

Human Relationships in the Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

Vipin Kumar*, Dr. Priyanka Panwar**

*Associate Professor, Department of English, Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun

**Humanities & Social Sciences, Graphic Era Deemed to be University, Dehradun

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore, variously referred by Albert Schweitzer to as ‘the Indian Goethe’ continues to hold a high esteem among readers till today. Besides his philosophic insights on diverse range of contemporary concerns, he fascinated the world through not only his poetic but also his prosaic expressions, especially his short stories. The depiction of the human relationship that makes Tagore’s short stories so remarkable is wunderkind. As a short story writer he explores the qualities of human goodness – kindness, sensitivity, simplicity, innocence, humility and love and has exclusive understanding of esoteric concerns such as religion, spirituality, death. In spite of it, his perspectives on societal subjects which Tagore addresses sensitively such as child marriage and dowry system as in “Profit and Loss”, bigoted orthodoxy or casteism as in “Son-sacrifice”, changing landlord-tenant relations as in “A Problem Solved”, the political frustrations of a rising educated class as in “A Single Night”, ruinous litigation as in “The Divide”, dehumanizing poverty as in “Punishment” and cruel and corrupt officialdom as in “Thoughtlessness”. The paper aims at exploring the depiction of human relationships in his short stories where the writer has depicted emotions that connect man with man outside the common family and societal bonds.

Keywords: human relationships, friendship, emotional bonds, innocence

INTRODUCTION

A poet, dramatist and novelist, Rabindranath Tagore also occupies an important place as a short story writer. That Tagore wrote more than ninety short stories, nearly half of which have been translated into English and a considerable number into other languages from the original Bengali, is itself a testimony to his interest in this literary form. Between 1891 and 1895 he wrote forty-four short stories, almost one every month. In an interview which was published in the magazine, *Forward* in 1935, Tagore, when asked about the background of his short stories and how he came to write them, replied:

It was when I was quite young that I began to write short stories. Being a landlord I had to go to villages, and thus I came in touch with village people and their simple modes of life. I enjoyed the surrounding scenery and the beauty of rural Bengal. The river system of Bengal, the best part of this province, fascinated me and I used to be quite familiar with those rivers. I got glimpses into the life

of those people, which appealed to me very much indeed. At first I was quite unfamiliar with the village life as I was born and brought up in Calcutta and so there was an element of mystery for me. My whole heart went out to the simple village people as I came in close contact with them. They seemed to belong to quite another world, so very different from that of Calcutta. My earlier stories have this background, and they describe this contact of mine with the village people.

In the same interview Tagore comments on the status of short story writing in Bengal at that time and his own contribution to it. He also analyses his basic concern in his short stories, which he considers to be universal human emotions and relationships:

Before I had written these short stories there was not anything of that type in Bengali literature. No doubt Bankimchandra had written some stories but they were of romantic type; mine were full of the temperament of the rural people . . . There was a note of universal appeal in them, for man is the same everywhere.

Tagore considered human relationship to be of paramount importance and that is why whether it be his novels, short stories, plays or even poems, the focus in most of them is on human relationships as seen in the context of different social backgrounds.

The three primary concerns of Rabindranath Tagore as a writer were Man, Nature and the Divine. His novels, short stories, plays and poems describe the interaction among these three. His fictional works present human beings interacting, transacting, negotiating and compromising with life. His world here is the world of the common man, close to reality with no myths attached. Panigrahi remarks:

At the same time and at another level his short stories, which are combinations of Tagore's realism and poetic idealism, seek reconciliation through opposites. He works on contradictions to achieve the literary vision that 'unites' man with the world around him and man with his relationships. The dichotomies of human life are dramatized through binaries such as urban and rural, old and new, solitude and chaos, male and female, rejection and acceptance. (113)

His short stories are rooted in the social realities of the time and show how these realities govern the social and emotional relationships.

