Chapter-4

Men in the Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore

and Kartar Singh Duggal

Bishwakabi Rabindranath Tagore is known worldwide as a great poet and a Nobel laureate but only few know about his immense contribution in the field of short stories. This iconic writer who had written nearly 100 short stories depicted many contemporary socio-cultural issues of his times in his creations. Tagore’s stories still retain their majesty and relevance and are even pertinent at the present time. They are still acclaimed collections of short stories worldwide viz. Hungry Stones and other stories (1916), Mashi and the other stories (1918), The Parrot’s Training (1944), The Runaway (1959), The Post Master and Selected Stories (1994).

In most of his stories, Rabindranath Tagore has depicted typical male characters of contemporary times; characters who were very conservative and authoritative as compared to the women of that time. His short stories have become distinguished based upon the ideologies and emotions of the male characters. Tagore’s male characters possess capabilities to be a central protagonist but in few stories male characters display strong antagonism and are overshadowed by Tagore’s more powerful and full-blooded heroines.

On the other hand, Kartar Singh Duggal is one of the most talked about writers of Indian literature for his immense contribution in the genre of short stories. Kartar Singh Duggal was a scintillating and revered multilingual short story writer of Punjabi, English, Hindi and Urdu. He had published eight volumes of short stories in English. Duggal
describes his passion for writing in his own words, “Writing is my first love. Writing is my creed. I go to it with the humility of a devotee” (Duggal 363).

Duggal in his early days depicted human pathos through the massacre and sufferings of partition in his stories but his stories became unique in the choice of the subject, theme as well as in style and technique as he gradually matured as a writer. As a short story writer he was perceived as patron of modernism in Punjabi literature. Duggal’s characters depict sincere love, co-operation, sacrifice and co-existence. He was a progressive writer who sketched the realistic face of the society through his writings. Duggal was also influenced by legendary short story writers like D.H. Lawrence, Poe and Maupassant as well as Indian writers like Tagore and Balwant Gargi. He authored 24 collections containing almost five hundred short stories. The majority of his characters in these stories are simple, unsophisticated, living with some social burden or the other and leading sexually starved lives. In his works, he depicted transformation of rural life of Punjab as well as the changing scenario in urban life.

A renowned Punjabi critic and writer, Ajeet Cour quotes:

Duggal is unique in Punjabi literature for having fictionalized important events in the contemporary history of India. The way he has interwoven personal relationships of the unforgettable characters with historical events shows his superb literary craftsmanship. (Choudhury)

His famous short story collections include Death of a Song and other stories (1973), Come Back My Master and other stories (1978), Birth of a Song (1991), The Night of the Full Moon and other short stories (1992), The Making of a Militant and

**Men in the Short Stories of Rabindranath Tagore**

Tagore narrated his stories in a modernistic fashion. A pioneer of modernist writing in Bengali literature, Tagore was far ahead of his times in conceptualizing the psychological underpinnings of character, the suggestive symbolisms in plot, the open-endedness of dialogue and the lack of closure in the short story as a whole. Inspired by European writers of the short story, Tagore attempted to present life in his stories through visual images and his works, while fully reflecting the social milieu to which they belonged, reflect the concerns and genius of Tagore, the artist who apart from being a litterateur was also a renowned lyricist and musician and also took very successfully in his later life, to sketching and painting. Tagore’s stories thus wonderfully fuse society and art, realism and romance and fact and fantasy. As the most significant intellectual of his day, Tagore staunchly stood for progress and social reform and expressed his dissatisfaction with a patriarchal culture that in all spheres of life restricted and limited the potential of all members of society and particularly that of women, to function as autonomous and independent human beings. Tagore never supported patriarchy and this is amply testified by the stance he took in the numerous short stories that he wrote. In almost all his stories, one comes across very powerfully sketched female characters whose voices ring out the loudest, even in their silence, and who, most of the times, embody the world-view of the author himself. His heroines possess more substantial qualities than the men in his stories and constitute, for the most part, the most memorable cast of his characters. Tagore was of the firm opinion that women lagged behind in the
social sphere not on account of their intrinsic inferiority and incapability but on account of the lack of respect and opportunity. If given equal rights and opportunities like men, there is no question that Tagore’s women too would find their deserved place in society and perhaps prove their mettle as superior to men.

Tagore’s men in his short stories are the typical representatives of the conventional mentality of their period who subscribed to dominant patriarchal ideas of the time and did not believe in gender equality. Tagore’s men, as stereotypical of his socio-cultural milieu, may be divided into: a) solitary souls b) lunatic c) neglectful d) the intellectual e) lovers f) courageous g) apathetic husbands and h) the cowards.

