

## RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S LITERARY SKILL IN PROJECTING GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHICAL AND HUMANISTIC IDEOLOGY IN HIS SHORT STORY WORLD : AN APPRAISAL

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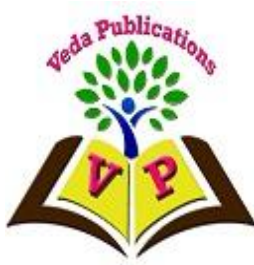
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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/IJREP.2019.39>

### ABSTRACT



This paper probes the literary skill exhibited in tune with Gandhian philosophy and humanistic ideology in the short stories of Tagore. He is a prominent writer and profound thinker, his concept of humanism and philosophy get mainly expressed in inter-personal relationship. His illustration of female characters reveals the non-violent quality. This shows the supreme inspiration towards Gandhian principles in his short stories.

Keywords: *Chastity, Humanity, Self-Suffering, Non-Violence, Hardship, Disloyalty, Magnanimous Love*

The art of writing short stories is said to have received, in recent times, a good deal of attention from literary circles. In an age of hurry and bustle, when at a stretch, a reader is not in a position to devote more than a hour or two to a work of fiction, this genre has received a wide appeal and attention. What is to be understood is that the short story proper in India is an offshoot of western literary impact. This impact was felt first and most deeply cherished in Bengal. The result was an early renaissance of literature here. In the field of short story, the pioneer was Rabindranath Tagore who had influenced either directly or indirectly the development of short story in other Indian languages. Srikumar Banerji is right in saying:

“The real founder of the Bengali short story  
as well as its most artistic exponent is  
Rabindranath who opened new paths for  
the Bengali short story writers” (Kaur 146).

Tagore is virtually the creator of short story proper in Bengali. For the first time, he handled it with the freedom and imagination of an artist and achieved a success in literary artistry what Goethe was the Germany, what Germany was to England, what Walt Whitman was to America, Tagore was to India. From whatever angle one looks at him, Tagore stands as the colossus. In the West, he is remembered as the wise old man and the author of the flowery vaporous poems of *Gitanjali* that were praised to rapturously by W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound and which was his in 1913. *The Nobel Prize* while in the East, particularly in India, he is regarded as an altogether more complex and many sided personality – a poet, a musician who composed the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh and also considered as the spiritual ambassador of India and the spokesman of India and the living symbol of Indian culture. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tagore was a prolific, yet qualitatively excellent poet, dramatist, novelist and short story writer. Tagore is said to have written 140 books which include his poems, dramas novels and short stories, and his notable works are *Manasi Galpa Guchha, Sonar Tari, Chitra, Chaibali, Kalpara Ksanika, Naivedya Chitrangada, Malini, Gitanjali, Gora* and so on.

Besides being a poet, mystic, playwright and novelist, he nourished his creativity rather abundantly in short – story writing, for he was found to the first writer of true short story in Bengali. He had no model to follow in his own literary tradition. He evolved a thoroughly congenial form of it. In other literary forms – poetry, drama, essay, he groped his

way to maturity. But short story came ripe to him. In 1890 when he came to the heart of rural Bengal to manage the family estates, life and nature here conspired to bless him with this literary form. He had to his credit composition of such notable short stories as 1.*The Beggar Maid*, 2.*Tale of the High Road*, 3.*The Crown*, 4.*The River Stairs*, 5.*The Postmaster*, 6.*False Hopes*, 7.*The Lost Jewels*, 8.*Vision*, 9.*The Auspicious Vision*, 10.*Trio* and so on. In story after story, Tagore is found showing the different facets of life in Bengal and of life as such which peeps through the chinks of eternity. They are woven around the joys and sorrows of men, women and children enacting different roles in the mysterious drama of life from stark reality to daring fantasy. With an infinite sympathy and rare psychological insight, he works out the joint family system, criticism of the evils of contemporary social life, and problems in conjugal bond also find a place in his stories. He is also a writer concerned with public issues and many of his short stories are didactic in nature.

