

TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES

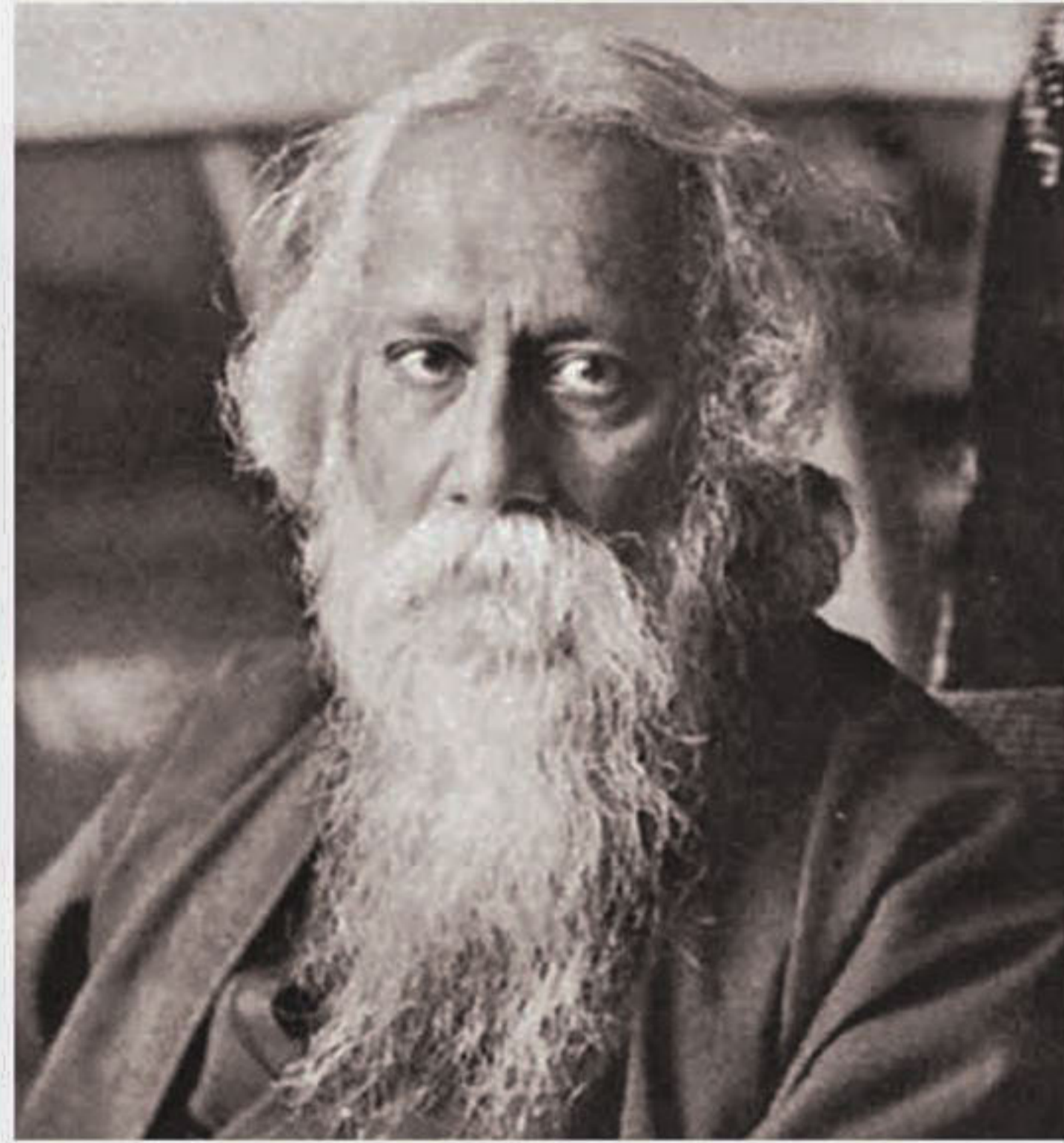
A look at a comic piece ...

SHIRIN HASANAT ISLAM

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) needs no introduction to the reading public worldwide, especially to the Bangla-speaking reader. A gifted genius, his creative imagination ranged over practically all the genres of literary activity, from lyrics and poems, novels and plays, and belles-lettres, travel descriptions, and of course a large body of short stories.