These characters are loved as protagonist or condemned as pessimist or hated by writer’s antagonistic description. Most of these stories revealed their own weaknesses and strengths in their own. Few men are spineless and phlegmatic and with their behaviour they tend to irk the reader. The youth could not break the conventional rigidity of the nineteenth century and Tagore’s vivid portrayal of evils of the society lurks in the post-modern times too. That social inequality between sexes is almost hard to find but these stories provide thoughtful insights for a study of gender bias that existed in pre-independence era.

Tagore portrayed his men as ironical and indecisive. In depicting the indifferent males of his times he wrote:

There is not a soul, who would undergo a strong inner struggle or live a really healthy life. Every one merrily eats and drinks, goes to the office, smokes, sleeps and chatters rubbish. By starting to talk about emotions they become like children. With all earnestness one would like to meet at least one full blooded, strong and
daring personality, but only ghosts are moving all around, who have severed all relations with the world. (Basu 72)

Tagore through his stories beautifully depicted the lassitude which prevailed in the life of the people, the quest for materialistic pleasures which caused miseries and how a person slowly lost all human qualities in pursuit of it. In this chapter eight stories of Tagore are going to be critically analyzed which have men as the major character. The stories are “Kabuliwallah,” “The Renunciation,” “The Folly of Ramkanai,” “The Judge,” “The Broken Home,” “The Babus of Nayanjore,” “The Difference or the Divide.”

“Kabuliwallah,” is the story of a fruit seller, Rehman, who came from Kabul for trade in Calcutta. Rehman visited narrator’s house for selling fruits and met his five-year old daughter, Mini. Mini was of the same age as the daughter of Rehman hence Rehman developed affection for Mini. They met every day and Rehman gave her dry fruits, it was cherished by both. The meeting was out of affection than materialistic things. All was well until one fine day his neighbour who owned some money to Rehman refused to pay, Rehman lost his cool and stabbed him. Rehman (Kabuliwallah) was suppose to visit his native land and that might be the reason for his hostile behaviour. Rehman got imprisonment for his crime.

After his imprisonment period he was released from the jail early due to his good conduct. He came to visit Mini which coincidentally happened to be the day of Mini’s marriage. Rehman (Kabuliwallah), was perceived as a criminal hence the narrator refrained from welcoming him on such a special day. Although he was educated, he could not get over his superstitions. He felt that Rehman’s appearance might bring them ill omen on the auspicious day. The narrator was not comfortable with the presence of
Rehman and also refused his request to see Mini. Before leaving, Rehman showed the narrator the hand imprint of his own little daughter on a dirty piece of paper. The narrator felt the affectionate side of Rehman and as the father of a daughter could correlate with the agonies of parting with loved ones. He himself brought Mini for interaction with Kabuliwallah. Rehman could not renew good old memories with Mini at that moment because she was a grown up girl and Rehman was astonished and imagined how swiftly Mini grew up.

When she had gone, Rehman heaved a deep sigh and sat down on the floor. The idea had suddenly come to him that his daughter must have grown up too, while he had been away so long. He would have to make friends again with her also. He would certainly not find her as she was when he left her. And besides, what might not have happened to her in these eight years? (Tagore 67)

Mini's father bestowed Rehman for travelling back to Afghanistan curtailing some of the wedding expenses to which Mini also agreed; she also handed over a gift for Rehman's daughter. The marriage celebration became more an occasion of aesthetic happiness to the narrator as he enabled a deprived father with the opportunity of meeting his only daughter. The story ends with Rehman travelling back to his homeland.

The philanthropic side of Tagore is revealed in this story, a father’s conscience made him curtail his expenses and he felt eternal happiness by helping Rehman. In this story Tagore emphasize that compassion and love can definitely bring satisfaction to one’s life rather than materialistic assets.

The child sees the Kabuliwallah with the eyes of trust and affection, and so the ‘beast’ becomes ‘Beauty’ and the stranger becomes the Friend. In due course, the
child Mini--‘who is incapable of wasting a minute in silence’--becomes a bashful girl, and with a few deft touches Tagore suggests the miracle of the bud’s unfoldment as the full-blown flower. (Iyengar 72)

Through Mini, the imperceptible emotions of children were unfolded. In this story the narrator’s fatherly side empathizes with another father’s affection. Kabuliwallah might have felt the agony of alienation with Mini during his final visit but it prepared him for the strange behaviour he might receive from his own daughter upon meeting. With this ending, the reader develops a feeling of compassion for Rehman as a solitary embodiment.

“The Renunciation” is the story of Hemanta who is a faithful husband, disregard futile traditionalism and places love above all. He protests against his feudalistic father and refuse to accept the set pattern of caste discrimination by the society. He supports his wife Kusum against his father who was not ready to accept Kusum because of her belonging to a lower caste. Approaching the door, Harihar Mukherjee called out, “Much time has elapsed, I can allow you no more time. Turn the girl out of the house” (Tagore, Hungry Stones and Other Short Stories 193).

