

Humour in Rabindranath Tagore's Selected Early Short Stories: A Freudian Reading

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To date, Rabindranath Tagore's critics have not adequately addressed the issue of humour in his short stories. In the introductions to the short story sections of two well-known anthologies of Tagore's work, Amiya Chakravarty's *A Tagore Reader* (1961/2003) and the jointly edited volume by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (1997), there is hardly any reference to humour. There is also no mention of humour in the translated collection of Tagore's short stories edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* (2000). If we browse through the indices of recent biographies of Tagore – e.g. Krishna Kripalani's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (1962), Dutta and Robinson's *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad Minded Man* (1995) and Uma Das Gupta's *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (2004) – we will find that humour is not even listed as a discussed item in any of these books, not to speak of discussion of humour in the context of his short stories. However, William Radice makes a passing reference to irony and humour in the introduction to his translation of Tagore's short stories, *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* (2005). Commenting on Tagore's supernatural stories, such as 'Skeleton' (Kankal), 'In the Middle of the Night' (Nisithe) and 'The Hungry Stones' (Khudita Pasan), Radice writes:

Such stories are just as full of pathos, grief, anguish and terror as the more naturalistic tales. They are also full of humour and irony – and this is another aspect of Tagore's realism that is found in both 'supernatural' and 'natural' stories.¹

Radice, however, does not attempt to elaborate on how and where irony and humour can be found in these or in any of Tagore's other short stories, and, furthermore, neither Radice nor Sukanta Chadhuri has included the stories that are most often considered to be genuinely funny or humorous.

In my recently edited and translated volume of Tagore's short stories, *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories*, I also briefly point to the aspect of humour in Tagore's short stories. Referring to a letter in which Tagore explains how he was in the habit of reading humorous stories to his family every evening and had asked a publisher friend to obtain a few new books of the genre for him as he had finished telling stories from the ones he currently had, I argue:

It is important for readers to keep this side of Rabindranath's personality in mind while reading the stories, especially the ones I mentioned earlier – 'The Path to Salvation,' 'The Professor,' 'Privacy' and 'The Auspicious Sight'. While he was essentially a serious writer, often writing in the vein of an acute observer, mindful of human sufferings (especially the plight of the socially deprived classes as well as women and children), seeking to improve their lot; he was also, at the same time, capable of a good laugh now and then at the inherent weaknesses and shortcomings in the human personality, including himself. This is what brings poignancy, variety and colour to his stories, adding to their

¹ William Radice, Introduction, Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Short Stories* edited by William Radice (London: Penguin, 2005) 14.

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richness of theme as well as their mood and atmosphere, making them ever so intriguing, stimulating and appealing to his readers.²

The objective of this essay is to explore this idea further by delving into the four short stories mentioned above: 'The Path to Salvation' (Muktir Upai), 'The Professor' (Addhyapak), 'Privacy' (Sadar O Andar) and 'The Auspicious Sight' (Subhadristi).³ These are stories from the first phase of Tagore's writing career, when he was living with the simple people of East Bengal to look after the family estate there, and therefore his fresh and youthful mind was still capable of observing life in its fullness and in all its myriad aspects, characterised by both mirth and gaiety as well as sufferings and sorrows. 'Happily I had no social and political problems before my mind when I was quite young. Now there are a number of problems of all kinds and they crop up unconsciously when I write a story,' Tagore explains in an interview in 1936.⁴ This unencumbered state of mind in the earlier stage of his writing career, when he was still free to document human nature as he saw it, and write stories for the sake of 'story telling' – rather than for addressing issues in the wake of Lord Curzon's heinous act of partitioning Bengal in 1905, which planted seeds of eventual break-up of the subcontinent into two rival nation states, Pakistan and India, on religious grounds, ignoring the historical one-identity of the people of the land; or the mind-boggling devastations of World War I, which exposed the darker and uglier side of human nature more explicitly than ever before; or the well-intentioned *Swaraj* and *Satyagraha* movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the early 1920s, which made the people of the subcontinent more self-aware about their political freedom from the British Raj but, at the same time, made the overall social and political environment in the country more turbulent and unstable – helped to keep Tagore's stories more simple, spontaneous and true to life. This is evident in the stories listed above, which, by reflecting the lighter side of life with their joyous emotions and artless laughter, act as veritable mirrors of life.

In a recent video posting on YouTube (by the Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia), Sugata Bose, eminent Bengali historian and Tagore scholar, made the following observation about Tagore's sense of humour:

Oh, there is tremendous humour in many of his writings ... and, well, humour of different sorts ... he had a sense of self-deprecation ... but also he had many many humorous sketches and plays ... one line in one of his compositions went, 'If you wanted to know what is my wish, I would say "whisky."' This is caricature of a particular kind of Bengali gentlemen ... so there is a lot of humour in Tagore ... he took life seriously but not always.⁵

Bose is obviously right; Tagore had a tremendous sense of humour. He wrote as many as seven comic plays, which are all full of rollicking fun and laughter, created through the intermingling of jokes, puns, witty remarks and repartee, or, as Asit Bandyopadhyay suggests, 'scintillatingly

² Mohammad A. Quayum, Introduction, Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Short Stories* translated by Mohammad A. Quayum (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2011) liii.

