

Humanity in Tagore's Short Stories

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Abstract: This paper attempts to illustrate the magnanimity with which Tagore portrays some of the great characters of his short stories. It highlights the deep love and affection that brought him closer to his fellow men and women and how he assessed the people of different races and social status and those steeped in pains and poverty. The paper throws light on Tagore's art of characterization by referring to some of his universally appealing characters who are found facing and fighting many social and existential battles. The paper further explores Tagore's deep insight into their daily battles as the cornerstone of his art, which paints fictional characters with profound touches of humanity. The paper finally provides an assessment of Tagore's persistent feeling of sympathy and his anti-racist stand which make him a revolutionary humanist. His in-depth observation of human sufferings and concern for mankind produce such characters as Hoimonti, Kabuliwala, Ratan and many more moving characters who will continue to resonate for generations in human minds.

Rabindranath Tagore, no doubt, is the cultural icon of this subcontinent. A versatile genius, Tagore tried his hand successfully in all the genres of literature. An essayist, a poet, a short story writer, a novelist, a lyricist, a translator and a playwright, Tagore explored all the areas of literary and creative art but his popularity and appeal across the world is grafted on his identity as a sage, a poet and short story writer. Tagore is widely regarded as the inventor of the modern Bengali short story and is credited with introducing colloquial speech into Bengali literature. He has been compared with such masters of the short story form as Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov. Tagore's short fiction is often set in rural Bengali villages and is peopled by characters from the underprivileged strata of society. Many of Tagore's short stories also include elements of the supernatural and bizarre. The simplest everyday events, the hallmark of his stories, have made him a great writer of modern times. We are familiar with the characters of his short stories, their frustrations, struggles, worries and pains almost unconsciously feeling one with them. In this process we can immediately relate to his characters. Tagore's undivided sympathy and humanity in the delineation of characters like "The Postmaster," "Kabuliwala," "Fatik," "Shuvashini," or "Hoimanti" have reached a high-water mark in the whole tradition of short story writing across the world.

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One reason why Tagore could feel intimate with the lifestyle and emotions of the have-nots, repressed and the poverty stricken is that his spirit of humanity sprang from his sense of humility and his ability to look upon the ordinary men and women around him from a humanitarian standpoint. His own surroundings are an indispensable part of his life. He could share their feelings and emotions by closely observing them and by being one with them. One might raise a question at this point as to how Tagore could feel one with the fellow humans though he belonged to the landed aristocracy? How could he realize so humanely the sufferings and pains of his subjects while playing the role of a landlord? We can try to find some plausible answers to these inquiries by looking at a few authentic statements. Jagadish Bhattachariya observed in his book *Tagore and his Humanity*:

Tagore is a great poet. His intellect and imagination could be worth-harnessing for the search of human history. He was the successor of a wealthy land lord. He was born on the palatial outskirts of Jorashanko. The blessings and bounty of his grandfather were thrust upon him. (2)

On the other hand, Tagore's own reminiscences give a different picture of his breeding:

I was not born and bred up amidst wealth, nor was I born even in the memories of it.

I am a class bunking student. Neither did I ever sit for any exam nor pass any. (*Atmoporichoy*, 77, 79)

Tagore grew up amidst sophisticated cultural traditions and values. The guardians in Tagore's family at Jorashakon nurtured and patronized his dormant talents, within the periphery of the palace and within the imagination of the new off-springs of the family. Tagore was born at a time when the family was at the apex of its tradition. So we can quite safely assume why Tagore was trained in such rich cultural and human values of his time and how he grew to be a sensible personality with unmatched humility and love for his fellows. The characters we have mentioned above are a testament to Tagore's deep love and affection for humanity. Taking a close look at some of the great characters of his fictions can possibly help us realize how dearly he loved and felt for the people he portrayed in his short stories.