As soon as Kusum heard this voice, she pressed Hemanta’s both legs with double urgency for fulfillment of her desire in one single moment, kissed his feet, took the dust off her head and withdrew himself…. Hemanta rose up to his father and said, “I won't forsake my wife." "What!" roared out Harihar, "would you lose your caste?" "I don't care for caste," was Hemanta's calm reply. "Then you too I renounce." (194)
The love and fearlessness of Hemanta saved their marital bliss and ensured that Kusum is not abandoned. In this story love of a husband overruled unethical feudalistic societal norms because they loved each other deeply. Hemanta knew that his father will renounce him too for this act, but his decision remained unaltered, love and logical reasoning helped Hemanta to save his love life.

Another story “The Folly of Ramkanai” tells the suffering of a man whose truthfulness made him enemy to his own family. Ramkanai’s elder brother, Gurucharan asked him to execute a will and transferred all his belongings in the name of his wife Baradasundari. Ramkanai was confident that Gurucharan’s will make his only son, Nabadwip the sole heir of the property. After Gurucharan’s death, Ramkanai broke the news of the will to Baradasundari.

Nabadwip became furious after being deprived of his right in his uncle’s property; he wanted to get the property at any cost. Ramkanai is compelled to leave for Varanasi as he may spill beans on their false claims. During the legal fight, Ramkanai was summoned to the court and he went against his family and own son revealing truth to the judge. “The will my son Nabadwip has produced is false. So saying, trembling violently, Ramkanai fell down in a faint” (Chaudhuri 44). Nabadwip was imprisoned for forging his uncle’s will. Ramkanai developed high fever on his return to home. “Deliriously babbling his son’s name, this foolish, numinous, and useless father of Nabadwip departed from the earth. Some of his relatives said, “A pity he didn’t die earlier” (Chaudhuri 44).

In this story the death of the protagonist clearly signifies the difference between honest Ramkanai and his corrupt son. Ramkanai’s affection for his only son doesn’t allow him to support the scandal of Nabadwip.
Yet in presenting this exceptional rectitude, Rabindranath does not lose sight of the man’s ordinariness. This paradox is central to the story and to the characterization of Ramkanai. Ramkanai is a loner and a social misfit. . . . His isolation is brought out by a basic feature of technique. While every other character . . . are inconsistent targets of satire, Ramkanai alone is treated with a gentle humour, in language that is supportive and empathic rather than sharply censorious. (Ghosh 11)

Ramkanai is hated by all because of his honesty even his sister-in-law, Baradasundari, misunderstood him. Ramkanai’s simplicity and moral values about the traditional Indian family restricted him to become dishonest whereas the rest of characters are influenced by greed and materialistic values. Hence, he received neglect from everyone for his truthfulness. Such high moral values are hard to find at present time. This story set an example to become truthful amongst familial corruption.

On the other hand “The Judge” is a depiction of lust, selfishness, neglect and cowardice of a man Mohitmohan (Binodchandra). He eloped with a fifteen year old widow Hemshashi and forced her to the dreaded world of prostitution. Binodchandra transformed his identity to a respectable statutory person in the society and now he was better known as Mohitmohan, a judge at the session court. He was full of deceit but still was of the opinion that girls should have strict impositions on them as relaxation makes them untamable and disobedient.

Mohitmohan, a judge of the Session court, was hearing a case where a mother tried to kill herself and her child by drowning in a well. The child died but people managed to rescue the mother Khiroda. She had performed such a heinous act as her
lover had left her in the middle of the night after stealing her deposits and jewellery. She had no money to feed her child and not a penny to repay the rent. Increased financial insecurity, breach of trust and utter frustration had driven her to plunge into the well. Fatefully, she survived and was produced in the court. Lawyers tried to save her on sympathetic grounds, but the judge Mohitmohan was of a different opinion and he gave her death sentence. Although he was a devotee of goddess yet had little concern and respect for women.

In his flashback he remembered the fourteen year old Hemshashi who was attracted to Mohitmohan in no time. Hemsashi was a widow, remained aloof from family and society. To her Binodchandra was the love god whom she could love, admire and worship. She thought marriage and family life to be full of merriment. Binodchandra took advantage of the innocence of Hemshashi. He made her elope from her house leaving behind her family. Hemshashi was remorseful about her act but Binodchandra didn’t allow her to go back, he took hold of her jewellery and before his exile pushed her into the profession of prostitution.

Before Khiroda’s hanging, violence broke out in the prison. Mohitmohan was out for a morning walk when he found Khiroda fighting with constables over a ring. When she was asked by Mohitmohan about the matter she requested them to return her ring: “As soon as he had approached Khiroda with the aforesaid noble purpose, Khiroda implored with folded hands, “I appeal on your honour! Please tell him to return my ring” (Bhattacharya).

