

# Paradoxical Situations in Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

Shweta Srivastava

Department of Humanities, Shri Ramswaroop Memorial Group of Professional Colleges, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India- 226028  
Email address: drshwetastriastava06 @ gmail.com

**Abstract**— Rabindranath Tagore is one of the prominent short story writers in Indian literature. Most of his short stories, which examine humble lives and their small miseries, have poignancy, laced with gentle irony. His stories present social and political satire both. The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon sorrows and sufferings of common people through short stories of Rabindranath Tagore. In his stories he satirizes the society through the character of Gokulchandra, Himangshu's father and Harachandra, Banamali's father that how a little dispute becomes the reason for break of friendship between two friends. Gokulchandra and Harachandra are so selfish that they cannot share even few lemons with each other while on the other hand their children are sharing their feelings and emotions. Though Tagore belonged to an aristocratic family, he had a heart which throbbed for the poor, the destitute, the neglect and the oppressed. He loved the people of his country and strove for the rights of the rural poor to ensure for them a life of dignity and social justice. He has satirized the issue of exploitation and torture of widows, heart-rendering problems of women who are not able to bear male child and torture of those who have not bought the sufficient amount of dowry with themselves, according to their in-laws at the time of marriage and later. A pungent satire has been witnessed in his stories where he brilliantly satirized some ironical situations and characters, e.g. the denial of respectability to Nirupma in her lifetime and the 'celebration' of her death through a grand cremation in "Profit and Loss" and the renunciation of his own son for the sake of caste by Harihar Mukherji respectively. The problems which he has discussed in his stories are universal; these issues are relevant in even present times. More than hundred years have passed, but these problems are still present as these were in his period. The importance of stories of Tagore is hidden in its message as he not only presents the problems through his stories, but the solutions of various issues are also there in the form characters, decisions or punishments etc. There is a universal appeal in his stories which transcends all boundaries of space and time.

**Keywords**— Injustice: paradoxical situations: pungent satire: sorrows: sufferings: unfortunate.

There is a popular saying in Bengal that it is impossible to finish reading in a lifetime all that Rabindranath Tagore wrote in one life. Tagore is undoubtedly the most outstanding name in Bengali literature. He was a poet, dramatist, novelist, short-story writer, actor, musician and a painter; he was keenly sensitive to the political developments of his time, but being an educationalist he turned his dreams into reality at his Shantiniketan. He was a reformer, philosopher and a prophet, a critic of life and a preacher par excellence. The award of the Nobel Prize for his *Gitanjali* was the recognition of his literary achievements at the international level. Tagore wrote over ninety short stories during his long and abundant literary

career. The themes that he dealt with in his stories are various; poverty, family disputes, romances, frustrated hopes, ghosts, lust for gold, exploitation of the weak and many more. His genius can easily be traced in his short stories. We can easily find in them rich emotionalism and at the same time a realistic portrayal of the poor and middle-class people in the villages and small towns. As other short story writers, he does not deal with incidents in his works, but he expresses the hopes and aspirations, disappointments and frustrations, joys and sorrows in human life. Tagore himself said:

When I turned back from the struggle to achieve results, from the ambition of doing benefit to others, and come to my own innermost need.... Then the unquiet atmosphere of the outward struggle cleared up and the power of spontaneous creation found its way through the centre of all things.<sup>1</sup>

Singita Gupta, in her work *Mystic Moods* point out: "Tagore's creative sphere was vast.... A marked characteristic to be noted in all his works is sympathy for the oppressed and the ignored. In some cases his heart goes out for the underdogs of society like the poor farmer or the casual labourer or the old domestic servant struggling to make both ends meet. Tagore sometimes cries out for the women who have been kept under fetters for years and who have not learnt how to protest against such injustice."<sup>2</sup>

Most of Tagore's short stories, which examine humble lives and their small miseries, have poignancy, laced with gentle irony. Social and political satire is another aspect of his work. In "The Renunciation", he presents a pungent satire on the prevalent caste biasness in society. The conclusion of the story leaves a direct and strong impact on the reader's mind. In the story Renunciation, Tagore criticizes Harihar Mukherji and persons like him who believe more in caste rather than in humanity. Harihar proves that nothing will ever change him. He hesitates not for a single moment as he renounces human beings instead of his traditional mindset.

