

Themes of Death, Separation and Suffering in the short stories of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon sorrows and sufferings of common people through short stories of Rabindranath Tagore. Though Tagore belonged to an aristocratic family, he had a heart which throbbed for the poor, the destitute, the neglect and the oppressed. His stories present various social problems and his deep understanding of real human nature. He loved the people of his country and strove for the rights of the rural poor to ensure for them a life of dignity and social justice. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the social aspect of his narratives and their universal relevance. He has discussed the issue of exploitation and torture of widows, heart-rendering problems of women who are not able to bear male child and torture of those who have not bought the sufficient amount of dowry with themselves, according to their in-laws at the time of marriage and later. The problems which he has discussed in his stories are universal; these issues are relevant in even present times. More than hundred years have passed, but these problems are still present as these were in his period. The importance of Tagore's stories is hidden in its message as he not only presents the problems through his stories, but the solutions of various issues are also there in the form characters, decisions or punishments etc. There is a universal appeal in his stories which transcends all boundaries of space and time

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Tagore wrote over ninety short stories during his long and abundant literary career. The themes that he dealt with in his stories are various; poverty, family disputes, romances, frustrated hopes, ghosts, lust for gold, exploitation of the weak and many more. His genius can easily be traced in his short stories. We can easily find in them rich emotionalism and at the same time a realistic portrayal of the poor and middle-class people in the villages and small towns. As other short

story writers, he does not deal with incidents in his works, but he expresses the hopes and aspirations, disappointments and frustrations, joys and sorrows in human life.

Singita Gupta, in her work *Mystic Moods* point out: “Tagore’s creative sphere was vast.... A marked characteristic to be noted in all his works is sympathy for the oppressed and the ignored. In some cases his heart goes out for the underdogs of society like the poor farmer or the casual labourer or the old domestic servant struggling to make both ends meet. Tagore sometimes cries out for the women who have been kept under fetters for years and who have not learnt how to protest against such injustice.”¹

The story “Profit and Loss” shows a pathetic picture of a girl Nirupma. The death of Nirupma is not just because of her in-law’s negligence but she herself made the circumstances worst. She neglects her food, her health, may be she has developed an idea if she would die, most of the problems of her father would also come to an end. In this way she can help her father and it is clear in the end of the story that her death puts a full stop to those problems which were just because of her.

In “Profit and Loss” Tagore shows how money plays a very important role in this society. Ramsundar tries his best to pay the whole amount of dowry to Raibahadur after the marriage of his daughter, but when Nirupma comes to know about this, she firmly says to her father, “If you give a single paisa more to my father-in-law, I swear solemnly you will never see me again. Do you think I am just a money bag, the more money in it the higher my value?” (P. 52)

¹ Singita Gupta, *Mystic Moods – Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore*, (New Delhi: UBS Publishers Distributors Pvt. Ltd.2005), pp. 9-10.

In “The Renunciation” Kusum has been introduced as a destitute orphan, a child widow, the daughter of a kayastha gentleman now dead. The story presents the problem of caste and creed; this problem makes Kusum a very pathetic figure. The story concludes with Kusum’s total surrender to Hemanta. She is a pathetic, helpless creature who has thrown herself at the feet of her master to arouse his mercy. Her worth is proved by Hemant’s judgment in her favour.

Peari Shanker is also another helpless character in the story. Tagore reveals the condition of a helpless father who has to forsake his village and settle down in Calcutta for he wants to live with his daughter.

When Hemanta asked Peari Shanker what harm had he done to him then Peari Shanker related his pathetic story: “My daughter– my only child– what harm had she done your father? ... My son-in-law Nawabkanta ran away to England after stealing my daughter’s jewels.”(P. 79) After five years he returned as a barrister but his father Harihar Mukherji declared if Peari Shanker has send his daughter to her husband’s home, he has to forget his daughter. Peari Shanker fall at his feet and requested him that his son-in-law would go through the process of penance even he would swallow cow-dung, forgive him for a once but Harihar Mukherji did not shift a inch from his decision and Peari Shanker had to leave his village for he could not leave his daughter and nor could infuriate the community also. He settled down in Calcutta but there also Harihar Mukherji did not spare him, his bad luck follow him there also and at his nephew’s marriage, Harihar Mukherji again created problems and the marriage broke off. Because of this so much of sufferings and pains, Peari Shanker decided to take revenge on Harihar Mukherji and used Kusum and Hemanta to hurt him.

