

Development of Rabindranath Tagore as a Short Story Writer

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore, a great poet and versatile genius, also write short stories during the same period. Those short stories are universal because in them Tagore has explored his inner self through immortal realistic characters who crave for love with perfect detachment. He has universalized his inner self that also craved for love in his childhood days and that was denied to him. Tagore has never commented on the characters in order to teach any moral lesson. Moreover, his short stories are modern because his characteristics of short stories are found in modern short stories. Tagore may be regarded as the pioneer of modern short stories of the world. A modern short story presents a character in a situation and the character reacts to the situation. The short story writer records the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist. Consequently action is undervalued and the place of plot is taken by suspense. The atmosphere is realistic but not without a vein of poetry. The attitude is that of toleration which the result of a humorous perspective is. On the whole, a modern short story communicates a mood. We get almost all the qualities of modern short stories in the short stories of Tagore.

Keywords: Character, Home-sick, Humorous perspective, Irony, Protagonist, Psychological, Suspense, Subtle humor, Symbols, Situation, Unfamiliar, Wit.

INTRODUCTION

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes,

*"He (Tagore) belongs unquestionably to Bengali literature, but he belongs to Indo-Anglian literature too—indeed, he belongs to all India and the whole world."*¹

In his biography "Rabindranath Tagore" E. H. Carter writes that Tagore considered the speech of the common people to be the foundation of all writings. The mother tongue was like a stream and the culture of the world was like a sea. Tagore believed that by following his mother tongue he could reach the culture of the world as the stream flowed into the sea. So he wrote in Bengali as it was spoken by the common people of Bengal. Carter goes on to say that Tagore was primarily a lyric poet. But he wrote plays, novels and short stories also. Carter feels that Tagore's short stories deal with touching human experiences. They are perhaps his best work.

The short story is the youngest genre because it has developed in the twentieth century and soon become very popular. In Europe the great nineteenth century writers of the short story are the Russians, the French and the Americans. The short stories of Tolstoy, Maupassant and Poe set standards of a very high order. But in India, Rabindranath Tagore, a great poet and versatile genius, also write short stories during the same period. Those short stories are universal because in them Tagore has explored his inner self through immortal realistic characters who crave for love with perfect detachment. He has universalized his inner self that also craved for love in his childhood days and that was denied to him. Tagore has never commented on the characters in order to teach any moral lesson. Moreover, his short stories are modern because his characteristics of short stories are found in modern short stories. Tagore may be regarded as the pioneer of modern short stories of the world.

A modern short story presents a character in a situation and the character reacts to the situation. The short story writer records the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist. Consequently action is undervalued and the place of plot is taken by suspense. The atmosphere is realistic but not without a vein of poetry. The attitude is that of toleration which the result of a humorous perspective is. On the whole, a modern short story communicates a mood. We get almost all the qualities of modern short stories in the short stories of Tagore.

Holiday is a typical short story written by Tagore. In the story he explores the inner self

of a boy of fourteen and presents his psychological problems superbly with poetic flashes. Phatik Chakrabarti is the leader of the gang of the boys of the village. His mind is full of mischiefs. All the boys follow his order. Phatik has a younger brother named Makhanlal. His mother is a widow. For his mischiefs he is often beaten by his mother who is fed up with him. Yet Phatik is very happy because he enjoys the affection and love of his mother. He also enjoys the leadership of the gang.

One day, Bishvambhar, Phatik's maternal uncle comes and decides to take Phatik with him to Calcutta for proper education. Phatik is very happy and before he goes he bestows on Makhan his fishing-rod, kite and reel, with permanent right of inheritance. But there is a problem with his age. In a beautiful passage Tagore analyzes the problems of a boy of fourteen.