Tagore's observation in *Chinnapatra* (Torn Letters) can be of interest here. He humbly observed:

When the subjects hold their hands together in supplication and humbly keep standing before me, I feel at the back of my mind that who the great healer I am that with the flick of my finger I can protect their lives or destroy them with my anger. I am pretending, sitting on this chair as if I am the unique creation of God amongst all and as if I am their fortune maker.

What can be funnier than this? Deep in my heart, they don't know, I am very much like them with humble needs and limitations of everyday life. How foolish is this of these ailing people to have known me so wrongly! They don't that I am one of them." (Chinnoptraboli-39)(Translated by myself. Henceforth all translations are mine.)

Tagore's women experience different roles in family and in society. They suffer a range of hardships due to the orthodox society they live in; they struggle for self-identification; they desire to break free to become respectable individuals. In the limited scope of this write-up, let us explore some of them.

Hoimonti in the short story "Hoimonti" is one of the finest characters in Tagore's short fictions. As we read it, we become compassionate towards her, and feel like developing a protective instinct towards her. While she shares her feelings on literature with her husband, she can only express her sorrows and sufferings through the language of her eyes. Hoimonti appears to us in a number of noticeable dimensions. Tagore portrays her in an unconventional manner amidst many social stereotypes. Her character is developed against the background of a conservative Hindu society. Tagore's attitude to the society and its people is explicitly ironic and his spokesperson is Hoimonti. She rebels against the customs and pretensions that confined her individual freedom of expression in different ways. Tagore depicts some remarkable features of her character while she faces many an opposition in the male dominated backward Hindu society. Her background and education, culture and tradition have made her a progressive young woman thrown against the psycho-social constrictions of her in-laws' family. We must remember that a character like Hoimonti is the forerunner of many progressive female characters as fully developed individuals in other works of Tagore. A sensible woman, she cannot cope with the pretensions, domination and superstitions of the society. She is never surreptitious about what she is and what she is not but she is forced to adopt against her nature a tortured way of life. Tagore brilliantly shows the clash between two cultures of the same time—one educated and the other prejudiced. The clash between Hoimonti and Opu's family is the contradiction between the progressiveness and the conservativeness, freedom of expression and superstitious customs, cultural enlightenment of modern education and age-old customs, prejudices and stereotypes. Hoimonti, as we see, has lost the world of her own after marriage. Narrated in the first person Tagore presents her in terms of concrete images and comparisons:

I will not tell you the real name of the lady I tied the marriage knot with because amongst the archeologists of the history of the universe there is no possibility of debate about her name. The Bronze Dynasty in which her name is engraved permanently is my sacred heart. (Translation mine.)

Tagore's art of depicting Hoimonti is very suggestively unique in that Hoimonti will not create any debate in the world of historians or archeologists but her

simple and easy-going attitude to life and assertive personality will impress the readers. Instead of visually describing her Tagore paints her character in terms of attractive comparisons. That her husband, Apu's feeling is genuine, though he failed to stand against the surroundings to support her, is beyond doubt. In the first person confession by Apu quoted above Tagore creates a vivid atmosphere for the emergence of Hoimonti that will possibly make her character and personality appear as a surprise for readers. As readers of this short story we know that the plot is ascending towards a climax. We know that the time Tagore is projecting is a typical rural society which was heavily prejudiced and conservative in regard to women and their age for marriage. Apu was more dominated owing to his moral inadequacy and financial dependence on his father. Yet he encountered the tug of war between what he is and what he could be because of Hoimonti's humane and progressive influences on him. He called her "Shishir" (dew drops), which symbolically shows the transient life span of something:

Shishir's age turned sixteen as time was ripe but that was the age of her nature not that of the society. ("Hoimonti")

We know how her age created so much of noise and disturbance at the time of her marriage ceremony. Since the amount of dowry was handsomer than her age, the marriage appeared more prospective to Apu's father. So Hoimonti is forced to sacrifice her honest convictions only to conform to the conservative customs of society. Yet again we find her effulgent with the glory of her own conviction that she will not accept falsehood. While we are waiting to see Hoimonti to appear in a favourable light before us we are also aware of the dreadful ambience that is to inflict violence upon her. Gourishankar Babu, Homonti's father needs special mention in this regard because he educated her with the modern system of education liberating her mind above the narrow thoughts of the world. About her upbringing Tagore comments thus:

The Himalayas where he used to live was his constant companion. In his grave personality, there flushed a pure and silent smile. Again, people who discovered the fact that there was a free flowing fountain of affection in the deep chasm of his heart, did not want to part with his companionship. ("Hoimonti")

The character of Gourishanker Babu is sketched with brilliant use of metaphors. His big-heartedness is personified and he nurtures great affection for people around him. He upholds highly sophisticated moral and ethical values which he consciously inculcated in his daughter so that she could cultivate those virtues freely. But regarding social relationship like wedding the society could not accept her courage to speak the truth in front of a pretentious bunch of relatives at her in-laws' house. The conversation below is evidence of Hoimonti's ability to assert herself without pretending to hide her age:

Grandmothers observed, "Listen lady, we still haven't lost our eyesight. The groom-side must have hidden her age."

Mother said, "But we examined her age on the touch-stone."

The elders said, "Doesn't the touchstone go wrong?"

There went a huge debate and quarrel over this issue. At such a point Hoimo appeared on the spot.

Some grandmother told, "Tell me how old are you, Granddaughter"?

Mother-in-Law beckoned her over with a wink. Hoimo couldn't understand the airy gestures and told, "Seventeen."

Mother-in-Law hurriedly said, "You don't know."

Hoimo asserted, "I know I am seventeen years old."

Grandmothers kept staring and pinching at each other at this. ("Hoimonti")

A little later Apu's mother angrily blamed her father for saying that Hoimonti was eleven, hearing which she right away protested against such a false accusation against her father:

Now Hoimo understood the airy gestures of her mother-in-law and with a strong and determined voice reasserted, "My father can't ever say such words."

She further added, "My father never tells a lie." ("Hoimonti")

Her protest is instinctive as she was born and bred up in a carefree natural surrounding and budded and bloomed in unbounded nature. She carried the vastness of nature in her heart unconsciously. May be she stands firm in her conviction to fight against such falsehood and hypocrisy of her relatives because her mind, like her father's, stood above all narrowness. She has shown the moral capacity to establish the truth about her age because her education freed her mind to become larger than the society itself which was beyond comprehension of her in-laws. While they were self-seeking, selfish, self-glorifying, Hoimo was selfless, intelligent, vocal against unjust mental oppression and unobtrusive about herself. That is why her clash with the conservative society is inevitable. That she never gets influenced and brainwashed reveals her personality as an unafraid and conscious individual self. Apu's admiration of Hoimonti is thus justified when he says, "She was not my property but priceless wealth". ("Hoimonti")

Her sad demise in the loveless, hostile and unsympathetic surroundings stirred Apu's heart deeply, and he compares the loss of Hoimonti from his life as the second sacrifice of goddess Sita. With Apu's confessional remark, we find her standing completely transfigured before our eyes.

Another remarkable portrayal is the character of the postmaster of the story "Postmaster." An introspective person, the postmaster is caught amongst the hard

realities of modern life, the pains of loneliness and alienation from his near and dear ones. His loneliness is further accentuated by his inability to cope with his existing conditions. He feels like a fish out of water here in an uncivilized village. He feels like an outsider who has left his familiar surroundings because of his professional obligation, a reality which hangs heavily upon him. Tagore introduces him thus:

Our postmaster is from Kolkata. His condition is like a fish out of water having stepped into this remote and rustic village. ("The Postmaster")