Both Tagore and Gandhi were contemporaries. Gandhi emerged on the literary scene in his full glory in 1920-21 at the time of Satyagraha movement. In Indian literature, some historians called it the Gandhi – Rabindra Era on the basis of the two mainstreams of literary activity, namely, the National-cultural stream and the Romantic – metaphysical trend. Both Gandhiji and Tagore were intensely spiritualistic simple-hearted, but intellectually sophisticated, ascetic, frugal and large-hearted. Both drew heavily from the old Indian Classics, ancient civilization, culture and literature; both believed in and advocated uncompromisingly the superiority of moral and spiritual forces and denounced the cult of violence, untruth, force, exploitation and dishonesty. Gandhi was a votary of self-supporting and martyrdom whereas Tagore stood for manly fortitude and moderation. Tagore throughout his life seems to have suffered from angst because of his concern for the destiny of natural man and he is said to have always been a searcher after truth, cherishing in life ready sympathy for the poor folk, innocent victims of oppression of the sarkar, of the rich landlords and the priests. Tagore also liberalized the management of his lands and took deep interest in peasant's welfare. These characteristic traits vividly place the poet and his view on similar lines with Gandhiji.

Gandhiji slowly emerged as a possible answer to the global crisis of human values and numerous other unresolved contradictions and he took an integrated view of life trying to weave insights, derived from different disciplines into a single unified approach. The Central

Gandhian values are derived from his own philosophical views which he arrived at as a result of historical, spiritual and material knowledge and this experience. For popularizing his ideas and converting the people to his way of thinking and action, Gandhiji, as a practical reformer, relied more on example than on precept or preaching. It is known to all that Gandhiji throughout his life waged a grim fight against violence, untruth, ignorance and malaise in every field of human activity. In his struggle, he made practical plans and decisions as the prevailing circumstances warranted, but a ceaseless search for truth permeated his whole life. The distinguishing aspect of Gandhiji from other good souls is that he made truth and non-violence dynamic which constitute in themselves all the good means that Gandhiji can think of. Truth to him is God with all the good qualities. Faith in Satya is the starting point of Gandhiji's philosophy. The greatest truth consists in loving and serving all, in striving after "the greatest good of all. Thus, satya cannot be pursued by violent means. A scrupulous discipline is needed to practice Satya; that discipline is self-control, required by the pursuit of non-violent values. In His words, truth and non-violence are like the two sides of an unstamped coin. Both cannot be separated, Evil cannot be cured by evil, nor hate be conquered by hate. "Satan cannot be exercised by Satan". The only way to cure hatred is by love. This is what the prophets and reformers have held in life. Gandhiji himself comments:

"It is no non-violence if we merely love those that love us. It is non-violence only when we love those that hate us. I know how difficult it is to follow this ground law of love. But are not all great and good things difficult to do? Love of the hated is the most difficult of all. But by the grace of God, even this most difficult thing becomes easy to accomplish if we want to do it" (Kripalani 1947).

Gandhiji hails non-violence as the greatest weapon at the disposal of the mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man. For Gandhiji, non-violence is not merely a policy, but also his religion which he not only preached but also practiced throughout his life. In his opinion, service to man is something divine. He himself holds:

“I am endeavoring to see God through the service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven an down below, but in everyone “ (Kripalini 338).

For Gandhiji, religion and morality are the same. They interchangeable terms, for religion, according to him, provides a moral basis to all human activities. With his strong belief in non-violence, Gandhiji is against all inequality in any walk of life, political, economic or social, for he makes no distinction between men and women. He holds that inequality ultimately leads to exploitation which for him is violence. He is, no doubt, a staunch upholder of ahimsa, Satyagraha and sarvodaya in his spirit and principle.

Gandhiji’s elaborate expositions of his theories of truth and non-violence get echoed in literary works, especially in the literary compositions of Tagore. Both Tagore and Gandhi assign the highest place to the freedom of mind. Tagore’s off-quoted poem “Where the mind without fear and the head is held high” mirrors the true philosophy of life, as preached and practiced by Tagore and Gandhi. Both are wedded to the principle of non-violence. The identical approaches to the various issues of human life by the poet show that he too is not free from the influence wielded by the apostle of our nation – Mahatma Gandhi. Since most of Tagore’s short stories are based on family life and the issues in it. We do not have any direct reference to the Mahatma. But the identical approach of Tagore of similar lines of Gandhiji’s philosophy is obvious in his short stories as well as in his other works. In Tagore’s short stories, the concept of Ahimsa is practiced by many characters. They bear all the inconveniences that are bestowed upon them not only by those whom they love but for their sake by those whom they dislike. In the short story “The Girl Between”, a piquant triangle is created by Hara Shundari, the childless wife of Nibaran, who decides that her husband must marry again in order to have heirs. Although he is shocked and unwilling to go along with her proposal, he accepts it when she arranges for his marriage and is ready to face the dire consequences arising over it. The little wife Shailabala is naturally tearful and Nibaran is consumed by embarrassment when Hara Shundari shuts them through a hole.

