

GLIMPSES OF BENGAL IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S STORIES

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1913 was the landmark year for Indian literary scene when Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian person, was awarded Noble Prize for literature. He was a man of true genius who wrote with utmost passion and with the child-like zeal. It is nearly impossible to talk about this great artist in a few words, or a paper. Tagore was a true multi-layered personality which is evident through his works as a novelist, poet, musician, short-story writer, painter, dramatist, activist, philosopher, musician, social reformer, a great academician, and above all a hardcore patriot! His works not only have enchanted the Bengalis but made the whole world dance to his tunes.

The Indian short story in English has a century long history which dates way back into 1898 when Kamala Sathianadan's *Stories from Indian Christian Life* was published. Since then it has attained maturity in many different ways. The writers seem to be settled and explore the themes in more matured manner than ever. The result of which is that Indian works are being given due credit and importance. Experimentation has always been a highlight of Indian literature. Bengali and Marathi literature in particular have shown tremendous growth and have enchanted the readers for ages. Tagore clearly scores an advantage over the other writers as he wrote in both Bengali and English and translated himself the stories into English from Bengali. That has helped him to keep the soul of the stories intact. Moreover his understanding of Bengali life has helped him immensely in producing powerful literary works. Having travelled worldwide gave him a chance to have a close look at the cultures of many countries and to compare it with Indian culture and also made stronger his belief in ancient Indian values and culture.

Tagore's short stories are probably the most neglected of all his literary works. But if one go through them thoroughly it becomes crystal clear that his stories too are powerful and they belong to the league of its own! Tagore's short story world is full of the portrayal of the protagonists chosen from cross-section of society. The stories take us into the boundless joys of a child's world, the sorrows and pathos of women, and the problems of working men. He has dealt an array of themes and depicted the characters with utmost care. India being a multi-lingual, multi-cultural country scores more as it has advantages of its own. The India-colonized and postcolonial- have shown tremendous maturity in its character. Though being ruled for more than a century and a half, India has maintained its essential cultural values throughout. The period in which Tagore wrote is considered as the Golden era of Indian

literature as it witnessed the works of stalwarts like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Munshi Premchand. Works of these writers did establish Indian firmly on the world literary map.

The Tagore stories are presented in a no-nonsense attitude and focus upon the struggles of ordinary people. He gives full panoramic view of the then Bengal and its people and culture in most charismatic way. It is an accepted fact that no one else could have given the identity to Bengal the way Tagore has done that. The stories *The Cabuliwallah*, *The Babus of Nayanjore*, *The Postmaster*, and *Subha* have the protagonists chosen from almost all walks of Bengali life. These stories are the case studies having the background both- rural and urban, and discuss the problems of the protagonists in most delicate manner.

Tagore's stories start abruptly and revolve round a trivial and ordinary looking theme. But as the story progresses one is given a chance to have an encounter with the most critical human problems. His stories take us into the world of unending problems of men and women, who struggle to meet both ends. Actually his understanding of rural Bengali life comes from his own spending many years in calm and placid rural Bengal himself. Humayun Kabir writes about this:

Many were surprised that the Maharshi should select his youngest son, already known as a Poet and dreamer, to be in charge of the family properties. Tagore soon proved that his father had acted wisely in making a poet the manager of an estate. What is of interest to us is that made Tagore live for years in the village of Bengal. Much of this time he spent on a boat among the sandbanks of the Padma, and thus came into intimate contact with nature and man in rural Bengal. (10)

Tagore gave no place to bifurcation of ideals and culture in his life. A sense of *the unity of life* was his greatest strength. He gave importance to both- the poor and the rich- and gave way to their sufferings and problems. For Tagore short story was a strong medium through which he discussed the human predicament effectively.

Tagore was a sensitive person for whom women held high esteem. He had keen observation of Bengali culture and as a tribute to women and their contribution to the society he wrote most of his stories with the women protagonists as the central characters. *The Postmaster* and *Subha* are the two stories dealing with women's problems. It presents the hardships and struggles of two young Bengali girls Ratan and Subha respectively. It also gives us a glimpse of the then Bengali life. In K.V. Dominic's words, "Tagore was a practitioner of psychological and social realism" (19). Through his stories Tagore also highlights the nature-man relationship. This human-nature relationship is another hallmark of his stories. *The Postmaster* is a classic example of Tagore's talent as a writer. The story is of a village girl brought up in the lap of nature. The simplicity and directness in her character are because of her being with nature all the time. This power-packed story deals with the bond between a postmaster and an orphan village girl. In fact the bond is only a 'one-sided traffic'. The moment this postmaster enters the life of the girl, after joining his services in village Ulapur, Ratan's life changes drastically. Slowly but steadily the girl realizes what

brotherly love means. She starts taking care of the postmaster, her Dada, who in the end deserts her.