"There is no greater nuisance in the world than a boy of thirteen or fourteen. There is no beauty in him, and he does nothing useful either. He arouses no affection; nor do his company welcome. If he speaks modestly he sounds false; if he speaks sense he sounds arrogant; if he speaks at all he is felt to be intrusive. He suddenly shoots up in height so that his clothes no longer fit him-which is an ugly affront to other people. His childish grace and sweetness of voice suddenly disappear, and people find it impossible not to blame him for this. Many faults can be forgiven in a child or a young man, but at this age even natural and unavoidable faults are felt to be unbearable. He himself is fully aware that he does not fit properly into the world, so he is perpetually ashamed of his existence and seeks forgiveness for it." ²

Tagore writes, "To leave home and other and go to a stranger place is hell for a boy of this age. To live with loveless indifference all around is like walking on thorns."³

Soon Phatik, the leader of the gang of the village, is miserable in Calcutta. He wants love and affection. But the tall houses of Calcutta seem to choke him. His maternal aunt finds him to be a burden. She has three sons and they are enough. Phatik works for her but does not get her love but hatred. At school he is not a good student. He is considered to be stupid. Even his cousins join them to make him a fool. He remembers his mother and wishes to be near her. He asks his uncle when he will go home to see his mother. His uncle says that he will go home when the school holiday comes. But the Puja holiday is a long way off.

One day Phatik loses his book. He cannot prepare his lesson. So he is caned every day. He goes to his aunt and speaks about the book. But he is disappointed. When he does not get money, he

feels miserable. He has a terrible headache. It is a stormy night. Phatik cannot be found anywhere. The police are informed and they bring Phatik who is muddy and wet. Bishvambhar takes him in. His wife says that the boy must be sent back home. Phatik hears her words and sobs out loud. "I was going to my mother", said Phatik weeping, "But they brought me back." ⁴ The boy's fever climbs alarmingly. His uncle brings a doctor. He is delirious all night.

"Opening his bloodshot eyes for a moment and staring blankly the ceiling joists, Phatik said, uncle, has my holiday-time come?" 'Mother doesn't beat me, Mother. I did not do anything wrong, honest!'"⁵

Bishvambar tells Phatik that he has sent for his mother. The day goes by. The doctor declares that the boy's condition is very critical. Phatik starts to shout out like a boatman to measure the depth of the sea- "More than one fathoms deep, more than two fathoms deep!" ⁶ Then he is himself plumbing an unfathomable sea. It is then that his mother storms into the room, bursting into loud wails of grief. "Turning slowly on to his side, and looking at no one Phatik said softly, "Mother, my holiday has come now, I'm going home." ⁷ Phatik is not going to his village home but to heaven which is his permanent home.

Holiday is a very good short story because it shows the psychological reaction of a boy of fourteen, who is taken away from his familiar surroundings to an unfamiliar place where he finds no affection or love. The contrast between his freedom and activity at home and his condition in his uncle's house is a general pointer to the contrast between the village life and the town life. The story is concrete with details which reinforce the general ideas. The unforgettable account of a boy of fourteen is relevant because it is also a picture of Phatik. In this way the story is written with a singleness of purpose and it creates the unity of impression so necessary for the success of a modern short story.

Holiday deals with the transplantation of a spirited village lad into the uncongenial and cramping atmosphere of a town and his longing to return to the paradise that is home. Thus a situation is created. Tagore has wrung pathos out of this commonplace situation and with profound psychological and poetic insight into the heart of a fourteen-year-old; he has transformed the simple village lad into the tragic protagonist of an intensely moving drama.

In his short story **Unwanted** Tagore explores the inner self of a homeless Brahmin boy named Nilkanta who yearns for love and affection and Tagore analyzes the paradox that Nilkanta

has stolen, yet he is not a thief in a very exciting manner.

Nilkanta, a Brahmin boy, gets shelter in the house of Sharat Babu and Kiranmayi after his shipwreck. Kiran, the wife of Sharat takes special care of Nilkanta who begins to consider and respect her as his god-mother. Nilkanta is very happy to get Kiran's love while Kiran is very much amused to get a brahmin boy as a servant. Kiran is ill and she has come to Chandernagore with her husband and mother-in-law for quick recovery. She is a social lady and so she is bored with the mechanical life there. But she is happy to find a new occupation to look after Nilkanta. Sharat and his mother are also happy. But soon they begin to dislike Nilkanta. Sometimes Sharat boxes and pulls his ears and beats him. But Nilkanta tolerates everything because he knows that he enjoys the affection of his god-mother, Kiran.

Then Tagore creates a situation. Satish, Sharat's brother comes to Chandernagore to spend his college vacation with them. He brings with him from Calcutta a beautiful inkstand which he loves very much. It is a fancy inkstand with two shell-boats on either side to hold the ink, and a German silver swan is there in the middle with its wings spread and breaks open to hold the pens. Satish prizes this greatly and he sometimes polishes it carefully with a silk handkerchief.

