

## **RABINDRANATH TAGORE AS A SHORT STORY WRITER**

**Dr. P.Satyanarayana**

Research Supervisor & Vice-Principal,  
Balaji College of Education,  
Anantapur, A.P., India

**A. Phaniraja Kumar**

Research Scholar  
Dept. of English  
Rayalaseema University  
Kurnool, A.P., India

### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper discusses short stories of Tagore during almost all the periods of his long career, though some of the best among them go back to the eighteen nineties. The recurring theme of the stories is the ‘tears in things’, the heart-aches at the core of life; also the beauty that is sometimes refracted by tears, the truth that defies the lie or the sheer mad thrill of pain. The short stories were really no more than the by-products turned out by the creative forge that was Rabindranath Tagore. The interest of the stories like ‘Cabuliwallah’, ‘The post-office’, ‘The Home Coming’, ‘The Castaway’, ‘Subha’ and other stories of this paper lie mainly in the manner of narration and the portrayal of the main characters.

## Introduction

Tagore was almost a pioneer as a writer of short stories. Sukumar Sen (1891) says that Tagore is the first writer of the true short story in Bengali. He wrote short stories during almost all the periods of his long career. Of the nearly one hundred stories that Tagore wrote, some fifty or more are readily available in English, in collections like ‘*Glimpses of Bengal Life*’ (1913), ‘*Hungry Stones*’ (1916), ‘*Mashi*’ (1918), ‘*Broken Ties*’ (1925), ‘*The Parrot’s Training*’ (1944), and ‘*The Runaway*’ (1959). Between 1891 and 1893 Tagore published 44 short stories in Bengali monthly journal SADHANA. The work of translation has been done either by the poet himself or by qualified people like Rajani Ranjan Sen, Surendranath Tagore, Amiya Chakravarty, C. F. Andrews, W. W. Pearson, Jadunath Sarkar, Indira Devi Chandhurani and Somanatha Mitra. Tagore had precious gift of imagination and felicity of expression.

The recurring themes of the stories are the problems of the Joint family system, evils of contemporary rural life traditions like Sati, dowry system, strong belief on supernatural powers, social criticism in a wide sense, love passionate as placid, outside lies on born of conjugal bonds in its way, wardeness and eccentricities about the pathos in the middle class families and suffering of women due to the evil customs and traditions.

The interest of the story lies mainly in the manner of narration and the portrayal of the main characters. Rabindranath Tagore’s atmosphere is of contemporary Bengal - Urban or rural but events happen which are beyond our ordinary experience. His characters in stories are with their domestic and material pre-occupation. Tagore gives priority to women in his stories later children and last men. In his stories the element of dialogue gradually assures greater importance. He gives much importance to natural learning rather than oppression and compulsive learning in his stories.

The subjects of these stories are various and come from a very wide field. How various they are and how wide the field from which they come will appear from a summary of some of them.

*In the Night*, a story with a supernatural touch, is a study of agonized conscience. Loken Balu of the story has a sick wife whom he pretends to love greatly. He, however, loves a younger woman, Manorama and brings her home and the wife asks who she is, the Bengali for this “okay”. The wife dies and the man marries the other woman. Some bird in the night makes a call which sounds like “Okay, Okay” and this puts the man into a fright. This occurs night after night. Tagore provides a psychological explanation of Loken Balu’s susceptibility to supernatural experiences, and as to the validity of his experiences. We are left brooding over the mystery of life. In this story supernaturalism is infused with human emotions of love and hate and conveyed through the forces of nature.

*The Editor* is the story of a man who has lost his wife and has a daughter, Prabha who looks after the household. He loves her well, but is unable to give her any attention because of his editorship of a zamindar’s paper. One day, when his work is causing him anxiety, the daughter comes and speaks to him of something. He is inattentive at the moment, but the fact of her having approached him and talked to him has touched some portion of his being. He finds later that she is ill and throws all of his work aside and tends her.

*Home Coming* is the story of a boy, Phatik Chakravorthi whose exuberant activity appears to his elders as mischief and leads to his being taken away to his uncle’s place, Calcutta. He

wishes to get back home because of a loveless life in Calcutta. He falls ill and when dying remembers his home and sees his mother. He returns home only through death. The delicious talk of the boy is touching. The kind hearted uncle is lightly sketched, so also the unfeeling aunt. Agony of Phatik's mother is well suggested. It is a beautiful short story.

