

Tagore's Aesthetics Revealed in his Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss Rabindranath Tagore's aesthetics manifested in his selected short fictions. Evidently, the world-famed author from India has portrayed the society, the culture and the people in a particular milieu where he lives during his time. Tagore's aesthetics basically conforms to Indian's view on art; where strong sense of humanism and realism apparently surface on the stories he has written and artistically woven with evident lyricism. The touching stories of common people are pictured with vividness that only a great writer can portray through the use of compelling words and expressions.

Key Words: aesthetics, rasa (flavor or taste), lyricism, humanism, realism, social context

Aesthetics, the study of art, beauty and taste, is manifested in literature as writers express their thoughts and ideas through the medium of language. Interestingly, every author has his/her own distinct manner of presenting hi/her craft, undoubtedly influenced by beliefs and philosophical underpinnings of the society where he/she belongs.

Rabindranath Tagore, India's first Nobel Laureate, is a prolific writer, who wrote his first poem at age eight. Within his lifetime, he has written ninety short stories along with over twenty-five volumes of poetry, fifteen plays, eleven novels, thirteen volumes of essays, has kept up correspondence involving thousands of letters, composed over two thousand songs, and after the age of seventy, created more than two thousand pictures and sketches. Tagore has also composed what are now the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh (O'Connell, 2003). Indeed, his voluminous works bespeak of an unsurpassed man of letters.

Tagore's aesthetic ideas as expounded by Sil (2013) are grounded solidly in the literary, philosophical, and religious traditions of the culture he inherited, albeit embellished and complemented significantly by the impact of Western influence – that of the Romantic Movement in particular, he imbibed. Similarly, Singh (2011) includes in his review of Quayum's Translations of Tagore's Selected Stories, the focus of Tagore's short fictions:

Tagore's stories encompass the vastness of human nature and the miscellany of vicissitudes and beliefs by which human beings both degraded themselves as well as triumphed over such degradation. While Tagore is not essentially a comic writer, he is, oftentimes capable of eliciting a good laugh by narrating episodes or describing scenes which make us laugh, or at least smile. But for the main part, Tagore remains committed to serious moral questioning of norms, values, traditions, customs and practices; in his native country of India, humanity's vast book lay open for scrutiny – and Tagore scrutinized. From the sheer poverty so harrowing to the horrific treatment of women and those labelled as untouchables by those who persisted in honouring the most menacing of Indian institution, the caste system, to corruption and weakness as enemies of our better character. Tagore was merciless in laying bare the truths behind the truth, and this did not sit easy with many.

The fictions Tagore has written, especially the short stories are most highly regarded – they reflect his aesthetics discussed in his famous essay, “*What is Art*”, where he points out that “the artist combines what is individual with what is universal”. He further notes that “one vital element of art is the element of realization of truth through love and sympathy” (Sastri, 1988). These ideas are mirrored in his stories, as he fuses individual experience associated with universal truth. Undeniably, Tagore’s life experiences must have contributed to the insights and ideals he has poured out in his works. To reinforce this concept, Kampchen (2008) remarks that “The Bengal Poet has not written his poems and songs without the experiences of alienation and anxiety, without the fear and trembling, he too felt when faced by the mysteries of life. Though he lived among his people with whom he shared a common language and culture, he was not confined to them, rather struggled through the ups and downs, through **ananda** (joy) and **dukha** (sorrow) and even his light-hearted, full-throated, melodiously happy verses are impregnated by this. Here, I see his universality.”

Nevertheless, the mingling of truth and beauty, love and sympathy, make his touching stories beautiful and unforgettable, since they display the aesthetic principle cited by Raghupati KV (2013):

“The principle according to which we judge a flower as beautiful also enables us to judge the universe as a thing of beauty. That principle is unity in diversity. The more completely we view the great panorama of the universe, the more we realize that good and evil, pleasure and pain, life and death, in their ceaseless ebb and flow, constitute the symphony of the universe. When we contemplate the symphony as a whole no note sounds false, nothing is ugly.”

In a conversation with Albert Einstein, Tagore was reported to have averred that “Beauty is the ideal of perfect harmony which is the Universal Being; truth the perfect comprehension of the universal mind.”

