

TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES: SOME POINTS TO PONDER

DSE III

INDIAN LITERATURE I

SEMESTER II 2020

In the words of Rabindranath Tagore, the great writer, about the origins of the short stories as remembered in 1936:

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 the village people and their simple modes of life. I enjoyed the surrounding scenery and the beauty of rural Bengal...My whole heart went 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. They have the freshness of youth. 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 a romantic type; mine were full of the temperament of the village people. There was the rural atmosphere about them.

... My later stories have not got that freshness, though they have greater psychological value and they deal with problems.

[From *Galpaguchcha*, Granthaparichoy]



Tagore's pioneering role as a short story writer is undisputable. The springs of his work may be described as follows:

- **Personal:** Tagore lost his sister-in-law Kadambari Devi and the pain resulting from this terrible loss influenced his creativity. See Tapobrata Ghosh's Introduction in the Oxford Tagore Translations ed Sukanta Chaudhuri
- **Philosophical:** Tagore had deeply imbibed teachings of the Upanishad— 'Sarvam khalvidam Brahman'— the finitude of life against the backdrop of the vast Infinite shaped his thoughts.
- **Artistic:** Although he found inspiration from observation of rural life, his stories are not photographic realism but imaginative reshaping of the experience. His artistic belief is aligned with the Romantic Expressive theory of Art and the Rasa theory of Indian aesthetics.



This is how Tagore describes story telling in '*Sonar Tari, Barshajapon*'. I'm giving a rough translation:

'Simple lives, simple sorrows, small losses that are extremely easy to grasp,

Of the hundreds of forgettings that float past everyday, [I'm capturing] a few of those teardrops,

[There are] no colourful descriptions, no grand occurrences, no theories and no advice—

In the end there is a sense of unfulfillment, even after close, the echoes will linger on in the mind.'



Tagore's short stories trace a curve through early, middle and mature phases. They are noted for the following:

- Complexity of form and technique
- Representation of the inner lives of men and women, especially championing women's causes, focusing on their frustrations, rebellions and aspirations
- Romantic appreciation of Nature
- Social consciousness
- Environmental consciousness—in which he was far ahead of his time

If the question is whether lyricism or social realism is dominant in the stories, it is difficult to decide.



Illustrative readings

1. *The Ghat's Story* [1884]

- One of the earliest short stories featuring the ghat as the narrator.
[Remember school exercises like writing autobiography of a river, a coin etc?]
- Tragic tale of a young woman's love which ends with her plunging into the waters of the river. [Remember Kadambari Devi and that Tagore's Muse (his mysterious Jivan-devata) found creative self expression by breaking the confines of the self and merging with the Vast and Immense, through separation and deep pain].
- In the early stories, women are at the centre, though passive, meek and suffering. In later stories, most memorably in *The Wife's Letter*, women are depicted as questioning rigid social strictures and seeking liberation.



2. *Hungry Stone* [1895]

- Note the frame narration and nested structure—stories within stories.
- The inset story never gets told—the tale by Karim Khan of the Persian slave girl but what is left to the imagination deepens the Gothic sense of combined mystery, suspense and the supernatural.
- Again, woman at the centre, haunting the present with the unfulfilled desire of the past
- Is it desire for the past? [Remember that as a seventeen year old Tagore had resided in the palace of Shahibag at Ahmedabad where his brother was posted? If possible look at Gaganendranath Tagore's painting.]
- Memory plays an important role and yet man is chained by illusions of the past and present. [What does Meher Ali represent?]



- Ponder also how the frame story juxtaposes colonial present times against a medieval past- [a past with haunting melodies –those unheard are sweeter?]-New signs like the railways replacing old signs in India like Mughal attire.
- Have you read Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*? It talks of the sentience of all things and of the living dead and there is again a woman at the centre. However the tale has a mysterious or terrifying closure, in Tagore there is an ellipsis , we are not told how the narrator escaped.
- What does Nature communicate in the short story?
- Have you watched the Bengali film based on the short story directed by Tapan Sinha in 1960, *Kshudhita Pashan* ?



3. *Balai* [1928]

- An occasional story that has transcended time.
- The boy-mystic might be an autobiographical sketch of Tagore as a child.
- The tale casts a backward glance at the world's primeval forests and its beings-in-the-trees that the boy seems to discover are as old as Greek myths down to Tolkien in western culture.
- *Balai* is ecological consciousness personified, in an unheeding age where all forests were turning into timber.
 - He is like the ancient sages in his union with the plant forms, grass, trees.



- The motherless boy seeks refuge in Nature, his aunt being his only friend till the silk-cotton tree springs up.
- The silk-cotton tree adds tension to a lyrical tale filled with nostalgia, it is the counter-point to the utilitarian adult world that finds no use for a tree springing up to block a path.
- When the tree is felled, all living trace of Balai disappears from the house. Is it symbolic of the uprooting of the boy from his aunt's care to be sent off to cold Shimla and later, colder England?
- The beautiful red flowers of the silk-cotton tree will never bloom and its pods will never disperse cotton—these things are unsaid but the short story says a lot about the adult desecration of Nature by leaving such details out.



Please read all the Tagore stories in your syllabus and more, if time permits.

The text I have followed is *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* in the Oxford Tagore Translations ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri.

The quotations are from Tagore's *Galpaguchcha* [Visva-Bharati edition].

My best wishes to all.

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