Tagore was pained at the division of Hindu society on the basis of caste, religious beliefs and sex. According to him the caste system failed to recognize the flow of life, the inherent oneness of all human beings. It failed to consider that in human beings differences were not like physical barriers. The Varna system was a socially uniting force in which different

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Uma Dass Gupta, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Singita Gupta, *Mystic Moods – Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore*, (New Delhi: UBS Publishers Distributors Pvt. Ltd.2005), pp. 9-10.

people could live together in harmony while having freedom to maintain differences. But it must be based on the principle of universal brotherhood and love. He was also against the differences which were on the basis of sex. In all areas of life he advocated equality for men and women. To him, husband-wife relationship was sacred and everyone should respect it. He said:

“The social organization of India largely contributed to the freedom from

narrowness and intolerance which distinguishes the Hindu religion, a phenomenon which astonished the Europeans who with less jarring elements, have struggled for ages to establish peace and harmony among them.”<sup>3</sup>

In the opinion of K.S. Bharati,

He insisted that the four-division system was based on the idea of unity in diversity, and by prescribing different functions for different groups of people it discouraged artificial competition, mutual jealousy and feeling of disharmony among the people. Though he belonged to the Brahma Samaj, he had his own peculiar religious ideals. He believed that true Varna ashram doctrine was based on the ideals of equality and dignity of labour. Tagore was of the opinion that it was the sacrifice of the old ideals of Varna ashram doctrine in favour of useless rites and observances and the resultant growth of a perverted caste that had undermined the liberal spirit of Hinduism making all man shudras at heart. He regretted that the Brahmans, teachers of four castes had madly rejected intellect, strayed far from Right Conduct, abandoned their Teacher hood, and became their pupils’ pupil.”<sup>4</sup>

Tagore shows how in the name of the caste, innocent people are subjected to unnecessary wretchedness, whether she is the daughter of Peari Shankar, or his nephew, or Kusum, the monster of caste makes them all helpless. He gives a realistic portrayal of how caste blinds a man to all other considerations of justice or kindness; it annihilates reason, it hardens one’s heart with hatred. The story is a bitter satire on a supposedly holy arrangement of marriage. Hemanta voices revolt against this unjust system. Through the story Tagore conveys a strong message that renunciation of the caste system is the need of the hour.

The story presents a bitter satire on a pious ceremony like marriage. The author highlights the endless misery caused by the age-old system of caste and creed. Often these caste considerations play a vital role in the settlement of marriage in conservative society. Gurudev Rabindranath has satirized this evil of the Indian society.

He satirizes the fathers like Harihar Mukherji who can renounce his son and daughter-in-law just to save his caste. He is so obstinate that nothing can change him; he does not hesitate for a single moment as he renounces people (Hemant,

his son and Kusum, his daughter-in-law) around him but not ready to leave his traditional mindset.

The same is the case of Kamala in the story “The Tale of a Muslim Woman” in which Tagore satirizes the theme of untouchability in a strong and loud voice. Kamala, is saved by the Samaritan, Habirkhan from being waylaid by Madhumollar and his party, while she was going to her in-laws in her nuptial dress, accompanied by her husband and guards. The story is significant because Kamala got a new vision of life and said that The God who has given me shelter is my God- he is neither Hindu nor Muslim. I worship him for that honour of love.