Tagore has depicted beautifully the relationship between wife and husband, father and daughter, brother and sister – relationships that have close family bonds, but he has presented very touching relationships outside such family and social bonds as well. In some of his short stories the human relationship has been presented so effectively that it immediately touches our heart. His short story "The Postmaster" is such an example. It presents a short interlude in the life of a city-bred young man who is posted as a postmaster in a remote village and this brings him into contact with an orphaned village -girl, Ratan who does housework for him in return for a little food. Commenting on their relationship Krishna Kriplani observes,

The fact that there was a city bred postmaster marooned in a village was all that was needed to set the author's imagination working on the problem of human relationship, and the possible tragedy of a simple guileless girl, who might take for granted that her affection would be returned. (162)

The postmaster was leading a very lonely life. There was not much work at the post office and the village afforded him little company. This made him seek the company of this 'twelve or thirteen year old' girl who had no one in the world to call her own. In the evening while smoking his hookah the postmaster would ask her if she remembered her mother. Ratan would recall the little of what she remembered of her mother and father. Her father loved her more than her mother did. She remembered a little how he used to come home in the evening after work. She also remembered her brother. She would recall how during the rainy season they had stood on the edge of a small pond and played at catching fish with sticks. The postmaster would tell her about his family as well. The writer narrates:

Occasionally, sitting on a low wooden office stool in a corner of his large hut, the postmaster would speak of his family – his younger brother, mother and elder sister – all those for whom his heart ached, alone and exiled as he was. He told this illiterate young girl things which were often in his mind but which he would never have dreamt of divulging to the indigo employees – and it seemed quite natural to do so. Eventually Ratan referred to the postmaster's family – his mother, sister and brother – as if they were her own. She even formed affectionate imaginary pictures of them in her mind. (43)

Thus, there grew between the two a relationship which could only be termed human relationship. Since the postmaster did not have much official work, he began to teach Ratan reading and writing to pass his time. Ratan would also devote herself to this new task. On a particularly rainy day the postmaster caught cold and fell ill. Since there was no one else to look after him, this task fell on Ratan:

He felt in need of comfort, ill and miserable as he was, in this isolated place, the rain pouring down. He remembered the touch on his forehead of soft hands, conch-shell bangles. He wished his mother or sister were sitting here next to him, soothing his illness and loneliness with feminine tenderness. And his longing did not stay unfulfilled. The young girl Ratan was a young girl no longer. From that moment on she took on the role of a mother, calling the doctor, giving him pills at the right time, staying awake at his bedside all night long, cooking him convalescent meals, and saying a hundred times, 'Are you feeling a bit better, Dadababu?' (44-45)

Once the postmaster became well, he began to yearn to go back to Calcutta. He applied for a transfer on the ground of the 'unhealthiness' of the place and began to wait impatiently for the response. When his request was turned down, he resigned from service. One day he announced to Ratan that he was going home. To her query as to when he would return, he told her that he would not come back. Since he had not told anything about it earlier, Ratan was dumbfounded. She resumed her household work listlessly. She suddenly asked the postmaster if he would take her home with him. " 'How could I do that!' said the postmaster laughing. He saw no need to explain to the girl why the idea was impossible." (45) A crestfallen Ratan did not say anything further. The next morning when the postmaster tried to assure her that he would ask the next postmaster to take care of her, she began to weep and implored him not to do so. At the time of departure, he tried to give her some money, but a weeping Ratan refused to accept any money. While crossing the river, the postmaster thought fleetingly of going back and taking Ratan along with her, but the boat had already moved on. Ratan

still wandered around the post office, weeping copiously. Observing about this relationship, S. C. Sengupta remarks:

Here is an undefinable relationship that is subtler than the feelings which we ordinarily call love . . . The girl yearns for a much warmer relationship than mere charity and a suitable employment. What exactly this warmer relationship may be, she did not clearly know; and when she is left disconsolate her sorrowing face seems to represent the great unspoken pervading grief of Mother Earth herself. What Rabindranath reveals in this casual acquaintance of a village postmaster is the primeval emotional yearning of human nature, which is too deep and too mysterious to fit into the coarser arrangements of human society. (183-84)

