



HUMANISTIC ELEMENT IN THE MEN CHARACTERS OF TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore is the most outstanding name in modern Bengali literature. He is indisputably one of the most renowned writers in Indian English literature. He is a prolific writer and versatile genius. The range and variety of his achievement are quite astonishing. His active literary career extended over 65 years. He wrote primarily in Bengali, most of his works later came in to English either through the translation by the author himself or by others. Thus his works consist of thirty plays, twelve novels, two thousand poems, two thousand essays and hundreds of letters, lectures on variety of subjects.

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INTRODUCTION

The contribution of Tagore for the development of Indian English literature is immense. He is one of the most influencing personalities in India that Iyengar remarks thus:

Next only to Mahatma Gandhi and Shri Aurobindo, Tagore has been the supreme inspiration to millions of Modern India.¹

Tagore is not sectarian in his outlook. He is universal in his outlook, he believes in the freedom and dignity of an individual. The influences of his Home, of Brahma Samaj, Ram Mohan Roy, The Gita, The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, Baul singers, Vaishnavic philosophy and western thought have widened his scope of thinking and understanding of

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Man and the world. He is a man thinking, man perceiving and man sharing his wealth of his wisdom.

The works of Tagore reflect human nature at its best. Most of the central characters in his novels and stories being women, one might think Tagore is a feminist or Tagore's chief concern is woman and not man or he has neglected men completely in his works. The conception that the 'comedies of Shakespeare have no heroes, only heroines' might be partially true because of the charm, intelligence and wit they present before their male counterparts in certain contexts.

But it is not convincing to deduce such a conclusion from the works of Rabindranath Tagore. He is neither a feminist nor a male chauvinist He is basically a humanist. He portrays men and women in his novels and stories with all their strengths and weaknesses. He does not idealize man or woman anywhere in his works. He presents them as he finds them. As the themes and the subject matter is of his novels and stories are related to women, women are obviously the central characters in them. It does not mean that the novels and stories of Tagore contain only women characters and not of men.

No doubt there is immense variety in the portrayal of women characters. There are a number of memorable women characters in his novels and short stories. There are certain men characters that are capable of understanding, loving and showing sympathy for others. Understanding, love, endurance, selflessness, sacrifice, dedication, conformity to truth and other such virtues are not just the virtues that belong only to women, and they can also be found in men. They are human virtues and human values. If any character lives long in the mind of a reader, it is for such virtues and it is for such values. Men characters in the novels and short stories of Tagore are not without such virtues and human sentiments. There are some fine characters that are ever memorable for their depth of thinking and understanding. A brief analysis of a few men characters from the stories of Tagore would substantiate this. Tagore is one of the best short story writers in English. Speaking about the greatness Tagore as a short story writer, Sukumar Sen says:

Tagore is the first writer of the true short story in Bengali, and he has remained best.²

Tagore portrayed a number of memorable men characters in his short stories. One of the most memorable characters is Cabuliwallah. Tagore himself is the narrator. The story revolves around the theme of Parental love, and at one point it crosses the boundaries of parental love and transcends into universal love. The story also reveals utmost humanity of its narrator. The way he would answer his young daughter's unending doubts, in spite of the obsessive fears of

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his wife for Cabuliwallah, the way he would let his young daughter, Mini speaking to Cabuli wallah show his depth of love for his daughter and his understanding and empathy for any one.

He is the one who opens the window for his daughter through which she can develop contact with the outer world. He encourages her hearty conversations with Cabuli wallah and he himself has proved his parental love. His genuine emotional bond that he has with his daughter is reflected in his love for Mini. After he is involved in a murder case, after he has spent eight years in jail, he comes straight to the house of Mini with an expectation to meet Mini, an old Mini who has been in his memory for eight years. When he comes the narrator identifies him immediately and feels sympathy for him. As the very day is the day of wedding of Mini, she is busy, and he cannot meet her. After he understands the impossibility of chances of meeting his friend, Cabuli wallah wants to send a few raisins and almonds, and dried grapes to Mini through the narrator, the narrator takes the fruit and offers him some money but he refuses and becomes speechless then he responds thus:

He puts his hand inside his big loose robe and brought out a small dirty piece of paper with great care he unfolded this and smoothed it out with both hands on my table. It bore the impression of his daughter.³

The impression of ink smeared little hand of his daughter, which has been with him all the years in his jail is quite moving. It shows that it has been the only source of comfort for him all these years. His loving refusal of accepting money from the narrator shows his purity of affection for his daughter and for Mini. For him his daughter and Mini are not different. It evokes the same kind of love and affectionate sympathy in the heart of the narrator. He is unable to resist tears and he tries hard to get Mini down to Cabuli wallah in her bridal dress. The narrator offers him a bank note though it curtails his freedom of spending on the day of his only daughter's wedding. His sympathy, broad thinking and understanding are reflected in the following lines:

I had to curtail some of the festivities. I could not have the electric lights I had intended. Nor the military band and the ladies of the house were despondent at it. But to me the wedding feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father met again with his only child.⁴

