Chapter-3

A Socio-Political Study of the Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore
and Kartar Singh Duggal

A story describes the contemporary events of the society to which the writer belongs. One could perhaps say with equal force that every writer is rooted firmly in the context of his age and influenced by his era. Shaped by the ideas, values and opinions current in his age, the sensitive mind of every writer is roused to respond to them – either in assent or in dissent, making the writer’s work characteristic of its period of composition. The values prevalent in any era create a strong impression on the writer’s thoughts which guides the flow of literary creation. Some writers engage with their times more openly than others and a clear political consciousness can be seen to mark their writings. Several other writers express their ideas in less candid forms and seem to be aloof to the happenings of their times. But the second impression is merely a surface one, for every writer is well aware and responsive in a subjective way to the socio-political conditions of his times. Rabindranath wrote in the late 19th century and early 20th century whereas Kartar Singh Duggal wrote in late late 20th century and early 21st century. There is a gap of more than 100 years between the composition of the stories of Tagore and Duggal and, as such, we come across a wide variation in plot, style and vision in their tales. Their period of story-telling travelled from Pre-independent to Independent era and from the modern to the Post-modern world. However, both clearly reveal a determined engagement with the dominant intellectual trend of their times. In the short fiction of Tagore and Duggal, society emerges as a clear protagonist and is responsible for the conflicts that the tales explore. The conflict that is conceptualized in each story of Tagore
and Duggal is of a socio-political nature and one is tempted to feel that given the same characters but a different social configuration, the ends and consequences of the stories would certainly have been different. The various short stories of the two writers are placed in different societal structures, functions and backdrops of political happenings but the message that they offer to the readers seem to be the same, namely that the individual is strongly engulfed by social forces and must struggle with them in order to achieve harmony both for society and within his/her own private life and family orbit. An assessment of the literary corpus of Tagore and Duggal with special emphasis on the socio-political aspect of their short stories will be the subject of research in this chapter.

**Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore**

Rabindranath Tagore penned some of the finest of short stories, which were later translated by the reputed foreign authors. E.J. Thompson commented that there was “no greater short story writer in the world’s literature” (Dutta and Robinson 142) than Tagore. Tagore received accolades for his collection of poetry, *Gitanjali* but he also globalised the short story form in Bengali which was later translated into English. Rabindranath Tagore was a teenager when he started writing short stories in 1877. He matched his creative skills with the best writers of the world like Anton Chekov and Guy de Maupassant.

D.P. Mukherjee a renowned Indian sociologist and writer expressed “The Russian classics have a candour of the soul, the French have a candour of the mind, and Tagore’s have a candour of feeling. If we are ashamed of feeling, Tagore’s stories are not for us. If we have no such obsession, they are among the best in the world” (Kripalani 153).
Tagore stories resonate with feelings which are heightened by the musical quality of his prose.

“Bhikharini” (The Beggar Woman), written in 1877, was more out of apathy rather than addressing a serious social issue. Tagore then was appointed as a manager of the family estates in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and Orissa by his father in November 1889. He went to live with the common people of rural Bengal. Tagore had never experienced the sufferings of the poor, living with the poor and needy created social and literary awareness in the writer. In an interview in 1936, Tagore explained:

I have different strata of my life, and all my writings can be divided into so many periods. All of us have different incarnations in this very life. We are born again and again in this very life. When we come out of one period, we are as if born again. So we have literary incarnations also. (Tagore, Galpaguccha 853)

Tagore managed the estate from (1890-1901) and he wrote half of his stories during this period, also known as the “Shelidah period” (Dutta and Robinson, Rabindranath Tagore: A Myriad-Minded Man 111). It is perhaps because of this leisure time Tagore could devote himself for writing stories.

Tagore also narrated the stimulus which triggered short story writing in him:

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 simple modes of life. I enjoyed the surrounding scenery and the beauty of rural Bengal…. I got glimpses into the life of the people, which appealed to me very much indeed…. My whole heart went out to the simple village people as I came into 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 the contact of mine with the village people. (Tagore, *Galpaguccha* 851)

All stories do not have in them a definite village connection but the majority of stories are
connected to the soil. His nostalgic moments of Kabul can be felt in the story
“Kabuliwala,” though the narrative of the story is actually set in Kolkata. Rehman could
not love Kolkata, as he found the city too mechanized and segregated. Rehman (Tagore)
sarcastically states:

Calcutta is an upstart town with no depth of sentiment in her face and in her
manners. It may truly be said about her genesis: In the beginning was the spirit of the shop, which uttered through its megaphone, ‘Let there be Office!’ and there
was Calcutta. She brought with her no dower of distinction, no majesty of noble
or romantic origin; she never gathered around her any great historical
associations, any annals of brave sufferings, or memory of mighty deeds. (Dutta
and Robinson, *Selected Letters* 22)

The beautiful surroundings of the village and the simplicity of rustic characters inspired
Tagore deeply. The exploitation of the poorer sections of the society and the various
developments in his personal life transformed Tagore gradually into a social activist
through short story writing. Tagore first wrote his stories in *Hitabadi* in the year 1891.
Tagore wrote one third of his short stories during 1891-95, which made him well known
for his short stories, such as “Mahamaya” (Mahamaya), “The Editor” (Sampadak),
“Punishment” (Shasti). “The Path to Salvation” (Muktir Upai), “Sacrifice” (Tyag),
“Kabuliwala” (Kabuliwala) and “Subha” (Subha).
Scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose appreciated Tagore’s short stories and motivated him to write during this period. Tagore’s son Rathindranath writes, “Every weekend that Jagadish came to Shelidah,” “he would make father read out to him the short story that he had written the previous week and get a promise from him to have another ready the next weekend” (Dutta and Robinson 55).

