

THE OLD AND THE MODERN INDIAN SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SELECT DRAMAS

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a well known Indian literary figure is marked for his prolific writing both in poetry and prose. Owing to his astounding versatility and distinctive charm, he has carved a special place for himself in literature. As an author, he bears out an extra ordinary literary career. He is such a coruscating genius whose qualities of head and heart are a beacon light for mankind. His achievement—winning of Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 is remarkably note worthy.

The research work, “Lifting the Veil: Society’s Self-Perception in Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories” is based on the thirty five short stories of Tagore comprised in the three volumes of Omnibus I, II &III. It attempts to examine the predominant themes of the short stories and modestly highlights some of the select facets of his multidimensional personality which get reflect in his superb style of writing. To facilitate the study of the stories selected,

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they are grouped according to their thematic affinity rather than the order in which they are written or published or compiled in the three volumes. But some stories as "The Wife's Letter", "The Laboratory", and "The Women Unknown" and some other have also been analysed as they are relevant to the research work.

The guidelines prescribed in the M.L.A. Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, seventh edition are followed in the work in conducting research, consulting library and other resources, the writing techniques, citation and bibliography.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is an introductory one. It defines the title of the research work. 'Self' is a reference by an individual to the same individual person. 'Society's Self-perception' explicates how people form impressions of other people and what inferences they make of them. We learn about other's feelings and emotions by picking up information about them from their physical appearance, communication and behaviour. Rabindranath Tagore wrote the stories with a view to create an awareness of the spirit of the period. He perceived the society according to his perception that is subjective in itself. 'Society's self- perception' indicates that his stories are reflectors of the ways-how the society actually functioned or was actually constituted. It is the idea or the reflection of society and social reality at the time of writing these stories. Any literary work is seen as an exact replica of its times. Tagore as a socialrealist, is a sensitive artist who has used 'realism' so as to present the social conditions of his time and his humanistic vision of life. The chapter proceeds on drawing a short life- sketch of Tagore, his growth as a writer with the influence of the contemporary social and political circumstances and then focuses on some of his short stories in the light of themes, realism, narration, use of supernatural elements, humanism and the motif of the stories as well as with the perspective of critical theories.

INTRODUCTION: XPLORING NEW POSSIBILITIES

This world appears to us as an individual, and not merely as a bundle of invisible forces. For this, as everybody knows, it is greatly indebted to our senses and our mind. This apparent world is man`s world. It has taken its special features of shape, colour and movement from the peculiar range and qualities of our perception. It is what our sense limits have specially acquired and built for us and walled up.....This world, which takes its form in the mould of man`s perception, still remains only as the partial world of his senses and mind. It is like a

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guest and not like a kinsman. It becomes completely our own when it comes within the range of our emotions. With our love and hatred, pleasure and pain, fear and wonder, continually working upon it, this world becomes a part of our personality.¹

‘Self’ is a reference by an individual to the same individual person. It constitutes a person's uniqueness that creates a consciousness in him/her. This consciousness helps to constitute the thoughts and emotions. It works behind one’s motivation, action, social behaviour and experiences. ‘Self’ is shaped by the social interactions and the physical environment. It is an essential being that not only keeps a physical existence but is a culmination of the cognitive, emotional and rational existence. It evolves with communion to the external world. It is not limited only to the inner working of the body but it gets its projection with external selves and circumstances. It gets manifested with society as how anyone behaves with others in external environment. So, the ‘self’ is not what we are or feel but what others give estimate of us. It comes into ‘being’ with the interfacing of the internal humanly processes with the socio-cultural environment. Culture plays an important part in exploring the evolution and change in ‘Self’. If one grows up in a certain culture, one joins with the specific standards of that culture. The ideology of one’s culture puts its effect on shaping one’s personality.

A FEMINIST READING OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE’S SHORT STORIES

‘Feminism’ as a word first appeared in 1880’s in France, in 1890’s in Great Britain and in 1910’s in the United States. It covers a very long span of time. It begins with 18th century and continues till the present. It is a movement that projected a common goal of equality between man and woman and challenged the structures that perpetuate the status quo. ‘Feminism’ has explored on the one hand, the suppressed areas of female psyche: finding patterns of subsuming as well as rejecting and resisting, on another hand, has identified potentialities of co-operation and solidarity between group and classes of women across ethnic, social, cultural as well as racial boundaries.

Feminist evolutions have been divided by the feminist scholars into three waves from past to present and each wave deals with the different feminist aspects. First wave Feminism (1830-1900) focused mainly on the right to vote and overturning legal obstacles

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to gender equality..

Women were circumscribed to do only house-hold works. They were deprived of educational and economic independence. They were set in the image of adopting virtual silence and obedience, and were not allowed to give expression to their feelings in the literary writings. The males in their literature depicted them as goddesses, obedient wives, whores and mother figures-not as an individual. They had to struggle against the established male ideology of gender- difference.