In this way the characters Cabuliwallah and the narrator provide the ground for considering men characters in the stories of Tagore do not suffer from the handicap of lacking in love and understanding. In fact their love transcends the boundaries of religion and region. The character of the postmaster in the story of The Post Master seems to be very unconvincing,

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when he says in sarcastic voice to the little girl, Ratan, who serves him like mother, "What an Idea?" when she asks him to take her with him to his home when he leaves the village. But one cannot totally demoralize him for it and say that he has no humanity. Because, soon after he says it, he repents. He offers his one month's salary, keeping a little sum out of it for his travel, and he also promises Ratan that he would introduce her to the succeeding postmaster. But Ratan refuses to accept anything. She leaves from there in tears, but the offer of money and consoling her by saying he would introduce her to the succeeding postmaster are not in genuine. The heaviness increases in the heart of the postmaster when he boards the boat that he wants to go back to Ratan at once and take Ratan along with him:

Then he felt grieved at heart, the sorrow stricken face of a village girl seemed to represent for him the great unspoken pervading grief of mother earth herself. At one moment he felt an impulse to go back and bring away with him that lonely waif, forsaken of the world.⁵

Sincere suffering and penance leads any one to self discovery and ultimate reality. Out of sincere suffering and sympathy he feels for Ratan, he understands the true meaning of life and human relationships. The transformation occurs in him through his sincere repentance and suffering thus:

So the traveler borne on the breast of the swift flowing river consoled himself with philosophical reflections on the numberless meetings and partings in the world and on death.⁶

Therefore the postmaster is not cruel but he attains maturity out of his genuine sympathy and suffering for the little village girl Ratan. Ramkanai is another character from the story Ramkanai's Folly .

When Ramkanai's elder brother Guru Charan dies, Ramkanai writes down the will for Guru Charan. Guru Charan bequeaths his property to his wife Barada Sundari. They have no children; therefore Ramkanai expects some part of property of his brother should at least be given to his son Nabadeep. To the contrary to his expectation nothing is left for his son and the will is all for his brother's wife. Though he writes it reluctantly, he safely hands over the will to Barada

Sundari. It causes a lot of disturbance in the house of Ramkanai. His wife pesters him for the property. As the disturbance increases to an intolerable degree, Ramkanai leaves for Banaras for some time to avoid this torture. By the time he returns from Banaras his wife and his son



creates a false will and false witness and challenge Barada Sundari in the court that the will she has is a false one. However the case comes for a trial, Ramkanai is the final witness to prove the will of Barada Sundari whether it is a fair one or a false one. But to the surprise and disappointment of his family members, Ramkanai admits the fact that Barada Sundari's will is a fair one and he himself has written it. He says before the judge:

Your honor, I'm old and infirm: I do not have the strength to speak for long. Let me say in brief what I mus. My brother the late Guru Charan Chakraborti bequeathed all his wealth and property before he died to his wife Smt.Barada Sundari. I wrote down the will myself and my brother signed in his own hand. The will my son Nabadip has produced is false⁷

In spite of the torture he suffers at home from his family members about the property, he does not yield to them. He stands for truth. He dismisses his own wife and son. This shows his honest nature and his conformity to truth.

Baidhyanath from the story The Golden Deer is another interesting character. His wife is Mokshada. She is a most self centered and greedy woman. She forgets her utter poor conditions of her parental home, how her family and herself is relieved from such conditions with the help of Baidhyanath's father and Baidhyanath himself, she tortures her husband for an immediate wealth and for an earning of unlimited money. Baidhyanath is very innocent. He is kind and loving to his wife and children. He is not harmful to anyone, moreover he is helpful to everyone. All the time he collects sticks and make them into beautiful walking sticks, give them away to the poor and the old. He is very charitable even makes the fishing rods, kite reels and distributes to the children. He never bothers about his earnings if he finds happiness only in helping others. His selfless nature has a fine depiction in the following lines:

It never occurs to him that he should work for a living. He spent his time cutting branches off trees and shaping them with infinite care into fine walking sticks. The young and old from miles around came to him for these sticks, which he gave away as gifts. This spirit of charity extended to fishing rods and kite reels as well, which took up a great deal of his time. Anything that required much time and effort, much chiseling and scraping out of all proportion to its practical worth, inspired boundless enthusiasm in him.⁸

She cannot appreciate her husband's simple way of living. She takes his innocence for his incompetence. She does not know the value of innocent love of her husband. He loves his wife and children very much. Baidhyanath sometimes feels sad about his meaningless



existence. This feeling would never come to him normally unless his wife reminds him of his worthlessness. At the time of Durga Puja every home is a happy home except Bydhyanath's. Bydhyanath asks his two sons what they want as gifts for puja, they say they want boats. He takes every pain to chisel the wood into two small beautiful boats as is described in the following lines:

*Baidyanath carried on whittling pieces of wood, and put them together to make two toy boats. He fixed masts on them, cut up pieces of cloth to make sails and little red flags, added a rudder and oars, and even little dolls for boatman and passengers. In all this he showed amazing skill and dexterity. Any boy who saw such boats without being thrilled to the core would evince a self-control rarely found these days. When Baidyanath presented the boats to his sons, they danced with delight. The hull itself would have been ample; and here were rudder, oars, masts, sails and even a boatman!*⁹

