

Imagining the ‘Enemy’: Adversarial Roles in Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Stories

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Abstract

This essay investigates Rabindranath Tagore’s portrayal of antagonists or adversarial characters in a select body of his short stories, and argues that his perception of the antagonist is rooted in the influences of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* on his literary sensibility. Cut off from the *paramatman* and their *antarkarana*, his antagonists live in *advaya* and in *rajasic* or *tamasic* states.

Introduction

It may seem awkward to begin an essay on Tagore with a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson, but anyone who has read the two writers will know how much they had in common. Although it is not the intention of this essay to investigate that similarity, suffice it to say that both Emerson and Tagore were significantly influenced by the teachings of the *Upanishads*. We will return to this point with regard to Tagore later in the essay, but one may turn to poems such as “Days,” “Hamatreya” and “Brahma” to see how deeply entrenched Emerson’s imagination was in Hindu mysticism. It is with the Upanishadic concepts of duality and non-duality in mind that Emerson explained the world around us in his essay “Compensation”:

Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; in the equation of quantity and quality in the fluids of the animal body; in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulations of fluids, and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; in electricity, galvanism, and chemical affinity.... An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as, spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay.

In the same essay, Emerson further wrote, “The same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man.... Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good.”

Given this inherent polarity or duality which we encounter in both nature and the human condition, it is not surprising that our imagination is likewise divided. That is to say, we cannot conceive of God without Satan, the hero without the villain, virtue without vice. We appreciate

the value of something beautiful only when we are aware of its potential ugliness. We treasure love because we know how hatred causes agony, destruction and sorrow. This push-and-pull tendency in our sensibility has also influenced literary writings from the beginning, where we notice an eternal clash of good and evil, often manifesting in the form of a hero or protagonist and his/her adversary or antagonist. Generally, the antagonist acts as a foil to the main character by embodying qualities that are antithetical to the good or admirable qualities of the protagonist, and intensifies the plot by trying to thwart his/her endeavours. However, the antagonist can appear in different forms: sometimes as a scheming, intriguing or purely vile human being; or as a monster, a giant animal, demon; or as a vicious force of nature that causes havoc in a community through the death and destruction it leaves behind. The antagonist can also be the double or doppelgänger of the protagonist, or embody an aspect or trait of the protagonist's own character which causes an inner conflict in his/her own personality or results in a moral dilemma, indecisiveness or vacillation, such as in the case of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Sometimes, the antagonist may not be a bad character at all and even have his own share of noble qualities, but stands opposed to the protagonist simply because his world view and aspirations are different. One such is Hector in Homer's *Iliad*; he acts as a foil to the poem's protagonist, Greek hero Achilles, being a Trojan prince who defends his people against the Greek invasion, but is himself virtuous, sensitive and heroic in every aspect. Sometimes, the antagonist may even occupy the central role in a plot and act as a typical hero, although he/she may not possess any of the qualities of a typical or classic hero, as in the case of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Satan is more dynamic a character and enjoys greater attention from the poet than Milton's intended protagonist in the poem, God, and fulfils the various characteristics of the "tragic hero" by showing hubris and hamartia in his character.

With such a range of possibilities in portraying the adversary in literary works, it will be interesting to explore how India's foremost writer, Rabindranath Tagore, depicted characters who are hostile or inimical to the protagonist, or played the role of the adversary, in his short stories. The discussion will focus on Tagore's selected short stories from the recently translated volume, *The Ruined Nest and Other Stories* (2014) and the collection, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (1997).

Tagore's Worldview: An Outline

As mentioned earlier, Tagore was profoundly influenced by the spiritual philosophy of the *Upanishads*, which made him a lifelong critic of religious formalism and orthodoxy. In "The Religion of Man," he stated that his religion was "a poet's religion and neither that of an orthodox man of piety nor that of a theologian" (qtd. in Atkinson), and added in a later section of the work, "The Man of My Heart," that he believed in "an intense yearning of the heart for the divine which is in Man and not in the temple, or scriptures, in images and symbols" ("The Religion of Man" 129). According to him, the self in union with God brings fulfilment, but the moment that the self is cut off from God or the Infinite Truth, it is trapped in a world of *maya* and becomes selfish, worldly, wayward and evil: "Our self is *maya* where it is merely individual and finite, where it considers its separateness as absolute; it is *stayam* where it recognises its essence in the universal and infinite, in the supreme self, in *paramatman*" (*Sadhana* 73). This *paramatman* or Supreme Self is also known as Brahman in Hindu literature, and our failure to realise our relationship with it comes from *avidya* (ignorance): "It is our ignorance which makes us think that our self, as self, is real, that it has its complete meaning in itself" (*Sadhana* 63). Organised religions also played a