The ring came in the hand of justice Mohitmohan and he recalled the whole episode that had happened twenty four years ago with Hemshashi. He often thought no
one in the world would remember him as Binodchandra but the engraved ring with his pseudo name and picture falsified all his myths. The stature of Khiroda (Hemshashi) changed; Mohitmohan’s deceit shattered his hollow eccentric attitude about gender and made Khiroda (Hemshashi) the real protagonist. The innocent young girl was deceived and forced to prostitution for survival yet she couldn’t find true love from her live-in partner. She still carried the token of remembrance in the form of that ring, which reminded her of her first love. Mohitmohan was left with pseudo idealism and fake concepts about women. He never experienced the true love and devotion from any woman. He betrayed many women in his life and had the deepest disregard for women. He always condemned women and thought them as foolish, materialistic and nonsensical. Hemsashi’s (Khiroda) miseries did not stop her from loving a deceitful person and her dedication for such a person was unmatchable. Mohitmohan felt humiliated about his hypocrisy, selfishness and apathetic behaviour towards females. Tagore’s depiction of duplicitous men in the society who acts in a pseudo-idealistic manner is a way of condemning gender inequality. He portrayed the innocence of love which allowed Hemsashi to love a man who exploited and turned her life to hell.

Similarly “A Broken Home” is the story of an apathetic husband Bhupati who was engrossed in his work, and remained detached from his wife. It appeared to all that his wife had a perfectly comfortable stereotyped life of a housewife. Charulata was fed up with her monotonous life, which was void of appreciation and wanted to get rid of her black and white life.

Charulata was childless and spent time with her intellectual husband at the time of Bengal’s cultural renaissance. Bhupati was mature and editor of a newspaper therefore
had little time to give to his young wife. Charu didn’t perform household work, as there were servants to perform routine domestic work. Charulata was surrounded by boredom and restlessness. Tagore depicted her restlessness in a picturesque fashion where like her pet bird she also felt trapped in the house. Her husband was a book lover and was unable to understand her hidden womanly desires, he rarely noticed her. But Charulata hoped that change in her husband will come so she always looked at him with her opera glasses. Her gesture reflects the marital discord between the husband and wife, which ultimately leads to emotional void.

Bhupati’s cousin, Amal, youthful of Charulata’s age entered in Charu’s life. Amal had regard for poetry; he was in favour towards her literary pretensions and ambitions. Charulata admired Amal for his compassion but Amal was interested only in her creativity. Charulata’s short story got published in a local publication. Bhupati became bankrupt as his brother-in-law (Charu’s brother) and Charu's sister-in-law deceived Bhupati and ran away with his money. Bhupati’s newspaper and the press was shut down. Bhupati admitted his grief to Amal asked him to be his trustworthy.

Amal’s conscience made him guilty of betraying Bhupati. Charu's increasing intellect also bothered him and he was unable to accept her growth which he only motivated at some point of time. He left Charu to end her infatuation towards him. Amal married and went to England for higher studies. Charu’s admiration turned to disappointment and her questions were merely answered with a letter which conveyed Amal’s departure.
“The Broken Home” ends with Bhupathi informing Charulata that he was leaving the town and Charulata wished to go with him. But sensing Bhupati’s hesitation, she didn’t impose her on Bhupati, as there was no emotional bond left between them.

This story was picturized as “Charulata” by the Oscar award winning director Satyajit Ray. The movie portrayed Charulata as the protagonist and her feelings for Amal, his escapism and Bhupati’s realization of neglecting Charulata. The film also ends with emotional void between Bhupati and Charulata. Charu raised her hand to stop Bhupati, but in the end she didn’t, the story informs the audience about the breach in trust resulting in the relation being broken:

Ray was asked what he thought was his best film, and he answered, apparently without any hesitation, “Charulata”. He further said that if he were asked to remake his films all over again, Charulata was the one film in which he would not change even a single frame. That is a big statement coming from Ray. (Palsule)

“The Broken Home” depicts the emergence of the modern intellectual woman and can be correlated with Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.

“The Babus of Nayanjore” depicts the display of grandeur and extinct magnificence by Kailas Babu whose ancestors were famous zamindaar at Nayanjore. They had lots of unnecessary extravagance which made them a common man. Their resources were wiped because of their worldly needs. Kailas Babu lost his father in childhood; his property was sold to reduce debt. Kailas Babu left Nayanjore and settled in Calcutta. He lost his son leaving his granddaughter to survive the poverty.