After this Tagore wrote short stories intermittently. He published in the journals Prabasi and Sabujpatra. Tagore’s stories always addressed the emotional aspect of the individual as well as the socio-economic conditions of his times and the existing political scenario of the nation. Answering a letter from one of his readers published in 1918, Tagore analyzed his stories as “artistic creations,” for the “enjoyment” of his readers and also as acts of “a teacher” wishing to impart “moral lessons” (Das 737-41). In the stories written by him are to be found a fusion of art and morality, i.e. the artistic element is combined with a keen sense of moral values. Tagore was a true reformist and hence he never deviated from the humanist approach in his fictional writings. Forever an observer of humanity, he meticulously depicted the flaws and merits of human nature in all his stories. He understood the agony of human life with sympathy and the great lessons hidden behind the simplest events of life.

He depicted the intricacies of human lives in every story, keeping in consideration the social context, gender relationships, psycho-analytical and socio-political conflicts. When he started his journey of writing short stories he focused on woman emancipation, removing social taboo of child marriage, neglecting rights of a widow, eradication of caste differentiation, gender discrimination etc. In the later phase of his writing, he shifted his attention and wrote on political turmoil, impact of colonial British rule, social
movement, social reforms like widow remarriage, political movement, personal greed, caste and religious rivalry and educational reforms. His stories sensitized people about the changing times and its changing requirements through humour, satire, realism and tragedy. He depicted vividly the truth prevailing in the society through his short stories, not stopping to regard traditions or conventionalities.

Tagore has acknowledged in several of the letters about his connection with his fictional characters. In a letter dated 25 June 1895, he wrote:

As I sit writing bit by bit a story for the Sadhana, the lights and shadows and colours of my surrounding mingle with my words. The scenes and characters and events that I am now imagining have this sun and rain and river and the reeds on the river bank, this monsoon sky, this shady village, this rain-nourished happy cornfields to serve as their background and to give them life and reality….

(Chakravarty 45)

In another letter, dated 5 September 1894, Tagore commented:

Noontime in Shahzadpur is high noon for story writing. It was at this time, at this very table, I recall, that my story, ‘The Postmaster’ took over my thoughts. The light, the breeze and the movement of leaves on all sides combined and entered my writing. There are few kinds of happiness in the world more filling than the happiness of creating something in which the mind is totally immersed in its surroundings. (Dutta and Robinson, Selected Letters 41)

Although Tagore’s critics accused him of unrealism and contradicted his thoughtfulness in his stories, such adverse criticisms have left the fame of the master’s stories untouched. These critics were of the opinion that because Tagore belonged to an
affluent family hence his sympathy for the poor could not be genuine as he himself never had the opportunity of facing hardships in his lifetime. Hence, they believed Tagore’s sympathy for deprived sections of the society was more imaginative than realistic. Tagore in a conversation with Buddhadev Bose in 1941 addressed his critics concerning the realism of his stories:

At one time I used to rove down Bengal’s rivers, and I observed the wonderful way of life of Bengal’s villages…. I would say there is no lack of realism in my stories. I wrote from what I saw, what I felt in my heart – my direct experience…. Those who say that my stories are fanciful are wrong. (Radice 13)

Tagore portrayed nature, the simple life of the country people, local culture, cultural heritage, rhythm, colour and aesthetics of the community. His characters are depicted in such a way that they establish a direct emotional connection with the reader. Buddhadev Bose righteously points out:

All of Bengal can be found here. Not only facts, but her living soul: we feel her pulse as we turn the pages of Galpaguccha. Her changing seasons, the vital flow of her rivers, her plains, her bamboo-groves, her festival canopies and chariots; her cool, moist, richly fertile fragrance; her mischievous, noisy, lively boys and girls; her kind, skilled, intelligent women…. (Radice 13)

Tagore was well aware about the literary movements that existed in the late nineteenth century; but rather than engaging with any theoretical aspect of writing, he was more interested in portraying human emotions, miseries and tragedies which directly sensitized the audience. He never described an event with mere scientific facts, he believed in democracy and a story of a commoner created more interest in the common man, rather
than popular myths and folklore. Tagore strongly believed in the ethical role of literature which sensitized the common man and roused the consciousness of readers. Tagore’s short stories were character driven, and he analyzed the psychological state of the characters rather than simply developing the plot of the story.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote with great compassion for the simple man and it can be felt in the stories such as “The Postmaster,” “Kabuliwala,” “Punishment,” “Imprudence” or “Purification.” These stories depict poverty, emotional void and sufferings of an orphan, shelterless, uneducated teenage girl Ratan, in “The Postmaster”; a courteous fruit-seller from Kabul, living away from his homeland and family, only for livelihood and assisting his family back home, in “Kabuliwala.” In “Punishment” a peasant’s under-privileged family breaks down due to domestic violence and male chauvinism, resulting in the death of two female characters and the catastrophic end of the marital relationship. Likewise in the story “Imprudence” personal greed leads to immoral activities by the doctor and the inspector. The doctor realized the fact that previous immoral activities were punished in the form of his daughter’s death. He then tried to transform himself by helping a father with his earnings to bribe the inspector to obtain clearance certificate before cremation. But his noble conduct made the inspector jealous and circumstances made the doctor a reformed person but that led to his exile from the village. The arousal of sub-conscience of the doctor made him the protagonist while the inspector chose to be the antagonist. Tagore exposed the habit of people taking bribe in noble profession like medicine and public administration. Demon of corruption persists even now and the desire of success and greed of a person destroy all ethical
responsibilities. Tagore narrated “the multiplication of money… whose motive force is greed” (Das 513) make people immoral.