He finds it unbearable but his professional responsibility makes him suffer loneliness and boredom here. In such bare and mundane existence the postmaster found a small girl of about 12-13 years of age for his household work who became the only companion in his colourless existence in the village. Tagore brings them so spiritually close that we tend to forget their age gap. In their relationship one supplements the other particularly when the postmaster communicates his feelings and emotions even though they go above her head. In the dark recesses of the man there is a storm always howling and yearning for his familiar acquaintances and dear ones. Tagore has beautifully juxtaposed various changes in the elements of nature under the impact of wind and rain and the cold and repressed reaction of the postmaster who is living in this rural wilderness being far away from his relatives. His resigned however is over with the arrival of the girl. The small girl Ratan is now his attentive listener and also one who shares freely with him stories about her father and her younger brother. Tagore delineates the stark reality of both. The postmaster wants to find someone to communicate his feelings and spend time with and Ratan has none either to share her feelings with. Her age is the age to celebrate the carefree play of imagination but the reality of her existence has put the burden of life on her. She is also a love-starved orphan girl and Tagore delves deep into her emotional recesses to show her longing for fatherly love and affection. Sometimes the postmaster and Ratan could spend the whole night gossiping about their memories and they found for themselves a strange companionship. Tagore puts it very lovingly:

At length, it happened that the girl while in conversation addressed his relatives as mother, sister, and brother as if she had known them for many years. Even in her little heart she also painted the imaginary portraits of all of them. ("Postmaster")

Tagore's profound love for humanity finds expression in this short story when we see that the postmaster appears uniquely with his human emotions, true beyond time and space and develops a loving and affectionate communion with a little girl who looks upon him as a father figure, a brother figure, a shade under which she finds a spiritual repose. Even though life is short, human relationships make it worth living.

And we come across a revelation of truth in the end when the postmaster is about to leave behind all his memories with this little girl who began to drench and bask in the sunshine of his love and affection. But her anguished cry at the time of his departure intensified the pathos of her bare existence. Her appeal to the postmaster met with an even more stark philosophical truth about human relationships on earth. Baffled and at bay he looked back desperately while leaving but that is how life is—an endless journey through many trials and tribulations against which such memories of human bonding tend to evaporate. But these memories will silently torture the postmaster at an uncertain hour and this separation between them will leave Ratan again helpless and homeless. Her spiritual shelter is turned upside down. She is left to the hands of cruel destiny. The emotional space that she found in the company of the postmaster made her life suddenly worthy of celebration. She even began to grow respect and affection for the postmaster's relatives, as she wanted to become a part of his family.

In the same way, the loveliness in nature outside, the leaves of trees drenched in the rains, the soft movement of the leaves and twigs in the cool wind suffused with the patches of sunbathed white clouds left a deep psychological impact on the postmaster making him suddenly feel restless in his imagination. In such a sensual and pleasant natural setting he is imagining the presence of someone very dear to his heart but he has to remain static and his silent imaginings get suffocated in his lonely and isolated life. The pains of his lonely thoughts are left unspoken but Tagore explores those complex psychological workings in his mind, investigates the subconscious and subterranean regions of his soul to drag out his tears, tensions and anxieties and we can immediately relate our metropolitan and lonely life to his experiences. Tagore embodies him with the essence of humanity and sympathizes with his crude realities.

Even the affection they both shared is unadulterated in that there is nothing selfish in their attitude to each other. We also see that they acted as gap-fillers for each other's spiritual emptiness. When the postmaster disclosed the fact of his final departure from the village, it broke her heart. She insisted on his taking her with him but he answered, "How can that be possible" — a remark which resounded and echoed intermittently in her mind like a nightmare. Even Ratan could not bear to think that she could live with the new postmaster and screamed desperately when the postmaster was trying to make her understand the situation:

Raton, the man who will join the post office as my replacement will be as affectionate as I was to you. Don't feel anxious because of my leaving.

At this she replied,

No, no, you don't have to ask anyone, I don't want to live here anymore.

This impassioned outpouring seems to have expressed her own natural right to protest against what the postmaster meant by someone else in his place. The bonding here reaches its ironical climax as the postmaster offered her some money for her sustenance for a few more days. It is true that she has hunger for food but she is hungrier for brotherly love and affection. A new postmaster she knows can fulfill her physical necessity for food but cannot appease her yearning for physiological nourishment of love and affection. The whole burden of the world will bear hard upon her shoulder alone in this cruel world. That is why with the fading of the possibility of her spiritual sustenance she becomes upset with the offer of money by the postmaster. She cried:

Dadababu, (dear brother), I cling to your feet and bow down to you. For God's sake, none of you have to think anything about me, please.

