

Humanism in Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

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ABSTRACT : *Humanism is a Renaissance doctrine. It aims at a life devoid of blind faith and asserts ability and accountability to read a moral conduct for the greater common good. Tagore's humanism focuses on the fact that humanism is not one thing but many. Through his short stories, Tagore has focused social issues such as inter-caste marriages, children's agony, women's suffering, superstitions beliefs, bigoted orthodoxy and growing gulf between urban and rural. His stories showed him that he was a great humanist and universalist- a true citizen of the world. He believed that the mind has more important than matter. He also believed in the essential unity of man and the University of the Mind.*

In this paper, I explore some of the select short stories of Tagore to prove him as a great universal humanist.

KEYWORDS : *Bandits, Dumb, Empathy, Humanism, Ministerial, Morality, nationalism, realism, troupe, Upanishads, Vedas, votary.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Humanism is a term applied to the philosophical view that emphasizes man's potentialities. The term 'Humanism' is derived from the Latin word 'humanus' which means human. Humanists in all ages have in common the desire to enlarge man's awareness of himself. Humanism is often regarded as the characteristic attitude of the Renaissance in Western Europe but the concept is not alien to India. It is a life stance that affirms our ability to lead meaningful, ethical lives capture of adding to the greater good of humanity. It can be considered the process by which truth and morality are sought through human investigation. It is a doctrine of reason that aims at a life devoid of blind faith and asserts ability and accountability to have a moral conduct for the greater common good. The world has produced humanists belonging to different schools but the essence of all is love. Various writers, poets, painters and musicians have propagated humanism with a view of shaping mankind. By dint of their vision, mission and action; they expose themselves as a universal man holding up the banner of human values-truth, love, beauty, forbearance, harmony and eternal search for the ultimate destination from here (earth) to eternity. In such a galaxy of the prophets of humanism, Rabindranath Tagore, the ministerial of mother India occupies a frontal position.

Tagore is a humanist: - Tagore played a vital role in the history of Indian Renaissance in the late 19th and early 18th century. He bought laurels and blazed trails of India's glory. He was

born in the highly educated, illuminated, cultured and rich Tagore family in Bengal. He imbibed the ancient humanistic tradition of Vedas and Upanishads. He was very deeply influenced by humanism of Buddha and the devotional poets. Tagore whole heartedly believed that friendship, fraternity, and love are the only way of human welfare. Elements of sacrifice, forgiveness, kindness, compassion, love, universal, fraternity, unity, equality and peace associated with Buddhist teaching and culture are greatly influenced him. Though he was deeply religious and believed in the innate divinity of man, he was against religious orthodoxies and communalism. He sought to unite all religious and asserts that god was not to be found in images or scriptures, in temples or mosques but in the hearts of men. Tagore condemned the exploitation of men anywhere.

Rabindranath Tagore as myriad-minded man

The epithet “**Myriad-minded**” which Coleridge applied to Shakespeare seems to be more eminently applicable to Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) whose long life of 85 years was marked by ceaseless and torrential flow of creativity manifested in the richness and variety of all kinds of literary forms-poems, novels, essays, paintings, music and short stories. Whatever he touched turned into gold. He was an author of children’s textbooks of science. He was a nationalist, internationalist, critic, statesman, artist and educationist. He wrote primarily in Bengali, but has a mastery of English also. He translated many of his poems, plays, novels, and short stories into English, often changing, telescoping and transforming the originals. Tagore is internationally known as a humanist who sought to reconcile such apparent opposites as man and nature, materialism and spiritualism, and nationalism and internationalism. Tagore’s humanism is visible in the literary works of Tagore. His works create awareness of life and problems of people around him and in his appraises and criticism of those problems in the context of the wide humanity and mankind. He treated the problems of his age from the intellectual and philosophical point of view and hence has more profoundness.

Humanistic Vision in Tagore’s short stories:-

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the pioneers of short story writing in India, in English and Bengali. Human life was the main subject of his stories and he was painted it in its Myriad hues. He has given expression to the silent agonies of the underdogs, the exploited peasants, the suffering women and helpless children. His stories are notable for their deep humanism, warmth of human relationships, down-to-earth realism and his great psychological insight. Tagore wrote over hundred short-stories during his entire literary career. They are mostly suggestive, impressionistically and lyrical, dealing with different aspects of ordinary human life. His characters are true to life, vivid and often unforgettable. They come from different classes and walks of life.

In this paper, I analyze some of the select short stories of Tagore from the point of humanism. Tagore has depicted the children’s life with power and dignity. Like a psychologist, he has treated the whole mental make-up of children, their fears, sensitivities, pathos and innocence. Tagore describes a child’s doleful tale as a child would describe it. A child would remember every cruel incident happened to him. He would remember it to his dying days. Tagore reproduces the intense sensitivity of a child with exactness and sincerity.