Kailas Babu left his immovable assets but he still possessed some family antiques like a silver cruet for sprinkling scented water, anotto-of-roses, a small gold salver, a
costly ancient shawl and the old-fashioned ceremonial dress and ancestral turban. He was better known as Thakur Dada in his neighborhood. His friends would gather in his house and sit with him for hours and entertain themselves by boasting about his ancestors, it was a routine entertainment for them. His friends would bring him tobacco and say; “Thakur Dada, this morning some tobacco was sent to me from Gaya. Do take it and see how you like it” (Tagore, *The Hungry Stones and other stories* 46).

He would then start narration about his good old days of Nayanjore. “I wonder,” he used to say, “if anyone would like to try it now. I have some left, and can get it at once” (47). But the tobacco would never be available. As he didn’t have any one to blame, he put the blame on his servant Ganesh and he used to take the blame silently. He quite often promised his companions of a grand rich dinner when the monsoons would arrive but everyone was very careful not to remind him of his promise even if it did rain.

It was difficult to get a habitable house in Calcutta those days and Kailas Babu’s friends knew the fact. Even if Thakur Dada used to say: “Well, well, I suppose I shall have to put up with this house after all.” Then he would smile and say: “But, you know, I could never bear to be away from my friends. I must be near you. That really compensates for everything” (47).

Kailas Babu was sensible and was consulted in ordinary business matters by everyone. People were only upset with the history of Nayanjore with absurd exaggerations, but he would accept their views and never doubted that anyone could disbelieve his words.

The narrator disliked the habit of boasting about everything by Kailas Babu. Kailas Babu boasted about his character, higher education and his market value as an
eligible bride groom. In his words narrator was preferred by every daughter’s father but narrator would select wealthy father’s only daughter, extremely beautiful and highly educated.

The narrator liked beautiful granddaughter of Thakur Dada and thought one day Kailas Babu would offer a proposal of marriage to him. But the narrator is not approached for marriage, it resulted in more disgust but the narrator waited for this girl with the utmost patience. Thakur Dada was adamant not to break his family tradition even if the girl remained unmarried.

One day he planned to fox Kailas Babu by narrating him that in all Bengal the only really respectable families were those of the Maharaja of Cossipore and the Babus of Nayanjore. The narrator’s friend came to visit Kailas Babu as Lieutenant Governor and everyone except Kailas Babu was amused by his activities during the visit.

Oh! er—by the way, how is the ChotaLât Sahib? Quite well, did you say? Ah, yes, I am so delighted to hear it! And the dear Mem Sahib, is she quite well too? Ah, yes! and the little children—are they quite well also? Ah, yes! that’s very good news! Be sure and give them my compliments when you see them. (48) Kailas Babu was remorseful for not receiving Honour Bahadur with all the ancestral grandeur of Nayanjore. But in Calcutta he was a helpless creature.

After a ten minute interview, the narrator’s friends rose to his feet to depart. They carried off the string of gold mohurs, the gold salver, the old ancestral shawl, the silver scent-sprinkler, and the anotto-of-roses filigree box; then placed them in the carriage.

The narrator was watching all the while from the next room. When he couldn’t suppress his laughter, he rushed into a further room, suddenly to discover, Kusum, Kailas
Babu’s granddaughter was sobbing heavily. When she saw narrator’s laughter she confronted him with tear-choked voice: “Tell me! What harm has my grandfather done to you? Why have you come to deceive him? Why have you come here? Why?” (49)

The narrator realized that he had hurt her sentiments; his laughter vanished in a moment. The narrator thought Kusum, as a commodity in the marriage market who has to attract a husband. But now he realized that even she had humanly feelings.

On the next day, the narrator took all those stolen goods back to Kailas Babu. He heard Kusum asking her grandfather: “Dada, dearest, do tell me all that the Chota LâtSahib said to you yesterday. Don’t leave out a single word. I am dying to hear it all over again” (49).

The girl was listening with all her attention. The narrator was deeply touched and tears rolled down his eyes. He stood there in silence, while Thakur Dada finished the story of wonderful visit of Chota LâtSahib. When the story finished, he took the stolen goods and deposited them at the feet of the girl. He didn’t speak anything and left.

That day he was again recalled by Kailas Babu. After the other visitors left, he made the marriage proposal to the old man in a humble manner:

…though I could never for a moment hope to be worthy of marriage connection with such an illustrious family, yet … etc. After his proposal of marriage, the old man embraced him and broke out in a tumult of joy: “I am a poor man, and could never have expected such great good fortune”. That was the first and last time in his life that Kailas Babu confessed to being poor. It was also the first and last time in his life that he forgot for a single moment, the ancestral dignity that belongs to the Babus of Nayanjore. (49)
“The Divide” or “The Difference,” (1891), is a story which depicts how an insignificant event can break the long-lasting friendship. Banamali and Himangshu are distant cousins and neighbours. Banamali is elder to Himangshu. When Himangshu was a child, Banamali did everything to entertain the child be it playing or singing lullaby. He is uneducated and is fond of gardening apart from being with his young cousin. Their friendship also grew with time. Himangshu shared his knowledge with Banamali. He loved to learn and do gardening. But there is a difference between the two friends i.e. their approaches towards life. Banamali loved and followed his heart, whereas Himangshu used reasoning and intelligence. When Himangshu returned from school both the friends would meet in the garden which separated their houses. Himangshu shared his daily itinerary and Banamali listened to it.

