

TAGORE AS A NOVELIST

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A man of genius is as much moulded by the age he lives in, as he is in turn, shapes the times. A novelist is essentially a social being and must be an extrovert while a novel is a social product. Tagore lived in times when the forces of the Indian renaissance were asserting themselves in all directions. They were the days of conflict between the old and the new, of rebellion against tradition and reaction against modernity, of political upheaval, social reforms and cultural renaissance. His novels being the reconstructive of reality reflect the working of these forces. In them Tagore presented two basic ideals: the Indian National Consciousness, the Upanishadic ideal of universal man, the enlightened soul; and the typical Indian woman, symbolising the sensibility and energy of the *prakriti*. In fact the age was most turbulent in Indian history and Tagore played a crucial role in reflecting and moulding the intellectual, social and cultural climate in resurgent Bengal. Deeply conscious of the decadence in Indian ethos, he responded readily to the rationalistic, humanistic and literary influences of the west, brought in by the British advent, and ushered in a new era of Indian letters.

Tagore stood the central figure in the Indian renaissance. With his extraordinary nexus of talents and gifts as poet, Playwright, philosopher, Painter, composer, novelist, short story writer, educationist, culture hero and reconciler of indigenous and foreign traditions has been rightly hailed as “the Leonardo da Vinci of the Indian Renaissance.” Tagore succeeded in infusing a spirit of liberal humanism in to the life of his times. The value informing his art and life are derived from the very springs of humaneness and are not invalidated by the experience of the contemporary man and his obsessional preoccupation with existential questions. His work may be said to have brought a new significance to the perennially profound issues confronting man in the metaphysical, cultural, social, and political spheres.

As a living legend of his own lifetime, Tagore projected an image of his personality in which the myth and the man seemed inseparable. A keen aliveness to the happiness around him was one of his strong points and he exhibited to the end of his life a deep interest in all matters concerning his country and the world of large. In his novels he delineates the inner landscape of Indian experiences at one critical moments of her history. In them he projects a society in transition. They represent his deepest concern about the emerging social order in his country.

His novels deal with social problems of a fundamental nature : the woeful conditions of Hindu widow and the emergence of a new type of woman in quest of self-fulfilment as in *Binodini*, the struggle for value in one's own tradition as in *Gora*, the conflict between true and false patriotism as in *The Home and the World*, problems of love versus possessions as in *Two Sisters* and *The Garden*, and the futility and tragedy of political terrorism as in *Four-Chapters-* in fact, a whole complex of conflicts and cross-currents in contemporary Indian life which could not be framed in theological terms.

Tagore's novels symbolize his perspectivisation of the social scenes in India emphasising on humanistic values. The humanistic persuasion dealt with in his novels is directed towards a change in die-hard reading of the Indian traditions to facilitate the birth of new order. Mulkraj Anand, himself a humanist of note, remarked that Tagore was one of the greatest humanists of our country to be humanists. Tagore loved man so fervently that he believed, there is nothing in creation higher than the spirit of man. Even God

has to manifest Himself through man:

“The revelation of the Infinite in the finite, which is the motive of all creation, is not seen in its perfection in the starry heavens, in the beauty of the flowers. It is in the soul of man.”²

Tagore opined that humanism which places man in the centre of things could form the basis for reforming the Hindu Society by itself. Born at a time when the nation itself was involved in a process of rebirth, Tagore inherited the spirit of the Indian Renaissance and later strove his utmost to consolidate its foundation through “the Hindu-British symbiosis.” There was a headlong rush for Westernisation misconstrued as modernisation among the educated century. They attempt at an outright condemnation of everything Indian. But Raja Rammohan Roy, according to R.N. Tagore, accepted the west without renouncing the East and single handed, brought the new Bengal into being. Very soon old customs, ideas, beliefs and institutions became subject to rational scrutiny and the process of reformation of a fossilised, convention-ridden and largely sacerdotal social system was inaugurated by Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and others. An attitude of self analysis and willingness to integrate Western values with the ancient traditions of India was fostered, resulting in institutions like the Brahmo Samaj (1828). But the orthodox Hindus began a counter-offensive under the leadership of Raja Radhakanta Deb who started the Dharma Sabha in 1830. Then came out two opposing attitudes- “the reformist liberal humanism as symbolised in Tagore's novels in Paresh Babu and Anandamoyi in *Gora* or even agnosticism as seen in uncle Jagmohan in *Chaturanga*, and the romantic nostalgia for the glories of the past and efforts for a neo-Hindu revival as witnessed in the career of *Gora*.”³

Tagore's novels hold up a mirror to this society in conflict and reflected the crisis of spirit resulting from the dialectal relationship between the reformist and revivalist impulses. Tagore himself strove for a synthesis of the past and present, the Eastern and the Western viewpoints. It is important to remember that he was a reformer and not a revolutionary and was not for the abandonment of tradition but for its reformation by removing the accretions of ages. That is why he remains true to Indian tradition or all that is acceptable in it while portraying the emergence of modern sensibility. That is why his novels- *Binodini*, *The Wreck of two Sisters* stress the need for social change but stop short of a radical transformation.

His distinction as a novelist lies in his creation of the modern novel from which is forward looking and manifesting an imaginative comprehension of the central issues confronting the Indian society of the time. He was concerned with many of the problems of the newly unfolding India - self-government, self-reliance, the status of women, the role of tradition, rural reconstruction, national education and the status of women, the role of tradition, rural reconstruction, national education and the intercultural synthesis of East and West. He had identified himself with the force of rationalism and reformation. His novels project of humanism born of an acute awareness of the betrayal of human personality engineered by the powers of stagnation and rigid orthodoxy. “His novels stress the needs for promotion of Catholicism in human relations and dealing and prevention of the erosion of human dignity while creating condition for the realisation of self-actualisation, if not self-fulfilment.”⁴ This is especially true of his women characters struggling against their dehumanization in the name of tradition. He assigns a central place to women in his novels because their roles are crucial to any transformation of Indian ethos. A spirit of realism runs through the novels of Tagore. He sought realistic models of presentation by avoiding romantic posturing or attitudinising.

The three novels, *Binodini*, *The Wreck* and *Chaturanga* relate to some of the pressing social issues which rocked the Bengali Hindu society towards the end of the last century. *Binodhini* dramatises the struggle of a young, beautiful widow for self-actualisation and selfhood in a social system that denies all scope for such attempts. *The Wreck*, as Anand remarks, is “a model of presentation of the new conflict of values of arose in Indian society through the contrast of the hedonistic idea of marriage as against the old Indian idea of marriage by arrangement.”⁵ *Chaturanga* explores the moral and spiritual dilemma generated the counteraction of scientific rationalism on the one hand and the resurgent Hindu religiosity on the other,

as projected in the career of Sachis.

Works Cited

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