Another short story of Tagore which presents a moving account of human relationship is his famous short story "Kabuliwallah". It describes the emotional bond between a five-year old girl, Mini, and a 'Kabuliwallah', as Afghans selling dry fruits on the streets of a town were popularly called. S. C. Sengupta observes:

There is a remarkable contrast between the two friends in age, religion, language, customs and associations, and at first this friendship seems to be nothing more than a mere joke and a little fondness which many grown up people have for children. Suddenly it is revealed that for the surly Cabuliwallah the Bengali girl is more than a passing acquaintance, and the time he passes with her as an emotional necessity, because Mini reminds this sojourner of his little daughter whom he has left behind in his home in the mountain vastness. His paternal yearning is vicariously satisfied through the cordial relationship he has established. (188-89)

Rabindranath Tagore has beautifully evoked the human nuances of the relationship between this little girl and the burly Afghan. Mini is a lovely talkative girl who is very close to her father. Her father, who is also the narrator of the story, is a writer. Mini often came to him to disturb him in his writing with her own account of the daily events in the house. This is how one day she came across the Kabuliwallah who was passing through the road selling dry fruits that he was carrying in his big bag hanging on his shoulder. Mini who was talking to her father suddenly went to the window and called him. But just as the Kabuliwallah, attracted by her voice, entered their house, Mini rushed inside the house as "She had a blind conviction that if one looked inside that swinging bag one would find three or four live children like her." (114) The writer bought some dry fruits and chatted with him for some time. When the Kabuliwallah began to leave, he asked where his little daughter had gone. To dispel her groundless fear, the writer called Mini who when she came there clung to her father and kept looking suspiciously at the Kabuliwallah and his bag. The Kabuliwallah took some raisin and apricots from his bag and offered them to her who, however, would not take them.

This fear and hesitation on the part of Mini, however, did not remain long with her. The writer expresses his surprise when one day he finds Mini and Kabuliwallah sitting together and the latter listening to the prattling of the former seriously:

A few days later when for some reason I was on my way out of the house one morning, I saw my daughter sitting on a bench in front of the door, nattering unrestrainedly; and the Kabuliwallah was

sitting at her feet listening, grinning broadly, and from time to time making comments in his hybrid sort of Bengali. In all her five years of life, Mini had never found so patient a listener, apart from her father. I also saw that the fold of her little sari was crammed with raisins and nuts. (114)

The writer came to know that the Kabuliwallah, whose name was Rahamat, used to come to his house almost daily where he would talk to Mini. They had their own jokes, such as when Mini would ask him what was there in his bag, he would reply in a menacing tone ‘elephant’ and then they would both laugh loudly. He also used to give her raisins and nuts.

It was a practice with Rahamat to go home once a year. He was always very busy before he left, collecting money from people who owed him. That year also he was engaged in collecting his dues. He had to go from house to house, but he still took out time to visit Mini. Unfortunately, while trying to collect money from a man who owed money to him but was denying it, a hot dispute took place and an infuriated Rahamat stabbed him. He was convicted of the assault and sent to prison for many years.

With the passage of time, the memory of the Kabuliwallah faded from the minds of both Mini and her father. In the process of growing up Mini’s mind was occupied by other things and so her association with the Kabuliwallah was completely erased from her mind. And the time came when her marriage was fixed and as the day came near, her father became immersed in its preparation. One day when he was sitting in his room doing his accounts for the marriage expenses, Rahamat appeared before him. As he was physically much altered, the writer could not recognise him at first but when he smiled, he did recognise him and asked him when he had come out of the prison. Rahamat told him that it was the previous evening that he was released from jail. Before going away from there he wanted to see Mini. The writer remarks that it seemed he thought Mini was still just as she was when he had known her; that she would come running for him and their old jokes would resume. The father, however, did not want her soon- to- be- married daughter to come before a convict and he told Rahamat that there was something going on in the house and so she would not be able to come. A crestfallen Rahamat began to leave but returned from the door and said that he had brought a box of grapes and some raisins and nuts for the ‘little girl’ and requested him to give it to her. When the writer wanted to give him some money, he implored him not to do so. He told him that he too had a daughter back in his own native place and it was with her in his mind that he had come with a few raisins for Mini. He had not come there to trade with him. Then he put his hand inside his shirt and took out a crumpled piece of paper on which there was a faded hand print of a child, a memory of his daughter that he carried with him. The writer says, “ My eyes swam 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 as I am a father.” (119)