role in obstructing the soul's awareness/union of/with God by trapping the individual in its sectarian machinery, with its many rituals and customs. Orthodox religion, Tagore said, "obstructs the free flow of inner life of the people and waylays and exploits it for the augmentation of its own power" ("The Religion of an Artist" 685). In "The Way to Unity," Tagore further argued, "When religion instead of emancipating mind fetters it within the narrow confinement of creeds and conventions, then it becomes the greater barrier against a true meeting of races" (462) – here union with races being a significant step towards union with God, as all human beings, in spite of their cultural differences, essentially belong in one God. In "The Religion of Man," Tagore explained, "We must realize... the love and wisdom that belong to the Supreme Person, whose Spirit is over us all, love for whom comprehends love for all creatures and exceeds in depth and strength all other loves" (91).

Tagore was also opposed to modern civilisation, because of its excessive predilection for the material instead of creating a symbiosis of the moral and the material. He was not against the physical or the material world per se, because he believed that God manifested himself through his creation of the physical world; the world was the embodiment of God's spirit. "I do not cry down the material world. I fully realise that this is the nurse and the cradle of the spirit" (Soares 145), Tagore wrote in "Voice of Humanity." However, he believed that the moment we lose sight of the spiritual and worship the material only, we then become monolithic and one-dimensional in a world that requires a constant process of synthesis, and as a consequence we act like "soulless progeny of greed" (Soares 56), "in which man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root" (Soares 44). In other words, this is when we become dehumanised and despiritualised; when we are driven by greed, passion, selfishness and violence, and fall, to borrow expressions from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, from the state of being *sattvic* to the states of *rajasic* and *tamasic*, and are lost morally and immersed in a world of ignorance or *avidya*.

Tagore spurned the idea of nationalism for a similar reason, because he found it to be a "soul-less organization" (*Nationalism* 9), one that championed "politics and commerce" (*Nationalism* 7), and brought "harvests of wealth" (*Nationalism* 5) and "carnivals of materialism" (Soares 113), but sacrificed the moral and spiritual aspects of human beings in the process. As a result, it would create a society of greed, selfishness and power, and stoke all the baser instincts of the individual, abnegating "the moral man, the complete man... to make room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose" (*Nationalism* 9). Tagore also found nationalism to be a constructed ideology, a political and commercial union in which a group of people would congregate to maximise their profit, progress and power, rather than for any higher purpose; it was not "a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being," where human relationships are naturally regulated, "so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another" (*Nationalism* 5). Moreover, nationalism was a source of violence and war, as it created rivalry between nations through a binary of self/other, or even rivalry between various religious and cultural groups within the national geographical border of a multicultural society. In other words, nationalism fed parochialism, localism and xenophobia, and instigated hatred and violence between different groups of people instead of helping to bring together humanity as one community within their diverse practices, ideals and values.

Adversarial Characters in Tagore's Short Stories

Given such a moral outlook, the antagonists in Tagore's short stories are those who are devoid of their human identity, or a sense of their spiritual self; those who are confined to religious orthodoxy, being overly preoccupied with its norms and customs without understanding their

undercurrent significance; or people who are trapped in an exclusively material world, looking for money and worldly success, sometimes following the ideals of the modern civilisation, such as nationalism, while forgetting their foremost allegiance to the individual self, soul or God. These are people who value construction over creation; artificial over the intuitive and the natural; money over love; customs and conventions over freedom, friendship and family; abstract ideas over the living and breathing human individual; and authority and power over honesty and truthfulness. In other words, these people have lost their *antar-karana* or “inner consciousness” (*Bhagavad-Gita*) and fallen from their *sattvic* state, which comprises the attributes of “perseverance, patience and tenacity of purpose” (*Bhagavad-Gita*), to the *rajasic* state of sensuality, pomposity, vanity and selfishness, or even to the *tamasic* state of intrigue, wickedness and cruelty. Their twin wings of *bhakti* and *sraddha* (devotion and steadfastness), which would lead them towards the inner being or Godhead, have been taken over by the *asuric* tendencies of pride, arrogance, falsehood, conceit, anger, harshness and ignorance, thereby making them self-serving, power hungry, vile, vicious and even bloodthirsty.