A dispute had arisen for the ownership of a lime tree, which grew on the drainage ditch that separated their lands. Banamali’s father Harachandra and Himangshu’s father Gokulchandra went to the court for the ownership of the ditch. Finally the verdict came from the court that the ditch was Harachandra’s and no one else had claim to the fruit of the lime tree. There was great rejoicing in Harachandra’s house since they won the case. But Banamali appeared sad on the patio in the garden. The time of their meeting elapsed but Himangshu did not turn up. In the evening when the lamps were lit he went to Himangshu’s house. He was sent away by Gokulchandra telling that there was no one at home. He went back to the garden and sat mutely. Finally the lamps of Himangshu’s house were put out one by one as the night grew. The next day he went again and sat in the garden, hoping that Himangshu might come. (Dominic)
Through this story Tagore urges readers to overcome selfish motives which ruin sincere friendship and love among the best of buddies. The lime tree was a medium which served as a subject to settle score between the age old rivalries. The petty issue was taken to court and the result in one’s favour acted as a final nail in the coffin. It broke harmony between Banamali and Himangshu, and they didn’t meet again.

When Fate had taken each of the seven days from Monday to Sunday away from Banamali, leaving no day on which to pin his hopes, he turned his tearful eyes towards Himangshu’s shuttered house, appealed to its from the depths of his distress, ‘Dear God’, he cried, gathering all his life’s pain into the words.” (Tagore, *Selected Short Stories* 69)

**Men in the Short Stories of Kartar Singh Duggal**

Kartar Singh Duggal is a versatile writer who has portrayed a variety of characters in the numerous tales that he wrote. His writing was influenced by Freudian psychology and his narratives foray deep into the psyche of his characters, attempting not only to describe their actions but offering to his readers convincing psychological justifications of the same. His stories mainly portray the damage and aftermath that took place on the North-West frontier of India in the wake of partition, but his stories also portray, in myriad shades, the common man engaged in his everyday struggles against a hostile and materialistic society that has no ideals, whatsoever, to offer to its inhabitants. Duggal, in almost all of his stories, portrays a deep humanistic side that helped him in endowing his fictional characters with realism and 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. (Choudhury)

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.

Through the familial microcosm, we are presented with a sneak peek into the testing lives of the rickshaw drivers in India. The general opinion about the auto rickshaw drivers in India is far from being good. They are known to be particularly notorious for their roguish behaviour, whimsical ways (when it comes to picking and dropping passengers) and for charging outrageous fares from their passengers. (Khan)

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.

A classical dilemma is central to “The Taxi Driver” with ethics and morality on one end and the need to provide for one’s family on the other. The human lust for lucre has been a subject of many a great work of literature. It is seldom justified and often has
terrible consequences. And, yet, the survival for existence is regarded as the most basic instinct of every living being. “So can we really blame an individual for choosing survival over morality?” (Khan).

In “The Taxi Driver,” the auto rickshaw driver serendipitously finds in his possession a wallet containing a considerable sum of money. It belonged to one of the passengers. The driver faces a great dilemma. Should he return the wallet to the man who was careless enough to lose it in the first place? Or, should he use the money to pay off his debts? While his conscience doesn’t let him keep the money, his love for his family doesn’t allow him to part with it either. The story doesn’t feed us with any definitive answers. It has been made into a short film in Kannada, “The Catalyst” directed by the Indian filmmaker Vaishnavi Sundar.

In the story “The Sins of Her Fathers,” Magistrate Murli Manohar belonged to the scheduled caste and for that reason he enjoyed specialized privileges through which he attained swift promotions in his career and became the sessions judge. He was of the opinion that the so called higher caste kept them out of promotion panel purposely and through judiciary they got justice and enjoyed power to excel in career. He was in love with a Brahmin girl Janki. Janki too loved him and accepted him as husband contrary to family’s fury and opposition. They were idealized in the town as the favourite couple. They were blessed with a female and a male child in a couple of years. During this period Janki’s family also accepted them with glee.

Manohar read a story where a low caste maid Santi fell in love with a Brahmin man who had lost his wife. The man was also 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. She was imbued with 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. Magistrate after reading this story was
astounded and was of the opinion that how could we live with such class discrimination
in the modern society? The story somehow reflected the neglect which he faced due to
his caste.