As a specimen of Tagore at his best as story-teller, one would choose *Cabuliwallah*. The story is told by an author whose little daughter Mini, lively beyond the average calls out to a Cabuli fruit-seller just for fun. The fruit seller comes in answer to the call, but the child is afraid and runs away. Later they become friends and the Kabuli gives the child plenty of fruits. Mini's mother does not like this intimacy with the fruit-seller, but it goes on. The Kabuli asks the child, "Will you go to your father-in-law house?" (p.137) and she asks him the same question in return. For him and his like 'father-in-law's house' means "Prison."

Sometime later the fruit-seller is involved in a street brawl and goes to jail. He is released later and comes to Mini's house just on the day of her marriage. Mini's father warns the fruit seller who has come from prison and tells him to come sometime later. The fruit seller starts to go away, but asks if he might see the child and Mini's father tells him that it is not possible that day. The fruit-seller is disappointed and goes out but comes again and hands over a little bag of fruits and says, he brought it for the child. Mini's father offers to pay for it, but the fruit-seller does not take money. "I have a daughter like her", he says, "that is why I give the fruit, not for the money", and takes out from his bag a slip of ragged and dirty paper with the imprint of a child's hand on it. That imprint was to the fruit-seller the picture of his child. Mini's father took pity upon this father in exile that had left his child in his distant home, and sent for Mini. The fruit-seller seemed surprised to see her so grown-up. Mini's father gave some money to the man and told him to go to his country and see his own child again. The skill of narration in this story is of the highest in art. Rabindranath Tagore is naturally lyrical and has in this story woven round a fundamental sentiment a picture of the utmost beauty. Rahman, the Cabuli Wallah, is a masterpiece of character creation, so tender, so humour, despite all his tenderness. The child sees the Cabuliwallh with eyes of trust and affection and so 'the best' becomes 'beauty' and stranger becomes 'friend'.

*Vision* is a fine specimen of Tagore's art, which have never seen before. It deals with a husband whose immature medical knowledge and carelessness the wife, Kumo loses her vision of the eye. Blindness is her gift which transforms her sour into a gem of purest ray. Kumo devotes still her affection to serve her husband. She is asking him to marry and other woman, he is refusing with a vow, though really inclined to do so. We got a glimpse of Tagore's vision of Hindu womanhood. Then occurs the anti-climax in the story, so far as the husband is concerned. It is the device of the author which creates a storm for the purpose of the end of the story. So the doctor did not meet the other woman on the marriage day. Therefore the other young woman, Hemangini marries the brother of the wife (Kumo) and the husband's vow is fulfilled in an unexpected way. The story reveals the potency of love which changes the will of man. We are grateful to Tagore for the unexpected ending. The second marriage is foiled by a kind of providence. The feeling of devotion in a wife is a familiar theme in the Indian home. Common yearnings of a wife in Kumo, along with an angelic and purity in her nature, create an atmosphere of feminine delicacy and softness in storm. As the story is told in the first person by

Kumo herself, the subtle analysis of her own feeling stand the telling depiction of the changes that she makes in her husband, came home as effectively to us.

*The Castaway* is another story of a neglected waif (boy) of a village theatrical troupe who finds a home and is soon cast away. The boy was Nilakanta who was never treated like a human being before he met Kiran. Kiran's affection makes a man of him and he would have spurned the idea of stealing. But soon when he feels neglected by Kiran and considers Satish to be the change of it, he stoops to stealing. There was no other way to take revenge upon Satish who had robbed him of his only bliss in life. Kiran's native kindness towards the homeless lad, seen especially when he is accused of stealing and above all when she keeps the stolen articles quietly back in his box with a deep sigh as if she knew the thief herself, leaves an indelible impression upon us.

*Subha* is a simple story of a dumb girl. Subha, whose parents get her married without informing the bridegroom of her defect. The story is full of pathos. Soon delivering their dumb girl into another's hands, Subha's parents returned home from Calcutta. In less than ten days, in the new house, even one knew her to be dumb and soon her lord bought a second wife who could speak. The story closes with this as the climax. We have to imagine that she was ill-treated on account of their anger at the fraud practised on them.

In the *Babus of Nayanjori*, we have the story of a young man who wishes to expose the vanity of a zamindar, Kailash who is really poor but does boast of himself. The young man discourse that his conduct hurts the zamindar's daughter, he takes pity on her marries her.

*The hungry Stones* is an immortal creation of Tagore. The scene of the story is an immense ruined place of the Mughal days, whose very stones seem hungry for living flesh. In this marble palace, which stands above a river-stair at the foot of a hill, a cotton-toll collector, a creature of uncommon tastes and given to look for wonders in his experience, takes up his abode. Before a week has passed the palace began to exert a weird fascination upon him. The sight of them (palace's beauty) has sent a watchman mad.