³ These stories were published in between 1892 and 1900, when Tagore was a resident on his family estate in Shelaidah, Kushtia, which now belongs to Bangladesh; 'The Path to Salvation' was published in 1892, 'The Professor' in 1898 and both 'Privacy' and 'The Auspicious Sight' in 1900.

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Galpaguccha* [Collected Short Stories] (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2008) 853.

⁵ Sugata Bose, 'Tagore's sense of humour' – Sugata Bose Part II [4/5] – YouTube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCP3m7fOXT0>

witty dialogues, incongruity of dramatic situations and other interesting dramatic devices'.⁶ Tagore was a master of both 'high' and 'low' comedy – he was deft in evoking 'intellectual laughter' by highlighting the follies and foibles in human nature, or their pretentiousness and incongruity in behaviour, but at the same time capable of arousing amusement, or even belly laughs, through jokes, gags and slapstick humour. It is no surprise, therefore, that several of the characters in his short stories, such as the protagonists in 'The Editor' and 'The Professor,' engage, and even excel (at least in their own imagination), in the writing of farce.

Tagore's unique sense of humour also resonates in several of his personal letters, especially those written from his family estate in East Bengal to his niece, Indira Devi. These are letters which Nirad C. Chaudhuri aptly describes as 'Great works of literature [which] reveal [Tagore's] character and personality with unadorned truth.'⁷ Several of them are in fact given to self-mockery or self-deprecation, in which the humour is elicited at the expense of some oddity or pretentiousness in the author himself; while in others, Tagore describes his relationship with his tenants on the family estate in a vein of light humour.

As a zamindar, Tagore had to often meet, greet and entertain British officials, such as magistrates and engineers. He dreaded these occasions, but had to put up a genial face in order to be polite and courteous. This disparity between the outer and the inner, appearance and reality, his actual feelings and the pretentious hospitality from a sense of propriety or social obligation, would make the occasions funny or comical for him. Tagore describes one such occasion by mixing indignation with self-caricature in a letter written on 25 January 1890. It begins by describing the author sprucing up for the formal occasion of meeting the magistrate, and then stepping into a palanquin with several visiting cards in hand and, after a series of events, reaching the magistrate's tent. Once there, he feels obliged to invite the officer for dinner, but feels 'inwardly exultant' the moment that the sahib says he has another business to attend the next day. However, his mood changes in a flash to one of discontentment as the officer adds that he will be free the following day – but, of course, the author hides his actual emotion for the sake of protocol. This situational irony in which the author is trapped in a condition against his wishes but has to keep playing his role to meet the social expectation, is the source of laughter in the episode. Paradoxically, it gets worse for the author as he ends up having to host the magistrate on the very night when the latter's tent gets blown away by a storm in the evening; again, he is compelled to invite the magistrate to spend the night with him out of propriety, although his soul does not rejoice at the prospect.

In a second letter to Indira Devi, written on 19 January 1891, Tagore recounts two hilarious episodes from his experience with his employees and tenants. The first is with one of his clerks

⁶Asit Bandyopadhyay, 'Rabindranath: Poet and Dramatist,' *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore* edited by Mohit Kumar Roy, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2004) 34. Tagore has also left behind scores of humorous stories and short humorous plays for children, which were finally collected under the titles *Hasyakoutuk* (Fun and Laughter, 1907) and *Byangakoutuk* (Satire and Laughter, 1907). The second collection included both stories and plays. For further details, see *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings for Children* edited by Sukanata Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002).

⁷Quoted in *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997) 134. Tagore himself considered his letters as serious works of literature. In a letter to W.B. Yeats, written on 17 June 1918, he explained, 'They [the letters] cover those very years which were most productive for me and therefore they act like a footpath in my life history, unconsciously laid by the treading of my thoughts. I feel sure these letters when published, will present to you pictures and ideas concerning me and my surroundings more vividly and truly than anything I have yet written' (Dutta and Robinson, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1997] viii).

who comes to plead for a salary increase, particularly needed as he is planning to get married, and goes on repeating his case while the author is immersed in writing the letter. Finally, when the author reminds the clerk that repetition of the same story won't make his case any stronger, the clerk outwits him by saying that he (the clerk) was only speaking as a child opening his mind to his parent. This puts the author in a fix as he does not know how to come up with a suitable reply to the comment, or handle the unexpectedly new relationship that he finds himself in. This is how the author narrates the incident, spicing his tone of a conscientious zamindar with jest and levity:

As I began to write to you, one of our clerks here came and chattered away about his sad state of poverty, the need for an increase in his wages and the necessity of a man getting married – he went on talking and I went on writing, until finally I paused and briefly tried to get him to understand the idea that when a sensible person grants someone's petition it is because the petition is reasonable, not because it has been repeated five times instead of once only. I had imagined that such a wise and wonderful remark would render the fellow speechless, but I saw that in fact it had the opposite effect. Instead of falling silent he asked me a question – if a child does not open its mind to its own parents, who will he talk to? This left me stumped for a satisfactory reply. So once again he started chattering and I for my part continued to write. To be nominated a parent out of the blue and for nothing is quite a trial.⁸