The value of truth is emphasized in Tagore's treatise on art as explained below:

The function of art is the building of man's own world, a living world of truth and beauty. It is this that brings him towards the discipline of truth and the truth of his self-expression. All man's creative efforts stem from this search and discipline: of self-realization. He might at times consent, or be forced to move along the path of the real – for this too is material meant to be used rather than spurned – but ultimately art points to the True. (cited by Ghose in "Angel of Surplus" 1978).

Parker (1946) reinforces such idea when he claims in his book about 'intellectualistic theory', that art seeks to express truth, thus the immediate pleasure that we feel in the beautiful is tantamount to the instant delight in the revelation of truth.

Another characteristic of a great art is the portrayal of reality, which affirms Heidegger's (1971) notion on art's function. Admittedly, the beauty of Tagore's stories lies on the verisimilitude, baffling events and emotions, in the joys and sorrows felt by the characters as they struggle in a stifling society with its unique cultural beliefs and traditions. In his stories, Tagore also reveals his experiences and observations about people, especially the men and women in the street; an observation Chakhavarty (1961) reinforces to the effect that "Tagore wrote stories with psychological depth about the common people - the ordinary men and women, especially the poor." His usual choice of subjects in his short stories brought universality to his works as the familiar experiences, feelings and emotions find reality in the characters he creates.

Prasad (2004) holds the unique blending of lyricism with the realism in Tagore's short stories. We perceive in them rich emotionalism – not bathos – and at the same time a realistic portrayal of the poor and middle – class people in hamlets and small towns. Tagore's skillful description of life of lowly folks is riveting in the short story, 'The Homecoming', where the influence of nature affects the characters. In this regard, Dominic (2013) points out that 'Tagore was a practitioner of psychological and social realism. His stories depict poignant human relationships within a simple, relatively uneventful plot.' This observation prevails in the majority of the stories studied, where human relationships suffer because of selfishness, narrow-mindedness and even domestic quarrels – themes Tagore lyrically dwells on in Poem 35 of **Gitanjali**.

Furthermore, in the short story, 'My Lord, The Baby', the mundane life of an ordinary servant is portrayed; however, the author has shown far more transcendental, something which can be seen only by the inner eye and the pure of heart.

'The Elder Sister' is another good example of Tagore's remarkable display of poetic lyricism; yet, dealing on simple conflicts and everyday lives of the people in Hindu society. In reading this short story one would readily feel its power to arouse sympathy, thus pathos and poignancy can be felt in this literary piece (Dominic, 2013). Furthermore, Dominic stresses that "Tagore's characters weep because of conflict between goodness and cruelty, depth and shallowness."

Modernism and humanism pervade in the short story 'The Patriot' as Tagore deftly weaves the thread of artistic language meticulously chosen to be deemed as worthy of praise. The universality of the theme is evident, as Tagore touches on the disquieting issue on social stratification and caste in India, a system which results in discrimination and chaos and undoubtedly experienced by people from the different parts of the globe. Thus, as Kampchen (2008) writes, 'creative writers like Tagore do not merely create works of art, but they also create a new art of living which translates as much as possible, the essence of their creative impulses into a social context.'

Profound humanism therefore suffuses in the majority of Tagore's works. In 'The Patriot', for instance, one senses that the author wishes to point out that our fellow human beings must be treated equally, a kind of treatment that transcends caste and whatever social stratification exists in a society, indeed a reworking of Tolstoy's insistence on fostering brotherhood among men, in literature. Moreover, Tagore's views echo those of Foucault who discusses a sociological concept which he termed as 'othering' or regarding the other person as one's inferior. As pictured in the short story, the mute defiance of the main character Girindra against constricting tradition and culture is also Tagore's sentiments about the social issues in his country.

Tagore's view on the oppressive nature of caste is revealed again in the short story, 'The Renunciation' where he uses Hemanta as his mouthpiece to express his revolt against such social issue. More important, his unmistakable humanism stands out in presenting Hemanta's compassion to his wife as well as the triumph of love over social inequality and human

idiosyncrasies. Evidently shown in this story is Tagore's ability to enter into the human hearts both of his characters and his readers.

Tagore's protest against his people's adherence to some irrational beliefs raises the readers' consciousness in the story, 'Stolen Treasure', wherein he presents the consequences of belief in superstition. Equally important, Tagore explores the ideal relationship between husband and wife putting emphasis on the value of love in a relationship. Ostensibly, Tagore implies that equality in the domestic world could be attained if love would pave the way.

