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**Editor:** Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



## **The Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore: A Historiographical Overview**

**Dr. Arpita Ghatak**  
Ex-Fulbright Scholar, 2015-16  
New York University, New York

**Abstract:** Literary magazines played a critical role in the development of Bengali literature throughout the nineteenth and the first few decades of the twentieth century. As the father of Bengali short-stories, Rabindranath Tagore was the first Bengali writer to take short-story as a serious art form and dealt with real and contemporary life. He established a new artistic and intellectual standard to Bengali literature with this genre. The present paper in genre studies tries to explicate the mobilization of short story from the Western conjecture to an Indian aka Bengali perspective through a critical ramification of Tagore's short-stories. Also, it consist a historiographical analysis of the genre and a paradigmatic study of Tagore's stories with their thematic exploration.

**Keywords:** Rabindranath Tagore, Genre studies, short story, nineteenth-century Bengal.

If Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-94) is considered as the founder-figure of modern Bengali prose, then Rabindranath Tagore can be well-credited as the father of Bengali short stories. Bankim Chandra Chatterji had established a distinctively artistic and intellectual standard for Bengali literature. With his efficient styling he had re-appropriated the language of Bengal from the stern edifices of the Sanskritized forms initiated by Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), till this form again found delineation among his later successors namely, Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore had written about a hundred short-stories and took the art form to an exceptional plane, not only in the realm of Bengali literature but also in the World standards. The present paper tries to explicate the concept of short story, as propounded by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) and then carried forward by Rabindranath Tagore in an Indian context.



Critics have often agreed that the genre of short story is an enigma of the Modern Age: “Men have always felt a fascination for stories. Even in the pre-historic periods man used to tell stories to a fascinated audience. But short story as a genre is a recent development. The origin and growth of short story as a literary term owe largely to the modern age” (Ray 57). Rabindranath Tagore was the first Bengali writer who ventured the short story as a serious art form, writing about real and contemporary life that had been limited in scope and size, based on a small slice of life, an incident or experience, perceptively dealing with the inner. There had been other contemporary writers who wrote many short stories with utmost precision among whom Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1937) and Nagendranath Gupta (1861-1940) took this art form forward.

As an exponent of a new standard of Bengal’s artistic tradition, Tagore established an ingenious intellectual stratum for the Bengali literature. He was a master stylist and his language was potent and compact. His literary style had surpassed all existing paradigms, a feature that Krishna Kripalani vouchsafed:

(He)s was the first Indian to attempt this form proper and though the short-story as a literary genre is now very popular with Indian writers, no one has yet equaled him in this art, much less surpassed him. How far he was familiar with the works of Chekov and Maupassant is not known—the only two foreign masters who could be compared to him in this field, though he was as different from them in his technique and mode as they from each other. (158)

Talking of the ‘foreign masters’ it seems necessary here to explore the idea of short-story as a genre, which grows redundant eventually among the recent and modern critical acronyms. Moreover, while reading Tagore’s short-stories, many critics have found structural and thematic similarities with the Western masters of short-stories—Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekov and even Guy de Maupassant. The plot of “The Judge” (*Bicharak*, 1929) is found to be similar to the plot of Tolstoy’s “Resurrection”, with *The Wife’s Letter* found constantly been compared with Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.



Critics generally define the term ‘short-story’ as “a prose work of fiction, differing from a novel by being shorter and less elaborate” (Lawrence 276). But this definition merely concentrates over the magnitude of a narrative and forfeits its diversification and allegorical reflection. It also informs that the word originated in 1877 in a magazine named *Independent*, thereby followed in 1882, 1898, 1902, 1923, 1929, 1936 and thereafter in its various editions. Edgar Allan Poe had tried to define it more clearly in *Graham’s Magazine* in May 1842 as a ‘unity of effect’. Edgar Allan Poe, an American writer who was known as a poet and critic, was most famous for mastering this form of short story—especially in the tales of the mysterious and macabre. Poe theorized short story as “unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose” (xv). According to Poe a “skillful literary artist’ should build a story carefully to create a ‘preconceived effect’” (xvi). He envisaged certain virtues of brevity and necessary coherence as the two elements required for the effect of totality in a short-story. The greatest advantage of short-story was also its ideal length, which was ample enough to produce ‘an intense and enduring impression’ but short enough to be experienced at one sitting and produce a temporary ‘exultation of the soul’ among the reader. Its length would allow the artist the opportunity to unify the total work for a single effect—thus transforming it from a mere narrative into a perfectly integrated work of art. Though Poe had little examples before him, except a few tales of Hawthorne and himself, the form hardly existed before 1842 and his visionary aesthetics proved prophetic to literature around the world.