She feels devastated at being left behind. With such emotional reaction we can see how some pennies without the presence of the postmaster became unbearable for her and she thought her love and admiration could not be compensated with money.

The next immortal character I would present before my readers is Rahman, of the story "Kabuliwala." The story "Kabuliwala" concerns a man who appears brusque, crude, and violent—to the extent that he lands in prison—but is so sentimental about his faraway daughter that he carries a crumpled piece of paper because it is smudged with her fingerprints. He features brilliantly in the story and captures our attention throughout. He happens to appear before us in a surprising manner with certain things strange about him. Due to his poverty-ridden life in the mountainous and desert areas of Afghanistan, he came to Bengal with the hope of making a good earning to secure his family financially. He has left behind his daughter and wife and fond memories with them. Every moment he feels being lonely and alienated from his folks back in the country. But the loving father in him rose at the sight of the small girl Mini in the story who is described as a chatterbox by the narrator. She loves to make an infinite deal of inquiries and calls out to the Kabuliwala while he passes by the house everyday hawking his goods at a loud voice to attract people to buy almonds and raisins from him. His business is greatly disrupted by his daily visit to this house to talk and play with Mini which becomes a psychological necessity and a spiritual satisfaction for him to appease his hunger for love and affection for his daughter left in his country. He suddenly feels oblivious of his professional obligation and enjoys the happy company of this small girl who talks to him freely and for the first time she has got an attentive listener to her prattles. Despite his different religion and community he looked upon this little girl as the image of his own daughter. At this critical juncture Tagore portrays him with all his sympathy and love that his fatherly feelings and affections are universal. Mini's father, being a writer could realize the depth of his yearning for his

daughter. He sympathized with Rahman realizing the circumstances that forced him to stay away from his roots. Though there was initially a protest from his wife about the racial factor which the practicing Hindus in those times took very seriously, the narrator goes beyond all man-made boundaries of race, custom, creed and community to lend credibility to humanity which in Tagore has always found an eloquent expression. The genuine and selfless father-daughter relationship that developed between them is unalloyed and Tagore depicts how Rahman's love for this little girl becomes his spiritual sustenance. The man-made boundaries of race cannot quell the universal feelings of a father in Tagore's fiction.

Rathindranath Tagore in his article titled "Father as I Knew Him" says,

Vicissitudes of life, pain and afflictions never upset the equanimity of my father's mind. His inward peace was not disturbed by any calamity, however painful. Some inner resources gave him the power to face and rise above misfortunes of the most painful nature. (48)

Another remark by Rathindranath convinces us even more of his passion for humanity in the same article,

Once when he was stung by a scorpion he sat quietly with his leg stretched out before him, trying to imagine it was somebody else's leg and not his, not of his essential self. The success of this experiment gave him power to resist pain, both physical and mental, throughout his life. (48)

Again

Father could not bear to see anyone suffer. He would himself nurse us if one of us fell ill. It is common knowledge how he nursed my mother for weeks on end before her death, and how he looked after my sister Rani, a victim of tuberculosis, taking her from one resort to another. Once when he could not get a conveyance for himself he walked all the distance of about 40 miles from Almora to Kathgodam alongside the dandi which carried Rani. (P-50)

His own life is a remarkably unparalleled testimony to his sacrifice and engagement with every simplest or complex situation in life. Rathindranath further reminisces:

Father wished to initiate me in the details of estate management and especially to help him in the work of village uplift that he had undertaken. He considered that my training in scientific agriculture would be useful. (51)

Abu Syed Ayub in his article titled "The Aesthetic Philosophy of Tagore" observes:

The central theme of Tagore's philosophy of art thus emerges as the notion that art is a bridge across the chasm which normally separates the individual from the world around. (81)

This is exactly how he consummated his art of presenting life in prose because he believed in sharing the same space of joys and pains with others. Another observation in the same article by Ayub on his art of prose is pertinent.