The story is full of gray shades and the setting is gloomy. The story evokes pathos, as in the end we feel for the girl who again will have to lead a 'lonely' life which would be more difficult than ever for her! The complexities of relationship are the central feature of Tagore's stories. Sheer need of company forces the postmaster to be friends with Ratan, an orphan girl. Slowly they both grow dependent on each other. Even when he yearns for a loving mate on a rainy afternoon:

Oh, if only some kindred soul could hold near my heart! This was exactly, he went on to think, what the bird was trying to say, and it was the same feeling which the murmuring leaves were striving to express. (165)

After the thought flashes into his mind he comes back to the world of reality and then calls Ratan to just console himself and to turn his thoughts to a different subject and says, "I was thinking of teaching you to read; and the rest of the afternoon he taught her the alphabet" (166). Their relationship grows naturally and at the end both of them are found tormented. When she asks him, "Dada, will you take me home with you?" (168), the postmaster laughs at this and says, "What an idea?" (168), this sharp reply shakes the girl throughout. For the whole night the postmaster's reply haunts her and makes her aware of the fact that she is an orphan girl! The girl faces the hour of truth when the postmaster informs Ratan that he will ask his successor to look after her. She retaliates by saying, "No, no you need not tell anybody anything at all about me; I don't want to stay on here". For her he was the one who cares for her, but when the postmaster, who was not hard-hearted, tries to give her some money she says, "Oh, Dada, I pray you, don't give me anything, don't in any way trouble about me" (170). She feels humiliated at the hands of a man whom she loved and trusted much, as her love for her Dada was unconditional. Then her figure running about the post-office, hoping to see her Dada coming back, evokes sudden sympathy for the girl and also evokes anger over the harsh realities we have to face in life. Tagore's sympathy goes with the simple, troubled, and lonely girl whom the postmaster leaves behind without caring. The narration of the postmaster leaving the village in a boat lets us connect with Ratan immediately, who undoubtedly would find solace amidst the nature only!

Tagore's stories appear to be simple and having an uninteresting plot, but still they have a charm to carry with. He was a true humanist who craved for the equality and justice for all including children and women. The child in a family is often being treated as an inferior. He has used this theme in his story *Subha*. In this story he gives way to the life and troubles of dumb girl. The dumb girl Subhasini, the youngest daughter of Banikantha, leads a silent life. This silent sufferer finds solace amidst nature and befriends with two cows-Sarbashi and Panguli. Her own mother is ignorant to her and the belief that she is a curse to her father makes her more restless. She shares her feelings with the cows who for her are the best friends:

Whenever she heard any words that hurt her, she would come to these dumb friends out of due time. It was as though they guessed her anguish of spirit from her quiet look of sadness. Coming close to her, they would rub their horns softly against her arms, and in dumb, puzzled fashion try to comfort her. (151)

It's a kind of slap on the face of whole human race where only the spoken words hold importance and a dumb one, though more capable than a normal human, has to lead a lonely and tortured life. In both the stories a vital role is played by emotions. Ratan and Subha both are the victims of destiny and both feel handicapped and they are left at the mercy of the other human beings. Their loneliness is the cause of concern for the writer.

Tagore has developed both these stories in rural setting. His shades of being a painter and musician are clearly visible in these stories wherein he invests word-music and exhibits a canvas full of various colours. *The Postmaster* has a rural setting of a remote village Ulapur and its green slimy pond, and rainy season. It instantly create picture of the same in the minds of the readers. In such setting the story of two ordinary folks develops. Subha's house is on the bank of a river and she would go and sit there quietly for hours. There is a certain flow of a river throughout the story. In Mohinder Kaur's words:

In story after story Tagore shows the different facets of life in Bengal and of life as such which peeps through the chinks of eternity. They are woven round their joys and sorrows of men, women and children enacting different roles in the mysterious drama of life. (Kaur 47)

On the other hand in the stories *The Cabuliwallah* and *The Babus of Nayanjore* the setting is urban. Both the stories show the protagonists as the resident of Calcutta. *The Babus of Nayanjore* is a story of a man who lives in the dreamy world of his past glory. We are forced to pity Kailash Babu, the protagonist, once we are being made aware of his glorious past:

..... They were noted for their princely extravagance. They would tear off the rough border of their Dacca muslin, because it rubbed against their skin. They could spend many thousands of rupees over the wedding of a kitten. On a certain grand occasion it is alleged that in order to turn night into day they lighted numberless lamps and showered silver threads from the sky to imitate sunlight. (175)

In fact Kailash Babu had seen more than a man could see in his lifetime. He has had his share of glory. The flood had washed away all his splendors with it and to manage things he had to move to Calcutta. In Calcutta he has to manage in a small house with only survivor along with him, his grand-daughter Kusum. His efforts to cling to his past glory are very amusing, but at the same time are touching too. With the help of his servant Ganesh he tries to impress his neighbours by telling them the lies in form of stories of his past. His true friends too show sympathy by accepting all his lies whole-heartedly. It is a story of a man who shifts from rural to urban area, having left no choice. Kailash Babu has no option but to hold fast to his past greatness, which makes him forget the bitter truth of his present poverty.

His young educated neighbour tries to push him in tight corner, as is the ways of youth, and make fun of him. But his cruel joke hurts Kusum, the tender granddaughter of Kailash Babu. His heart fills with remorse and he, in all humility, comes to Kailash Babu with an offer to marry Kusum. The old man feels more joyous and he breaks out, “I am a poor man and could have never expected such great good fortune” (194). This was the first and the last time when Kaiash Babu had ever confessed his poverty, which amaze the young man.

