

Selected Short Stories

R. Tagore

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Tagore, the most celebrated of Bengali poets, was the fourteenth son of a wealthy and successful Bengali intellectual. In his early manhood he was employed by his father as a zamindar, i.e. a collector of rent, sent to one of his father's estates in the river basin of the Bengali delta. Tagore was thus an Indian aristocrat with a lot of leisure and servants¹, and one is naturally thinking of a Tolstoy. Could it be that the stories of Tagore can be compared with the Russian ones of a Tolstoy and a Chechov? Pearls of an exotic location, largely unknown in the West due to the problems of translation? Now Tagore was discovered in the early 20th century by Western literatis, especially by poets such as Yeates. He was for a brief period lionized and given one of the earliest Nobel Prizes in literature (1913). Maybe the short stories of his are real treasures, finally revealed to a western audience?

Tagore was very productive and his collected oeuvres make up many a volume. At the time of the writing of the stories he was editing as well as contributing to various journals during a time of very active Bengali cultural awakening. His stories were criticized by his contemporaries as being artificial, if written in a beautiful language, criticism that seems to have stung. Reading those stories one cannot but agree with the old caveats, they are indeed rather artificial, and at the end of more or less everyone of them, the reader is left feeling a bit cheated. Was that all? What was the point? Pretty melodramatic, if nothing else. True, Tagore is a poet, and of course his depictions of weather and scenery and appearances are done very nicely and competently, and more often than not, beautifully so, and also the beginnings of each story are usually enticing enough, luring the reader to read on. But Tagore lacks the ultimate genius of a true story-teller. He has the verbal skill, glib as he is, he has the technical know-how, but what he lacks is the point. Why were those stories written? To give finger-exercises to the author (yes, exercises are good, but do they always have to be published? Is their point not their ephemerality?)? To fill out the pages of a periodical (that seems to have the ring of truth)? To provide a distraction from poetic composition? To indulge in daydreaming?

Of course for all their failures they still manage to depict a kind of life, to some extent vanished, but strangely enough not entirely so in Modern India, whose exotic charms to the cynical visitor, is to some large extent due to the preservation of a fossilized past. It is a life of social division by caste and wealth, in which the great majority lead lives of unobtrusive misery. The interesting characters are thus those in the middle, those who have the ambitions to better themselves under the ever present threat of collapse into the

¹ The cover of the book shows a houseboat, in fact the very one used by Tagore. The houseboat is still an important institution in parts of India, such as in the backwaters of Kerala, or the lakes of Kashmir, in addition to the river deltas of Bengal, providing a convenient and relaxing means of slowly moving residence

anonymous mass of oblivion and want. Pointless would it be to make a list of stories, and almost equally hopeless it is to out of the mass extricate some particularly memorable ones. Maybe the story of the postmaster who befriends a young girl acting as his servant, who falls in love with him, but which he abandons without any regrets when he no longer can stand his position and returns home. Or the old woman crying in Darjelling, having been born a Mughal Princess, abandoning her faith in the extended pursuit of a man her father betrayed during the Sepoy mutiny and she idolized with all the fervent passion of generous youth, only to find this Brahmin hero in mundane circumstances. Was her sacrifices worth it? Apparently not, and the whole thing trickles into nothing. Pretty melodramatic though. Yet the references to the Yammu river, which flows by both Delhi and Agra, gives to the reader who has encountered them, pungent associations, reminding us that stories are not written in isolation but depend on their effectiveness on a matrix of context and associations, without which they are but empty, dusty remains. Perhaps some of the failures of Tagores stories to succeed are due to their dependence on shared cultural traits, because it is the hallmark of a good short story to transcend such regional anchorage (but never that extended one of shared humanity). Other examples can be culled forth, stories of some initial promise, given cheap endings. Maybe the lasting impression of those stories is the Indian tradition of early marriage, of dispatching mere girl children to household of strangers, burdering the family with the onery of dowry to boot. No wonder that to this day the birth of a female child is too often a source of misery and disappointment to mother and father alike. A woman child becomes a financial obligation, and also one to be relinquished in spite of all the affection inspired by and bestowed on it.

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