Tagore started writing short stories when he was barely in his twenties. His earliest one was published in 1884 when he was just twenty three. It must be recognised and applauded that he was venturing at a very young age into what was then practically uncharted territory, for the Bangla short story was a type of writing virtually unknown and a satisfactory diction for such a form had not yet developed. In an interview given to Satyavati Devi *et al* which was published in *Forward* on the 23 February, 1936, Tagore said, "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 a romantic type; mine were full of the temperament of the village people." In another article printed in *Probashi* in May 1941, Tagore said (I translate), "You speak of my language, say that I remain a poet even in prose. If my language sometimes overcomes the substance of my stories and establishes itself in an independent character, I cannot really be blamed. The reason for this is that I have really had to develop the diction of Bangla prose myself. It did not exist as such earlier, and at every step I have had to work on finding an appropriate diction..... Foreign writers, like Maupassant to whom you refer, found their language ready made. If they were compelled to develop their language as they wrote, I do not know what would have happened to them." (Source: Viswabharati edition of *Golpoguchcha*, reprint 1998). What he achieved is astonishing, for, in his long career as a writer of prose as well as poetry, he really pulled Bangla literature into the modern age.

Golpoguchcho or a bunch of stories consists of eighty-seven pieces with an additional eleven pieces. Some of these last were published during his lifetime and some left in draft form. They vary in length from a short and sharp three pages to pieces with several parts to them. In terms of subject and character, of type and style, the range and variety of these stories astounds one. Even knowing how prolific Tagore was, I was really unprepared for the richness of the world he opens to us. He limits his vista to Bengal of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century but peoples it with characters who are drawn from every sector and level of society, from the unlettered young village girl to the fashionable blade in a newly risen urban society seeking recognition for his achievements, from the rigid unbending widow showing an unexpected streak of compassion to the wealthy city dweller desperate for a heir spending all his wealth in pursuit of one and yet unknowingly turning away his real son. His stories range from domestic tragedy to dramatic irony, from pathos and melancholy to the occasional



tongue-in-cheek comedy. There are stories of the supernatural and of what can only be described as very sweet romance, there are stories which seem bizarre, stories which can be recognised as dealing with familiar experiences of everyday pleasures and the small griefs and hurts which arise from misunderstandings that we all know of.

Many of these stories have been dramatised. I recognised many as I was reading them and enjoyed them all over again. Some have been turned into timeless films. We remember, for example, the unforgettable *Kabuliwala*.

There is, however, one aspect I was disappointed and puzzled by. Tagore's characters do not seem to include anyone from the educated middle-class professional Muslim community which was definitely and visibly present and growing in the metropolis of Calcutta at the time. His references to Muslims are few and are mostly about rustic characters or in one or two of the stories to characters drawn from the nobility or their associates or even as late as 1941, to characters who are religious figures or *faqirs*, (*Musalmanir Golpo*). This lacuna is sad and could surely have been avoided. Further research and study could surely give us the answer to this puzzle.

I will not elaborate my observations further, for there is a story I would like to talk about, which seems different from the general run. Most stories in the *Golpoguchcho* have a tragic or elegiac vein even when the outcome is sometimes positive. There are not many stories here which can be considered comic but I came across a story

called *Muktir Upay*" in the first part, written around 1891, which I found very amusing, and of which I would like to present a brief synopsis. The story concerns two young men, the first of whom, Fakirchand, is a very serious and solemn individual who seeks to project himself as possessed of considerable spiritual excellence. His hirsute appearance at a young age adds to the air of gravity he seeks to project. His wife, Hoimobati, however, is of a light-hearted frivolous nature and is frequently berated by her husband for her lively ways. He is further burdened by the two children she produces and faced with the material necessity of obtaining a job and an income, he decides to leave home and becoming a wandering ascetic like a present-day Lord Buddha.

The other young man, Makhanlal, from Nabagram, a village not too far off, is of a completely opposite temperament. Of a very shallow and irresponsible nature and given to pursuits of selfish pleasures, he had been married young to a wife who did not produce any children. Following the custom of the times, his father got him married again, whereupon his wives promptly produced eight children between them, seven daughters and a son. Laden with the burden of such a large number of dependents, whom he was expected to support, he very soon left home and was not heard from for quite some time.