These adversarial roles are not necessarily ascribed to a stranger or someone totally unknown to the protagonist, but in fact are often played by a family member, a friend or even the protagonist’s father, wife, in-laws, aunt or brother. Sometimes, the antagonist may also be the protagonist’s double, his other self, or the manifestation of his inner evil or some foul aspirations in him, which he must struggle with until he either resolves it or it brings about his downfall. In some instances, the protagonist, lost in a state of *avidya* or *maya*, may even collude with the antagonist and be his companion or accomplice in certain base actions, until there is a self-awakening in him or some kind of a moral rebirth (epiphany) which helps him to return to his innate good or virtuous self. A whole society may also act as an adversary against an individual self, trying to initiate the self into society, forcing it to succumb to its collective norms and practices, and thus take away the uniqueness of the individual, or even destroy the individual in the process.

In stories such as “Sacrifice” (Tayag), “Mahamaya” (Mahamaya) and “A Woman’s Conversion to Islam” (Musalmanir Galpa), the adversarial roles are ascribed to characters who are religiously orthodox. They are so obsessed with their caste status that they are willing to go to any length to uphold its social inviolability; they are sanctimonious and pretend that as Brahmins they are morally superior to others. Therefore, any interaction with a lower caste Hindu, especially Sudhras and Panchamas (Untouchables), and even Muslims (who are generally seen as pariahs by Brahmins), would contaminate and violate their identity. Tagore himself found this totally unacceptable in real life, as such self-righteous or holier-than-thou attitudes were nothing more than arrogance and wrongful aspiration and appropriation of power in society. As mentioned earlier, Tagore believed in the divine inheritance of every human being in the spirit of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* – that a “self-luminous Brahman [lived in the] hearts of all” (Prabhavananda and Manchester 45) and therefore, all human beings were potentially equal notwithstanding their caste, creed, colour or language. He did not believe in any social hierarchy as such but rather championed love and fellowship of all. For him love was the highest of human qualities, as love helped to establish the interconnectedness among human beings and reaffirm humanity’s bond with God. Thus, in *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*, Tagore explained, “For love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us. It is not a mere sentiment; it is truth; it is the joy that is at the root of all creation” (88). He believed that love brought both harmony and freedom, because God stood for both truth and love. However, if love brought any disharmony and thralldom, that was only temporary. Love created obstacles only for the sake of conquering them and thus make the longing stronger. Explaining this paradox, again in *Sadhana*, Tagore wrote,

"Only love is motion and rest in one.... Bondage and liberation are not antagonistic in love.... It is the high function of love to welcome all limitations and to transcend them. For nothing is more independent than love, and where else, again, shall we find so much of dependence? In love, thralldom is as glorious as freedom" (95).