According to Tagore untouchability is an un-Hindu practice. He made an appeal to the people of India to follow Mahatma Gandhi to remove the evils of untouchability. He was against to the exploitation of human beings in the name of caste, religion and sex. He said, “In the lands where cannibalism is prevalent man looks upon man as his food. In such a country civilization can never thrive, for there man loses his higher value and is made common indeed.”<sup>5</sup>

He again said, “We never can have a true view of man unless we have a love for him. Civilization must be judged and prized, not by the amount of power it has developed, but by how much it has evolved and given expression to, by its laws and institutions, the love of humanity.”<sup>6</sup>

Tagore exposes the unjust social system of dowry in “Profit and Loss”. He was very much disturbed by one of the major evils of the society that is dowry and its tragic effects. The torture which is given to the daughters of poor and insolvent fathers in their in-laws’ houses often resulted in death of young brides. Tagore wrote, “I have seen...the unredeemed animosity of the mother against the daughter-in-law...the picture of the in-laws’ house with all the control vested in the redoubtable father-in-law and the sharp-tongued mother-in-law operating the machine of torture.”<sup>7</sup>

Santosh Chakrabarti stated that it “left a deep impression on his mind. *Sasurbari* is synonymous with prison. Hence in the very insipid stage of his writing short stories he draws a lucid picture of torture and death in the in-laws’ house of a girl whose indigent father fails to provide sufficient dowry for her daughter. *Denapaona* is a saga not of Nirupama’s woes alone, but of the thousands of such hapless girls whose fathers fail to meet the rapacious demands of their in-laws at the time of, and after their marriage.”<sup>8</sup>

When the Deputy Magistrate refuses to obey his father, The Raibahadur sits despondent at seeing the poisonous fruits of modern education in his own son. Tagore satirizes the in-laws of Nirupma, who have no feelings for their dead daughter-in-law and start making arrangements for the remarriage of their son. He condemns such people who measure relations in terms of money. Ramsundar is not looked upon honorably in his son-in-law’s house for he had not given the whole amount of dowry to the parents of his son-in-law. Tagore pungently satirizes the mother-in-law of Nirupma who

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by K.S.Bharati, *Encyclopedia of Eminent Thinkers: the Political Thought of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1918), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Sadhana* (London:Macmillan, 1913), p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> Santosh Chakrabarti op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

always neglects her. He satirizes the system of funeral when Nirupma was alive, nobody cared her but after her death, a huge sandalwood pyre had been made for her dead body. After her death her in-laws were treating her as a deity. It is very ironical that although the Deputy Magistrate tried his best to save Nirupma, fate had something else in store for him as he had been transferred to some other city. Nirupma had to suffer at the hands of her in-laws.

Marriage in Bengal is a family affair; it is not an individual relation. It has contributed its complicated situations and provoked some of the sharp arrows of satire in Tagore's short stories. The attack is mainly at the insistence on the extraordinary demand of dowry and the lack of humanity among the bridegroom's party. The happy or sad end generally depends on the personality of the bridegroom and his power of asserting himself. Verinder Grover states, "Generally he (bridegroom) is a dummy toeing the line of his elders with sheepish submissiveness. He is a passive spectator of the tragedy that he has not the courage to avert. On rare occasions he defies authority and leaves the parental roof along with his wife."<sup>9</sup>

Tagore has highlighted the problem of dowry in "The Skeleton" also. The spirit in the story "The Skeleton" belonged to a young woman who had committed suicide for her lover had married someone else just because the girl's parents were providing him a good amount of dowry. Tagore has satirized this tendency of giving and receiving of dowry through the voice of a soul who relates its grief to a student of anatomy and disappears at dawn. The story dealt with a curious intermingling of belief and disbelief.

The evil of the dowry system is deeply embedded Rabindranath's heart; he makes it a subject matter for many of his stories. Santosh Chakrabarti writes:

The dowry system with its ugly offshoots handed down from a feudalistic past so deeply convulsed Rabindranath's mind that in a story called *Aparichita* (The Unknown Women). He unravels the nakedness of a feudalistic mind set which does not balk at robbing the sacramental bond of marriage of all its decency and dignity. The picture of the bridegroom's maternal uncle weighing and testing the purity of the bride's ornaments points to an ugly relic of the feudalistic marriage system in which the bride is looked upon as nothing more than a money fetching instrument. The brake-down of so many marriages at the ceremony itself because of non-fulfillment of dowry commitments is not rare even today. But side by side with this picture of ugliness Rabindranath presents another picture – that of self-dignity first on the part of the bride's father, Sambhunath Sen who refuses to give his daughter in marriage to a member of such a mean-minded family, saying, 'I cannot give my daughter in marriage to a family the members of which think that I have stolen my daughter's

ornaments,' and secondly, on the part of the bride, Kalyani, who remains a life-long spinster by way of protest against such an ugly insult.<sup>10</sup>

In "The Living and The Dead" Tagore condemns the unreasonable belief of people in spirits and ghosts. He ridicules all such people the people who only show that they are educated and wise, but in reality they are superstitious and conservative. When Kadambini assists Satish in the beginning, Satish parents' have any problem, but when she returns after her presumed 'death', Sharadshankar requests her:

"Sister-in-law, it is not right for you to do this. Satish is the only son in the family: why are you casting your eye on him? ...please go away- we'll perform your proper funeral rites." (P. 41)

Tagore holds up to scorn the entire male community in the story "Punishment" through the character of Chindam. He denounces the mentality of men who use their wives just for physical pleasures and household chores. He is at pains to explain that such characters are not acceptable to their spouses. Before the hanging of Chandra, the Civil Surgeon asked her:

"Do you want to see anyone?"

"I would like to see my mother" she replied.

The Civil Surgeon asked, "Shall I call your husband?"

She bluntly replied, "Not him"

(P. 133)

This dialogue shows how bitterly Chandra hates him, though she has left her parents and her home for Chidam but he has ranked her inferior to his brother. He (Chidam) even accuses her (Chandra) of murder of his sister-in-law (elder brother's wife) to protect his brother from death whereas she hadn't done anything wrong, she was that much hurt with this behavior of her husband that she didn't allow him to come and meet her before her hanging. Jadu Saha comments on Chandra's character in – *Portraits of a Woman*:

"She could have fought and saved her life by telling the truth to the investigators and the judge. But she decided that her life was not worth living when she was betrayed by her husband who was keener to save his brother and did not care for the consequence of his grotesque proposal. Chandra decided death would be better than living with such a husband."<sup>11</sup>

"Unapproved Story" and "Reform" expose the false humanism of the so-called social workers and patriots. In "Unapproved Story", Anil, the social worker and patriot's love for Amiya, the college girl, evaporates when he is apprised of Amiya's birth story. The hollowness and hypocrisy of Anil are exposed when, despite his patriotic fervor and the espousal of the non-cooperation movement, he distances himself from Amiya because of her birth. Again in the story "Reform" Kalika, a social worker refuses to give a lift in her car to a sweeper because of his caste.

The story "Son Sacrifice" is full of irony and satire. It is fate which is working against Binoda. When Baidyanath orders Binoda to get out of his house, she is pregnant and has

<sup>9</sup> Verinder Grover, *Political Thinkers of Modern India* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1998) p. 286.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 93-94.

<sup>11</sup> Jadu Saha, *Rabindranath Tagore-Portraits of Women* (New Delhi: Shipra Publication, 2004), p. 31.

already conceived the seeds of Baidyanath in her womb, when she leaves the house. It is truly ironical that after ten years when she meets Baidyanath with their son, they both cannot recognize each other and once again Baidyanath left alone with a desire of having a son (an inheritor) whereas his son dies out of hunger.

It is paradoxical situation that on the one hand Baidyanath is feeding a lot of Pundits and 'sanyasees' to get the blessing for a son and when his own son comes to him, starving and distraught, he does not give any morsel to him; not only this, he orders his servant to get him out of the bungalow.

Tagore has very realistically portrayed the character of Baidyanath who represents all such heartless people who do not have any feeling for the poor. Baidyanath is a man who has been spending money all these years to have a son but when he arrives, he cannot recognize him and orders his servant to get him out in that pathetic condition. The title of the story is full of satire. Through it the writer shows Baidyanath, without knowing, sacrifices his own son in order to have a son!

