

Rabindranath Tagore, *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories*. Ed., Trans. and with an Introduction by Mohammad A. Quayum. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2014. 256 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-48-6.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Asia's first Nobel laureate, excelled in many genres. He was primarily a poet (he won the Nobel Prize in 1913 for *Gitanjali*, a collection of poems), but he was also a painter and a musician. He wrote and composed more than 2200 songs which have become an integral part of cultural education in modern Bengal. He was an educationist and cultural and social reformer. As a playwright, novelist and short story writer, Tagore is a towering figure in Bangla literature.

Mohammad A. Quayum, professor of English at International Islamic University Malaysia, has written widely on South Asian and Postcolonial Literature. *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories* reveals his passion for Tagore's writings. Rabindranath Tagore wrote ninety-five stories in his lifetime, almost half of them during the period 1891-1895, after his father appointed him the manager of the family estates in East Bengal and Orissa in November 1889. He experienced rural life for the first time; as he observed in an interview in 1936, "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" (qtd. in Quayum 26). The first nine of the twenty stories selected by Quayum were published in the period 1891-1893. They give a realistic picture of the life of the poor villagers, and reveal the deprivation of women and children in a money-worshipping patriarchy. The first story, "The Postmaster" shows the city-bred postmaster's callous attitude towards the orphaned village girl Ratan who looks after him. The next story, "Assets and Debts," exposes the cruelty of the dowry system; young Nirupama is ill-treated and starved because her father has not fully paid the 10,000 rupees demanded as dowry. When she dies, "her funeral rites were carried out with great pomp." The avaricious Rai Chaudhuries lose no time in finding another girl for their son, and "This time the dowry was set at 20,000 rupees, all in cash" (64). "Punishment" is the story of a poor, hungry man hitting his rude wife with a chopper. When she falls dead, his younger brother puts the blame on his wife, and tries to justify the action: "If I lose my wife I'll get another, but if my brother is hanged I'll never get another" (116).

Some stories have a touch of humour, mocking male pretensions and insensitivity. "The Path to Salvation" is a light-hearted account of two men who are fed up with their wives, and want to renounce the world and become ascetics in search of salvation. Fakirchand is married to the lively Haimabati, who had "anticipated much affection and entertainment from her husband in her adolescence," but he is a killjoy who recites the scriptures to her. "The night

Fakirchand discovered Bankim's *Krishnakanta's Will* under Haimabati's pillow, he found peace only by making the frivolous young woman cry all night. Reading a novel and deceiving the husband-lord, too! However, through constant advice, instructions, lectures on piety, and coercion, the high and mighty husband eventually succeeded in eradicating all smiles from Haimabati's face, destroying her peace of mind, and draining away every bit of her youthful exuberance" (65-66). The other husband, Makhanlal, has every reason to be unhappy; forced by his father to marry for a second time, the two wives keep fighting and give him no peace. It is rumoured that he has run away to Kashi, but "now and then he restlessly longed to return home, but dared not for the fear of being caught" (66). The sombre Fakirchand is claimed as his son by Makhanlal's father when he wanders into his village, and Makhanlal's eight children clamber all over him. The villagers and the two wives abuse him roundly whenever he tries to run away, and he fondly remembers Haimabati, who never spoke a harsh word.

Many of the stories (such as "Kabuliwala") present the father-daughter relationship, and show how social customs like dowry and caste impact this mutual love. In "The Editor," the narrator writes farces and edits a newspaper to make money so that he can pay dowry for his motherless daughter; very soon, he is so absorbed in moneymaking that he neglects his loving child. He comes to his senses when he realises that she is very ill. Another story does not have a happy ending: "Imprudence" is the story of a village doctor who gets together with the Police Inspector to extort money from hapless villagers. The Police Inspector lays a false charge that Harinath Majumdar's widowed daughter who died during an abortion, and demands the corpse for autopsy. The narrator "helps" the father:

Suffice it to say that Harinath went bankrupt in order to give his daughter proper funeral rites.

My daughter Shashi came and asked me piteously, "Father, why was that old man crying at your feet like that?" (152)

The father is full of remorse when twelve-year-old Shashi dies on the eve of the marriage he has arranged with his ill-gotten wealth. He is haunted by the child's question, "Father, why was that old man crying at your feet like that?" The next time a poor man is denied permission to cremate his daughter (who has died of snakebite), the doctor confronts the Police Inspector. "The love between the Inspector and the doctor that had been flourishing, moistened by the tears of so many persecuted people, was razed to the ground in that storm" (155), and the doctor ends up losing his ancestral property to the avaricious Police Inspector. One marvels at the way Tagore does justice to so many themes in a five-page story: the love between a father and his motherless daughter, the iniquity of the

dowry system, the poverty of the villagers and the corrupt practices of the police and the doctor.