The story throws light on the pathetic conditions of the past glories of the landlords who used to live a very aristocratic and lavish life. But time changes and the extravagant life shifts to mere poverty, but the pride remains the same. This clash between the two persons from altogether different background is interesting. The actions of the young neighbour may anger us, but it was normal behaviour for the young man. Speaking about this Kabir says, “Men differ in appearance and build, they have different customs and traditions and even their emotional reactions differ because of differing backgrounds” (Kabir 40).

The Kabuliwallah is arguably the best mythical story of Tagore which shows him at the height of his imaginative powers. It is a fine example of Tagore’s artistic vision. The story is a milestone in his career as a short story writer, which works on many different levels. In this story Tagore weaves together several relationships that break the barriers of caste, creed and religion, in the background of Calcutta lanes. There are two different relationships explored in the story. One is the bond between two person with a huge age difference- Mini and Cabuliwallah, and the other is the bond between the narrator and the Cabuliwallah formed purely on the bases on one common factor of fatherhood. The character of Kabuliwallah is seems true to life. It evokes sudden sympathy for a man far away from his homeland, working hard to earn his livelihood for his family. It is a myth created by Tagore, which then acquires the stature of a legend. Myth has the power to hold societies together more strongly than languages. It provides insight into the mysteries of life, and to understand its intricacies we need to experience and appreciate it on its own. Rabindranath Tagore is probably the best myth user from Indian English literary field. According to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, “The myth-making power could be seen in *The Cabuliwallah*. In this story the character is seized by inward vision and presented with total understanding and love” (72).

The story has a mix of both happy and sad moments set beautifully in the streets of Calcutta. A peddler working hard, leading a lonely life in a huge city away from his motherland and his family, meets Mini for the first time and instantly they become friends. The man finds a suitable substitute to his own child and Mini finds a suitable companion who would listen to her constant chatter patiently which for her was missing till then. For her he becomes an embodiment of affection and fearlessness. Mini’s mother having concern for her daughter tries to oppose this strange relationship, but the narrator neglects that:

I tried to laugh her fear gently away; she would turn round seriously,
and ask me solemn questions:
Were children never kidnapped?
Was it not true that there was slavery in Kabul?
Was it so very absurd that this big man should be able to carry

off a tiny child? (268).

Despite this the friendship grows. Tagore has taken due care in creating Cabuliwallah's and Mini's characters. Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi in his preface to K.V. Dominic's "Pathos in the Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore" comments:

Kabuliwallah is a study of the mind of Mini, a five-year-old Bengali girl who forms friendship with a middle-aged Afgan peddler Rahman. It also hints at the social hierarchy which persisted in Bengal during Tagore's time. (Dominic: ix)

The Cabuliwallah's joyous face after meeting Mini, his interactions with her, his grave face when he had to go to prison, everything seems to be familiar to us. How a father feels desperate to meet his child becomes obvious when after releasing from prison the Cabuliwallah straightway goes to the narrator's home to meet Mini. The narrator tries to avoid him as that was the day of Mini's marriage and he thought of Rahman, the Cabuliwallah meeting his daughter as a bad omen. But then the father in the narrator realizes the vows of another father after taking a look at a dirty piece of paper bearing the impression of a little hand,

Tears came to my eyes. I forgot that he was a poor Kabuli

fruit-seller, while I was--. But no, what was I more than he? He

also was a father. (275)

The father in the narrator realizes that with the passage of time he can never experience the happy childhood of his daughter, which forces him to not only let the Cabuliwallah meet Mini, but to give him a currency-note! The story from happy trance moves into the never ending world of pathos where one father, the Cabuliwallah is suffering from the separation from his daughter and the other, the narrator was going to enter that state of mind. Tagore sums up the story in most touching words:

Having made this present, 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 about it. But to me the wedding feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father had met again his only child. (277)

The poet in Tagore never left him alone in other literary genres he explored. Even in his short stories, also, the traces of Tagore - the poet pops up many a times. In K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's words, "With Tagore's short stories the poetic flash is the main thing; it is the poet that sees the truth of things, the story-teller merely snapping the scene at the required angle" (73-74). This reaction by Iyengar proves to be more apt when we go through lines from *The Cabuliwallah*:

The morning was bright. After the rains, there was a sense of ablution in the air, and the sun-rays looked like pure gold. So bright were they that they gave a beautiful

radiance even to the sordid brick walls of our Calcutta lanes. Since early dawn to-day the wedding-pipes had been sounding, and at each beat my own heart throbbed. The wail of the tune, Bhairavi, seemed to intensify my pain at the approaching separation... (272)

No other writer, at least in India, could have made use of the poetic talent in short stories too up to such extent. His mastery over all forms of art is deeply rooted in his constant communion with nature and with people. Humayun Kabir's remark over this quality of the great man speaks volume. He says, "Rabindranath Tagore loved man with all the fervour of his imagination and feeling and held that there is nothing in creation higher than the spirit of man" (29). This fellow-feeling of Tagore makes him a true genius India has ever produced.

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