Kadambini's life in "The Living and The Dead" was full of grief and suffering. She was a widow, living in her brother-in-law's house. She had devoted her life in looking after Satish, her brother-in-law's son. Satish was everything for her as she did not have any child of her own. One day her breath suspended for sometime and when she regained consciousness, she found herself in the cremation ground. She thought that she was no more and went to Yogmaya's house. There she received proper treatment for some days but when Yogmaya and her husband, Shripati came to know about her 'death', they were speechless. Kadambini asked both of them, "But other than being dead, what harm have I done to you? If I have no place in the world, then where shall I go? And again, in the rain and the night, as if to wake God from his sleep, she screamed, oh, tell me, where shall I go? Then, leaving the dumbfounded husband and wife in the dark house, Kadambini fled in search of place in or beyond the world." (P. 39)

But when she returned to her in-law's house and wanted to see the little boy again, everybody treated her as a spirit. She said pathetically 'Why are you frightened of me? See - I am just as I was.' (P. 41) Sharadshankar's wife could not keep her balance any longer, she collapsed unconscious. Sharadshankar, clasping his hands, said, "Sister-in-law, it is not right of you to do this. Satish is the only son in the family: Why are you casting your eye on him? ...please go away- we'll perform your proper funeral rites."(P. 41)

Kadambini could bear no more. She screamed out, "I did not die, I did not die! Can't you see: I am alive?" (P. 41), she hit herself with a metal bowl, blood gushed out from the impact, by this act she wanted to convince everybody that she was alive; she jumped into the tank in the courtyard of the house to prove that she had not died. The story ends on this depressing note that

even in this scientific age people believe in spirits and ghosts and because of this belief Kadambini had to actually die to prove that she was not died!

It is intolerable for a wife that the man for whom she leaves her parental home, now treats her as an unimportant person. Tagore has raised this problem in the story "Punishment". The relationship between husband and wife is a relationship of devotion and faith. Chidam loves Chandra but the position of his brother in his life is higher than his wife. To save his brother from the noose, he did not hesitate to sacrifice his wife. He told Ramlochan, "In their (Radha and Chandra) quarrel, Chhotobau struck at Barabau's head with a farm-knife." (P. 127)

Chidam asked Ramlochan to help him for he wanted to save his wife also. Ramlochan advised him to put the blame on his brother but at the advice his response was very shocking. He replied, "If I lose my wife I can get another, but if my brother is hanged, how can I replace him" (P. 128). It was very disturbing for Chandra that Chidam did not think about her for a minute and to save Dukhiram from death put blame on her. She was so shocked that when Chidam wanted to met her before her hanging, she refused to see him.

"The Child's Return" is very pathetic story. Raicharan's own son does not behave properly with him. He treats him as a servant and in the end his behavior becomes intolerable when he asked for a monthly allowance for Raicharan. He says to Anukul, "Father please pardons him (Raicharan). If you won't let him stay in the house, give him a monthly allowance" (P. 64). These words are very piercing for Raicharan.

It is really a very pathetic scene when Raicharan makes an obeisance to all and goes. When Anukul sends his allowance to his address, it comes back because no one is there to receive it. Raicharan is lost in this huge and heartless world.