Santosh Chakrabarti states, "In some short stories Rabindranath touches, sometimes sarcastically, upon some other evils of the society born out of blind customs and unhealthy traditions. The sanctimonious concept of the sanctity of the precincts of Hindu temple is treated, rather satirically, in the story called "Anadhikar Prabesh" ("Intrusion") in which Jaikali the sanctity-conscious widowed owner-custodian of Lord Radhanath temple gives shelter to a young pig inside the sanctum of the shrine to save it from a rushing group of Doms."<sup>12</sup>

The crowd reaches Jaikali's temple in search of that unclean animal but they are of the opinion that she cannot give protection to it. The last sentence of the story shows the satirical tone of Rabindranath:

The great God of mortal creatures was delighted at this odd little episode, even if the petty God of mean and narrow social custom was mightily outraged.

(P. 150)

"The Parrot's Training" is Tagore's pleasant satire on the education-system. Here the training pattern is so defective that the parrot dies in course of its training and its so-called teachers and trainers show to the king that now the parrot has attained, a class of education and wisdom.

Tagore satirizes the society through the character of Gokulchandra, Himangshu's father and Harachandra, Banamali's father. Human beings are so selfish that they cannot share even lemon with each other while on the other hand their children are sharing their feelings and emotions.

It is ironically presented by Tagore in the story "Wishes Granted" that people are not satisfied with their present. The father Subalchandra wants to be like his son, he wants to go back to his past so that he can utilize his time and devote his childhood to studies in order to make his old age secure. On the other hand Sushilchandra wants to be as old as his father so that nobody can stop him from doing whatever he likes but

<sup>12</sup>Santosh Chakrabarti, *Studies in Tagore* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2004), pp. 96-97.

when both are granted their wishes, they realize that their previous condition is better than the present and request to the Goddess of wishes to convert them to what they were before.

The conclusion of the story "Master Mashai" is shot through with a poignant irony expressed through the resources of a resonant symbolism. As Haralal, the tutor of Venu, crosses and re-crosses the ground in his hired horse carriage, his anguished thoughts about harassment by police in the presence of his mother gradually abates as he recognizes for the first time the triviality and insignificance of his being: "No King or Emperor in the world had the power to make captive this non-entity, this Haralal." (P. 91)

The one thought, the one presence that fills his mind at this moment is the image of his mother – the symbol of undemanding and unquestioning love: "she seemed to grow and grow till she filled the infinity of darkness. All the roads and buildings and shops of Calcutta gradually became enveloped by her." (P. 91)

Subhir Dhar states: "But ironically, this expansive consciousness brings only the deliverance of death to Haralal. Having poured his love to a rich man's son, Haralal's reward is not a return of love and affection but the pain of death."<sup>13</sup>

Santosh Chakrabarti writes about the satirical theme of Tagore in his stories:

Though over shadowed by the tale in *Prayaschitta* (Penance) of the shameless self-seeker who writes roughshod over his self-effacing innocent wife by playing false with her (Anathbandhu deceives Bindhyabasini by marrying an English woman during his stay in England for study), the custom of doing penance for crossing the *Kalapani* is satirized in the story as a secondary theme.... In *Durbuddhi* (Foolhardiness) Rabindranath exposes the corruption in the police administration and also the police medical practitioner unholy nexus.<sup>14</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore presents almost all shades of life in general in his stories. In his stories like "Sunday", "Last Tale" and "Laboratory" – he satirizes the theme of the neo-anglophiles among the urban people and finds them hollow. Rabindranath Tagore being an aristocrat does not treat common people as lower one, even comes in contact with them and presents their problems in his works and always satirizes this unjust social division. He is of the opinion that God has made all the creature of the world and nobody has right to think that he or she is superior due to his or her caste or social position. He wants to abolish prevailing bad customs in society.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Mohit K. Ray, *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore – Volume II* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2004), p. 223.

<sup>14</sup> Santosh Chakrabarti, op. cit., p. 97-98.



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