In "Sacrifice," it is the protagonist's father, Harihar Mukherjee, who acts as his son Hemanta's adversary. The story is about Hemanta and his wife Kusum, whom he loves passionately. As the story opens, we witness Harihar walking to Hemanta's door at a swift pace and asking his son to drive his wife out of the house. The writer then takes us to the past to explain how Hemanta fell in love with Kusum and how they got married. We are also told why Harihar now wants Kusum out of the house. As the story develops, we are informed that Kusum was a widow at the time of her marriage with Hemanta, a fact that was kept secret from Hemanta both before and after the wedding, but which has been made public recently by one of their neighbours, Pyarishankar Ghosal. This brings Pyarishankar into the story, who then explains why he has done so, resulting in a story within a story. Pyarishankar describes the elaborate deception he created to get Hemanta to marry Kusum, knowing full well that it was socially unacceptable in Hindu society for a widow to remarry and for a Brahmin to marry a widow. Pyarishankar then reveals that he did it all to avenge the harms done to his family by Harihar in the past. We learn that many years ago, Pyarishankar's son-in-law stole his wife's jewellery to flee to England in order to study law. When he came back five years later with the bar-at-law degree, Harihar, adopting the role of the village leader, insisted that Pyarishankar should either cut off ties with his son-in-law or give up his caste. Pyarishankar pleaded for mercy and forgiveness from Harihar but Harihar refused to relent. Pyarishankar then moved to Calcutta, giving up his ancestral home, but this still was not enough for Harihar. When Pyarishankar arranged his nephew's marriage, Harihar again intervened to break up the match. To avenge these wrongs, Pyarishankar has trapped Hemanta into marrying Kusum, although Hemanta was genuinely in love with Kusum and would probably still have married her, going against the social norms. Hemanta is a free man and does not care much about religious creed and his caste status as a Brahmin in particular. But his father, Harihar, is obsessed with the caste system, which is what led him to act cruelly against Pyarishankar, and again towards his own son at the end of the story. The story ends with Harihar walking to Hemanta's door a second time few days later and ordering his son to drive his wife out of the house, because apparently Kusum's widowed status has made her an outcast and Hemanta's marrying her has affected the caste status of the entire family. When Hemanta refuses to heed to his father's instructions, Harihar asks both Hemanta and Kusum to leave the house. For Harihar, his caste is more important than his love for his son. Thus his antagonism is rooted in his religious orthodoxy and excessive regard for convention, which makes him blind to his basic duties as a father and as a fellow human being to his neighbours, and act arrogantly and maliciously towards everyone. He is lost in a world of *maya* and *adviya*.

In "Mahamaya," it is Mahamaya's elder brother, Bhavani Chatterjee, who acts as her adversary. Mahamaya is the eponymous character in the story and its protagonist. A twenty-four-year-old woman from a Brahmin family, she is in love with Rajeev Lochan, a boy of nineteen who hails from a Brahmo Samaj family. They are deeply in love with one another but feel constrained by their different family backgrounds. Mahamaya is aware that her orthodox brother won't accept Rajeev Lochan into the family and she will be disowned if she goes ahead with the marriage. Yet, they continue with their relationship, and are discovered by Bhavani Chatterjee one afternoon while rendezvousing at a dilapidated temple. This is the only time Bhavani Chatterjee enters the story, but in spite of his brief appearance, his actions have lasting consequences on Mahamaya's life. He takes her home, buys her a wedding sari, takes her to the nearby crematory and forces her

to marry a dying Brahmin – all this solely to retain his caste. Selfish, and blinded by his caste obsession, Bhavani Chatterjee does not think for a moment how his actions might adversely affect his younger sister's life. Love and compassion are something alien to him; his caste awareness has made him indifferent to his inner consciousness or *antar-karana* and hardened his feelings. The groom dies soon after the wedding ritual is completed and Mahamaya is forced to climb the funeral pyre to commit sati with her dead husband. However, she is spared by the intervention of nature, as a huge storm hits the place and everyone is forced to take shelter indoors. Mahamaya avails of this opportunity to step down from the funeral pyre, first to go home and change her clothes and then run to Rajeev's house. Although her life has been spared by the storm, the flame from the funeral pyre has burnt one side of her face. This makes her overly self-conscious of her appearance and so although she continues to live with Rajeev, neither of them seem happy in their relationship. Therefore, finally one day she steps out of the house and walks away to an unknown place. That is where the story ends, with Mahamaya totally destroyed by the ruthless actions of her elder brother who is absorbed in his caste prides. In both "Sacrifice" and "Mahamaya," Tagore shows how an organised religion with a rigid hierarchical structure can poison the people and wreak havoc on its followers, emotionally, socially and morally.