Tagore described the caste discrimination in “Purification,” the story depicts the humiliation of an untouchable sweeper who unconsciously touched a Hindu and was mercilessly assaulted by a fanatic mob. Kalika, the protagonist who is an ardent follower of Gandhi and an active freedom fighter refused to help the sweeper at his moment of crisis and also stopped her husband Girindra to rescue him from the mob and instigated Girindra to drive off from the scene. Tagore exposes political hypocrisy and social inequality of the so-called nationalists. Some freedom fighters were not selflessly fighting for the Indian people in the freedom movement; they were involved with the movement for their personal benefits. Tagore was of the opinion that opportunistic participation would allow more exploitation in the name of caste, religion or profession in post-independent India. He suggested that independence from social taboos required honest intention to rectify the problems persisting within the society. Tagore reflected his moral responsibilities in the stories “Assets and Debts,” “Subha” and “Mahamaya.” In the story “Assests and Debts” a child bride Nirupama, is brutally killed since her father couldn’t pay the promised money as dowry, but she never questioned or misbehaved with her in-laws. In the story “Subha” Tagore shows the miseries of a dumb girl who is left out by the family and the society into a forceful marriage, although Subha was never ready for the marriage because her parents concealed her dumbness. Subha was finally disowned by her husband and in-laws. In “Mahamaya,” Tagore depicts the greed of Mahamaya’s brother who forces her to marry a man standing at death’s door and then threatened her to become sati with her dead husband. She was able to escape from the pyre but she
acquired burns at the time of sati that made her distasteful to her lover Rajeevlochan. Mahamaya came to her lover for solace and thought he would support her to fight against cruelties of the society, but she was amazed to see the transformation in Rajeevlochan who couldn’t accept her with the scar on her face. This story unfolds social evils like sati and also the human mind which is biased to physical beauty and materialistic pleasure.

Tagore wrote stories for sensitizing readers about social justice, social equality, education for all, and empowerment for women and children. Tagore’s stories often highlight a single character’s ability to solve the crisis situation or succumbing to social pressure. Many stories such as “The Postmaster,” “Subha,” “Mahamaya” and “Judge” have been deliberately named after the main character.

Tagore’s protagonists live a resourceful life of truth and conscience and, where necessary, they suffer or even sacrifice their lives “for the True, for the Good, for the Eternal in man,” while his antagonists or adversarial characters, often cut off from their antar-karan and lost in a world of maya and adviya, live in an asuric state of anger, pride, falsehood, cunning and arrogance, ensuring their ultimate doom. (Mohammad 80)

Tagore may not have been even aware of the Western philosophy of realism which he used in his short stories. Tagore was a complex writer, his poetry was lyrical and idealistic, but in his short stories, he was more down-to-earth and realistic. The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Everything has two handles, there must be both” (Matthieissen 24). On another occasion, he added, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds” (Emerson, “Self-Reliance” 1164). Likewise, in the final section of his poem “Song of Myself,” Whitman declared:
Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.) (2275)

Perhaps no other writer came to embody this philosophy of multilateral consciousness or the belief in encompassing “many in one” educated by the American Renaissance writers, more than Rabindranath Tagore. Earlier I suggested that Tagore’s realism has an impressionist tinge to it, the belief in and that he was more interested in the impression that a character, an object or an experience made on his mind than in the cold details surrounding it. The idea was to take that impression and place it in the cauldron of his imagination so that it is enriched through a process of filtering as well as conflation with other experiences and observations, before becoming the subject of his story. This process of filtering and blending would also transmute the particular experience into something larger, saying something about humanity as a whole.

Thus in a letter written in 1931, Tagore wrote, “Remember one thing; a story is not a photograph. Unless whatever I have seen or heard dissolves and becomes part of the aggregate memory, it has no place in a short story” (Tagore, Galpaguccha 848). On another occasion, explaining his creative process, he wrote:

… when I am writing a story, my contemporary experience is woven into its fabric, and also my personal likes and dislikes…. The possibilities that lie deep in human nature are the basis of the plots of all the best stories and dramas in literature…. Events happen in a different manner in different places. They are never the same on two occasions. But man’s nature, which is at the root of these
events, is the same in all ages; therefore the author keeps his eye fixed on human nature and avoids all exact copying of actual events. (Das 740)

If we study the genesis of some of the stories referred to in his letters and interviews, we find that this is precisely how Tagore composed his stories; his mind would be activated by a certain scene or incident or character and he would weave a story around it by intuitively blending it with an assortment of other experiences as well as with his broad understanding of human nature. “The Postmaster,” for example, was suggested by a real postmaster who worked at the estate office building at Shahjadpur. There are several references to him in Tagore’s letters.

The city-bred postmaster didn’t like his sluggish life in the village, and this was enough to set the author’s imagination working and create a moving story of the relationship between the postmaster and a simple, guiltless, orphan girl, Ratan. The real postmaster even saw the story after its publication in Hitabadi and, Tagore recounts in a letter to Indira Devi, “touched on it [in a conversation with the writer] after a series of bashful smiles” (Dutta and Robinson, Selected Letters 32). However, it should be noted that although the story was born out of a casual contact with an actual postmaster, Tagore’s fictional character is very different from the living person narrated in his letters. The actual postmaster himself had some writerly qualities; “He tells of the most improbable things in the gravest possible fashion” (22), Tagore says in one of his letters. In another, he adds, “I must say I like the man. He has a fund of anecdotes which I dip into and silently enjoy. He also has a nice sense of humour. That is how he catches and holds one’s interest” (32). But the fictional postmaster has been reduced to a timid,
practical and sombre person; and Ratan is of course the creation of his imagination, perhaps based on some village girl that he had come across in Shahjadpur or Shelidah.