1. In “**Home Coming**”/ “**Holidays**,” Tagore has depicted the depression, alienation and isolation of the child Pathik. He is a boy of fourteen. His exuberant activity appears to his elders as mischief and leads to his being taken away to his uncle, Bishmber’s place,

Calcutta. He is enchanted with the prospects of visiting such a big city. His mother is distressed to see his eagerness to leave the home. His flight to Calcutta is not very pleasant and favorable as he expected. There is no one expect his uncle to look after him. He never feels secure at his uncle's house. His aunt seems as an irritable and ill tempered woman, who scolds him at the slightest provocation. He receives miserable failure in the school. He has never developed the feeling of loneliness. His heart always waits for the October holidays. Lastly, we see the boy lying in high fever and muttering in delirium. Finally the holidays have come but it is in the form of his death. Agony of Pathik's mother is well suggested. The delicious talk of the boy's touching. Here, Tagore analyzes the interest of the public in social condition of life. He is so steeped in realism and humanism of the world.

2. In another story, **"The Castaway"/ "Unwanted"**, Tagore glorifies the social and economic condition of the child, Nilakanta. He is a neglected waif of a village theatrical troupe who finds a home and is soon castaway. When their boat is caught in a storm, Nilakanta has succeeded in swimming and reaches the home of Kiran and Sharat. They have no children. So he becomes the favourite of Kiran. He is on the period of growth. Then suddenly, Sharat's younger brother, Satish comes to spend his holidays with his sister-in-law, Kiran. Satish and Nilakanta are of the same age. Soon, Nilakanta feels neglected by Kiran and considers Satish who has robbed him of his only bliss in life. He never dared to show his enmity to Satish openly. But he would contrive a hundred pretty ways of causing him annoyance. With the idea of hurting Satish, Nilakanta steals Satish's ink-stand. Nilakanta is not a thief, and only revenge has promoted him to take the favourite Ink-stand of Satish. Unfortunately, it is gathered by Kiran when she wants to put some presents in Kiran's box. She is surprised and shocked Nilakanta's box. Nilakanta is blushed with shame. Next day Nilakanta is missing. Later Kiran's family goes to their village. Thus, Tagore's observation no doubt reveals his deep knowledge of the child psychology through which he exhibits his humanism. He delves deep in to the minds of the children and portrays them with perfect sympathy and understanding as in **Homecoming and The Castaway**.

In his short stories, Tagore has displayed his deep sympathy for the poor, the untouchable, the exploited peasants, the silently suffering women and servants. The characters in his stories come alive with the touch of his compassionate humanism.

3. In his story **"Punishment"/ "The Sentence"** Tagore highlights the position of women in the lowermost strata of the society. Dukhiram Rui and Chidam Rui were sub-tenants; they had no land of their own. They tilled the lands of the tenants of the landlord and also worked as menial workers. They belonged to lowermost caste, "Kuri" caste. Utter poverty and destitution resulted in frequent quarrels and wrangles between the wives of the two Rui brothers. Chandra was the wife of a Chidam and Radha was the wife of Rushiram. One day Rushiram comes home after work and asks Radha to serve food and she replies adversely instead of giving of food. Rushiram plunges his knife in her neck without a moment's thought. The terrified Rui brother persuades Chandra to own up the murder which she has never committed. Tagore exposes the problems of conventional woman through the character of Chandra who lives under supremacy of male. She believes that the death will be preferable to continuing to live with a man who betrayed her. Tagore's heroines are not only brave, beautiful, gentle and kindhearted but also strong, determined, progressive and open-minded.
4. In the story **"Profit and Loss"/ "Debits and Dues" / "The Matrimonial Deal"**, the protagonist Nirupama is subjected to inhuman treatment and humiliation by her in-laws as her father was unable to pay the total amount of promised dowry. Her father was

disgraced and not allowed to meet his daughter. Unable to bear the contempt, humiliation and torture, that his daughter was facing, the poor father sold off his own house and borrowed money with high interest for giving the promised sum of dowry. But Nirupama would not accept the money. Nirupama fell seriously ill due to utter neglect and starvation and finally died. Immediately after her cremation, her mother-in-law arranged for her son's remarriage.