A strange murder case came to Manohar for hearing. The Zamindar’s son was
murdered by an untouchable girl. The girl accepted her guilt and during her confession
her statement about the crime boggled Manohar’s mind. The Hindu boy forced to have
sex with the girl in the crop field where the she was scouring for weeds. The girl
repeatedly told him not to assault her sexually as she was a cobbler girl but the guy was
not ready to give up. He overpowered the girl and no one could refuse Zamindar’s son. In
frenzy the girl asked the guy 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 her act of passion strangled the boy to death. After she
quenched her thirst 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 never came
across such 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).

The case troubled his family life too; he could not kiss his wife on lips anymore.
He lost all interest in his wife and kids. Janki tried her best to win him back but nothing
changed Murli Manohar’s process of alienation. One day Janki came to know where her husband spent his evenings. She was a teacher in Municipal Board School, dark in complexion and also tagged with the label of untouchable. Janki’s faith was shaken and she felt like tissue paper which was directed after use in the dustbin. She did everything possible to save her marital discord but her husband remained indifferent. She could not go back to her parents as marrying Murli Manohar was her rebel against societal discrimination and she wanted to prove all of them wrong. She was hounded by the act of deceit of her husband. She was not able to identify for whose sins she was victimized. She was paying penance for belonging to the higher caste which suppressed the so called lower class people for ages. The story thus, becomes a pathetic testimony to the psychological oppression that society can give way to individuals. Despite all his progressive ideas, Murli Manohar cannot stop himself from falling prey to the same notions of caste that he has worked hard to subvert in his own personal life. Having come up the social ladder and having established a love and matrimonial relationship with a woman belonging to a high caste, Murli Manohar is fated to finally break down when he is forced to handle a caste-sensitive case. The case wreaks havoc on his personal life, transforming his wife from his beloved to an ally of the higher caste with whom he has nothing in common and forces him to establish an emotional bond with a woman of his own caste, deserting in the process, his own wife forever.

Similarly, “Lali” is the story of a sweeper’s son who worked in the Lahore office of the narrator. Lali in his childhood was liked by everyone in the office. He was dark black, barefooted, bareheaded and played all day around the office. As Lali grew up he became notorious. He was admitted to English medium school with Zamindar’s son but
he fought with his mates and never went to school again. Lali smoked, went to cinemas and always refused to pursue the cleaning job of his father. He also developed the habit of drinking and his father was worried about his future. The tears of his father made the narrator appoint Lali as an assistant to the Director of the office. 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 act of people was condemned by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. 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 next rendezvous with Lali was in the house of a Brahmin friend where he worked as a waiter. The narrator’s friend introduced him as a Brahmin refugee. The very next day Lali came to meet the narrator and revealed that it was that ayah of Lahore who helped him enter that Brahmin friend’s house. He told that he would not continue the deception anymore and quit his job. Lali was a freebie; he 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 was 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 as the narrator was not able to
digest his up rise as he was sweeper Manak’s son. Lali’s father went out of station for
three days and promised that he would make shift arrangement during his absence. Next
morning he found Lali sweeping his courtyard, the narrator felt inner satisfaction as it
was his original place and thought of all stories of Lali’s success were lies. Lali greeted
him with a hearty ‘namaste’. He told about his stay abroad and how a poor country like
India would be affected if war took place. The narrator didn’t pay any heed to his words
and went to his office. He worked for the next two days. On the evening of the third day
while the narrator was going out in his Skoda car, Lali commented on the types of cars
and their 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 was of the opinion that after having such a decent job he could not even go beyond Delhi and how could a sweeper’s son visit so many countries? Lali was a popular figure among woman whereas the narrator was not even though he was more educated and belonged to an elite class. The narrator was jealous of Lali and his inability to become a popular figure in these years made him think that Lali was a bluffer.

Lali came to say good bye to the narrator with a telegram in his hand. He promised to bring gift for the narrator in his next visit. He also thanked the narrator for his kind feelings for servants like him and reminded him that Lali was like a child to him. That evening the narrator went with his wife for an English movie. To his surprise Lali was sitting next to him with a young girl. During the interval Lali introduced the girl with the narrator and his wife. Before the end of the movie, Lali and his companion were about to leave. The narrator thought 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 it was an eye opener for the narrator that whatever he thought about Lali was wrong.

The class conflict in this story is the main theme. The son of a servant is not destined to become a servant too and should be allowed the freedom to choose his own course in life. But under society’s strict prescriptions, class mobility is, at best, a fantasy and the mere suggestion of someone rising to heights of success from humble origins is enough to be a cause of social resentment. It is this pre-determined mentality of the so
called upper class that has created this notion. Lali’s character becomes polished and polite as the story advances. He is adaptable and feels no shame in doing any kind of work be it that of a waiter, taxi driver, peon, cleaner or an airline staff. He doesn’t envy the narrator for his class and authority. On the contrary the narrator feels jealous of Lali and his visit to foreign countries. According to the narrator Lali is a bluffer and a liar who is irresponsible and good for nothing. Lali boasts about his affairs which agonizes the narrator as he is not a popular figure in his society. In the end all his myth about Lali is broken and he realizes his pre-notions are wrong about Lali. Lali had the right to live life differently from what his father had led.

