again to his work. The cadences of a language and the beauty of the script go hand in hand in making indelible imprints upon the human mind. Nuanced and controlled, Tagore etches such permanent word images with the bold strokes of his pen upon the canvas of the human mind. His simple words, rich in colloquial idiom flow with the ease of a river and communicate deep spiritual feelings. Vivid imagery, relatable themes, myths, and folklore not just lend a unique Indian flavour to his work but also create a timeless appeal for his work. Every fresh reading opens new vistas of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Humanism, Compassion, Emotions, Fantasy

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### Introduction

The mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by social and political upheaval in Bengal under colonial rule. By this time, several upper-class Indians had access to western education which evoked a dual response by making them question age-old conventions of their own society as well as those being imposed by the British rulers. This intellectual awakening ushered in the Renaissance first in Bengal and later in Punjab and Maharashtra. In Bengal there arose loud criticism and stiff opposition of the arbitrary rule of the Britishers on the one hand and a frank denouncing of the many socio-religious customs prevailing in society at the time. The enlightened and educated Bengalis of the Renaissance era advocated social reform as the first step to political autonomy and were hence also associated with the freedom movement which was gaining momentum by the day. Education of the

masses was regarded as the vehicle of this reform and several educational institutions were established that synthesised western and Indian learning. They stand even today as landmarks in the Bengal educational sphere. Liberalism and humanism were the hallmarks of this education. Doyens in this endeavour include luminaries like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Jagdish Chandra Bose, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, and many others. The wave of revolutionary fervour that swept across the country and the growth of indigenous literatures were simultaneous occurrences. This intellectual reawakening in Bengal found expression in Bengali literature, arts, and music of the time. While some writers were vigorous in their expression others like Rabindranath Tagore were more restrained and nuanced in their approach.

Hailing from a prominent family of artists, intellectuals, and religious thinkers, Rabindra Nath Tagore (1861- 1941) is one of the outstanding figures of all times. He was surrounded by literature and music right from infancy. A multi-faceted personality, Tagore was a prolific writer and wrote over one thousand poems, two thousand songs, nearly one hundred short stories, numerous novels, plays, essays on religion, politics, education, etc and delivered lectures at home and abroad. He was the first non-European to win the Nobel prize for literature for '*Geetanjali*' in 1913. Tagore was an established figure in Bengali literature. He belonged to an influential and affluent zamindar family. Tagore had the good fortune to travel abroad and experience the western culture, language, and music. He was fluent in English, was intimate with the English educated elite of Calcutta but he never sought to acquire an elitist image for himself. Despite his privileged status, he remained down-to-earth and connected to the ordinary people. Though the corpus of his writings is in Bangla, it was the English translation of '*Geetanjali*' (Song Offerings) by Tagore himself that catapulted him into fame. This slim volume of poems fired the imagination of the whole world and placed India and Tagore on the international arena of literature. In the Introduction to his edited book: 'The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore' Sisir Kumar Das writes:

"...we do not know of any writer in the history of literature who wrote so much in an alien language and yet remained as prolific and as important in his mother-tongue as he was before he became a bilingual writer." (Introduction, pg18)

Tagore would spend long stretches of time in the countryside on his estate on the banks of the river Padma that features in much of his work. The theme of life and death is a dominant motif in his work. He suffered many personal tragedies due to the deaths of his many near and dear ones. He tried not to make them occasions to be sad or gloomy. Rather, he spiritualised his grief like a true philosopher and devotee of God. Sisir Kumar Das in his Introduction quotes Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, a radical political activist of Bengal's view of Tagore:

He (Tagore) will be ranked amongst those seers who have come to know the essence of

beauty through pain and anguish. (Sahitya Akademi, 1994)

#### Discussion

Tagore once wrote:

"The art of storytelling has a long antiquity in India. The myths and legends of Vedic times have been followed by the stories of the Upanishads and epics and Jatakas which merge into history blurring the frontiers between history and fiction." (The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore pg 198, 1994)

His stories help the readers gain a deeper understanding, a deeper insight into the hearts of men, women, and children. His heart flows out to them without derogation or condescension. So vividly he could project the circumstances of their lives. "... *the blowing of conch shells, the heavy rain of the Indian July, or the parching heat, a man sitting in a boat upon a river, playing upon a lute...*" (The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore pg 40, 1994) wrote Yeats in his Introduction to the English translation of '*Geetanjali*'.