In India, 'Feminism' came into existence after 1960. But if we look back to Indian History, we come to know that women in ancient India occupied a dignified place. They participated in the outdoor activities as the circumstances and the situations demanded. They were free to get education.

'Indian Feminism' is much akin to 'European Feminism' because the history provides evidence that both the societies had been a male-dominated culture and women were reduced to submission and put under the veil of many layers of prejudices and traditional prohibitions. Women had to forebear the societal dominance of patriarchy, child-abuse, frustration and second place in society. They had to struggle hard to get an equal status to men, to be treated as having their individual existence, establish self-identity and self-assertion. They were treated as behaving according to the established conventional male estimation- pleasing, pliable, vulnerable, without a mind of her own and incapable in judging.

In the book, when she (the narrator) was asked to give lecture on 'Women and Fiction', she was interrupted by the approach of Beadle, a university security guard. She tells that even she was interrupted in entering the library as it was not allowed to women. Even they had to face many hardships to enter into the world of art. Just as Virginia Woolf in *A Room Of One's Own* states that women could not write and give vent to their thoughts on paper and they were not given the proper environment to show their talent as she imagines in this work of Shakespeare's sister, Judith who could not be so popular as her brother, in absence of proper suitable environment that was given to her brother, as being a male.

BY WAY OF SUMMING UP: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

With this chapter, the present analytical study of Tagore's short stories from a thematic and society's self-perception view draws to a close. Having traversed through thirty five stories, it remains to recapitulate briefly by way of summing up the main line of the argument developed in the previous chapters. However, it has to be stated at the outset that the present study has no claims to make either by way of new insights or startling discoveries. All that it has tried to do is to respond to Tagore's stories assensitively as possible and to understand his genius, achievements and life-long literary impact, taking help from accessible relevant published or online critical commentary on his works.

The relation between literature and society is integral and eternal. But the role of History cannot be negated in the formation of a literary work. The reflexive value of literature is an important factor that helps to understand the historical significance of a literary work. The angle of vision, with which the artist undergoes, and his experiences also shape the content of his creative work. A man of genius is as much moulded by the age he lives in as he gives shape to his period and events in his works. It is important to give attention to the voices recorded by the previous writers because they provide a comprehensive perception of their age.

Roland Barthes, a French Literary Theorist and philosopher and critic(1915- 1980) says that

Any text is an intertext¹ for the works of 'previous and surrounding cultures' are the constituents of a literary work. This expression does not remain mere imitative but becomes constructive as it transcends the depicted societal realities to project the future possibilities.

Tagore was a product of his social environment. As a poet, writer, a man of action and thinker, his art was conditioned by the situations of contemporary life in the society. He gave a shape to this conditioning with his reason, sensibility and psychical attitude. He articulated his responses and reactions in the creative expressions and produced an idea, image or action. He was the first Indian writer who made an honoured place of modern India on the literary map of the world by winning the prestigious Noble Prize for Literature in 1913 for his literary work, *Gitanjali*.

His international reputation largely lies for his poetry but his short stories too have brought him a considerable recognition as a world- famed Indian writer. He was a sort of

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path-finder or torch-bearer who brought in the varied themes, contents, forms, narrative techniques and style that opened up new possibilities for the other writers to follow them. In his fiction and short stories, he showed his forte that suited to his creative genius. The short story form, on account of its brevity and unity of effect, has served him as a powerful vehicle for conveying his insight into different facets of human experience. His multi-dimensional vision of life is discernible in the short stories in which, the significant moments of human life are depicted by telescoping man's relationship with man and with environment.

He lived in such a time when the forces of the Indian renaissance were asserting themselves in all directions. Those were of the days of binary opposition in the old traditions and the new principles, of rebellion against tradition and reaction against modernity. His literary works are the culmination of ideas, the organic development of plot, the nicely executed characterization; all these make them as works of art. The quality of the stories depends upon his attitude of mind being progressive in his thinking as well as reactionary to the social conditions. Despite of his depiction of social injustices related to women, he presents the Indian women as self-reliant, fighting for their rights against subjugation. He shows his utmost desire for equality in society.

The thirty five stories covered in this study cover a wide spectrum of women of his contemporary period. In Tagore's hands, women are pure, complacent and meek characters who fall and fail under the heavy hand of tradition but they are very strong in their forbearance and sacrifice. Their sensibilities are thoroughly sensitizing as they strain under the triple weight of poverty, patriarchy and colonialism. The stories are sharp and satirical, and build unflinching crescendos of tragedy of womanly life. He exercises his stories on realism and naturalism both. The stories are not to be viewed only as a representation of events but as having been written with the intention to produce the aesthetic and emotional experiences. They exhibit the traditions, morals and spiritual values as well as an awareness of 'self-expression'.