Kartar Singh Duggal’s short story “Kulsum” depicts the story of a young girl who is confined by an old Sikh man to offer her as a gift to the young school master. The schoolmaster felt that the gift was unfit to be swallowed. When she poses resistance, she is first raped by the old man and then presented to the school master. The male characters in this story portrayed the instinctive, opportunistic and animalistic instincts of humans. The story “depicted the physical, psychological and emotional trauma faced by women in the hands of man of other religion which was the most accepted and discussed fact during the Partition” (Sarvani 75).

The “Making of the Millitant” depicts extreme exploitation of the lower caste by feudal lords. Mangu and his father Marhu were exploited by Biswedar. To prevent Mangu from joining a separatist group, his father decided for his marriage. After marriage on first night Mangu came to know about a bitter custom of his family’s suppression.
He was looking around for her when 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.” (Duggal, The Night and the full Moon and Other Stories 222)

The revelation made him a rebel who was absconding after murdering the landlord and had a prize money of one lac rupees announced on him by the government.

Duggal seems to be upholding the warmth of human relationship, highlighting eternal values. His main narrative mode is psychological realism and through this mode, he attempts to portray characters whose individualities, personalities and destines are intimately intertwined with social forces. Duggal’s male characters are all the victim of some or the other kind of social ideology. While the world of men is naturally influenced by the world views of the public sphere, in Duggal’s stories this public sphere becomes so oppressive and claustrophobic that it is impossible to separate one’s personal wishes and desires or even sufferings from that of the society. Hence, his men become either victims or rebels and in both the cases the courses that they choose, they must be prepared to go through their own burdens of suffering. Duggal’s main intention in his stories is to bring out this intimate relationship between man and society and to portray the causes of sufferings and pleasures of human life, particularly among the middleclass. On the whole, the stories depict immense cognitive and artistic values and their characters remain etched out in our memory for a long time to come.

Having compared the stories of the two writers to one another, it shall be no exaggeration to say that both the writers are similar in their approach towards male
characterization. Both Rabindranath Tagore and Kartar Singh Duggal have portrayed different shades of male characters through their stories and surprise us with their variety of characterization. In the work of both the writers, the male characters are framed against the backdrop of dominant socio-political ideas and are presented as being shaped influentially by these forces. While in certain stories of both the writers, the men attempt to break free of societal codes and take on the mantle of committed rebels, on the whole they remain either perpetrators of social inequality or its victims. Class, caste and gender emerge as important issues in the works of both Tagore and Duggal and most of their male characters project the typical social biases of their times with respect to these issues.

In their dealing with women, almost all the male characters sketched by the two short story writers, present themselves as patriarchs and chauvinists. Their notions concerning women are highly constricted and orthodox and it is difficult for them to conceive parameters of equality. Caste and class are important factors that the male characters must negotiate within these stories and though, in many of them, attempts are made to overcome societal prejudices, these efforts are often doomed to failure. All stories depicted in this study support gender, social and psychological freedom of a person. The injustice and atrocities prevailing in the society can only be curbed if the male characters become conscious, socially aware and refined. Both writers seem to indicate that in a patriarchal order, it is essential for familial and social health that the male learn to think rationally and to question the codes and mores of society. In the event of the male character asserting his typical man’s prerogative, the writers leave out in their narrative, any scope for the sense of readerly empathy. Such characters are projected in these writers’ fiction as far from human. On the other hand, sensitive male figures are sketched
memorably and the message is there for all readers to see that it is through the agency of such egalitarian men that a social change can be brought.

On the whole, it is important to appreciate the psychological skill with which both Tagore and Duggal have uncovered various facets of the Indian male psyche. Though separated from one another by a gap of almost a century, both writers seem to evince a kinship in the manner that they have tried to bring out the trials and tribulations that even the men must encounter within their socio-political world. In a culture that grants power to the male through a patriarchal set-up and an androcentric ordering of things, male victimization cannot be ruled out as long as social disparities like caste, race and culture prevail. Again, when mindlessly confronted with false projections of religion, it is men particularly who come into the grips of fanaticism and become instruments of violence and social destruction. By bringing out this delicate manner in which male sensibilities are shaped through positive and negative social forces, both Tagore and Duggal seem to indicate that a rational and sane society is one which promotes individual thought and action. Collective decisions or perceptions may be erroneous and therefore, if the health of the individual, family and society are to be recovered, it can come about only through men who realize the shortcomings of a patriarchal world view and work to bring about equality in all social spheres of life.
Works Cited