The same principle of composition also applies to “Kabuliwala,” “Balai” and other stories. “Kabuliwala” was inspired by a real Afghan man who, Tagore said in an interview, “came to our house and who became very familiar with us” (Tagore, *Galpaguccha* 852). But the story was also inspired by his daughter Bela, his eldest born and his “favourite child” (Dutta and Robinson, *Selected Letters* 27). “Bela was just like Mini. Mini’s dialogues are almost entirely taken from Bela” (Tagore, *Galpaguccha* 857), Tagore affirmed on one occasion. Therefore, while the story was based on two real people, he had to apply his imagination to bring these two people together and create the story. He had to also imagine, as he pointed out in the same interview, that the Kabuliwala “too must have a daughter left behind in his motherland to be remembered by him” (852). This is where the story became poignant, as it helped to show that fatherly love is the same everywhere despite cultural and geographical differences.

“Balai” reflects Rabindranath’s life-long love for nature. He was sensitive to nature since childhood. There are many passages in the story which echo Tagore’s real-life experiences with nature which have also been narrated in his letters. Here is one that shows his mystical kinship with the earth through its various stages of evolution:

I feel as if dim, distant memories come to me of the time when I was one with the rest of the earth; when on me grew the green grass, and on me fell the autumn light; when a warm scent of youth would rise from every pore of my vast, soft, green body at the touch of the rays of the mellow sun, and a fresh life, a sweet joy, would be half-consciously secreted and inarticulately poured forth from all
the immensity of my being, as it lay dumbly stretched, with its varied countries
and seas and mountains, under the bright blue sky. (Kripalani 338)

Here is another, taken from a letter to Tejeshchandra Sen, written in 1926:

My mute friends around my house are raising their hands to the sky intoxicated
with the love of light; their call has entered my heart…. The stirrings of my heart
are in the same tree-language: they have no defined meaning, yet many ages hum
and throb in them. (Ghosh 28)

Thus although the story was suggested by his own childhood experiences of
nature, he had to distance himself in the narrative by introducing a fictional child and his
unique environment. Notwithstanding this, the story is real as Tagore shows a profound
understanding of human nature in his portrayal of Balai’s love for nature as well as his
family members. There is nothing fanciful about the way Balai interacts with his uncle
and aunt; it is obviously drawn from his shrewd observation of life and society around
him, whether at Shelidah or at his own family home at Jorasanko.

Tagore’s stories show extraordinary thematic unity. Over and again he returns to
the same social, psychological, cultural, economic and political issues, despite their
period of composition. Most of them are about human nature and human relationships
and show how our fundamental values, attitudes and emotions either unite us or separate
us. Humankind is capable of profound love, fellowship, tolerance, understanding and
mutuality but also equally capable of hatred, selfishness, vanity and narrow conformity to
the age-worn practices of society, be they religious or cultural in nature. These two forces
co-exist in us like light and shade, day and night, ebb-tide and high-tide, and sometimes
love triumphs in us and sometimes we are overtaken by the impulse of evil. Tagore knew
that evil is a reality in human life, for “where there is no possibility of evil, there can be no place for good” (Das 740), he said. It is like disease and health; there can be no health without the possibility of disease. He also acknowledged the presence of suffering and pain in life. Sometimes, pain is a necessary price to make ourselves worthy human beings; “that it is the hard coin which must be paid for everything valuable in this life, for our power, our wisdom, our love” (Das 66). But pain invoked for self-gratification or for some worldly gain can result in retribution and bring misery. Thus many of his characters become better human beings through their psychological ordeal or experience of suffering, while others continue to suffer or cause suffering; but as a thumb of rule, so far as Tagore is concerned, it is mostly men who are the source of suffering whereas women and children the victims of it. This is because he saw men as the makers and guardians of society and civilisation whereas women and children its unwilling captives.

Within this broad scope of depicting the complexity of human nature and human relationships, some of Tagore’s stories focus on certain specific socio-cultural issues of his time. Thus, for example, “The Postmaster” highlights the problem of the increasing gap between the village and the city which Tagore saw as a major handicap for India’s success as a nation; “Assets and Debts” deals with the evils of child marriage and dowry practice; “Sacrifice” with widow remarriage and caste hierarchy; “Kabuliwala” with the issues of racial and religious harmony; “Mahamaya” with caste rigidity and the viciousness of sati; “Punishment” with the vices of caste and patriarchy; “Purification” with religious and political hypocrisy, and “A Woman’s Conversion to Islam,” again with caste hierarchy and the virtue of religious unity. “The Editor” and “The Painter” explore the destructive effects of the passion of greed; “when any civilisation gives the first place
to greed,” Tagore said, “the soul relation between man and man is severed” (Das 432). He dramatises this view in the context of family relationships in these two stories.

Some of the stories deal with basic human frailties and shortcomings, such as excessive piety and self-righteousness as in the story “The Path to Salvation”; vanity and overweening arrogance in “The Professor”; jealousy and over protectiveness in “Privacy”; and credulity and impulsiveness in “The Auspicious Sight.” These are stories written in a lighter mood, sometimes in self-mockery, and are mainly intended to arouse laughter than to hurt or offend. They serve as comic relief in the otherwise emotionally intense stories that Tagore wrote, and testify that in spite of his seriousness of temperament, Tagore also had a humourous side to his imagination; he could sympathetically laugh at the ridiculous and ludicrous in himself and his fellow beings.

In several of the stories, Tagore’s love and tenderness are monopolised by women and children; he often portrays women and children with profound sympathy and admiration. Tagore believed that women were victims of a “masculine” civilisation; a civilisation built after man’s “own temperament and tendencies,” and in which “woman for ages” have been “constrained to a narrowness of sphere” (676). But women could not be held captives forever, nor could they be crushed by male aggression and arrogance because they were endowed with Shakti, a vital charm, “the living symbol of divine energy” (676), without which the masculine powers would remain inactive and dormant. Therefore, giving equal status to women, instead of forcing them to submission, was the only way to create a balanced and meaningful civilisation in which man and woman could complement each other’s attributes and “talents” and create a “paradise” on earth. It is from this perspective that he depicts a whole gallery of suffering but strong women
who are trounced by the wheels of a heartless society but who refuse to compromise their self-worth or dignity.