The sad plight and social injustices suffered by women in Hindu society have not escaped his readers' attention either- indeed these issues stare us in the face. After all, this poet-prophet and social reformer has a soft spot in his heart for women, a positive aspect undoubtedly revealed in the story, 'The Wife's Letter', where a psychological presentation of women's plight in his country is illustrated by way of a letter using a woman (Mrinal) as his mouthpiece. With utter clarity and simplicity in the use of words evident in the narration, Tagore's pathos pours into the whole narrative combined with a defiance that ensues from a rebellious heart.

By nature, his women characters appear "frail and fair, yet wise and strong, always – or almost always – more sinned against than sinning. He plumbs into the depths of the womanly heart and behind the seemingly wiles and the helpless gestures, sees reserves of devotion and sacrifice" (Iyengar, 2001). For instance, in the story, 'The Judge', Hemshashi or Kshiroda becomes a prostitute, but her desolate state is justified and the pure love she has for Mohit appears to be her redeeming grace, not much unlike Sonia's devotion to Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's **Crime and Punishment**.

Tagore's great insight into woman's heart again illuminates in the story, 'The Elder Sister'. As in his other stories, Sasikala, the main character, is presented as a wise and strong woman ready to fight and even defy some social norms in order to defend what she upholds right and true. However, such idealism may lead to eventual disintegration of the old family ties, since Tagore made his women characters intense lovers of freedom and truth. A poet at heart, Tagore's lavish poeticism is evident in his short stories, a singular style that stands out in his works and reflects among his other short stories. Notably, Tagore has adroitly woven a literary piece combining the vivid influence of tradition and culture with the modern ideas he wants to

convey. Another short story, 'The Victory' exemplifies a literary gem written with intense lyricism, as images pile up to heighten the readers' sense and sensibility.

“Next day Shekhar began his song. It was of that day when the pipings of love's flute startled for the first time the hushed air of the Vrinda forest. The shepherd women did not know who was the player or whence came the music. Sometimes it seemed to come from the heart of the south wind, and sometimes from the straying clouds of the hill-tops. It came with a message of tryst from the land of the sunrise, and it floated from the verge of sunset with its sigh of sorrow... “

In the short story, 'The Postmaster', the lyricism overpowers, as the paragraphs below prove:

He felt like a fish out of water in this remote village. His office and living-room were in a dark thatched shed, not far from a green, slimy pond, surrounded on all sides by a dense growth.

...At times he tried his hand at writing a verse or two. That the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky were enough to fill life with joy such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expression. But God knows that the poor fellow would have felt it as the gift of a new life, if some genie of the Arabian Nights had in one night swept away the trees, leaves and all, and replaced them with a macadamised road, hiding the clouds from view with rows of tall houses.

Tagore's lyricism also resurfaces in the story, 'The Supreme Night', where his well – combed out phrases strike us for their forceful diction. The following paragraphs from the story tell of Tagore's dexterity:

“I am no genius. In the quiet of the home I may form vast plans; but when I enter the field of work, I have to bear the yoke of the plough on my neck like the Indian bullock, get my tail twisted by my master, break clods all day, patiently and with bowed head, and then at sunset have to be satisfied if I can get any cud to chew. Such a creature has not the spirit to prance and caper.”

“That one night, out of all the days and nights of my allotted span, has been the supreme glory of my humble existence.”

Tagore’s poeticism is equally observed in this story where excellent expressions such as the following seem to leap through the pages:

“Like the autumn, there comes at youth’s end a mellow and gracious period when life’s fruit and the ripe corn are ready in an atmosphere of beautiful serenity. Our foundations have been laid secure, more or less; the inner personality has been developed through sorrows and happiness in a world where evil as well as good have shaped our character; we have, by this time, withdrawn our desire from the realm of enchantment lying beyond our reach, and established them within the confines of our powers.”

“The distant shore, with its dim blue foliage, seems like a vision of beauty, but it is no longer so enchanting when one has landed. “

Conflict in love and affection is one of the common themes in Tagore’s works. The short story, ‘Mashi’ written in 1918 depicts joys and sorrows in human life. Furthermore, the story also mirrors the much abused practice of child-marriage, one of the subjects that Tagore rebels against.