The research work has been divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is an introductory one that draws a short biographical sketch of Tagore's life and focuses on Tagore as a social writer and a social thinker of the contemporary age, the effect of socio-political environment on his writings, change in his thinking with the changed social environment and his stories with new theoretical and critical explanations.

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The second chapter discusses Tagore's short stories as the reflections of his interest in women's emancipation and his desire to treat the women equal to men. These stories represent female voices in the form of a progressive mix of twentieth century feminism with orthodox Indian mind set of nineteenth century. The chapter explores the different dimensions of 'feminism' as weaved in the structures of the stories and establishes the fact that the importance of these stories is because they represent the problems of common life arising out of the complexities of man-woman relationship and, present the possible solutions.

The third chapter focuses on Tagore's short stories through the characters' impulses, thought-processing and behavioural actions. It touches upon the significant area- 'psycho-analysis' in his short stories. His stories have been discussed with the association of psychoanalysts' theories as Freudian theories-*id, ego, super ego, libido, dream* etc. Other psychological and behavioural inferences as *isolation, displacement, Lesbian Feminism Ideology, modern conflict theory, the object-relation theory, jealousy, greed, Hamartia* etc. have been explored in the mould of the stories.

The fourth chapter attempts to prove that Tagore's short stories play its part as a reflector and a corrector of the society and provide an insight into its aspect of substantial contribution in lessening the prevalent social evils. Focusing his stories on the issues of human beings, especially of women, he brings into public view numerous social injustices related especially to women and presents his literary works as a social document.

The fifth chapter discusses the fact that any work that is written by the writer with the best efforts to be totally impersonal, but the work always carries the writer's thinking, ideology and impression that cannot be escaped. This chapter makes subtle speculations of the influence of Indian philosophy on Tagore's ideas though he never claimed to have built any philosophical system. It also examines his emphasis on humanism, ideal of spiritual harmony, interpersonal human unity, affinity with nature and self-completeness through artistic creativity that is fabricated in his short stories. As an educator, he had a definite social aim to make the society to achieve the high human values through education.

The sixth chapter concentrates on the methods of presenting the narratives. It explores the variety of themes handled, and the different techniques used by Rabindranath Tagore in his short stories. The chapter also discusses his style of writing as rewind, flashback, situational opening, dialogue-based story, letter-method, poetic expressions, use of songs indicating his

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poetic interest, story within story, use of nature infilling the gap of the story, use of symbols, conversational style, humorous style in between narration of a pathetic tale, use of a homodiegetic character, creation of hagiographic characters, heterodiegetic- narrator, adopting the low pitch of language while describing the sad theme, high pitch in language at the time of aggression and excitement.

Tagore's short stories are marked with the deep human qualities of the characters and relationships. He treats the familial and social problems and creates examples of womanhood which remain immortal in the minds of the readers. The research work investigates the male-female relationships, reveals gender-biases and presents the real picture of society as a protest against patriarchal system in Tagore's stories. It is a general thinking that woman is woman and is expected to behave as a woman in all corners of the world. Their condition is same though the degree of the standard of living is different. So, the woman becomes the victim of a male- dominated society one or the other way and it is her life which goes through a painful journey. As the society is made up of man and woman relationship, so both should be given space on equal planes. However since long, the society has been walking with the ideology of men. The sprouts of 'feminism' can be traced as he presents the women struggling to be treated as equal human beings. In the stories he reflects his wish for the progress of women and to build up a society of equals. Generally, Women is viewed as men's *other* rather than as an independent human being with her own rights. She has remained under subjugation of the power- relations between men and women that prevailed in patriarchy. Tagore never consented to the patriarchal ideology.

Tagore seems to support the idea that our existence on earth transcends the laws established by man and the society and therefore, a life led in a natural environment devoid of all forms of social- evils and restrictions would eventually help man in manifesting his true nature and thereby lead to the creation of a society that does not encourage domination at any level. Nature keeps the things in balance. Anything in excess is not desirable for the betterment of the society. Everything is interrelated and that is why for better environment and culture, women must be treated as equal human beings.

Throughout these stories, Tagore's main interest in human beings and he deals with the changing colors and shapes of human life. He presents the human beings with the emotional aspect in different human relations. His stories portray the life of characters with different

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themes. His close affinity with men and his interest in manners and their lives enabled him to understand the innate significance of humanity in the physical world and he presents it in the excellent characterization of his short stories. All the human emotions-love, grief, anger, fear, terror and disgust have been depicted in the stories. Imbued with emotions and high quality of expression, his universal themes transcend to the regional and cultural boundaries and become the themes of humankind.

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