Kiran becomes very happy to find a fresh occupation. She and Satish are of the same age and they pass time in a pleasant manner. Kiran diverts her attention to Satish and slowly Nilkanta is losing the love of Kiran. He is hungry for love and affection. He feels that Satish is poisoning Kiran's ears against him. His heart burns within him, but he never shows his enmity openly.

Nilkanta wait for the call of Kiran to take food. But it does not come. Tagore writes; "He (Nilkanta) would then turn out the lamp in his room, throw himself down on the dark bed, sobbing and choking and pressing his face into the pillow. But who came to give him comfort? Eventually sleep-kindest of nurses-came with her gentle touch to bring relief to this sad, motherless boy."⁸ The boy remains hungry for many days. The affectionate call never comes.

At last it is time for Kiran and others to return home. Kiran wants to take Nilkanta with them. But all are opposed to her idea. So Kiran advises Nilkanta to go back home. But Nilkanta begins to weep. Satish asks Kiran not to be moved away by his tears. In the morning before departure Satish's swan inkstand is missing. Everybody suspects Nilkanta, but Kiran saves him by declaring that "Nilkanta did not steal your inkstand."⁹

Kiran decides to give Nilkanta secretly some loving gifts and a ten rupee note inside the box.

She opens the box and wants to rearrange things so that her gifts can be placed there. She brings out all the things one by one. She is very much surprised when she finds, at the bottom, Satish's precious swan inkstand. Amazed and flushed, Kiran sits pondering for a long time with the inkstand in her hand. Then she keeps it and her gift and money. Nilkanta has seen everything. Tagore writes, "He saw everything: realized that Kiran had herself come like a thief to confirm his thieving, and that he had been caught. But how he could explain that he had not stolen like a common thief out of greed, that he'd done it in retaliation.....He was not a thief, he was not a thief! But then what was he? How could he say what he was? He had stolen something but he was not a thief!"¹⁰

The fact that Kiran has suspected him-it is the cruel injustice of this that he will never be able to bear. He cannot make Kiran understand that he is not a thief. Revenge has prompted him to take that inkstand that he has meant to throw into the river. He has stolen the inkstand, no doubt, but he is not a thief from his point of view. Then the paradox is justified. But, perhaps his god-mother has understood his inner self. So she keeps it again in the box without declaring him to be a thief. Nilkanta feels ashamed before Kiran's goodness and leaves the house without the box. He remains an unwanted person to the family. Then Kiran brings the box into her room and throws the inkstand into the river. All leave the place. But, "the house and garden lay empty. Only Nilkanta's Village dog remained. It wandered along by the river, forgetting to eat, searching, searching and howling."¹¹

In this way Tagore explores the hidden inner self of Nilkanta who longs for love and affection by placing him in a particular situation to which the protagonist reacts by stealing the inkstand and he is not a thief although he has stolen. There is no plot. Only suspense is there to present the psychological reaction that Tagore captures brilliantly.

In **Kabuliwallah** Tagore explores the inner self of an Afghan, named Abdur Rahman, in order to universalize filial love of every place of the world. In it Tagore has used the first person singular for the narrator of the story. In many stories, like the narrator of this story, the narrator is a shallow, jauntily, self-regarded individual, who is changed and deepened by the events of the story, or by a story, told to him by someone else. This tone is found in **Kabuliwallah** and Tagore's capacity for scepticism, mockery and hard-headed rationality contributes just as much to his realism as does his awareness of grief and suffering.

Abdur Rahman, a Kabuliwallah, comes to Calcutta to sell nuts and dried fruits. He is a tall

man ambling along the road of Calcutta. Mini, a little girl, is the daughter of the narrator who is a writer. She is always chattering and her father is a patient listener, but at times he also becomes impatient.

One day Mini sees the Kabuliwallah and calls him. When the Kabuliwallah turns, she is full of fear and runs to her mother. When the Kabuliwallah comes, the narrator has to buy something. He talks to him for a bit. When he gets up to leave, he asks, "Babu, where did your little daughter go?"¹² Mini comes, but she cannot shake off her fear. That is their first meeting. Then Tagore develops the story with much humour and suspense. In fact suspense is the prime mover of all the stories.