The end of the story “The Postmaster” is very depressing. The readers feel sorry for Ratan for she did not get anything in her life. In her childhood she lost her parents and then Dadababu was leaving her. She asked him to take her with him but he refused for he knew that he had no moral responsibility towards her. He declared that their relation was just of give and take relationship and the scene in which he assured Ratan that the other Postmaster would look after her, is very pathetic. The post master said, “I’ll tell the man who replaces me that he should look after you as I have; you mustn’t worry just because I’m going.” (P. 46)

She cried, “No, no, you mustn’t say anything to anyone- I don’t want to stay here” (P. 46). Before going the post master called Ratan and said, “Ratan, I’ve never been able to pay you anything. Today before I go I want to give you something, to last you for a few days. Expect for the little that he needed for the journey, he took out all the salary that was in his pocket. But Ratan sank to the ground and clung to his feet, saying, “I beg you, Dadababu, I beg you don’t give me any money. Please, no one need bother about me. Then she fled running.” (P. 46) Though Ratan knew that Dadababu would never return, yet she had some hope that she would meet him again.

The element of pathos is one of the most important and dominating aspects of Tagore’s story. It is really very depressing that the girl like Binoda does not get her rightful share of love from her husband Baidyanath. In the story “Son Sacrifice” Baidyanath is more concerned about his inheritor rather than his wife. Binoda has to suffer all her life, though she has done no fault.

It is a very pathetic scene in which Binoda with her starving son arrived at Baidyanath’s Bungalow and asked for food. She made it clear that she was asking food only for her son, not

for herself but Baidyanath called for the servant and ordered him to get them both out of the bungalow:

An extremely thin woman with her emaciated child entered the room— she had somehow evaded the guards— and said piteously, ‘Babu, give us a bite to eat.’ Baidyanath, in a hurry, shouted for his servant, ‘Gurudoyal, Gurudoyal!, hearing the words, the woman said pathetically, ‘Can’t you give the child something? I don’t want anything.’ Gurudoyal came and chased off the woman and her little boy. That starving unfed boy was Baidyanath’s only son.”

(P. 32)

The readers feel sorry for the starving boy because Baidyanath was spending all his money only for that unfed starving boy without recognizing him.

Tagore presents the helpless condition of such a strong girl Mahamaya in the story titled “Mahamaya”. It is quite pathetic that a girl cannot oppose to her elders or even can not take any decision related to her own life. She has to marry according to her parents wish. Mahamaya, a proud girl, could not say anything to her brother when he selected an old dying man to get her into marriage.

The custom of ‘Sati’ which prevailed in society is raised by Tagore in “Mahamaya”. Mahamaya had been put in her husband’s pyre with tied hands and legs but it was her fate that saved her from death. However, it became impossible for her to live with that burnt face.

The ‘sati’ practice of widows accompanying the bodies of their husbands to be burnt on the same funeral pyre with them was a common practice in Rajasthan and Bengal. After a long struggle by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to stop it, it was finally banned in 1829.

“A Wife’s Letter” is a story in a letter-form. Mirinal raises a strong protest against the society which brings about the tragic end of Bindu and many more girls like her. In the story

“The Judge”, Khirood is a victim of exploitation of women for sex by men. The Judge, Mohitmohan had seduced many girls in his youth and Khirood was one of them. It is indeed pathetic that these unfortunate girls had to live as prostitutes. While Mohitmohan, a despicable man with animal instincts, became a judge and a preacher of virtues and vices.

“The Ghat’s Story” is another extremely pathetic tale. This is about the unfortunate condition of a young widow Kusum. She got married at a very young age and became widow soon after. This incident transformed her into a girl who had no joy and enjoyment in life. In her village a young holy man came and she started serving him. Her suppressed desire as a woman surfaced in a dream. She was a widow and for a widow such kind of emotions and feelings were a taboo. She could not express her feelings but that holy man forced her to tell him about the dream. On knowing about the dream he gave her a hint that the feeling was mutual and that he had to leave the village and she must forget him. The holy man left and she slowly descended into the water of the Ganges and drowned herself by saying, “It is his command that I must forget him.” (P. 45)

The story “Unwanted” poignantly describes how an orphan boy Neelkanta got a family and how he had to be an orphan again. Nilkanta got motherly treatment from Kiran. Sharat and his mother thought that there would be trouble if they did not get rid of him soon. Sharat often ill treated him but he never took it as an insult. Satish, Sharat’s brother, came to their house to spend the holidays. Because of him Kiran started ignoring Nilkanta. When Kiran and her family were going back to their village, she told Nilkanta that he might have to return to his village too.