Tagore's all-encompassing humanism shines through the story '**The Cabuliwallah**'. It is an endearing story of a feisty little girl Mini and her friend the fruit seller from Kabul both of whom have endeared themselves forever to readers. The Cabuliwallah sees the reflection of his own daughter whom he had left behind in the mountains when he had come down to the plains with other Afghan merchants. The story's reach and popularity are manifested through the black & white cinematic version of the story. It is a heart-warming universal story of a father's love for his little child. A mere five-year-old chatterbox that she is, Mini is a tyrant over her father's heart when he encourages friendship between his daughter and the Cabuliwallah to remove her unfounded fear of the Cabuliwallah being a kidnapper of little children whom he carried in the huge bag slung over his shoulder. Soon the two struck a friendship and would share jokes about elephants and the father-in-law's house. "*Mini would run in smiling, with her, O! Cabuliwallah! Cabuliwallah! And the two friends so far apart in age, would subside into their old laughter and their old jokes.*" (Selected Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore pg155)

Unfortunately, the Cabuliwallah is arrested on a charge of murderous assault upon a debtor who

refused to pay up the amount due for the Cabuliwallah was to return to his homeland, a journey that he undertook once every year to go and meet the family he had left behind. He is sentenced to some eight years in jail. Upon his release he comes to Mini's house to meet her and is faced with a staggering realisation that Mini is no longer the little child he knew. She is all grown up and about to be married. It suddenly dawns upon him that his own daughter must also have grown up in these years and he despairs over the fact whether she would even remember him. The only solace that he had in his long years of imprisonment was the piece of paper which bore the inked imprint of the little hand of his daughter. Is it possible for any reader but to be profoundly moved by the predicament of this unfortunate father so loving and affectionate! All boundaries of caste, race, and nationhood collapse and we perceive with a startling clarity of vision that it is the same heart that beats in all fathers.

The novelist gives psychological insights into man-woman relationship in the story 'Vision'. The narrator is a young wife whose still-born child jeopardizes her life and weakens her eyesight. Her precocious husband, being a medical student, tries to cure her vision on his own with his imperfect knowledge and ruins her eyesight completely. She becomes completely blind. The husband realizes his folly and is filled with remorse at what he had done but the wife does not blame him at all, in fact she urges him to remarry because now she is no good for him. He refuses outright saying that he would never leave her side because she was his 'Goddess'. He is now devoted to her, repentant that he is responsible for the loss of her sight. Their life continues peacefully for a while, but they drift apart. He obtains his medical degree and goes to the countryside to practice medicine. With the passage of time, he gained reputation in his profession and became prosperous. Gradually, a change came over him and he no longer considered his profession as service. This greatly distressed the wife, and she became more troubled when an aunt approached them with the proposal of remarriage of the husband. The wife sensed her husband was open to the proposal. Consequently, a young girl 'Hemangini' was brought to live with them. The wife intensely felt that her husband was going to commit a grievous wrong and prayed to God to save her husband from such a sin.

The young girl has a natural liking for the wife and a bond develops between the two women. In the meantime, her brother came for a visit and immediately sensed the pain that his sister was going through. In the meantime, Hemangini repulsed all attempts of the aunt to bring her closer to the man. After a while, her husband prepared to go somewhere, lying that it was a visit to a patient. A confrontation ensues between them and he disclosed that he wanted an ordinary woman not a Goddess as his wife, an ordinary woman whom he could approach without fear. It was an eye-opening encounter for the wife, and she realized that a wife must be a woman with all her needs and not a Goddess placed on a pedestal. With all her heart, she prayed that her husband should be saved from this sin. Her prayers were answered, and her brother married Hemangini, though he had vowed never to marry. Even her husband realized his folly and confessed the same to her and returned to her. The world of nature conspired with the wife when the storm that broke out delayed her husband long enough for her brother to get married to Hemangini. The wife may have lost her eyesight but gained a deeper and clearer vision into the heart of things. Marriage is not to be renounced; it must lead to spiritual union of two people. Her spiritual self awakens after she loses her sight.

