

**MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM,
TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED.
RABINDRANATH TAGORE:
Selected Short Stories.
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■ **PAOIHWANG**

Paoi Hwang was born in Taiwan but grew up in Malawi, Africa. She has a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of London and was an assistant professor at the National Taiwan University. Most of her publications are academic and research-oriented, but she has also published a few short stories.

In this age of globalisation, English writing is more frequently translated into other languages than vice versa; hence the tendency remains for western thoughts to travel faster to non-western audiences than for non-western thoughts to travel to a western audience. It is useful to consider this imbalance in a global community because it may be a hindrance to the healthy flow and exchange of ideas. Rabindranath Tagore was very well-known in his lifetime, he visited at least thirty countries and won the Nobel Prize in 1913, but now he is relatively unknown outside his own country. Very few of his works have been translated into English recently and only an early collection of his short stories is in circulation. This new collection, translated by an accomplished literary scholar who is also Bengali, is both timely and much needed.

Quayum's selection of stories is not only entertaining but also thought-provoking, and his informative introduction immediately draws us into the debate on Tagore's place in both Bengali and world literature. Tagore was loved and revered for his wise and humane views on life. Despite being the son of a wealthy aristocrat who grew up wanting nothing, he showed an unusual sympathy for the poor and the helpless. According to Quayum,

"Tagore believed in a dialogic, interactive world, in which communities and nations would bear a deep sense of sympathy, generosity and mutuality towards one another, and shun exclusivity, parochialism and idolatry of geography for a centrifugal outlook, principle of universality and reciprocal recognitions." Tagore not only believed in educating his peers to have compassion for the less fortunate, but he also entreated the British to accept their subjects as equals. He was an advocator of peace who strongly opposed Gandhi's agitation for national independence. Consequently, George Lukacs called him a "bourgeois reactionary" who received a knighthood for being a faithful colonial subject. Lukacs regarded Tagore's literary, anti-rebellion pleas as "a romantic movement for intellectuals"; he pointed out that it was "difficult to assess wisdom 'in itself' in the vacuum of pure theory." Admittedly, if an oppressed people were to wait patiently for their master's conscience to awaken in order for the unfair system to change they might have to wait forever.

Now that many post-colonial ideas have been realised and nationalism is under scrutiny, it is important to be reminded of writers like Tagore who had envisioned this dawn of global unity and preached post-nationality long before our time. Tagore may have been too idealistic hence his early calls for equality and inter-cultural alliance fell on deaf ears, but if critics have lauded his contemporary Joseph Conrad as the pioneer of post-colonialism, then it may be appropriate to say that Tagore was the pioneer of post-nationalism. While Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* hinted at a dialogical understanding of "the Other" without attempting to solve the solipsism it had identified, Tagore wrote as the voice of the Other who saw universal joys and sorrows as proof of an undivided world. Using himself as an example he declared, "I am not in favour of rejecting anything, for I am only complete with the inclusion of everything." This vision of plurality and global culture has not been more clearly reiterated than by Ngugi wa Thiong'o who writes of "a universal garden of many-coloured flowers" where "internationalism" is based on the understanding of a joint democratic struggle for human equality, justice, peace and progress.

Although short stories do not provide the same kind of details for in-depth discussions as novels do, a writer can present a wide range of topics and characters in this form. Quayum's collection provides an edifying glimpse of the thoughts of a significant writer and his times; it gives us the opportunity to consider alternative principles and new solutions. For example, Tagore often uses the institution of marriage to explore gender inequality and social

strife. "The Auspicious Sight" is a story about a rich man falling in love with a girl he sees on the riverbank. He quickly persuades his future father-in-law, a poor but virtuous nobleman, to arrange their marriage without any formal meetings. On his wedding day the protagonist discovers that he has mistakenly married a different girl; however, he is greatly relieved that it is the "right" woman. In "Subha," a mute girl is secretly married off to a stranger, who we are told soon takes a second wife. In "Sacrifice," a man is deceived into marrying a lower caste girl pretending to belong to a noble family. When his father finds out, the protagonist Hemanta is forced to choose between his father or his wife. Hemanta bravely chooses his wife and is cast out of the family. Stories like these are rich in cultural references and yet have a universal bearing.

Interestingly, a large number of Tagore's protagonists have money, property, status or all three. A few of them have received good education, and some have British employers who provide legal and financial support, and most of them are literate and love their books, particularly western ones. It would seem that while Tagore does not portray money and status as guarantees of virtue in a person, the lack of either is frequently the cause of great tragedies. "Purification" arguably sways the debate in Lukacs's favour. Girindra, "King of the Mountains," is a wealthy intellectual who dislikes his wife's nationalistic acquaintances and activities. He claims to see through their bigotry: the way they insist on wearing traditional costume but ignore the ills of traditional customs and religions. Girindra's wife points out, "You only talk about caste discrimination but practically you do nothing to redress it." This story ends with Girindra apologising for his cowardliness at doing nothing to help an old sweeper who was being beaten for touching a caste Hindu.

At times Tagore's point of view may seem limited and his allegiances open to debate, but in order to do his work justice and truly appreciate the significance and radical nature of his visions, we must read his writing ourselves. In an ideal world we would read the original texts, but when that is not an option, it is important to have the translations. In this multicultural age, it is an absolute necessity for all of us to read diversely and think universally. Quayum's highly readable translation of Rabindranath's short stories will serve that cause, and also help to revive interest in the works of a literary genius who was once described by a French writer as "an eagle-sized lark."