After a few days Mini is found talking to and laughing with the Kabuliwallah who is a patient listener. He has given Mini nuts and dried fruits. The narrator gives him a half-rupee for those things and goes away. When he returns home, he finds that his wife has lost her temper and asks Mini, "Where did you get this half-rupee from?"¹³ In fact the Kabuliwallah has returned that coin to Mini.

The narrator has seen Mini often with the Kabuliwallah after their first meeting. They are great friends. They have their own jokes. The Kabuliwallah tells Mini that he has an elephant in his bag. Both burst out into laughter. The narrator observes: "The notion of an elephant in his bag was the source of immense hilarity; it might not be a very subtle joke, but they both seemed to find it very funny and it gave me pleasure to see, on an autumn morning, a young child and a grown man laughing so heartily."¹⁴

They have other jokes also. Rahmat will say, "don't ever go off to your *Sasur-bari*."¹⁵ In fact the word means the house of the father-in-law. But Rahmat means it to be a prison. Mini does not know the meaning of the word. She asks Rahmat if he is going there. Shaking his fist at an imaginary father-in-law Rahmat says, "I'll settle him!" Mini laughed merrily as she imagined the fate awaiting this unknown creature called a *sasur*.¹⁶ But Mini's mother does not trust the Kabuliwallah. She asks her husband to remain watchful.

Rahmat is to go home in January. So he is busy in collecting money. But he never fails to see Mini. To see them together, one may well suppose that they are plotting something. If he does not come in the morning, he is sure to come in the evening. His appearance in the evening in darkness is indeed frightening. The narrator observes:

*"But my heart would light up as Mini ran to meet him smiling, O Kabuliwallah, Kabuliwallah,' and the usual innocent jokes passed between the two friends, unequal in age though they were."*¹⁷

One day Rahmat has quarreled with a man who will not pay his money back. He takes out his knife and stabs the man. He is going to prison. Mini sees Mm and asks him if he is going to his *sasur-bari*: "Yes, I'm going there now", said Rahmat with a smile. But when he saw that his reply had failed to amuse Mini, he brandished his handcuffed fists and said, "I would have killed my *sasur*, but how can I with these on?"¹⁸

Rahmat is convicted of assault, and sent to prison for several years. He slowly fades away from the minds of all. They have no thought to how a free-spirited mountain-dweller is passing his years behind prison walls. Mini also swiftly forgets her old friend.

Several years go by. Rahmat is set free one night. Next morning he comes to see Mini. It is the day of Mini's marriage. The narrator feels, "our pride and joy, like Durga going to Mount Kailas, darken her parents' house by moving to her husband's."¹⁹ He does not like that Mini should see Rahmat that day. Rahmat has brought a box of grapes and a few nuts and raisins wrapped in paper. When he realizes that he cannot see Mini, he says, "Babu salaam," and then returns and says, "I brought this box of grapes and these nuts and raisins for the little one," he said, "Please give them to her. Taking them from him, I was about to pay him for them when he suddenly clasped my arm and said, "Please, don't give me any money I shall always be grateful, Babu. Just as you have a daughter, so do I have one, in my own country? It is with her in mind that I came with a few raisins for your daughter. I did not come to trade with you."²⁰

Then he brings from his loose dress a small and dirty piece of paper. He unfolds that paper with great care if the paper had life. He makes the paper straight on the narrator's table. The narrator is dumbfounded seeing an impression of a small hand. It is neither a photograph nor a painting. It is just a thing of remembrance, a thing of love. Every year Rahmat carries this memento of his daughter in his breast-pocket to sell raisins in Calcutta's streets as if the touch of that soft, small, childish hand brought solace to his huge home-sick breast. The narrator's eyes swim at the sight of it, *"I forgot then that he was an Afghan raisin-seller and I was a Bengali Babu, I understood then that he was as I am, that he was a father just I am a father. The hand-print of his little mountain-dwelling Parvati reminded me of my own Mini"*²¹

At once the narrator sends for Mini in spite of many objections Mini, dressed as a bride,

comes into the room and stands close by the narrator. The Kabuliwallah is confused at first when he sees her. He cannot bring himself to utter his old greeting. At last he smiles and says, "Little one, are you going to your *Sasur-bari*?"²² Mini then knows the meaning of the word. She cannot reply as before. She blushes at Rahmat's question and looks away. The narrator remembers their first meeting. His heart begins to ache.