Tagore had a great love for the people of India and he strove for the rights of the rural poor to ensure for them dignity and social justice. He was full of humanity. He himself related an unpleasant scene, which affected him deeply:

I see many things from my open window. Most of them are pleasant, but a few are downright upsetting. When I watch an ox, for example, pulling an impossible load over an impossible track, being goaded with a stick, the sight is unbearable. Only this morning I saw a woman bring her naked little boy to wash him in the stream. It is really cold here today, but she made him stand in the water while she splashed him with water. The child cried out and shivered pathetically and had a frightful cough. All of a sudden the woman slapped him so hard on the cheek I could hear the sound in my room. The child crumpled and fell, with his hand on his knees, and gave choking sounds in between coughs. Then the woman grabbed his wet and shivering body by the arm and pulled him home. I can call this a nefarious act. The boy was really young – probably the same age as my son. To witness a scene like this is to feel a blow against my idea of humanity ...²

Tagore's writings, whether stories or poetry, all bear an imprint of sorrow and agony. In one of his poems, he describes that in the *Kaliyug* gods turn old, even they do not think about women. In one of his poems he presents the picture of an earth which is deserted by the gods:

I have heard that in a former time the gods used to come from heaven to earth out of love for womankind. That time has gone. By the dried-up, burnt-up river and fields of this Baisakh day, a pleasant-girl pitifully entreats, 'Come, send rain! She keeps on looking at the sky with sad eyes, in pathetic expectation. But rain does not come; the deaf wind impatiently drives away all clouds; the sun licks up all moisture from the sky with his fierce tongue. In the age of Kali, alas the gods have grown old. A girl's plea can only be directed, now, at man. (Anabristi/Drought)³

² Quoted by Uma Dass Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 37.

³ Quoted by William Radice, *Rabindranath Tagore – Selected Short Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin Books Ltd. 1991), p. 12.

Tagore used to watch common people on the ghat of the river Padma. According to him the human life is full of happiness and sorrow. He said:

The essence of the matter is this: that men are small and their lives are fleeting, yet the stream of life, with its good and bad and its happiness, flows and will eternally flow with its ancient solemn murmuring sound that can be heard.⁴

His stories cover many moods. Usually pathos is the dominating factor. His characters suffer without their fault. Some of his stories are humorous like “Wishes Granted” but mostly all are full of pain and suffering. Sometimes the problem becomes unbearable for the character and death is the only option left.

Once, while Tagore was observing the intensity of the midday sun in June at his Sajadpur ghat, he was stuck by the discord between the peace of nature and the turmoil in the mind of man:

I was thinking, why is there such a deep note of mourning in the fields, ghats, sky and sunshine of our country? I think perhaps the reason is that nature is constantly before our eyes; the wide, open sky, flat and endless land, shimmering sunshine – and in the midst of this men come and go, crossing to and fro like a ferry-boat. The little noises that they make, the ups and downs of their happy or sad efforts in the market of the world, seem in the context of this endlessly reaching, huge, aloof nature so small, so fleeting, so futile and full of suffering! We feel in nature’s effortless, unambitious stillness and serenity such vast, beautiful, undistorted, generous peace; and compared to that such an effortful, agonized, tormented, petty, perpetually unstable lack of peace inside ourselves, that when we look at the distant blue line of the shabby woods on the river bank we are strangely unsettled. Where nature is swathed and cramped by mist and snow and dark clouds, man feels in command, feels that his work can leave a permanent mark: he looks towards ‘posterity’ he builds monuments, writes biographies and erects huge stone memorials over dear bodies...⁵

⁴ Ibid. p. 17.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 22-23.

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