When the first wife tries to touch the second, housework, Nibaran accuses her of being harsh with the child and finds himself growing infatuated with her. Though in the beginning, the first wife is jealous of the second she gives her room and jewellery. Hara

Shundari quietly carries out her task and takes solemn pride in it. She never grumbles or feels inferior or wretched. She also forgets her husband's attitude and helps him in his crisis. She nurses Shailabala when she falls ill. Though the latter curses her for the slightest slip, she devotes herself day and night nursing and comforting Shailabala as if she were a child. Hara Shundari being the first wife and older to the second could have easily subdued her by various means. But the self-effacing love for her husband makes her prone to all sorrows that come on her way; she silently bears all the inconveniences for the sake of her husband who realizes her worth after the death of Shailabala his second wife:

“He realised that she, and she alone, occupied  
the seat of honour in his shrine of memories,  
She who had shared all his joys and sorrows” (SSST 65).

Similarly in the character of Raicharan, who appears in the story, ‘The Return of Khoka Babu’, we find the dedication and loyalty of this man who receives the little of a traitor in return, he calmly takes the name and returns to the lap of death. Raicharan brings up his master's little son. Every prank of the child comes like a revelation to him. One day unfortunately due to his foolish fondness, the child is swallowed by the river Padma and he is so stunned with grief and remorse that he fails to give any satisfactory answer to his master's query. He is summarily dismissed crest fallen, he comes back to his village and in due course, is blessed with a son. He looks upon it with contempt as an usurper. But when the child displays the same characteristics as the lost child, as all children must do, he feels, his master's lost baby has come back to his arms, and he dedicates himself to the rearing up of this boy as his old Lord, the baby. With much hardship and suffering, he raises him. He sells his late wife's ornaments and also his own property to educate the boy. Raicharan exhibits the grand law of love, though he bestows fatherly love and affection on his son, he waits on him like a servant and conceals from everyone the fact that he is Phelna's father. He takes his son Phelna to his master, saying he is their own lost son whom he had stolen. Here is an affection which is stronger than parental love. But his hardships are received with abuses. He is accused by the master for usurping their son and in that old age, he is driven out for disloyalty. The magnanimous love of this man highlights the trait of Ahimsa which as Gandhi says:

“Love never claims; it never gives; love ever

Suffers, never revenges itself” (Rajack 86).

The short story “The Atonement” is a beautiful story of a wife’s self-effacing love. There can be no greater contrast than between Bindhya, a self-effacing wife, and Anathbandan, a selfish brute of a husband. As Ernest Rhys comments,

“What the wife Bindhya does in this apologue  
is only the sacrifice and self-annihilation of  
the funeral pyre in another form” (Tagore 55).

This type of love, ever giving and never claiming is the characteristic quality of an Indian wife, which is exquisitely pictured in Tagore’s short stories. Another such story of a young devoted wife who feels the loss of her vision amply compensated in the love of her repentant husband, but is soon disillusioned is featured in the short story “vision”. With a childlike faith and feminine delicacy, Kumo lets her husband apply his immature medical knowledge on her weak eyes and calmly bears the loss of eye sight. At first, her husband loves to do everything for her but soon she marks, from very trivial things, how he is getting tired of serving a blind wife when they shift to a village, she relives her childhood, with the sights and sounds of the old village fresh in her mind and remains moored to the ideals of her early days, but he, as a doctor, gets busy in making money. With an anguish she perceives her husband drifting away from her, to the extent of going for a second marriage which, however, is foiled by a kind of providence. The character know vividly portrays the common yearnings of a wife, and shows her angelic purity who goes to the extent of losing her vision in the hands of her husband. The immature knowledge of the husband is the root cause of her loss, but she never feels ill towards him, such is the quality of the wife, never retorts but the silent suffering borne by them elevate them to a higher level. This traditional loyalty to the husband rules the whole story. The woman suffers through the failing of man and a kind providence can restore the happiness of the mind even if the physical loss cannot be rectified. These virtues of love, truth, self-suffering are best highlighted in another character. Rashmani. She stands as a very good example for Gandhiji’s interpretation of Ahimsa:

“Woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa.