In “Punishment,” Chandara is the tragic heroine who, betrayed by her husband into a false confession of killing her sister-in-law, would rather accept the gallows than live with the man she found totally unworthy of her. In “House Number One,” Anila is the victim of an insensitive husband who is vain and always takes his wife for granted, reducing her status from a wedded-partner to a “maid-servant” – but who eventually abandons him to find her freedom. In the process, she also rejects the love from her neighbour, Shetankshu, an aristocrat, who had written twenty-five letters to her admiring her unique beauty, because to her both her husband in his intense egotism and pride and her neighbour in his dreaminess and passion are unconscious of her true self and fail to see her as their equal.

Tagore also pays homage to children in several of his short stories. He considered children closer to God and nature for their innocence, candour of feeling and sense of pure joy. In the poem “Highest Price,” Tagore shows how children were capable of inducing happiness more than worldly power, wealth or the lure of a woman. This sentiment is expressed in characters such as Mini and Balai in “Kabuliwala” and “Balai” respectively who are totally free of the miseries of the adult world. Mini and Balai are vibrant, creative, honest and spontaneous; they are “more living,” as Tagore would say, “than grown-up people, who have built their shells of habit around themselves” (78).

However, while children deserved to live in love and freedom, surrounded by objects of nature; more often than not, they were victims of the same “masculine supremacy” and ruthless male exploitation, or “unbridled greed, competition, and tribal
hatred” (799) that sought to crush their simplicity and innocence to dust. Thus, we see how the six-year old Prabha becomes a victim of her father’s senseless greed for money and power, until of course he returns to his senses at the end of the story through an epiphany and reinstates Prabha in his heart.

Prabha’s father, the story’s narrator, began with the humble intention of making some money to pay for his daughter’s dowry, but somewhere along the way his heart was entirely consumed by money and a false sense of arrogance which brought untold sufferings for the young girl. In “Imprudence,” the father begins with a modest desire to raise a dowry good enough to find a suitable groom for his daughter, Shashi. But soon he becomes so preoccupied with money that Shashi is replaced in his heart with Mammon; and neglected and left to herself, the motherless Shashi gets infected with cholera and dies on the day of her wedding. In “The Painter,” it is the artistically inclined little Chuni who becomes the target of his materially driven uncle, Govinda. Govinda is determined to perpetually drill his own love for money into the boy’s impressionable mind, but he is eventually saved by his imaginatively resourceful mother who takes him out of Govinda’s care.

In several of the stories, such as “Assets and Debts,” “Kabuliwala,” “Subha,” “The Editor,” “Imprudence” and “The Auspicious Sight,” Tagore has deliberately depicted father-daughter relationships to show how fathers were influential in determining the future of their children, especially if they were girls. In a traditionally patriarchal society like India girl children were (and still are) often less preferred than boys, and therefore it is more important for them to get the father’s love, protection and blessings. In this sense, Ramsunder’s unwavering affection for his daughter Nirupama, in
“Assets and Debts,” the Kabuliwala’s yearning for his daughter back home in Afghanistan, and the narrator’s heartfelt love for Mini, in “Kabuliwala”; or Nabin Mukherjee’s tenderness for Sudha in “The Auspicious Sight,” are outstanding examples of how fathers could selflessly adore and care for their daughters and make a positive difference in their lives. Likewise, Banikantha’s failure to protect Subha, or the failure of the narrators in “The Editor” and “Imprudence” to care for their respective daughters, Prabha and Shashi, are negative examples that Tagore would want all fathers to avoid.

While most of the stories deal with Hindu characters, or those from Tagore’s own religious community, in “Kabuliwala” and “A Muslim Girl,” for example, the author has introduced Muslim characters. The Kabuliwala is not only a Muslim but also one from Afghanistan, while Habir Khan is an Indian Muslim. Both the characters have been depicted positively and with compassion, which shows that Tagore had no prejudice against Muslims as such. By introducing Rehman, an Afghan Muslim, as a family friend of the narrator, a Hindu Brahmin, and by creating a special friendship between the burly Afghan and the little Bengali girl Mini, Tagore introduced a cross-racial and cross-religious relationship, which was extraordinary given the history of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, as well as the deep-seated prejudice that the Bengalis generally had about these Afghan traders. A herald of religious unity and an advocate of racial harmony, he tried to sow the seed of trust among his readers from different communities. The introduction of Rehman as a caring father and his unmediated affection for the little Mini is Tagore’s attempt to break the religious and racial aloofness which had plagued India, and create sympathetic understanding between cultures.
“A Muslim Girl” is also written in a similar manner. It is the story of a Hindu girl, Kamala, who is rescued from abduction by brigands and sheltered by a Muslim man, Habir Khan. Kamala’s family, being Brahmins, repudiates her for her defilement by contacts with a Muslim man, whereas Habir Khan allows Kamala to continue living in one isolated part of his house as a Hindu woman, without ever forcing her to convert to Islam. These opposite images of orthodoxy and magnanimity suggest that Tagore wanted all Indians (both Hindus and Muslims) to shun the narrowness, bigotry and prejudice represented by Kamala’s uncle and aunt, and embrace Habir Khan’s spirit of tolerance, mutuality and inclusivity, in order to create a united India in the midst of its cultural and religious divergence.