After Poe, Brander Mathews (1852–1929) made this point clearer in his book named *The Philosophy of the Short-story* where he emphasized that the difference between short story and novel did not lie simply upon magnitude but a unity of impression which could only be derived from a unity of time, place and action (2-3). Now, what Poe and Mathews essentially asked for, was that the short fiction be written in the manner of lyric poetry. And these qualities find an optimum manifestation in Rabindranath Tagore and his greatest competence as a short fiction writer lies in this respect. The poet outrights the novelist, dramatist, painter and essayist in him. The lyrical nature in his prose pieces, drama and even



his paintings, is highly recognized by critics. Sisir Kumar Ghose envisioned the nature of Tagore's short-stories as revealing the "nuances of an aesthetically valid universe (*bhavalok-sristi*) closest to the lyric" (80). Interestingly, it is in a lyric that Tagore seems to express his aesthetic rationale for writing short-stories, named "Varsha- Yapan" (Passing the Rainy Season) in a collection of poems *Sonar Tari* (Golden Boat):

I feel the urge of writing stories, one after another in my own way, on humble lives and their small miseries, on matters of small consequence, really simple and plain, like a few drops of tears from thousands of forgotten memories flowing down to oblivion.

There would be no colourful narration, no piling up of incidents; there would be no philosophizing and no moralizing. On coming to the end one would feel a sort of unsatisfaction as if the is not really the end . . .

All that is neglected and rejected, all this unpurposeful display of life, I would for a moment gather for me and with it I would create a shower of all that is forgotten, in a rainy night of the life. (Ray 219)

As the first part of the poem depicts the Tagore's convictions over the contents of a short-story, the subsequent stanzas articulate his ideas regarding its form. The last part unifies the entire idea and envisions the whole *oeuvre* of nearly hundreds of stories that shows up the culmination of 'few drops' into a 'shower'. In other words, in the selective economy of materials in a short-story, the unity of design and mood, the spontaneous flow of emotions and the predominance of one temper, are overall poetic. But poetry is not the exact thing as the lyric verse, nor is Tagore's poetry identical to the lyric. Hence, it might seem to be improper to consider Tagore's stories to be essentially lyrical.

In the nineteenth century, Bengali literature in its initial phase, reached its readers mainly through periodicals. Novels were serialized in such journals that had been complemented by other literary pieces like poems, travelogues and small features. *Bangadarshan* had been a big name associated with Bankim Chandra Chatterji as its editor. Tagore's short-stories found their light in a series of such literary magazines thereby eroding



the distraught of literary outputs. *Hitabadi*, a weekly started in 1891 held some of his early stories, namely “Exercise-book” (*Khata*, 1891), “Debts and Dues” (*Dena Paona*, 1891), “Ramkanai’s Folly” (*Ramkanaier Nirbudhita*, 1891), “Taraprassana’s Fame” (*Taraprassanar Kirti*, 1891), “Postmaster” (1891), “The Divide” (*Babadhan*, 1891) and “Housewife” (*Ginni*, 1891). His talent found a more generous outlet in *Sadhana* (1891) a family magazine contributed mostly by the creative lot of the Tagores of Jorasanko. The magazine included mainly poetry, literary criticism, ‘modern science’, music, book reviews and short stories. Among the stories of Rabindranath Tagore that were written in this phase, “Little Master’s Return” (*Khokababur Pratyabartan*, 1891), “Skeleton” (*Kankal*, 1892), “The Living and the Dead” (*Jibito O Mrito*, 1892), “Holiday” (*Chuti*, 1892-3), “In the Middle of the Night” (*Nishitey*, 1894), “Punishment” (*Shasti*, 1893) are but a few. *Sadhana* became an immediate success and held high impact upon the development of modern Bengali literature, often comparable to Bankim Chandra Chatterji’s *Bangadarshan* and Pramatha Chaudhuri’s *Sabujpatra* (1914) in the later phase. But *Sadhana* had to be stopped in 1905, as Rabindranath Tagore could not carry forward with the burden of its editorship being its chief suppliant at the same time. Although it benefitted the literary history, since the years of *Sadhana* had been profoundly fertile in Tagore’s career as a short-story writer. He wrote forty-four short-stories between 1891- 95, almost one in a month to keep *Sadhana* going. Critics are of the belief that his attention seemed to be primarily centered upon story-telling during this phase (Saha 11). The poems that he wrote in this period were also based on tales and narratives, *Tales and Stories* (*Katha O Kahini*, 1900) being one of them. Another family magazine that came into light in this period was *Bharati*. Compared to the 1890’s Tagore wrote only eight stories between 1901 and 1914. His literary forte comprised of more short-stories to meet the demands of *Sabujpatra*. Tagore wrote some ten stories for this magazine, seven of which were published in the 1914. Afterwards he had written several short-stories in subsequent intervals; his last one being “The Story of a Muslim Woman” (*Musalmanir Galpa*), which was drafted in 1941, before his death but published posthumously in 1955 as an unfinished work.