Ahimsa means infinite love, which again  
means infinite capacity for suffering.

Who but woman, the mother of man, shows

this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feels it during nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour? (Kripalani 396).

“The son of Rashmani” is a great story of Tagore, by virtue of the character of Rashmani. This woman’s tender consideration for her simple good-for-nothing husband is amazing, and her suppression of her great sorrow thinking of his great shock extends to her a tragic dignity. We love to be acquainted with her and to be reminded of all that she stands for. She ignores all the abuse and censure, goes on with her own way of doing things, and takes all the blame upon herself. The epitome of her virtue of Ahimsa comes at the hour of her suppression of her grief for her dead son for the sake of husband as Tagore depicts it:

“Preoccupied. She had little opportunity to grieve. Once again love of her son merged with love of her husband. She now took up the burden of sorrow for two loved ones. Her heart said : I can bear no more, still. She sustained him” (SSST 235).

Tagore’s illustration of the beauty of spiritual delicacy of the female characters, their dignity, the cheerful bearing of the suffering inflicted by their dear ones reveals their non-violent quality. The short story “Gift and Return” may be cited as a good example for the attributes of Ahimsa – truth, harmony, brotherhood and justice. Here in this story, the elder brother’s practice of ahimsa has purged the evil in the younger one retaining truth and justice and change of heart at last confessing his guilt and regretting for his action. Another aspect of Ahimsa as Gandhiji says in his Young India is:

“The test of love is “Tapasya” and Tapasya Means ‘self-suffering’.

This aspect of ‘Tapasya’ is well-portrayed by Tagore in his short story namely “The Austere wife” or “Tapashwini”. Though Tagore is satirical in tone, one cannot miss the self-suffering of a fifteen year old girl for her husband. Gandhiji’s prescribes Satyagraha for individual



action as well as for group action, the success in either case being judged in terms of moral values. The aim of an individual as well as a group satyagraha is not to punish the tyrant, but to convert him. Conversion implies that the tyrant realizes his mistakes, repents and there takes place a peaceful adjustment of difference. A Satyagrahi's progress is to be measured by the amount of self-suffering he undergoes, cheerfully and without ill-will. There is nothing that is not capable of achievement by means of Satyagraha.

“The hardest metal” he argues, “yields to  
Sufficient heat. Even so must the hardest melt  
before the sufficiency of the heat of non-violence  
and there is no limit to the capacity of  
non-violence to generate heat” (Bedi 212).

A Satyagrahi is one whose joy comes not out of infliction of pain on others but out of pain voluntarily borne by oneself. The story “A Resolve Accomplished” depicts the love and sacrifice of one elder brother. A Satyagrahi is one who moves the heart of the opponent, by self-suffering. This conversion implies that the tyrant realizes his mistake, repents and there takes place a peaceful adjustment of differences, similar is the mode adopted in the story “Pride Destroyed” which is a feeling tale of a talented wife's tenderness for her vain husband. To attest to the fact that love alone rules in the end as being in tune with Gandhiji's principle to R.S.Iyengar quotes rather aptly:

“Sufferance might awaken the other man's  
conscience and convert him to the  
way of love” (P 257).

To conclude, next only to Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, Tagore has been the supreme inspiration to millions in modern India and he had the enduring the heart to feel the pulse of the poor and distressed whose life-blood has strengthened the stream of livelihood of the so-called intellectual urbanities by applying the Gandhian principles in his short stories as well as other works. The Gandhian way is the stern humanistic way, because it seeks to build the edifice of humanity's future, not on the quick sands of perpetual technological advance and global industrial strife, but on the durable foundations of love, truth, chastity, honest labour, equitable sharing, simple living and the in competitive ordering of national and international

affairs. Falling in line with the profound thinking and feeling of Gandhiji, Tagore has projected almost all Gandhian principles in his short story world.

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