He takes a lot of pain to make the two boats. For a poor father

like him, though he has love in abundance, it is very difficult to present his sons expensive gifts. He has made those two boats with a sensible heart of a father, putting all his love and affection into it. His wife does not understand it. Though she is mother, she does not know the simple things for her children bring them great joy. She takes away the boats and throws them away. He is so gentle that he does not even say a single word to his wife for all she does. What all he does is that he feels sad at heart and stands in silence thinking of his useless existence. The main problem of his wife is their neighbor, wife of Bydhyanath's cousin. Her feeling is that, when the wife of her next door enjoys wealth at her will, she cannot enjoy anything on account of her innocent husband. It is the real cause of her sorrow. Finally on the advice of Mokshada's uncle, he is forced to buy certain house in Varanasi, popularly believed to have some hidden treasure in it. By force Mokshada sends her husband to Varanasi. After a fruitless search for hidden treasure in the house, he comes back home. Bydyanath is given very cold treatment from his wife after his return from Varanasi and it is too much for his innocent heart that he leaves the world without trace.

Another interesting character is Raicharan, from the story The Child's Return. He is not only a loyal servant but also he is above all the men characters in his sacrificing his own son for the happiness of his master's family. Raicharan has been a servant in the house of his master since he was twelve. He belongs to the same community of his master. He has been the sole attendant to his master's only son Anukul. Anukul's childhood, schooling, college education and finally his marriage and everything happens in the care of Raicharan.



A child is born to Anukul. He is left into the hands of Raicharan. As he grows up to the stage of calling Raicharan, chan-na, he takes out the baby in go cart everywhere. Once he takes out the child to the riverside. The sight of the flowers of Kadamba tree attracts the child. He insists his chan-na to get them. Finally Raicharan yields to the demands of his little master. But he leaves for picking up the flowers, giving the child strong instructions not to move towards the river. As if the fate dictates, the child does the same and the river washes him away. The heart of Raicharan almost ceases to throb. He goes to Anukul and describes what has happened, but his mistress throws him out. Later he goes back to his own village. He has a son after many years of his marriage. His wife dies soon after giving birth to a child. His sister feeds the baby and named him Phailina but he is not happy with his son. In fact he has some resentment on the baby. His mind is always preoccupied with his little master's memories, and often the memories of master's child disturb him. His loyalty for his master and his love for his young master is so sincere that he feels:

*It is a great offence to be happy with a son of his own after what happened to his master's little child.*¹⁰

As the child grows up, he bears the features of his little master, who has died in the river Padma. He is surprised to see the resemblance between his son and his old little master and soon he decides to reach him to the house of Anukul at an appropriate time, so that the loss of his little master can be compensated with his presence into the house of Anukul. From then he forgets his personal comforts and also he forgets his son to be of his own son and he feels that he is son of Anukul. He sells the gold ornaments of his wife and has gold bracelets and gold bangles and chain to the child. He brings up the child without letting him aware of the fact that he is his father. The child does not know what pain means or what suffering means. He does everything for the boy beyond his limitations thus:

*At last the time came for the boy to go to school. Raicharan sold his small piece of land and went to Calcutta. There with great difficulty he found employment as a servant and sent Phailina to school. He spared no pains to give him the best education, the best clothes, the best food. Meanwhile, he himself lived on a mere handful of rice.*¹¹

He does menial works and save some money for his son's education. He passes through hunger but he feeds his son with best food. He never treats his son as his own son. He treats him with such loyalty that he had once for his little master. He intends to send Phailina to the house of Anukul. Finally the time has reached when he loses his employment because of his old age. Raicharan considers, it is the right time to send his son to Anukul's house. He approaches Anukul and he says, his child is with him and once he takes his son to Anukul,



introducing his son to him as his father. He bears the blame of stealing the son of Anukul, in a way deprives his son, the rights of being a member of their family. The mistress of the house excuses him, but finally Anukul asks him to move out of his sight. At the suggestion of his son he fixes a monthly pension for Raicharan, when a money order is sent to his address it comes back as an indicative of his death. Having lost one's wife, a private life of an ordinary man revolves round the other woman, because it may not be just for physical comfort, but it may be for an emotional company. Raicharan, without giving himself to such thought, bringing up his son only to send him into his old master's house as a compensation for the mishap took place in his master's house for no fault of him is no little sacrifice and is no little commitment. Though he is a servant, in his understanding, sympathy and sacrifice for the sake of others happiness, he is above his master. Thus, when one looks at the above men characters in the short stories of Tagore, one would understand that Tagore portrayed men who are capable of loving, understanding, being kind and sympathetic to others and sacrificing their joys and comforts and happiness for the sake of others, and that men are also capable of human sentiments as women are, and that Tagore has not given any disproportionate picture of man or woman by idealizing one, by ignoring the other.

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