Fakirchand, the first young man, had been wandering about and now entered the village of Nabagram. As he sat for rest under a tree he suddenly saw his father from a distance, and thinking he was coming in pursuit, fled precipitously and entered the nearest house, which happened to be Makhanlal's. Makhanlal's father, who was short-sighted, immediately assumed he was his missing son, despite Fakirchand's protests that he was a wandering hermit called Chidanandashami or Paramanando. Because the old man was having nothing of this Fakirchand thought it would be useful to hide out here for a few days until his father was successfully eluded. But then the old man called in the whole village, who all came and greeted him as the prodigal son, suspiciously asking him endless questions. The questions range from his whereabouts and the reasons for his disappearance to his present appearance. He maintains as far as possible a grave silence in the face of this onslaught, answering only when his wits can provide him with a response. The result is often hilarious. One villager, rather pugnaciously, demands to know, how he had become so light-complexioned when he had previously been so dark and he very solemnly answers that it was achieved through yoga! Then to land him in the utmost catastrophe, the

father decides to call in the two daughters-in-law to meet their supposed husband. Fakirchand does not know how to get out of this predicament should he try to run away, in which case the whole village would set off after him in furious pursuit, or should he sit and meet the women and seek to pacify them? He chooses the latter option and is at once set upon by two enraged spitfires. Totally helpless, he thinks the only option is to stay put for the time being. But it is not only his wives who make his life miserable. A horde of teasing sisters-in-law descend upon him, followed by all eight of his supposed offspring, all of whom fling themselves on him with caresses and embraces, as well as tugs at his profuse facial hair, greatly adding to his misery. At this time he thinks he can occasionally hear high-pitched laughter from a feminine voice which seems familiar, but he cannot identify the origin. Not getting any relief from any source he proclaims his resolve to leave as soon as possible.

At his threat to run away again, the villagers bring in a severe lawyer who tells him he will be prosecuted if he once again abandons this large family of his. Seeing no way out, Fakirchand writes to his father, who arrives promptly to retrieve his son, but neither the father, nor the wives, nor his extensive family or the villagers will let him go. Fakirchand's world seems about to descend into total insanity when a figure enters, who was the source of the laughter he had heard, and who was none other than his wife, Hoimobati. She was a niece of this family and had come on a visit, deriving enormous amusement at the sight of this unknown man caught in a trap he could not get out of. Recognising her husband, Hoimobati bows her head in a *pronaam* to him and Fakirchand, seeing the wife he'd run away from, is beside himself with delight for she is now his only avenue of escape. Another man, who had been lurking in the neighbourhood, now comes forward, and reveals himself as Makhanlal, the actual son of this household. Seeing Hoimobati he realises that Fakirchand is her husband and therefore his cousin-in-law. He asks that Fakirchand be let go and gallantly takes the responsibility of his wives, (*his dari and kalshi*) we can guess his immediate future, at least, is precarious at this point. The villagers, knowing his wives, are much impressed with his courage and magnanimity.

A bare synopsis like this does not really impart the flavour of the story and I hope readers will enjoy it as much I did. For myself, I once more express the delight and stimulation which I received from these works of Tagore's imagination the Bangla phrase '*go-grashe*', could, I believe, be used to describe the speed at which I read these pieces, but I have reservations about this phrase, for in my admittedly limited acquaintance of cows, I have seen none eating with the speed at which I have read these books. I am quite confident that new readers will follow my example.

SHIRIN HASANAT ISLAM IS MEMBER, THE READING CIRCLE. AN AMENDED VERSION OF THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT A TRC MEETING HELD AT IGCC, GULSHAN, ON 19 MAY, 2012.

POINT OF VIEW

The genius of Humayun Ahmed

RASHID ASKARI

Humayun Ahmed is perhaps the only writer in Bangladesh who has the highest number of admirers as well as detractors. You will hardly find any literate Bangladeshi today who has not read his books, and, at the same time, you won't find any literary critic who has not looked askance at his writing. A lot of people praise his books to the skies. Equally a lot of others see in them a manifestation of decline in literary standards.

I have seen many critics, who have the gall to blast his writing in public, picking his latest arrival from the bookcase, and reading it on the sly. And caught in the act, they, much to their embarrassment, give the pretext that they were in fact weighing up how bad it was as a work of art.

Humayun Ahmed is, now, easily the most popular writer in Bangladesh a superstar author with a prolific following of fans. Most of the younger generation are Humayun-mad. They are passionate devotees of his writing. Not only do they read him voraciously, they also get influenced by it. Perhaps no other writer in Bangladesh has exerted such a powerful influence on readers as Humayun has. We have seen many youngsters leave home with empty pockets wearing yellow *panjabis*, and walk the streets barefoot at dead of night, emulating one of his characters called Himu.

If popularity is the yardstick of a writer's quality, Humayun Ahmed could be the greatest writer in Bangladesh, and one of the greatest writers of Bengali literature. But connoisseurs of literature won't surely agree. They are used to taking popularity mostly in negative connotations. They do not want to see Humayun Ahmed on an equal footing with Shawkat Ali, Akhteruzzaman Elius, Hasan Azizul Haque, Selina Hossain and



others. So, however popular Humayun Ahmed may grow to be, he will not likely be able to lay claim to real literary merit.