5. In the story, "**The Inscrutable Woman**"/ "**The Woman Unkind**", the heroine Kalyani gives a befitting reply to her would be in-laws demand for dowry. She refused to marry and vowed to remain a life-long spinster. When the groom's uncle humiliated her father, Sambhunath Babu on the wedding day, she herself vowed to serve mother land and rejected all marriage proposals
6. In the story "**Skelton**", /"**A study of Man**", Tagore briefly outlined the plight of married women and their suffering after widowhood.
7. In the story "**The Exercise book**"/ "**The Note-Book**", Tagore focuses on the problems of child marriages and female education. He provides a glimpse of the average middle-class mentality towards female education.
Tagore believed that human emotions live like, friendship, affection and sympathy could transcend the barriers of caste, creed, language, nation, race and religion.
8. The story "**Kabuliwallah**"/ "**The Fruit Seller**" Tagore conveys the message of universal brotherhood and equality. Rahamat the peddler from Kabul had come to Calcutta to sell his goods. He befriended a little girl called Mini. After a long period of imprisonment on false charges, he returned to his friend to discover that it was her marriage day. Mini's father hesitated to call Mini from the inner quarters on that auspicious day. Rahamat was very disappointed but he gave a box of grapes and some raisins and almonds which he brought for mini as a token of his affection. When Mini's father tried to pay him he refused it. "I have a daughter like her," he says "that is why I give the fruit, not for money". He retrieved from the chest pocket of his tattered dress a soiled scrap of paper which contained the impression of a little child. That imprint was of Rahamat's little daughter. He hoped that Mini could not forget him, but beyond his expectation, she kindly refused to identify him. Tagore lavishes his art especially on children and presents them realistically.
9. In the story, "**The Child's Return**" / "**My Lord, the Baby**", Tagore represents the love and sacrifices of a devoted servant towards his master's son. Raicharan was 12 years old when he came to his master's house. He was appointed there to serve his master and then was given his master's little son for looking after him. One day a calamity overtook him. The servant had taken the child out in a perambulator to the riverside, and the boy had suddenly dropped into the current from the bank owing to his folly. The poor man had not the heart to disclose this, and was dismissed summarily. With a broken heart, he came back to his native place. In due course of his life, he was blessed with a son but his wife died after delivery. Later on, Raicharan realized that the child displayed the same characteristics as the lost child. So he returned back with his own little son and introduced him to his old master as the lost boy. Here is an affection, which is stranger than parental love. Raicharan could not release himself from the memories of the lost child.
10. In the story, "**Subha**" / "**The silent girl**", Tagore brings out the silent agony and pathos in the life of physically handicapped child subhashini. Subha is a dumb girl. Her parents get her married without informing the bridegroom of her defect. 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, everyone knew her to be dumb and soon her lord brought 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 as the fraud practiced on them. Thus, the story is full of pathos.

11. In the story “**The Postmaster**”, Ratan is the protagonist who is an illiterate orphan girl of the village helped the post master to bring water from the river and raise fire in the kitchen. The postman belonged to Calcutta. He was for the first time appointed in the village of Ulapur. He felt like a fish out of water in this remote village. Meanwhile, Ratan does odd jobs, cooks meal for the postmaster. She forms a stranger attachment to her employee, only to find that her affection is not returned. She treated him well when he full in illness. After recovery, the postmaster resigned his job. Then he informed Ratan that he was going away from ulapur and would not come back at all. It is full of pathos. Every meeting ends with departure. Those who came must go. Tagore’s concept of woman’s emancipation and empowerment reaches new heights in his story.
12. “**The Laboratory**”. The protagonist of the story, Sohini, towers above all the women characters of Tagore. She would be considered an unchaste woman according to conventional morality, but she proved to be a tower of strength to the man NandKishore whom she had chosen him as husband. He died early in an accident caused due to daring scientific experiment. But she was ever faithful to his memory and tried to build up the institutions he has started. In an age when young widows were being burnt in their husband’s funeral tyres, Tagore was sketching an independent, open-minded, brave, intelligent widow, who was fully conscious of her rights and responsibilities.
13. “**The story of a Muslim Woman**” was the last short story composed by Tagore in 1941, only a month before his death. It is a document of Tagore’s ruthless attack on social ills and communal conflict. At a time when India was witnessing the worst communal riots, Tagore pleaded for religious harmony by marrying a Hindu girl Kamala to a Muslim boy, whose father, old Habir khan had saved her from being abducted by bandits. Thus, Tagore conveyed the message of universal equality and religious tolerance. For him only one religion was true and that was the religion of man. Tagore was a votary of human life.

2. CONCLUSION:

Thus, Rabindranath Tagore has portrayed ‘small lives, humble distress, tales of humdrum grief and pain’ with deep empathy. He champions the rights of children and workers. He spreads the message of universal peace, co-operation, friendship, harmony and brotherhood. He seeks the unity and harmonious co-existence of all the races, languages, cults and religions in India as well as the world. He upholds the dignity of man. He establishes the glory of human soul and sings the glory of human life. Tagore expresses the concepts of humanism through every character of his work and gives more importance to Indian tradition. His thought of humanism is not only confined to India but also had spread to the entire world. Every character makes the reader to understand the significance of humanism. Hence, we need to read such stories which are soaked in and saturated with humanism. No doubt, Tagore proved himself to be a humanist par excellence through his short stories.

3. REFERENCES

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