In a letter, Tagore explains how he was in the habit of telling humorous stories to his children, and urges a friend to help him obtain some of those materials for his evening storytelling sessions:

If you are placing an order with Chunder & Brothers please include the following books: Choice Works of Mark Twain Mark Twain’s Library of Humour published by Chatto and Windus. Each evening I sit surrounded by my family circle and read to them by lamplight. I have discovered that Mark Twain’s humour is the family favourite – Bela and Bela’s mother find it particularly funny. I have copies of Tramps Abroad and Innocents Abroad but I have nearly exhausted the humorous sections…. I remember noticing in Thacker’s some time ago some short English farces in two or three acts – can you send me a basketful? (Dutta and Robinson 51)
It is important for the readers to keep this side of Rabindranath’s personality in mind while reading the stories, especially the ones mentioned earlier. While he was essentially a serious writer, often writing in the vein of an acute observer, mindful of human sufferings (especially the plight of the socially deprived classes as well as women and children), seeking to improve their lot, he was also at the same time capable of a good laugh now and then at the inherent weaknesses and short comings in the human personality, including himself. This is what brings poignancy, variety and colour to his stories, adding to their richness of theme as well as their mood and atmosphere, making them ever so intriguing, stimulating and appealing to his readers.

**Short Stories of Kartar Singh Duggal**

Kartar Singh Duggal is a versatile writer who has portrayed a variety of characters across his fictional canvas. His writing was influenced by Freudian and Jungian psychology and he delves deep into the motives that the various characters in his fiction have for choosing their idiosyncratic courses of action. Abnormality emerges as an important thematic issue in his fiction and Duggal’s narratives attempt to trace the abnormality of his characters to the absurd and illogical socio-political situation prevailing in the country. His stories are chiefly woven in the context of the horrible national tragedy of Partition and portray its damage and aftermath. Partition is a subject that Duggal handles sensitively, yet with detached irony. Refusing to take up any communal point of view, Duggal’s partition narratives bring out the human loss that the tragedy of partition entailed. Yet, at the same time, his stories also portray the middle class simple man in his everyday struggle against social conventions and evils. As a writer, there is a humanistic side to Duggal that leads him to focus his fictional lens on
the unchampioned common man and to pick up from his life, incidents that appear very ordinary but which, when explored through Duggal’s creative art, transform themselves into singular moments of self-evaluation. This keen interest in love for humanity helped the writer in endowing his fictional characters with rich existential individualities of their own. His favourite character is the unsophisticated country simpleton, living in the primitive world of magic and superstitions and leading an instinctive animal life. Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia says:

The spatio-temporal particularity of characters and events constitutes the essence of the novel form. Short story in a sense is an expression of atomistic experience happening in atomistic time. Because it is the experience in a flash of moment, so it has all the spontaneity looked up in that moment when it appropriates to itself the totality of time. Spontaneity and intensity- these are the qualities of Duggal’s artistic experiences which have ensured him top position that he enjoys today. (Chaudhury 26)

Kartar Singh Duggal’s story “The Taxi Driver,” is a poignant tale revolving around an honest taxi driver, who does not want to use the money left by a passenger in his taxi, but his demanding wife questions morality and its changing relevance in the gruesome times which they were forced to live in. The issue of ethics is thus effectively posed against the backdrop of a society which thrives on inequalities and where no justice is recognized in practice. Through the familial microcosm offered in the story, we are presented with a sneak peek into the testing lives of the rickshaw drivers in India. The general opinion that prevails about the auto rickshaw drivers in India is far from being good. As a class, they are reputed to be wayward, dishonest and lacking in human values.
They are known to be particularly notorious for their roguish behavior, whimsical ways (when it comes to picking and dropping passengers) and for charging outrageous fares from their passengers. Duggal, with his humanistic portrayal of the auto rickshaw drivers in “The Taxi Driver”, certainly makes us think to the point of making us question our own perception about the fraternity.

This short story has been made into a short film in Kannada, “The Catalyst” directed by the Indian filmmaker Vaishnavi Sundar, effectively bringing out the conflict within the protagonist. The plot of Duggal’s ‘The Taxi Driver’ revolves around the incident of a taxi driver coming across a handsomely-filled wallet left by some customer in his taxi. While, in general, taxi drivers are projected as dishonest individuals who, in their bid to make money, do not hesitate in employing even the most immoral practices. Duggal puts forward a very sensitive sketch of an individual from this fraternity. An honest man, Duggal’s protagonist finds it unethical to appropriate a piece of property that does not belong to him and is eager to return it to its rightful owner, but there are circumstances when the straightforward regulations of ethics do not apply. Duggal seems to state that in a society that guarantees neither health nor education nor any welfare measure to its underprivileged inhabitants, ethics is an empty term devoid of any meaning. While the taxi driver agonizes over the decision of whether to keep the money or return it to someone who has plenty of it and has been careless enough of his property to have waywardly lost it, his wife interprets the decision as a simply rational one. In their circumstances, it would be foolish and illogical of them to refuse on any score of ethics, the much desired wealth that had come to their door and with which, they could make their end meet for a few more days. Thus, Duggal attempts to realistically point out
that while morals and ethics are an integral part of human life, many a times these terms are rendered meaningless given the context of cruel, apathetic and unequal social conditions.