Does Humayun Ahmed's writing really have no literary value? How do we evaluate his works? Is there any particular standard for judging the merit of literature and art that can be taken for granted? Is there any fixed criterion for assessing the ability of a writer? If there is, who would set it and apply to others? Who is the right authority to judge the quality of art? Writers like Shakespeare could not escape critical censure. Darwin found him 'intolerably dull and nauseating'. Did it diminish the importance of Shakespeare in the slightest degree?

As a matter of fact, there are no hard and fast rules about literature and literary judgment. Art is the oldest expression of human creativity, and gave birth to the written form of literature after the invention of letters. Literature is precisely nothing but the art of writing. It has come

a long way and assimilated numerous changes into it. Modernists and postmodernists have come up with a baffling variety of themes and contents, and this variety has been the spice of literature. Tagore's personal letters have taken on a high literary status, and his proofread matters have been accorded great artistic quality. If literature is thus unlimited in circumference, it will not be that easy to exclude Humayun Ahmed from pure literary circles. Besides, being popular is not always a bar to becoming a genuine writer.

The man who could enter the Bengali literary arena with the 'blazing inferno' as a metaphor for life on earth, and connote it quite contrarily as 'admirable' at the tender age of 24 is not one to

be sneered at. *Nondito Noroke* (1972), Humayun Ahmed's debut novel, must have carried the seeds of a master literary craftsman. There may be no question about it. But whether the seeds are properly sowed, and the seedlings have properly grown and produced flowers may well come into question. It is true that Humayun has become so exceedingly prolific that much of his later writing has been a pale imitation of the former ones. He is revolving around the same old and clichéd circle of writing, and dealing with hackneyed human behaviour and eccentricities which he confronts at every turn.

But there is the other side of the story too. Humayun Ahmed, as a writer, has done many things to his credit. It is true that like a master craftsman, he could not exploit the literary devices in diverse ways. But he has his own sweet way of telling stories which too is fascinating. The most important attribute in him is that he can obviously strike a chord with

his readers. He is a man of luxuriant imagination and profound compassion. His imaginative empathy with his subject is so intense that it tugs at the reader's heartstrings. This is where the secret of his popularity and the grounds for his success as an author are to be espied. To this has been added his use of language, which is easy, simple, direct and accessible to a wider reading public. His novels *Nondito Noroke*, *Shankhonil Karagar*, *Jothsna O Jononir Galpo* are valuable contributions to Bengali literature. His characters like Himu and Mishir Ali are not less important than Satyajit Roy's Feluda.

Humayun Ahmed has many strings to his bow. He is a playwright of a high order. He has done much to popularize the trends of soap opera in Bangladesh. One of his TV serials was so appealing that people took to the streets with an impassioned plea for saving the life of one of his heroes. In addition, he is an accomplished filmmaker. His *Aaguner Parashmoni* is an invaluable addition to Bangla films on our Liberation War. Of late, he has added another fresh feather to his cap which testifies to his versatility as a creative mind.

These are few manifestations of a creative mind named Humayun Ahmed, who seems to have been more sinned against than sinning. He is misunderstood both by his supporters and detractors. What his fans do is nothing other than claptrap, and what his critics do is unnecessarily patronizing. There is no need to make a song and dance about him, nor is there any reason to frown upon his writing. A fair gauge of his achievements can place him in the right position.

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POETRY

RASHIDA AHMED ISLAM

Being and beyond!

... a heavy feeling settles inside you

when you realise you can somehow forgive but you can never forget the hurt and the sharp twisting of a knife .. the serrated edge rusty with recriminations and misgivings which never allow the soft breeze of love blow through and soothe the ragged bloody skeins of your understanding ..of the fact that you have to live through and live on with these...that is when you make it numb enough to not feel the hurt.. you cannot give in to the neurotic wanderings of a lost mind.. you know better to be able to shield yourself from that which may split you asunder.. you realise you are made of godly stuff and that will keep you going till the end of time...when you can be brave enough to welcome oblivion with steely nerves and be whole and one!!!!

Precious Moments

The latticed windows swing out onto the glittering sunlight the speckled sparrow flits and plays in the shadows of the jasmine leaves....

It picks up a worm and flies off to feed its ravenous little one I marvel at nature's goodness Its bounty unceasing...

There is no sea beyond the wall which mesmerises me; yet the sky beckons with infinite dreams which I am yet to slip into as the rays of the dancing sun play on My world is here, bound by sweet duties and a few bothersome chores

I tread the cool floor with happy steps as the sparrow is my guide... I get on with this life putting all worries and strife on hold; now the moments are too precious to waste; I am alive!!!

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