The bulk of short stories written by Tagore can be divided broadly into two periods—the pre-*Gitanjali* period and the post-*Gitanjali* period by various critics. The stories of the first phase are “lyrical, objective, realistic, inter-connected with nature and human-life, psychological, supernatural but not unrealistic” (Ray 217). Dealing with the everyday life of small towns and villages in Bengal, the stern realism and superstitions, multifarious natural and unnatural elements are woven in the fabrics of realism. But the short-stories of the post-*Gitanjali* period reveal that Tagore is not merely a writer with romantic fervour, but he is also a realist who grapples with the tougher problems of contemporary life. There is a realistic appraisal of the social content and a brutally frank approach to the psychological complexities of human lives. Insidious tendencies within the society have been conspicuously exposed and the inner conflicts of the mind have been unveiled, while the human characters are interrogated with their excellences and limitations. Kripalani visualizes the stories of this phase quite abjectly:

The stories he wrote now have a different setting. They deal with middle-class life and its problems, in particular the tragedy of woman in a Hindu household, and if they lack the sweet fragrance of fresh fruit, they have the appetizing aroma of well-processed cheese. The author’s irony in exposing the cowardice and selfishness of the smug Hindu husband is as subtle and sharp as his courage in denouncing injustice perpetrated in the name of holy scriptures and tradition is admirable (252).

The matrices of Tagore’s short-stories are quite in a number. Some of them centers on the different moods, sentiments and atmosphere, while others emphasize character and temperaments, and yet a third group deal with problems. The first two had kept him engaged for about twelve years around the last of the nineteenth century, and the third group in the second decade of the twentieth century. In those days Tagore frequently visited his family estates in North Bengal and spent several months in the house-boat on the river Padma and its tributaries. His love for nature, his concern with the commonplace of day to day life of the villages of rural Bengal, and the sudden revelation of humanity in the least expected of situations and the most neglected of creatures flocked around the river-banks mark the stories



of this period. Tagore had repeatedly attributed the origin of his short-stories being the landscapes and the experiences gathered by meeting the villagers on his boat-trips over the river Padma, while he did spend much of his time supervising his family estates at Shilaidaha, Patisar and Shahjadpur (in present Bangladesh). Answering the question what made Tagore, the poet to employ himself immensely into writing short-stories, he more than once explained it in different terms. On some occasion, he commented:

To begin with I only wrote poetry—I didn't write stories. One day my father called me and said, 'I want you to take charge of the estates.' I was astonished: I was a poet, a scribbler—what did I know about such matters? But my father said, 'Never mind that—I want you to do it.' What could I do? Father had ordered me, so I had to go. Managing the *jamindāri* gave me the opportunity to mix with various kinds of people, and this was how my story-writing began. (*Selected Short Stories: The Postmaster and Others* 4)

Tagore's young creative mind was keen to portray the mundane world and the queer psychological efficacies of the ordinary people residing in it, unlike the somber note that presided in the stories of his later phase. Hence, probably, there was more of 'realism' in the stories of the earlier phase. Again, on another occasion of giving an English interview to a magazine *Forward* on February 23, 1935, Tagore remarked on the background of his stories and how they had originated, in the following terms:

It was when I was quite young that I began to write short stories. Being a landlord I had to go to villages and thus I came in touch with the village people and their modes of life. I enjoyed the surrounding scenery and the beauty of rural Bengal. The river system of Bengal, the best part of this province, fascinated me and I used to be quite familiar with those rivers. I got glimpses into the life of the people, which appealed to me very much indeed. At first I was quite unfamiliar with the village life as I was born and brought up in Calcutta and so there was an element of mystery for me. My whole heart went out to the simple village people as I came in close contact with them. They seemed to belong to quite another world, so very different from that of





Calcutta. My earlier stories have this background, and they describe this contact of mine with the village people. They have the freshness of youth. Before I had written these short stories there was not anything of that type in Bengali literature. No doubt Bankimchandra had written some stories but they were of the romantic type; mine were full of the temperament of the rural people...There is a note of universal appeal in them, for man is the same everywhere. My later stories haven't got that freshness, that tenderness of earlier stories. (4-5)

Some of the scenes and characters in his early stories were taken straight out of observation. For example, Rabindranath himself wrote about the origin of the story, "Conclusion" in this selection as follows:

A boat moored near our ghat and a crowd of local housewives were standing in front of it. Perhaps someone was going somewhere and they all came to bid farewell. Many little children, faces partly covered with a part of sari and heads with grey hair gathered there. But my attention was mostly on one girl among them. Perhaps she was twelve or thirteen years old. Because she was chubby she looked more like fourteen or fifteen. Her face was attractive. She was dark complexioned but with a pleasing appearance. Her hair was trimmed like that of a boy and it made her face look charming. She looked intelligent, smart, uninhibited and easy going. Carrying a boy on her hip she was observing me with an unembarrassed and curious look. There was no streak of dullness, pretentiousness or incompleteness in her face. Because she was half a boy and half a girl she had a special charm. Like boys she was not at all self-conscious. This, together with the pleasantness, made her a kind of novel girl. I didn't expect to see such a girl among the countrywomen in Bengal . . . At last when the time of departure came I saw the same shorthaired, bright and unsophisticated girl, adorned with bangles on her round arms, being led into the boat. I realized that the poor girl was leaving her father's house and going to that of her husband. When the



boat set sail the women kept on looking from the riverbank and a few of them wiped their eyes and noses with their sari's end. . . It appeared to me that the world was so beautiful and yet filled with such sadness. The story of this unfamiliar young girl seemed somewhat familiar to me. (Saha 13)

Whereas, a few of his earlier stories like "The Hungry Stones" (Khudito Pashan, 1895), "In the Middle of the Night" (*Nishithey*, 1894) and "The Skeleton" (*Kankal*, 1892) belong to quite a different genre. They are neither macabre, nor are tales of horror and mystery. But the ordinary human element lingers at the axis to turn the supernatural around itself. Other stories of this genre, for example, "Secret Wealth" (*Gupta-Dhan*, 1940) and "Wealth Surrendered" (*Sampatti Samarpan*, 1891-2) take off the weirdness by the dexterity in plot- weaving and a matter-of-fact style. Also there are instances of penetrating psychoanalysis "The Living and the Dead" (*Jibito O Mrito*, 1892), "Lost Jewels" (*Manihara*, 1898). *The Broken Nest* (*Nashtanir*, 1902) ends this epoch and begins a new one. It registers an important crisis in every sense—the then evolving 'woman question', deriding factors like the socio-political changes in the society, all together start the 'problem-story' in the Bengali literature. *The Wife's Letter* (*Streer Patra*, 1914), "House Number One" (*Paila Nambar*, 1917), "The Unapproved Story" (*Namanjur Golpo*, 1925) and "The Uncle" (the first part of *Chaturanga*) are essentially the derivatives of some significant problems; they are seas apart from the others, such as, "Rasmoni's Son" (*Rasmonir Chele*), "Elder Sister" (*Didi*), "Postmaster", "The Teacher" (*Mastermoshai*) and "Kabuliwallah" (1892).