Mini leaves the room. Rahmat sighs deeply and sits down on the floor. He suddenly understands clearly that his own daughter will have grown up too. He will have to become re-acquainted. He does not know what has happened to her during these eight years. His mind begins to move among the barren mountains of Afghanistan. The narrator gives him a bank-note and asks him to go back home and daughter. Their blessed re-union will bless Mini. The story ends thus "By giving him this money, I had to trim certain items from the wedding festivities. I wasn't able to afford the electric illuminations I had planned, nor did the trumpet and band come... for me, the ceremony was lit by a kinder, more gracious light."²³

In this way Tagore, with great suspense, unfolds the mystery of the strange friendship between Mini and the Kabuliwallah. He has explored the inner self of Rahmat brilliantly and records his psychological superbly. The narrator is also moved by the story of Kabuliwallah. He reacts to the situation and is forced to believe that there is no difference between one father of a place and the other father of the other place of the world. The filial love is universal. Before this all mankind is one. Thus Kabuliwallah, Phatik Chakrabarti and Nilkanta are symbolic characters created by Tagore.

Tagore has written over ninety short stories and each story is unique in its own way. But he is at his best when he explores the inner self of the protagonist. In a speech at a felicitation ceremony in

1940 Tagore said, "... conventional wisdom isn't true knowledge. In true knowledge there is love: the heartfelt love with which I have observed village life has opened the door for me."²⁴

Tagore defended himself by pointing out that he had to play the demanding role of a pioneer in the art of writing short stories in Bengali. In his interview with Buddha Dev Bose he said, "*You speak about my language, and say that even in my prose I am a poet. But if my language sometimes goes beyond what is appropriate in a story, you can't blame me for that, for I had to create my Bengali prose myself. My language was not there, heaped up and ready-made... I had to create the prose of*

my stories as I went along."²⁵

"William Radice writes,

*"He (Tagore) was the first Bengali writer to think of the short story as a serious art-form, rather than merely as an entertaining way to fill up the pages of periodical; the first to write about real, contemporary life rather than romanticized history or myth."*²⁶

He concludes his introduction thus:

"His (Tagore's) blend of poetry and prose is all the more truthful for being incomplete."²⁷

In an English interview in 1935, when asked about "the background of your short stories and how they originated," Tagore replied,

*"It was when I was quite young that I began to write short stories. Being a land lord I had to go to villages and I came in touch with village people and their simple modes of life the.....river system of Bengal fascinated me. I got glimpses into the life of the people, which appealed to me very much indeed.....my earlier stories have this background and they describe this contact of mine with the village people. They have the freshness of youth. Before I had written these short stories there was not anything of that type in Bengali.....mine were full of the temperament of the rural people..... there is a note of universal appeal in them, for man is the same everywhere."*²⁸

CONCLUSION

Indeed Tagore's stories have universal appeal. His technique is also modern. He presents a situation and the character reacts to the situation. In **Holiday** Phatik's reaction is superbly presented. There is a touch of poetic flash and irony and subtle humour. In **Unwanted** we find Nilkanta's reaction to the situation by stealing Satish's inkstand and his declaration that he is not a thief. All these things are unique. His paradox is understood by his god-mother, Kiran only. All these characters crave for love. In **Kabuliwallah** the reaction of Rahmat is superbly presented by Tagore and the narrator of the story realizes that filial love is universal, that there is no difference between an Afghan and a Bengali Babu because both are fathers. But Tagore never comments on the incidents and the characters. He achieves complete objectivity. His message of love is felt everywhere. He has presented suspense, psychology, subtle humour, irony, wit and symbolic characters. His stories have no plot-suspense has taken its place.

Tagore's claim of universality does not go in vain because man is everywhere the same. No doubt, Rabindranath Tagore is a great short story writer of the world because in the nineteenth century his short stories

have presented all the characteristics which modern short story writers are trying to do. We conclude with the words of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar,

“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 suggested angle. Quite unexpectedly the poet of nature and humanity suddenly reveals his hand, our eyes open wide, and the pulses quicken as the heart beats faster.”²⁹

Indeed Tagore's short stories will never become stale.

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