In the story “The Sins of Her Fathers,” Duggal describes the life of a magistrate Murli Manohar who, despite his lower social class, has managed to rise up the professional ladder and earn a worthy reputation for himself in his social circle. Strongly prejudiced against the social system where upper-caste people get what they want with comfortable ease, Murli Manohar is of the opinion that life is extremely difficult and challenging for the likes of him who have no high-class affiliations. Married to an upper-caste woman, Janki, with whom he has had a fulfilling love-relationship and who, against the wishes of her family has eloped with him, Murli Manohar is blessed with a daughter and a son and has, with time, been forgiven and heartily accepted into Janki’s family as well. However, the class inequality in society fails to relax its hold on Manohar. Manohar reads a story where a low caste maid Santi fell in love with a Brahmin man who had lost his wife. The man also fell madly in love with the maid as time passed. He treated Santi equal to him so made her eat on the same table with him. Santi was apprehensive about this treatment, having imbibed from infancy the thought that untouchables don’t have the right to enjoy equality, love and fondness from upper class. She refused the request of her lover to enter his kitchen and cook. Her perceptions prohibited her as she was of the opinion that it was against Shastras. The Magistrate after reading this story which reminded him acutely of his own lower-caste origin and status, was astounded that how could modern society live with such class discriminations still intact.
One day, a strange murder case came to Manohar for hearing. The Zamindar’s son had been murdered by an untouchable girl and the girl’s statement of guilt during her confession of the crime weighed heavily on Manohar’s mind. The Hindu boy forced the girl to have sex with him in the crop field where she was scouring for weeds, and though the cobbler girl repeatedly told him that she was an untouchable and pleaded with him not to violate her modesty, he was not ready to give up. He overpowered the girl and no one could refuse the Zamindar’s son. In frenzy the girl asked the boy to satisfy her desire and to kiss her once but he brushed her aside. The rejection was unacceptable for the girl and in rage she grasped his neck with both hands and started kissing him. She was in a fury and in her act of passion, she strangled the boy to death. After she had quenched her thirsty desire from his lips, she loosened her grip and surprisingly found him dead. Murli Manohar had handled many strange cases in his judicial career but he had never come across such a confession. The words of the convict echoed in his ears, “My lips were burning, I begged him to kiss me just once. But he would not” (Duggal, The Night and the Full Moon and other stories 117).

This case not only invaded Murli Manohar’s mental peace but also completely poisoned his affectionate and fulfilling family-life. He failed to recover within himself that old love and trust for his wife and could never bring himself to kiss her on the lips anymore. His wife, Janki too began to acutely experience his drying affection for her. He began to grow aloof from his family and began to find solace in the companionship of another woman who belonged to his caste and was a teacher in the Municipal school. This friendship gradually swelled into a full-fledged affair and Janki was unable to understand how her own cozy home had been shattered to bits by her husband’s
professional case. She failed to decipher how she could be responsible and punished in this manner for something that she had never done. In other words, Duggal seems clearly to be hinting that Janki has been punished only for her caste affiliations. In her husband Murli Manohar’s eyes, Janki has ceased to be his wife and represents only a member of the upper caste whose victimization of the lower class with all its tyranny and injustice has severely upset his sanity and balance of mind. The story seems to indicate that despite the love and harmony that may exist among individuals, the historical inequality that underlies social relationships is a force so strong that it is capable of tearing asunder even the most intimate of relationships.

Similarly, “Lali” is the story of a sweeper’s son who worked in the Lahore office of the narrator. Lali was a lad dark black, barefooted, bareheaded, playing around the office all day and liked by almost everyone. But as Lali grew up, he became troublesome. Although admitted to an English medium school with the Zamindar’s son, Lali fought with his mates and never went to school again. As he grew up, Lali picked up smoking, went to cinemas and always insisted on leading a carefree life refusing to pursue the cleaning job of his father. He also developed the habit of drinking and his father grew extremely anxious for his future. To allay the anxiety of his father, the narrator appointed Lali as an assistant to the Director of the office where his work was to carry papers from office to the Director’s residence and again back to office. After sometime he was asked to lend domestic help as the servant fell ill. After a few days his casual affair with the ayah next door was discovered and that was the laughing stock for the whole office.

Afterwards due to partition the narrator moved to Delhi. There was violence and looting incidents in Delhi and the acts of people were condemned by the then Prime
Minister. Lali narrated the incident to the narrator and told him that while he was busy in looting Nehru slapped him and returned the piece of silk cloth to the shop in Connaught Place. He boasted about that slap to everyone in the office. But he was not happy in Delhi and in the office hence he left the job. He wanted to sell his parker pen to the narrator which made the narrator more suspicious about his looting during riots.

The narrator’s next meeting with Lali takes place in the house of a Brahmin friend where Lali was discovered working as a waiter. The narrator’s friend introduced Lali to him as a Brahmin refugee and Lali disclosed the next day to the narrator that it was that ayah of Lahore who had helped him find work there. Lali confided to the narrator that he would not continue this deception anymore and quit his job. Lali was a freebie who never bothered about his next day meal, clothes or shelter. He was missed by the officers from Lahore and one day he sprouted as a taxi-driver when the narrator was waiting outside the cinema after a late night show. He told he took up cleaner’s job with a cab driver and then got license to drive. He told that that job was also monotonous and tiring. The only exciting thing that happened was a girl who broke up with a guy in his taxi and promised to see him the next day.

The office of the narrator was shifted to Jalandhar. Lali’s father Manak had his dues with the office. He was reinstated in the office as sweeper and allotted a residential quarter to live in. Lali didn’t write to his father for a year. The narrator remembered him as an irresponsible person as he didn’t bother about his old father. One day he appeared in a neat and tidy suit with a western style haircut. The narrator was dumbstruck. He thought that the makeover might be the gift of that rich girl who sat in his taxi. But later
he came to know he had left taxi driving and joined airlines job and had been to America, England, Japan and so many countries.