Tagore continues with his attack on organised religion and its evil consequences on society in "A Woman's Conversion to Islam." In this story, the enemy is an aunt, again a Brahmin, who is arrogant and vain about her caste identity. The story is about Kamala, a young, innocent and beautiful girl who lost her parents early in life and has been brought up by her uncle. The uncle is relatively benign and takes good care of the niece, although he is not totally free of the influence of caste. The aunt, though, is malicious and ruthless and feels overly self-important about her Brahmin identity. On Kamala's wedding day, as the bride is travelling with her newly-wedded husband to her in-laws' house at night, her caravan is attacked by brigands. Her husband and his men flee the place, leaving Kamala at the mercy of the bandits, but she is eventually saved by an elderly Muslim man, Habir Khan. Kamala is not comfortable being in the company of a Muslim man, as Muslims are often seen by Brahmins as equal to Untouchables. She presses Habir Khan to take her back to her uncle's house. Habir Khan knows well that the uncle will not take her back as her contact with a Muslim has contaminated her caste. Still he takes her back to the uncle's house to avoid any misunderstanding. As soon as she enters, the aunt starts shouting at her and demands her to leave the house. "Drive her out, drive out the evil creature. You ruinous girl, you have come back after entering a pariah's house. Have you no shame?" (*The Ruined Nest* 254) she yells at Kamala. This shows that, blinded by her caste, she has lost all compassion for a girl who has no other place to go and who considers her uncle's house her only shelter. Tagore shows how religion, which is supposed to humanise us, has dehumanised this woman and made her vicious and heartless. Like Harihar and Bhavani Chatterjee, she too is a victim of Hindu sectarian machinery, and fails to see her inherent divine quality as a human being, which she shares with all other people regardless of their standing in society. The rest of the story is about how Kamala finds a new shelter at Habir Khan's house, falls in love with Habir Khan's second son, voluntarily decides to convert to Islam and finds a new identity in her Muslim name Meherjan. In this sense, "A Woman's Conversion to Islam" has a relatively happier ending compared to the previous two stories, where the consequences of caste pride in the antagonist cause homelessness and suffering for the protagonists.

While in "Sacrifice," "Mahamaya" and "A Woman's Conversion to Islam," Tagore introduces individual antagonists, in "The Parrot's Training" (Totakaahini) a whole society plays the role of antagonist against a little parrot. The story is about how a parrot is taken away from its natural habitat in the forest and confined to a cage. But since the parrot still tries to fly, its wings

are clipped. The parrot is also forced to learn the scriptures so that it can acquire “manners” (*Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* 327) through education and become a “useful” member of society. While the parrot continues to suffer in the cage, a whole industry develops around educating the bird. Security guards are employed so that the bird cannot fly off, scribes are appointed to copy the scriptures, and increasingly more and more people get involved in a fanfare surrounding the bird. In this way, the bird is reduced to an object while others continue to prosper at its expense. Torture and loss of natural environment finally kills the bird. However, the king, who has been at the centre of the whole thing and had ordered the bird's education, feels happy when he pokes the bird's dead body and hears the rustling sound of book leaves coming from its inside. The bird has been stuffed with book leaves in much the same manner that individuals are stuffed with norms and values to fit into society. The story is of course an allegory in which the parrot stands for a human child or the human soul. It shows how the child or the soul is made to give up its individuality and uniqueness to belong to an organised religion/society, or sacrifice its personal identity for the development of a collective identity. Here, Tagore treats society as a villain because he considers society as a repressive force on the individual who is more interested in practical and worldly affairs than the spiritual side of life. His view of society in the story bears echoes of Emerson, who wrote in his essay, “Self Reliance,” “Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.”

In stories such as “Assets and Debts” (Denapaona), “Imprudence” (Durbuddhi) and “The Painter” (Chitrakar), the adversarial roles are played by characters who are completely immersed in a material world and trapped in their finite selves. Driven by sheer greed, they are morally decadent and corrupt to the root. They are so blinded by money and worldly success that they lack even the slightest compassion for a fellow human being, even a friend or relative, if they stand in the way of their material goals. The in-laws in Tagore's short story “Assets and Debts” belong to this category. They are utterly coldblooded in the treatment of their daughter-in-law, Nirupama, and eventually push her to her premature death. Nirupama is a child bride in the story and also the story's protagonist, who has been married into a relatively wealthy family by her father so that she can live in love and comfort there. However, the father had promised a dowry of Rs. 10,000 for the girl at the time of the wedding which he fails to fulfil even long after the wedding. This results in untold atrocities committed against Nirupama by her in-laws, and continuous insult and humiliation of her father at the in-laws' house. The father is not allowed to see his daughter freely and the daughter is not allowed to visit her father's house even on festive occasions. The in-laws become so cruel with Nirupama that they continue to abuse her at every step and even deprive her of her regular food. When she falls sick, they call a doctor only when she is at a point of no return. Eventually Nirupama dies of negligence and for lack of treatment, solely because her father couldn't pay the full amount of dowry promised at her wedding. Money is thus indisputably more important to Nirupama's in-laws than the beautiful little bride they had brought home as their son's wife. What makes them more cruel in the eyes of the readers is that Nirupama is a child and her innocence is beyond question, yet none of these things mean anything to the in-laws. They continue to harass and maltreat her for some unpaid money which she is in no position to pay. Devoid of *satyam* and *sattvic* states, these characters are totally lost in the *tamasic* state of greed, passion and selfishness. In their love and reverence for money they are nothing but, in Tagore's phrase, “soulless progeny of greed” (Soares 56).