Besides, Tagore has subtly attacked in his short stories some societal issues, as patronage in the corridors of power and influences – peddling, so evident in ‘The Supreme Night’

I saw that my father always treated these court officers with the greatest respect. I knew from my childhood that they had to be propitiated with gifts of fish, vegetables, and even money.... For gaining material success, people have more genuine faith in them than in the good

Ganesh, the giver of success; hence the people now offer to these officers everything that was formerly Ganesh's due.

Notably, corruption is one of the social problems that beset third world nations as reflected in the works of world famed writers such as Achebe's **No Longer at Ease** (1960), Rizal's **Noli Me Tangere** (1950), or in Allende's **The House of the Spirits** (1993), to name a few.

Iyengar (2001) writes that "the recurring theme of Tagore's stories is the tears in things, the heartaches at the core of life...the truth that defiles the lie, or the sheer mad thrill of pain." This acute observation, indeed, applies in Tagore's short stories under study where he has described the suffering of human beings and the pain they bear in this life. Tagore pictures sheer realism in his psychological stories where the characters struggle in life's adventure, balance the fragile vessel of life in the sea of joys and sorrows as brought about by pressing problems, the need to love and be loved, sacrifice, betrayal ennobled by strong faith in God.

Dominic (2013) further notes that "hopes and aspirations, disappointments and frustrations, joys and sorrows in human life are depicted through his stories." To illustrate, his story, 'The Postmaster' tells of individuals who become victims of the harshness of life, yet hope, as indicated in the story of Pandora's Box, lingers and makes one continue living and dreaming. To wit, in the last paragraph of the short story:

She was wandering about the post office in a flood of tears. It may be that she had still a lurking hope in some corner of her heart that her Dada would return, and that is why she could not tear herself away. Alas for our foolish human nature! Its fond mistakes are persistent.

Evidently, when Tagore's works evoke powerful, human emotions, they have been influenced by aesthetic thoughts of Classical India, traceable to Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra*, a treatise containing the rules of the performing arts – music, dance and theatre, but it has later cast its influence on literature. One of the most important concepts treated in *Natyasastra* is that of **rasa**, which literally means "flavour, taste or juice", but in aesthetic employment, **rasa** means "mood, emotional tone or sentiments". Tagore's masterful portrayal of human emotions and

feelings expressed in lavish poeticism has made him one of the masters in the literary world. In fact, Dominic (2013) holds that “Tagore is widely regarded as the innovator of the modern Bengali short story. He has been compared to such masters of the short story, as Tolstoy, Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, and Guy de Maupassant.” Citing Bandyopadhyay’s (2004) claim, Dominic confirms that while ‘Tolstoy is didactic: de Maupassant erotic, blends the good qualities of both without their excesses.’”

As to writing style, Tagore, like Chekhov, believes that endings of the stories should have an element of ‘incompleteness’ where the reader must feel that though that was the end, the story did not end there (Dominic, 2013). This characteristic incompleteness rises in ‘The Elder Sister’, as the story ends with incertitude; hence, open-ended. The following ending shows uncertainty.

At parting, Sasi gave her word to her brother they would meet again. Where that word was kept none can tell.

This style is also reflected in ‘The Judge’, where the ending appears vague or open-ended, since the reader is left to decide whether Kshiroda lives or dies, after the judge realizes that he has contributed to the fall of the unfortunate woman.

Tagore’s narrative technique of using a homodiegetic character, a narrator and a character at the same time is observed in his stories, contributing to the atmosphere of authenticity of events and experiences. Though most stories are told from the first person point of view with men characters as narrators, the stories focus on women, conforming to Dominic’s (2013) claim that ‘women occupied the central roles in the majority of Tagore’s stories’.

Observably, Tagore has created hagiographic characters or those characters who display saintly attributes, as exemplified by selflessness and devotion of Mashi in the story, ‘Mashi’; faithfulness and sacrifice of Kumo in ‘Vision’; and even in the servility and sacrifice demonstrated by Ratan, in ‘The Postmaster’. In Satyanarayana’s and Kumar’s (2013) estimate, “the narrative skill of Tagore in his stories is remarkable, which reaches a level that is the highest in literature and gives Tagore a place of eminence among the world’s story-tellers.” While Rajagopalan (2013), holds that “Rabindranath Tagore filled the whole of our horizon with his personality during his life-time and continues to do so even after his passing away.” He goes on saying that “Judged by any standard whatsoever, Tagore’s many-sided achievements

must compact recognition”, since Bengal can’t claim him alone, much less India, for he belongs to the world of letters.

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