The old cadence of union with the nature, typical characters that emerge out of the trifling human contour are not present in the stories of Tagore's later phase of writing. "Now it is not so much love as understanding, not the reality of living as the process of growth, not acceptance but refusal, i.e., to say, a new note of protest against the injustice of abstractions and institutions on the ground of personality" (Chatterjee, I. 44). For example, in "Haimanti" Tagore interrogates the evils implied within the institution of Hindu marriage and how Haimanti, a sensitive young woman, must—due to her sensitiveness and free spirit—sacrifice her life prematurely in the face of atrocities. Through *The Wife's Letter*, a dismal lifelessness



of Bengali women after they are married off and how pseudo-moral hypocrisies plague upon the Indian middle class *Bhadralok*. Even in the last passage of *The Wife's Letter*, Tagore directly attacks the Hindu custom of glorifying Sita's attempted self-immolation as a mean to appease her husband Rama's doubts, as depicted in the Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*. Tagore also examines the strenuous relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims, a theme much in vogue, in "The Story of a Muslim Woman" and thus embodies the essence of Tagore's humanism in many ways.

The first evidence of Tagore's critical approach to the 'woman question' is found in the 1884 publication "Story of the Ghat" (*Ghater Katha*), which is commonly recognized as the first of his short-stories. He had been preoccupied with this theme over the years of his life, till his last and posthumously published story "The Story of a Muslim Woman" (*Musalmanir Golpo*, 1955). "Laboratory" published in 1940, took Tagore's notion of womanhood to the edges and led a paradigmatic shift within the contemporary ideals in the society. Critic Sumana Das Sur has identified an elementary question in every man of words, including Rabindranath Tagore—the man-woman relationship and women's position and roles in the society. She has found an articulation of passivity among the women characters projected in the trio of stories *Tinsangi* (1940), consisting "Sunday" (*Ravibar*), "Last Words" (*Sesh Katha*) and "Laboratory". In this context, I wish to cite a few excerpts from the lectures that Tagore had delivered in 1916-17, during his tour to America and were later published as a collection named *Personalities* (1917). "Woman" has been one of the six essays in this collection where Tagore is found to be insistent in demarcating the roles of women:

At present stage of history civilization is almost exclusively masculine, a civilization of power, in which woman has been thrust aside in the shade . . . Woman is endowed with the passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self-sacrifice in a greater measure than man is. It is the passive quality in nature which turns its monster forces into perfect creation of beauty—taming the wild elements into the delicacy to tenderness fit for the service of life. This passive quality has given



woman that large and deep placidity which is so necessary for the healing and nourishing and storing of life. (Bhattacharya and Samanta 173)

Critics try to formulate that all fiction emulate common events of life and have some basis, however insignificant it may be, in the writer's personal experiences. It may also be some aspects of a person's character, or fragments of a situation, real incidents or an image. One may recollect Coleridge's adding up of the imagination in this context. The amusing anecdote about the postmaster in Shahjadpur can be raised on this occasion; Tagore fondly recollects it in a letter to his niece Indira Devi which is later collected as Letter No. 17, in *Chinnapatravali*, on 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1891:

I dearly love to listen the stories of the postmaster. He can tell many impossible tales very seriously. He told me yesterday that the local people had so much reverence for the Ganges that if a relative died they grind a piece of his bones and keep it. If sometime they come across a person who had drunk waters of the Ganges they would mix the bone-powder with waters of the Ganges they would mix the bone-powder with his paan and think that a part of their dead relative had mingled with the Ganges, I laughed and said, 'It is probably just a story.' 'Sir, it may be so,' he admitted after thinking about it seriously. (Saha 13)

Rabindranath wrote most of his short-stories in the 1890s which were mostly published in several periodicals. In *Sadhana* alone thirty-six of his stories appeared. He intermingled stark realism and poetic idealism in his stories which reflected the contemporary life in rural and urban Bengal. Later, during 1914-1917, several of his great stories like *The Wife's Letter* and *Woman Unknown* appeared in the monthly magazine *Sabuj Patra*. The generic form changed gradually in his stories as he grew older. The themes from nature and rural Bengal were replaced with deep psychological revelation and Tagore's own ideologues. But novelty is evident in the changing pattern of the short-stories that have grown out of



Tagore's experience and worldview. It is certainly another reflection of the crisis that has been brought about by his deeper understanding of the world and the contemporary situation.

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