

Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Short Stories*. Trans. Mohammad A. Quayum. New Delhi: Macmillan, 2011. liii+160 pp. ISBN 023-033-277-3.

Whereas the names of many Nobel laureates in Literature have been forgotten, Rabindranath Tagore, Asia's first Nobel laureate (1913), remains an important and compelling figure in world literature. Professor Quayum's book, with its collection of nineteen of Tagore's short stories, is a welcome addition to his oeuvre and his legacy.

Primarily known for his poetry, Tagore "was also an actor, playwright, producer, musician, painter, educationist, cultural reformer, philosopher, novelist, short story writer, and a critic of life, politics, art and literature" (xv). A polymath, Tagore had this to say about himself: "To tell you the truth, I do not quite know what my real vocation is or should be. I am very much in the position of a young woman who, in the pride of her youth, is unwilling to part with any of her suitors" (xv). I smile whenever I read that, because my graduate advisor at the University of Illinois told me I was "too eclectic." To me, having broad interests is just the way I am. It's no wonder that Tagore had such great appeal to me when I first read him as a college sophomore back in 1954.

Tagore's views on social justice, spirituality, respect for women, children and all people are both compelling and relevant to the global village reality of the twenty first century. Sadly, when I began my professional studies in 1960 and became preoccupied with developing my professional career, I forgot about him until asked to review this book. Reading these nineteen stories, reminds me just how much Tagore's ideas influenced my thinking, and how deeply indebted I am to him. "In each of these stories," Professor Quayum writes, "Tagore's concerns are essentially moral and ethical.... He believed in the equality and fellowship of all human beings. He urged his readers to shun Kuvera, the god of money and the genius of property that knows no moral responsibility..." (xxxix). "[I]n his short stories he recurrently pleaded for social justice, protection of the helpless, education of the illiterate, material well-being for the indigent, and an unfettered dignity for woman and children" (xl). "Over and again, he returns to the same social, psychological, cultural, economic and political issues, despite their period of composition" (xliv). His stories show "how our fundamental values, attitudes and emotions either unite us or separate us" (xlv). Rabindranath Tagore is as relevant – and as accessible – as he was when his work was first published.

In each of the stories, written between 1891 and 1941 and translated into very readable English by Professor Quayum, English speaking readers will identify with the characters in the stories. For example, in "The Postmaster," an

urban-bred young man is sent to a rural village where he is totally ignorant about village life and has no idea how to relate to the villagers. This put me in mind of an experience in my own life when, in the summer of 1963, I moved from San Francisco, California to a job in a central Illinois village of 150 people. The young postmaster's discomfort was my discomfort, his experience in a small Bengali village my experience in that tiny village in central Illinois. The myriad ways in which differences in race, background and class distance people from each other are glaringly obvious in the story. In the end, the young Postmaster puts in for a transfer back to the city, leaving behind Ratan, a destitute orphan girl who bakes his bread, fixes him meals and cares for him when he is ill. At the end of a year I moved on to graduate school, where I was much more comfortable with the culture.

To Tagore, connection and connectivity are fundamental realities in all life, especially in human relationships. Each of the stories in this collection illustrates what is a major preoccupation in his life and his writing – the interplay between connection and brokenness, justice and injustice, and the way fear and suspicion destroy harmony and peace. Disconnections are obvious in cruelty, discrimination, hatred and neglect, and in those instances where connection is so obvious in loving and tender relationships. As drawn by Tagore, the difference between connection and disconnection between people is so painfully obvious in these stories that it brought tears to my eyes.

Fear and suspicion lurks in almost every human relationship, which Tagore illustrates so well in each of the following stories. There is the brutal beating of an Untouchable who accidentally brushes against someone of a higher caste (“Purification”); a husband’s cowardice in allowing his wife to prevent him from helping the Untouchable (“Purification”); the deep yearning in an Afghan street merchant’s heart for his daughter, far away in Afghanistan (“Kabuliwala”); the frustrated rage of a father at an Inspector who refuses to let a penniless man cremate his daughter (“Imprudence”); and a wife who, “[a]fter living for so many years in this world (though not many), ... has still not been able to temper her fear that the world is full of all kinds of horrors: thieves, robbers, drunkards, snakes, tigers, malaria, cockroaches and European soldiers” (“Kabuliwala”). The juxtaposition of cockroaches and European soldiers makes me laugh each time I read the sentence, because it is so true. I’ve known people with that level of fear and had that kind of unreasonable fear myself in situations where I felt uncomfortable and out of place. It is the kind of pathological fear that gossip feeds on and cynical politicians use to shape and control public discourse and opinion, and it can be deadly. Tagore is a master at depicting its corrosiveness. And last, but not at all least, there is the story of a young woman who, because a respected Muslim saves her from a band of robbers after her new husband flees the scene, converts from Hinduism to Islam, marries a son of her protector and saves her younger sister from the

same band of robbers on her wedding day. Written at the end of his life and not published until 1955, “A Woman’s Conversion to Islam” is a story of compassion and courage that will not go down well with many people, yet it expresses so well Tagore’s deeply held beliefs about the unity of all mankind.

Professor Quayum’s translation of the stories in the book is clear, contemporary and accessible to twenty-first century readers. I hope this book will be made as widely available as possible so readers throughout the English speaking world will be able to order and read it. It is one I will recommend to all my English speaking friends here in Sapporo. It will certainly help to renew interest in the remarkable talents and insights of Rabindranath Tagore.

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