'The Devotee' is a haunting story of penance where Tagore portrays the deeply hurting soul in search of reprieve. The narrator is a writer who has retired to the countryside to escape from the criticism he had received because of his literary activities in the city. It is the story of a woman who is in search of truth and perfection. God is Truth and Perfection and coming face to face with God would give her an opportunity to seek His forgiveness. The story deals with remorse caused by negligence of duty and sexual aberration. Tagore describes the lengths that one truly repentant would go to atone for the sins committed due to immaturity and in moments of weakness. It is a humane treatment of pain that humans undergo, a humane treatment of human frailties and weaknesses without assuming a high moral ground or being judgemental and in this is reflected a sublime depiction of the workings of the human heart, the one that suffers and the one that understands.

'The Kingdom of Cards' is in another genre altogether and bears witness to the versatile genius of Tagore. It is a story of fantasy and imagination. On an imaginary island dwelled the characters of a pack of cards who lived a very humdrum life, adhering strictly to their social hierarchy, "according to the Rules". Everything happened according to routine, nothing exciting ever happened. In fact, nothing 'new' ever happened. However, their monotonous existence was disturbed by the arrival of the Three Companions: The Prince, the son of the Merchant and the son of the Kotwal who had come from a foreign land across the sea in search of adventure and fortune. To their utter amazement and disbelief, these three newcomers obeyed no rules. When confronted, they answered that it was because of their '*Ichcha*' (wish)- a word which they had never heard before, nor had any idea as to what it meant. This started the process of 'change' and the cards gradually became aware that life was not bound by regulations. One had the right to choose for oneself and listen to what the heart says. Emotions which had been so conspicuous by their absence, began to affect every heart on the island, passions kindled, and love began to unfold its wings and with it came all the other emotions of longing, doubt, self-consciousness, jealousy, bashfulness and so on. It was as if, the people were awakening at last after a long spiritual slumber. The Prince and the Queen of Hearts fall in love with one another and were united. Suppressing our desires and always trying to be correct in our behaviour is not a natural thing. We must lead a complete life, must live life fully and truly. One must be true to oneself and must realize that we are after all human beings, who have their positive points as well as their negative points. The message that rings loud and clear is living life sensitively and enjoying it thoroughly is important.

#### Conclusion

Thus, we find that the range and sweep of emotions that Tagore could paint on the canvas of his stories is a humbling experience for the reader. We come face to face with the vastness of his heart. It was perhaps because of this quality that the Bengalis venerate him as 'Thakur'. Once Nehru wrote of Tagore... "*...he forced people to measure out of their narrow grooves of thought and made them think of broader issues affecting humanity. Tagore was the greatest humanist of India.*" (The English Writings of

Rabindranath Tagore pg 29, 1994) He had immense sympathy for the suffering mankind. He believed in reaching God through service to humanity that is oppressed, deprived, unfortunate, and downtrodden. He believed in progress of humanity only through peace, friendship, co-operation, and mutual goodwill. He was horrified by the evils of materialism. He upheld the virtue of dignity of labour and love of and service of humanity. God can be realised through this not through renunciation of the world or through hypocrisy of religion and ritual. He was greatly drawn towards children due to their innocence, purity, and simplicity. He glorifies childhood. This is a characteristic feature of Romanticism and Tagore shares it with writers like Blake and Wordsworth. "*Heaven lies about us in our infancy.*" Tagore believed in this dictum of Wordsworth. His romanticism finds further expression in feelings of awe and wonder of creation, of Nature, in his love of simplicity, and the intensity of feeling and emotion.

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