The writer sent for Mini, overruling objections from the women inside the house. Mini, dressed as a bride, came there and stood by the side of her father shyly. The Kabuliwallah was confused at first when he saw her. He could not utter his old greeting but at last he smiled and asked her if she was going to her in-law’s house. It was an old joke that they used to share in their old days. Mini could not reply as before. She blushed and looked away. When she left the room, Rahamat sat down on the floor with a heavy heart. He suddenly understood clearly that his own daughter would have grown up too since he last saw her and with her also he would have to become re-acquainted. The writer, who

fully understood what was going on in Rahamat's mind and felt his pain, took out money from his pocket and giving it to him asked him to go back to his homeland and his daughter. By his blessed reunion with his daughter, Mini would be blessed. The writer says:

By giving him this money, I had to trim certain items from the wedding festivities. I wasn't able to afford the electric illuminations that I had planned nor did the trumpet -and-drum band come. The womenfolk were very displeased at this; but for me, the ceremony was lit by a kinder, more gracious light. (120)

It is this depiction of the human relationship that makes Tagore's short stories so remarkable. In his short story, "Thoughtlessness" it is the loss of his own daughter that makes a greedy doctor relate to the feelings of a father whom he had exploited earlier. The story has been narrated in the first person by a doctor posted in a rural area. He lived with his daughter, Shashi, who was under his care as his wife was dead. He had friendship with the police inspector of the area and was often a party to his dishonest dealings. The inspector had often suggested to him that he should remarry, but the doctor was unwilling to put his daughter whom he loved very much to the custody of a stepmother. Shashi was approaching the marriageable age and the doctor had some indication from a well-placed family that if he could get together a decent sum of money, he would be able to marry his daughter in that family. He began to think seriously about this proposition because once he fulfilled his parental obligation, he could think about his own marriage. It so happened that at that very time a person, Harinath Majumdar, came to him in a desperate condition. His widowed daughter had suddenly died in the night and his enemies had written a letter to the police inspector insinuating that she had died because of an abortion. The police now wanted to examine her dead body. So he had come to the doctor for help. The doctor exploited his situation by putting all kinds of fear in his mind. Majumdar had not much money and so had to overstretch himself in arranging money to save himself from shame and to give his daughter a decent funeral. This virtually ruined him but the doctor got enough money to arrange his own daughter's marriage. As if by a divine decree, on the eve of her marriage Shashi went down with cholera and all the medicines that the doctor gave her proved of no avail. The sense of his own sin hit the doctor and he went to HarinathMajumdar seeking his forgiveness and saying that because of his sin his daughter was dying. Though his confession could not save his daughter, her death certainly transformed the doctor. He could now empathise with the sufferings of others.

This message of humanity, the need to reach out to others, to empathise with the sufferings of others is the central message of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories. They underline the qualities of human goodness – kindness, sensitivity, simplicity, innocence, humility and love. He has written on a range of subjects – child marriage and dowry system as in "Profit and Loss", bigoted orthodoxy or casteism as in "Son- sacrifice", changing landlord-tenant relations as in "A Problem Solved", the political frustrations of a rising educated class as in "A Single Night", ruinous litigation as in "The Divide", dehumanizing poverty as in "Punishment" and cruel and corrupt officialdom as in "Thoughtlessness". But, despite their varied themes these short stories give us an overall message of humanity.

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