“Imprudence” is a more complex story in which the protagonist was originally a friend and accomplice of the antagonist in his evil acts until the former's recent change of heart, which has resulted in the loss of his ancestral

property, thus prompting him to tell the story. The protagonist is also the story's narrator, and although we get to see the story's antagonist only once towards the end of the story, when the protagonist rushes into his house to offer him some money as a bribe, his presence is felt throughout the story in the protagonist's narrative. The story is about a village doctor, the only one in the area, who exploits and extorts the poor villagers in collusion with the village police inspector, Lalit Chakraborty, to make themselves wealthy. They are so deeply immersed in money and greed that they have lost their conscience altogether. Their nefarious activities continue without control or compunction until the doctor's little daughter, Shashie, suddenly falls ill just before her wedding and dies. This is the turning point in the story, as, jolted by the tragic loss of his young daughter, the doctor starts feeling remorse for his past activities and considers his daughter's death a punishment from God. He then tries to make up for his evil deeds by asking for forgiveness from one villager in particular, Harinath Majumder, who had approached him for help when his daughter too had suddenly died, but instead of helping him, the doctor had acted so deviously that the man was utterly ruined. In other words, the doctor and the police inspector had conspired to extort every penny out of the poor Harinath. Now the doctor feels that his daughter has paid for his evil machinations with her own life. One day, as he is travelling to the village zamindar's house to see a patient there, he comes across another sorrow-stricken father waiting with the dead body of his daughter who had died the previous night of a snake bite. The father attempted to obtain clearance from police before arranging for her cremation, but the poor man received no attention because he had no money with him to pay a bribe. This prompts the doctor to rush into the police inspector's house to give him his day's earnings, so the inspector would allow the hapless and helpless father to cremate his daughter. But the gesture backfires on the doctor as, obviously, the inspector feels humiliated for such noble conduct coming from one who was his accomplice until recently. As a consequence, the doctor has to quit his ancestral home; he must now pay with the same coin that he had forced others to do for him in the past. However, in spite of his material loss, the doctor has been saved by his epiphany from an obvious moral doom, as he has resurrected his sense of good and evil and learned to stand apart from the story's antagonist, the inspector.

In "The Painter" it is Govinda, a modern-day disciple of Kuvera, who acts as the adversary of his sister-in-law Satyabati and her little son, Chunilal. In his essay "City and Village" Tagore makes a distinction between Kuvera, the Hindu god of money and wealth, and Lakshmi, "the Deity of Prosperity" (513). Kuvera is the counterpart of Mammon who stands for greed and avarice, or the devious nature of materialism and its seduction of humanity. "He represents the multiplication of money whose motive force is greed.... He is the genius of property that knows no moral responsibility. But the goddess, Lakshmi... is beautiful. For prosperity is for all" (513), Tagore explains. He goes on to describe Lakshmi as "the sunshine of wealth" and Kuvera as the "hungry fire of concentrated wealth" and "the presiding deity of our modern cities" (514), who is "ugly and gross... [and] comic in [his] vulgarity of self-exaggeration" (513). Govinda embodies all these detrimental and morally decadent qualities of Kuvera, so all he knows is how to build a fortune, no matter at what cost. After the death of his elder brother, when he becomes the legal guardian of his sister-in-law and her only son, he tries to impose his world view on them. Satyabati and Chunilal are both artistically inclined, and Satyabati wants her son to pursue his talent. But Govinda, in whom greed and ugliness reign supreme, wants his nephew to take up his path and be worldly and materialistic like him. This conflict of outlook between the uncle and the mother and their different visions for Chunilal's future are what build the story's tension, pushing it to a climax, until finally the mother rescues her son by moving out of Govinda's house and finding a new shelter in her own nephew Rangalal's house, who is himself an artistic genius. This marks Govinda's defeat at Satyabati's hands, as he loses control over the boy and with it the possibility of passing on his mantle to the next generation (as Govinda has no children of his own) – thereby indicating the triumph of good over evil in the story, and perhaps the only one with such an optimistic ending among the stories discussed so far.