The later stories lay more emphasis on the psychology of the characters. "The Ruined Nest" (1901) is a 55-page novella about the lack of communication between husband and wife; Charulata's husband is too busy running a newspaper to devote time to his adolescent wife, and she turns for emotional support to his young cousin. In this story (made into the film *Charulata* by Satyajit Ray) the husband is presented sympathetically. In "Sacrifice" (1892, Tagore's own translation is shorter and has the title "Renunciation") the husband refuses to disown his low caste wife at the cost of being turned out of his home. In some other stories, Tagore satirises the insensitive husband. "He thought that women-folk's imaginations are limited to only one man on earth, him whom they love. That there could be many other virtuous men deserving of honour in society is not inscribed in their sacred books. All the love and praise of a woman is heaped on the man who sings marriage incantations into her ears," declares Chitta Ranjan ("Privacy" 144). In another story, "Number One" (1917), the pompous husband, jealous of his talented neighbour, is happy that his wife wants to move to a new house:

I was overjoyed by this and told my followers, "See how women have a gift of intuition. That's why they are not so good with logic, but when it comes to matters of the heart they are extremely perceptive."

Kanailal laughed and added, "For example, in matters related to ghouls, demonic ghosts, charm in the dust of a Brahmin's feet, religious merit in worshipping one's husband etc., etc."

I said, "No, you see how we have all been awed by the flamboyance of Number One, but Anila is not tricked a bit by his ostentation." (226-227)

The husband does not realise that his wife wants to move away because she is drawn towards the sensitive neighbour in house Number One, who has fallen in love with her.

The stories are of varying lengths: some, like "The Postmaster," "Imprudence," "The Auspicious Sight" or "Privacy" are just five or six pages long, while "The Ruined Nest," "Number One" (16 pages) and "The Professor" (20 pages) are longer. Quayum has arranged the stories chronologically, from "The Postmaster," first published in 1891, to "The Painter" (1929). The last story in the anthology, "A Woman's Conversion to Islam", was published posthumously in 1955: Tagore had dictated it on 24-25 June 1941.

Tagore's world view expressed in his non-fictional writing are reflected in the short stories. He believed "that God could be realized in the daily realities of life, or by attending to practical matters, such as looking after the family,

instead of renouncing it for some vague quest of divinity” (Quayum, “Rabindranath Tagore: a Biographical Essay” 15). “The Path to Salvation” pokes fun at such husbands. “A Woman’s Conversion to Islam” highlights mutual respect and understanding between Hindus and Muslims.

Tagore’s patriotism was different from Mahatma Gandhi’s *Swaraj*, because he believed that what India needed was not political freedom but “constructive work coming from within herself” (qtd. in Quayum 15). He wanted a just society, where there would be no discrimination on the basis of caste or religion. “Purification” (1928) is somewhat unusual because it satirises a woman. The narrator’s wife is unhappy because he refuses to wear khaddar, “Whatever be the ideology of a group, I feel reluctant to dress in sectarian attire” (236). His wife declares, “You only talk about caste discrimination but practically do nothing to redress it. But we are trying to paint a colour of unity over that disunity with our khaddar uniform, and replace caste disharmony with the fellowship of all” (237). On their way to a friend’s house, they “hear people yelling and the sounds of beating” (238). Their old municipal sweeper is being brutally beaten because he has accidentally touched someone in the crowd going to the temple. The narrator wants to rescue the sweeper by taking him into his car, but his wife overrules him, “I won’t ride with a sweeper” (239).

Tagore’s short stories first appeared in English in 1916: *The Hungry Stones and Other Stories* (Macmillan) had 13 stories. According to its Preface, “Victory” was translated by Tagore himself, and seven other stories by “Mr. C.F. Andrews, with the author’s help. Assistance has also been given by the Rev. E.J. Thompson, Panna Lal Basu, Prabhat Kumar Mukerji, and Sister Nivedita.” Tagore’s work continues to be relevant, with every generation publishing its own translations. Twenty English translations of Tagore’s poetry, drama and prose have appeared in the last five years. Recent translators of his short stories include Arunava Sinha, Radha Chakravarty, Sukhendu Ray, Prasenjit Gupta, Supriya Chaudhuri, Joyasree Mukerji and Sharmistha Mohanty. Two anthologies would be of great interest to students of translation. *Hungry Stones: The Story in Multiple Translations* (Bhubaneswar: Four Corners, 2008) has translations by the author, William Radice, Amitav Ghosh, Sinjita Gupta and Malobika Chaudhuri. *The Living and the Dead: The Story in Multiple Translations* (2010) carries six versions – by Tagore himself (1916), William Radice, Madhuchchanda Karlekar, Supito Chattapadhyay, Sinjita Gupta and Sipra Bhattacharya.

Scholarship and readability are the outstanding features of Quayum’s translation. He provides the date of publication and the original Bangla title for each story. The biographical essay on Rabindranath Tagore provides all salient facts about his life and world view. The 28-page introduction gives us an insight into his development as a writer of fiction. The works cited in these two essays would be very useful to researchers. All except two stories, “Kabuliwala” and the title story, are set in rural Bengal; Quayum’s translations capture the natural

beauty of the place. Words likely to be unfamiliar to the non-Indian reader are explained in footnotes, without breaking the smooth flow of the narrative. The book is beautifully produced, with flawless proof reading. The lay reader as well as the researcher can derive much pleasure from *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories*.

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