Lali sat next to the narrator in his office room and the narrator plainly could not come to terms with the fact that the sweeper Manak’s son had become so high and mighty. Lali’s father went out of station for three days promising that he would make shift arrangement during his absence. Next morning when the narrator found Lali sweeping his courtyard, the sight gave him a deep inner satisfaction as it somehow was a clear-cut evidence of the fact that Lali was doing his rightful job in society and that all the glorious stories of his success were false. Lali greeted the narrator with a hearty ‘namaste’, told him about his stay abroad and how a poor country like India would be affected if war took place. The narrator didn’t pay heed to his words and went to office. He worked for the next two days also. On the third day evening while the narrator was going out in his Skoda car, Lali commented on the types of cars and there durability too. The narrator went off brushing him aside as he was sweeping the corridor. On the fifth day Manak came back. The narrator was of the opinion that he would not agree to appoint Lali in place of his father even if he insisted. The narrator himself had never crossed the threshold even of Delhi and the idea of a sweeper’s son having travelled far and wide not only seemed ridiculous to him but also socially unacceptable. Besides, Lali was quite popular among women and though the narrator was more educated and belonged to an elite class, he failed to make the same impression on women. He was jealous of Lali and his inability to become a popular figure like him in these years made him think that Lali was a bluffer.
When Manak returned and joined work, Lali came to say good bye to the narrator with a telegram in his hand and promised to bring him a gift on his next visit. He also thanked the narrator for his kind feelings for servants like him and reminded him that he, Lali was like a child to him. That evening the narrator went with his wife for an English movie and to his sheer surprise, he found Lali sitting next to him with a young girl. In the interval Lali introduced her to the narrator and his wife. Before the end of the movie, Lali and his companion were about to leave and it seemed to the narrator that they were escaping like thieves. But at that very moment Lali whispered in his ears, “I have to take the plane at ten sharp. The taxiwallah outside must be on tenterhooks for us, and moreover it should take me at least half an hour to reach the airport” (146). He shook hands with the narrator and walked out with his girl-friend saying namaste. In the darkness Lali left the smell of his branded perfume and the episode remained a clear revelation for the narrator that whatever he had thought about Lali was wrong.

The main idea in this narrative is the class consciousness of the narrator and his resentment against Lali’s upward social mobility. Somehow the idea that offsprings will and inevitably ought to follow the footsteps of their parents in terms of profession, has always lurked in the Indian social psyche. It is assumed that a sweeper’s son like Lali is destined to live out the life of his father and has neither the ability nor the right to rise above this social destiny. In the story the narrator begins to feel uncomfortable with Lali’s behaviour because it deviates from his sanctioned identity as a sweeper. He is constantly jealous of the conversations that Lali makes and though, he dismisses them as fictions, he cannot help envying the boy’s easy charm and his successful way with women. When ultimately, Lali’s fictions are proven right and the narrator realizes that he
had finally broken free of social traditions, he cannot help but admire the protagonist for his resourcefulness and his success.

Kartar Singh Duggal’s short story “Kulsum” depicts the story of a young girl who is abducted by an old Sikh man to offer her as a gift to a young school master. The schoolmaster felt that the gift was unfit for use and hence to make her fit for the schoolmaster’s sexual consumption, the old man first subdues her resistance by raping her himself and then hands over the broken, defeated, dishonoured and molested girl for his entertainment over to the school master. Duggal brings out in the story the animal abuse to which the young girl is subjected. Her self and being completely ignored, she becomes a commodity of sexual use and only a means to satisfy animal instincts for pleasure in the hands of these men. Her rights over her own body become an obstruction to the men’s fulfilment of their desires and hence, she has to be humiliated and violated to surrender to defeat.

The “Making of the Millitant” describes the story of a young man, Mangu, who on the night of his wedding, comes to know about a cruel custom that has, for generations, existed in his village but which has remained unspoken and unresisted in public. On the night of his wedding, when he failed to trace his wife in the house, his mother noticing her son’s discomfiture, told him “Beta, the bride has gone to the Biswedar. She will be back soon….” In the meanwhile his father came out of his room and explained. “The bride has to spend the first night at the Biswedar’s” (222). This revelation completely undoes Mangu who is shocked to know that this custom has made a victim of each low-caste woman in the village including his mother. This shock makes him a rebel and he ends up murdering the landlord.
Duggal seems to be upholding the warmth of human relationship, highlighting eternal values. His main narrative mode is psychological realism. Duggal’s main intention is to portray the sufferings and pleasures of human life, particularly among the middleclass. On the whole, the stories depict immense cognitive and artistic values.

From the discussion of the above stories of Tagore and Duggal, it becomes apparently clear that though separated by a century, the writers share many things in common with one another. To begin with, both writers are humanists who put forward the human above everything else. To them no ideology matters as much as the simple fact of being human. Hence, both locate their subjects in the everyday trials and tribulations of the common man. Their characters are all drawn from the lowest of the low and are portrayed with the same sensitivity. Both writers believe in understatement and in the use of irony to bring about the desired impact upon their readers. Both writers evince a remarkable interest in gender issues, in the unequal relationship between men and women and in the oppression that women, as a lot, have to face under the system of patriarchy. Marriage and family constitutes an important domain for the fiction of both writers and they bring about how such gender inequality, in the long run, becomes detrimental to the health of the institution of family. Again, both writers are also seen to have a deep fascination for psychological delineation of character. They like to foray deep into the minds of their characters and their lives to uncover the explanations for their being what they are. Whether their characters are men or women, Tagore and Duggal prove themselves to be experts in the act of psychological sketches and bring out the singularity of their characters through an intimate projection of their inner personalities. Another major concern of the two writers is their literary protest against social evils. The injustice
and atrocities prevailing in society can only be curbed if the people living in the society reform themselves. Reform can only be brought about through knowledge of right and wrong and through the awareness of consequences. Through their short stories both writers attempt to take up this project of sensitizing the reader on socio-political and religio-moral issues in the society that they inhabit. Both writers seem to indicate that in a patriarchal order, it is essential that healthy socio-political relationship develop and rectify social evils like poverty, women oppression, domestic violence, dowry, bribery, and religion and caste discrimination. By leaving most of their stories open-ended, the writers leave the scope for the readers to come to their own conclusions and allow room for the development of empathy in their readers. Empathy leads to identification and identification leads to the possibility of change. Thus, both writers have left behind an unforgettable impact upon the society and literature of their times, an impact that is testified by their continuing popularity.
Works Cited