In his Bengali essays Tagore reminds us again and again that the Bengali word for literature, *shahitya*, comes from *sahit*, and it etymologically means "togetherness" or "intimacy". (P-81)

It can therefore be safely inferred that Tagore's feeling of togetherness and deep intimacy with mankind in general is what his readers know as his philosophy of humanity. We can conclude by presenting his all embracing definition of short fiction.

Simple events of life happy or sad,
Some sad strings from the train of forgetfulness,
Not fraught with heavy descriptions,
Not crowded with events,
No advice, no philosophy
Only the feeling that the story is not yet over
Although there is no more to read.

To him life itself is a work of art. Art illumines daily life and when it is divorced from life, it is like a soulless shell. The definition proves Tagore's love of the austere, affection for the simple and desire for the mundane. About his profound interest in humanity Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in his article, titled "A World Poet" observes:

In a very real sense, he was a world poet. His words--the tools which he used--are words of beauty, sensuous but not sensual, comprehending not only love of God and relationship between man and God but human love.

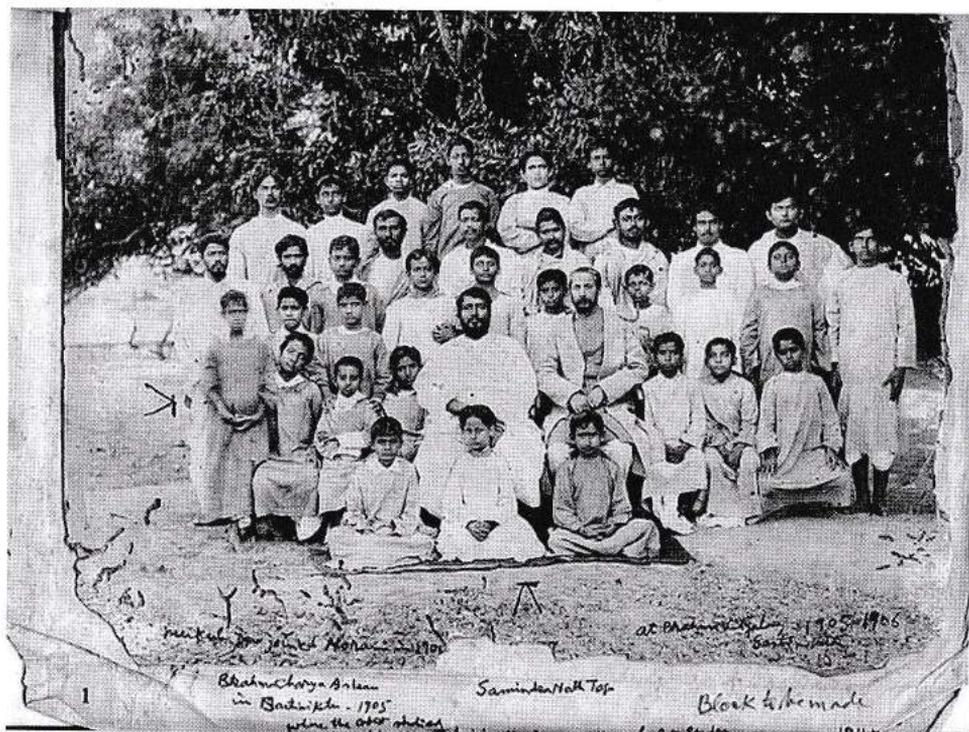
His eyes were fixed on the future of mankind, when goodness and beauty shall flower out of inspired love. To him beauty is eternal and invincible, the indispensable source of refreshment for the soul, the mind, the heart of mankind.

And it is this aspect of his personality and his literary expression that he appears to have his deepest appeal to men and women of today.

Finally, the most significant thing is this all-embracing character of Rabindranath's genius, and the background to it will strike any one in his Love of Man. (119-123)

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