In "Purification," a story in which Tagore projects his vision of nationalism, much like in his novels *The Home and the World* (Ghare Baire, 1916) and *Four Chapters* (Char Adhyay, 1934), the narrator Girindra's wife, Kalika, acts as the narrator's adversary. Kalika is a nationalist and thinks whoever does not follow her ideology does not love their country. Her flaw is not religious orthodoxy (as with Harihar, Bhavani Chatterjee or Kamala's aunt) or excessive love for money (similar to Nirupama's in-laws, Lalit Chakraborty or Govinda), but rather, obsession with an ideology that

Tagore saw as alien, soulless, and essentially rooted in commerce and politics. Tagore was of the view that love for one's own country is good, but to let it take over one's human identity and engage in activities that would go against the individual's soul and conscience and result in idolatry of the nation is reprehensible. When love for the nation becomes the overriding passion of an individual or a society, it results in jingoism, militancy and xenophobia: "Formalism in religion is like nationalism in politics; it breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution" ("Letters to a Friend" 273). It also creates a false sense of unity among the people without a genuine fellowship and harmony. This is precisely what happens in the story. Kalika is constantly abusive towards her husband because he is indifferent to her ideology. She thinks that she and her party have fought off caste hierarchy by introducing a khaddar uniform for its members. But Girindra does not believe in such shallow unity. He believes that such unity is only superficial; it is not reflective of a true sense of oneness in the people. This is proven true when he witnesses one day, on his way for a visit to Kalika's political mentor Nayan Mohan's house, an elderly municipal sweeper being physically assaulted by a group of religious worshippers near a temple because he had accidentally touched one of them. Girindra notices that the sweeper was clean, having bathed at a nearby tube well, and was walking home with his grandson who had also bathed, so he cannot understand why the people should be so rough on him, except that they still harbour the prejudice customarily practised in organised Hindu religion. At this point, Girindra mulls over the idea of rescuing the old man by bringing him into his car, but Kalika, the ardent nationalist and advocate of national unity, instinctively realises what is in Girindra's mind and asks their driver Gangadin to drive off. The whole incident shows that Kalika's love for her country is only a sham; to love the country she must learn to love and respect all members of society equally. The sense of unity that she possesses and fights about with Girindra is merely illusory, as her express prejudice against the old man for being an Untouchable shows her elitism and the overriding caste consciousness that is there in her heart. All this exposes Kalika's hypocrisy and makes her the "bad" character in the story and the adversary of her husband Girindra, who appears relatively innocent although somewhat confused and indecisive in the story.

Conclusion

What emerges from the above discussion is that Tagore's perception of good and evil, protagonist and adversary in his short stories was largely defined by his religious sensibility, especially the influences of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* on his imagination. He believed in the principle of *Advitam* or one identity of creation/humanity – that people everywhere were connected by the presence of the same God or Universal Consciousness in their hearts. As long as they remembered this truth they were in the right frame of mind or in the *sattvic* state. But the moment they forgot that reality and became overly preoccupied with their personal egos or the material world around them, they became trapped in the world of *maya* and fell to the *rajasic* or *tamasic* states, resulting in lives of greed, selfishness and sorrow. This is precisely what happens to characters who are cast in adversarial roles in Tagore's short stories. Forgetting that life's joy and fullness comes from being in union with God, or serving the "Lord in all" and beholding God's infinite glory, these characters in their deluded state either fixate on money or power, or seek life's meaning in stale and orthodox social and religious practices at the expense of individual freedom or inner sanctity of the self, or some false ideology like nationalism that places idolatry of geography above truth and conscience. This is the pattern we observe in the stories discussed in this essay.