*The Postmaster* is, perhaps, Tagore's first study of a chance acquaintance developing into a relationship too deep and subtle to define. To remote malaria infested village, comes a Calcutta-lived young man as a postmaster and employs an orphan girl, Ratan for his menial work. She forms a stronger attachment to her employee, only to bind that her affection is not returned. She treated him well when he felt in ill. He was transferred to Calcutta suddenly. It is full of pathos.

In the story *Child's Return*, the loss of the little son of the Munsiff is sought to be made good by the restoration to him of Raicharan's own son. The servant had taken the child out in a perambulation to the riverside, and the boy had suddenly dropped into the current from the bank owing to his inadvertence. The poor man had not the smart to disclose this, and was dismissed summarily. He returned after fine with his own little son and introduced him to his old master as the lost boy. The balance now seems to have been fully restored. But the anguish of Raicharan whom he is turned out as a child lifter is poignant. It becomes unbearable when his own son coldly suggests the grant of a small pension to Raicharan who is to see him no more.

In *Living on Road*, Tagore tries to explain the basic difference between life and death. It is the story of a widow, Kadambiri whose baby while in a swoon is being taken to the burial ground in the relief that she is dead. She wakes up on the cremation ground and her bearers run away in terror. She comes back home but is treated as a ghost. Not knowing what to do with her, she drops into a well and died. The theme is simply striking. It is all about life and death. Besides, the reader will enjoy a subtle satire on conservative social values and on blind belief in the existence of spirit.

*The Victory* takes us to an ancient court life and its poets. It is the story of the fortunes of poetry in a court. There is in the court of Narayana, a poet, Shekhar whose voice is genuine, whose utterance is simple and straight. There comes to contrast his position a path of learning whose words are sonorous and manner has grandiloquence.

The latter wins in the contest and the former falls ill and closes his eyes, feeling at the last moment that the princess, Agila whom he had pleased with his verses came to his bedside to honour him. It is purely romantic story with a setting in the remote past.

*The Skelton* is another story of Tagore. It is the rewind dead holds converse with the slumbering living, and a tragic tale is unfolded, and the tale ends abruptly when, at the first cock-crow, the morning light enters the narrator's room.

Tagore's *Mashi* is the story of the widow, portrayed as the multi-inglorious heroine, the woman who, childless herself, is dedicated to a silent career of selfless love and unremitting sacrifice.

These summaries after the manner of theatre advertisements can give really no idea of the quality of Tagore's stories as literature. They are not intended to do so either. They make, moreover, one point clear. The world of Tagore in these stories is a large world. There are in it Zamindars and Zagirdars, the poor and the destitute, men and women, happy and sad, persons who are in the world and out of it, actors and actresses and musicians, men of learning and poets, boys and girls, youth and old age. Tagore saw innumerable types of people and situations in life and all seemed to him worth seeing. He could sympathise with these innumerable people in innumerable situations and thus comprehend their inner being. To comprehension of this sort, no life is small and no occurrence is trivial. Stanes speak to him; skeletons make friends with him. Corresponding to variety of subject, there is in these stories variety of manner. In the story of the mischievous boy, the occurrences described are those of an ordinary household. In the story of the Bada Shah's palace, the occurrences are worthy of a magic mirror. In the story of the poets, we get fine specimens of the learned man's grand grandiloquence and the simple poet's sweet words. The narrative skill of these stories is again remarkable. In the best of the stories, the skill reaches a level that is of the highest in literature and gives Tagore a place of eminence among the world's story-tellers. Life interested him all the time and was continually fresh to him, and constantly he enjoyed contact with it and play in it. His story-writing was, therefore, tireless, however, far it had travelled. It has spacious as life was spacious and ever reaching out in new directions.

**Conclusion:**

Now we may say this appraisal is not intended to be comprehensive, it is not meant to be an objective assessment of Tagore's greatness as a Writer of Short Stories. It is a personal tribute to his creative genius, an attempt to recapitulate his methods of narration, characterisation and selection of themes for his stories which are unique.

**Work Cited**

Thomson, Edward. *Rabindranath Tagore*. London: Oxford University Press, 1948 Print  
Canby, H.S. *A Study of Short Story*, New York: Henry Holl & Co, 1935 Print.  
Mukherji, Bharati Prasad. *Tagore-A Study*, Bombay: Padma Publications, 1942 Print.  
Tagore, Rabindranath. *Stories from Tagore*, London: MacMillan, 1939 Print.  
Andrews C F and Various Authors, Rabindranath Tagore Selected Stories,