Perhaps there is one more issue that we should address with regard to this topic. We notice that in almost all the stories evil triumphs over good, or at least appears to do so. In "Sacrifice," Harihar wins the day by driving his son and daughter-in-law out of the house. In "Mahamaya," Bhavani Chatterjee totally destroys his sister's life by forcing her to marry a dying Brahmin, and her future becomes unknown at the end of the story. In "A Woman's Conversion to Islam" Kamala is also driven out of the house, but by a stroke of luck she fares better than Mahamaya as she finds a new life and identity after being disowned by her own family. In "The Parrot's Training" the little bird dies at the end, and in "Assets and Debts" Nirupama meets the same tragic fate. In "Imprudence" the doctor is forced to vacate his property by his adversary Lalit Chakraborty, and in "Purification" Kalika seems to triumph over

Girindra by establishing her view over his. So how would this fit into Tagore's own optimistic view of life or with R.K. Narayan's claim that the underlying objective of every Indian story is to create a "distinction between good and evil" and to show that "goodness triumphs in the end" (5-6)?

To understand this, again we have to consider the wider context of Tagore's moral and spiritual philosophy. Tagore believed that as human beings it was more important for us to live with dignity, honesty, truth, love, courage and fellowship than for some material or worldly gain. Self-indulgence, self-love and self-aggrandisement were not honourable qualities in his view. In poems such as "Who is This," "Where the Mind is Without Fear," "Highest Price" and "India's Prayer" he makes this argument clear to his readers. In "Who is This," he expresses his disdain for his ego that continues to follow him like a shadow. In "Where the Mind is Without Fear," Tagore's prayer is for an India that is free, enlightened, inclusive and fearless. In the "Highest Price," he explains how the innocence of a child is more valuable and worthy than the power of a king, the riches of a wealthy man or the allurements of a sexually attractive woman. In "India's Prayer," Tagore prays:

Make us strong that we may not insult
the weak and the fallen,
That we may hold our love high where
all things around us are wooing
the dust.

They fight and kill for self-love, giving
it thy name.

They fight for hunger that thrives on
brother's flesh,

They fight against thine anger and die.

But let us stand firm and suffer with
strength

for the True, for the Good, for the
Eternal in man,

for thy Kingdom which is in the union
of hearts,

for the Freedom which is of the Soul. (Qtd. in Gupta 270)

If we take this into account, we notice that although Tagore's protagonists may have lost in the immediate context, they are the ultimate victors as they stand up for their principles, and show courage and dignity in the face of adversity. In contrast, their adversaries win by "cunning or might" or through acts of moral irresponsibility and lack of compunction, but by doing so they draw themselves into the vortex and make themselves the victims of their own wicked actions. "Those who built their power on moral cynicism are themselves proving its victims. The nemesis is daily growing more ruthless" ("Man's Lost Heritage"), Tagore wrote in 1940, referring to the Sino-Japanese war.

Thus, although Hemanta may have lost to his father in "Sacrifice" for having been forced out of the house, he achieves a moral victory by standing up for his love and conscience and by retaining his personal freedom against an age-old custom that strikes at the very heart of Tagore's vision of unity of humanity. Likewise, Mahamaya shows

her courage and dignity as a woman by defying the caste system and India's decadent male-centric culture, and by learning to take responsibility for her own life at the end. In "The Parrot's Training," the little bird at the centre of the story, signifying the human soul or the human individual, demonstrates the importance of living a simple, natural life of honesty and integrity rather than capitulating to the false ideals of social collectivism and conformity. In "Assets and Debts," the adolescent Nirupama valiantly resists the repressive and discriminatory dowry system that commodifies women, and seeks to restore women's pride and self-esteem although it eventually costs her young life; she suffers, but "suffers with strength" and instead of succumbing to social pressure, accepts death with a head held high. In "Imprudence," the doctor may have lost his ancestral property to his former accomplice in crime, the police inspector Lalit Chakraborty, but his victory lies in the restoration of his inner goodness, honesty and conscience, or in finding his moral worth, while the police inspector remains trapped in his old corrupt self. Finally, in "Purification," Girindra wins because by narrating the story, he exposes his wife Kalika's political hypocrisy and brings to light the futility of fighting for a cause like nationalism that is concocted in the post-religious laboratory of capitalism and has little to offer towards the moral, social or spiritual upliftment of humankind. In brief, 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-karana* and lost in a world of *maya* and *advaya*, live in an *asuric* state of anger, pride, falsehood, cunning and arrogance, ensuring their ultimate doom.

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