In the second episode, Tagore recounts an event from the previous day when a group of boys had come to him to ask for some furniture for their school. One of the boys gave a pompous speech in a formal, declamatory language, describing the benches and stools as 'wooden supports', and went on with the speech even after the author had granted his request. Tagore found it all very funny that the boy should use such high-flown language for a simple request and insist on finishing his speech even after the request had been approved. What added to the fun was that the rest of the villagers saw nothing untoward in the incident, and instead of laughing at the boy's affected behaviour found it an object of envy. Amused and bemused by the whole thing, Tagore narrates the incident as follows in the last paragraph of his letter:

In due course I interrupted and said, 'Well boys, I shall arrange for the required benches and stools.' Undaunted, the boy took up where he had left off and, despite my having spoken, finished to the last word He had lavished such pains over his learning by heart. Had I refused to supply the seats he probably would not have minded, but had I deprived him of his speech – that would have struck him as intolerable. Therefore, though it kept more important matters waiting, I gravely heard him out. If someone with the right sense of humour had been about, probably I would have jumped up and turn next door to share the joke. But a zamindari is simply not the place for a humourmonger – here we display only solemnity and high learning.⁹

I have discussed the two letters in some detail and quoted at length from the second letter to show that humour was an innate aspect of Tagore's personality; indeed, it was a native ingredient of his genius. He could see and relish the oddities and drolleries in human nature and behaviour, but, as he reveals in the last sentence of the passage quoted above, being a zamindar –

⁸ Tagore: *An Anthology* 141.

⁹ Tagore: *An Anthology* 142.

and one who was revered by his contemporaries and compatriots as a *kabiguru* (teacher-poet), *gurudev* (master-teacher) and *bishwaskabi* (world-poet) – he often had to restrain his humour in order to display his ‘solemnity and high learning’. But, of course, he never forsook humour altogether, and continued displaying it in many of his writings. For example, Mausumi Sen has compiled several anecdotes from Tagore’s life to show that despite his serious temperament, he was always capable of hearty laughs through improbable and exaggerated statements and/or caricatures of himself as well as of others. In fact, he was so fond of humour that he declared in one of his poems:

Never in my life will I grow so old
To dismiss a laugh or a joke as frivolous.¹⁰

Humour is the predominant sentiment in the four stories I intend to discuss in this essay: ‘The Path to Salvation’, ‘The Professor’, ‘Privacy’ and ‘The Auspicious Sight’. They are characterised by what Freud would call ‘innocent’ humour that ‘is an end in itself and serves no particular aim’,¹¹ as opposed to ‘tendentious’ humour which gravitates towards being either ‘hostile’ or ‘obscene’¹² and exploits ‘something ridiculous’¹³ in another person or others with the purpose of wounding, insulting or exposing the individual or group. Humour, in this second category, according to Freud, is not ‘an aim in itself’, but it serves as a disguise ‘to [access] sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible’.¹⁴ Freud further makes a distinction between ‘innocent’ or ‘non-tendentious’ humour and ‘trivial’ humour by saying that while trivial humour lacks in substance, non-tendentious or ‘abstract’ humour, in spite of its lack of a definite purpose except for giving pleasure, could still be ‘of great substance [and] assert something of value’.¹⁵ Another characteristics of ‘innocent’ humour is that its ‘pleasurable effect ... as a rule [is] a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearers A non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious one so irresistible.’¹⁶

Freud’s main contribution to the theory of humour appears in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* which came out in 1905. He developed on the topic further in his essay ‘Humour’ published in 1928. In this essay, Freud suggests that in addition to giving pleasure, which has a liberating effect on the individual, humour also has a ‘grand and uplifting’ quality about it in that it allows the ego ‘to assert itself against the disfavour of real circumstances,’ or to find a ‘defence against the possibility of suffering’.¹⁷ He also suggests that there are two ways of experiencing humour; it is either through the individual’s own humorous attitude towards himself, in which ‘the humorous process is accomplished within his own person and clearly brings him a certain satisfaction,’ but also giving pleasure to the ‘uninvolved listener’ at the same time; or by adopting a humorous attitude towards another, ‘when, for

¹⁰ Quoted in Mausumi Sen, ‘Tagore and Humour’, *Muse India* 47 (Jan-Feb. 2013). Online. <http://www.museindia.com/featurecontent.asp?issid=40&id=2960> 22 April 2013.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* [1905] edited and translated by James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) 90.

¹² Freud, *Jokes* 97.

¹³ Freud, *Jokes* 103.

¹⁴ Freud, *Jokes* 103; italics in the original.

¹⁵ Freud, *Jokes* 92.

¹⁶ Freud, *Jokes* 96.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, ‘Humour’, *The Penguin Freud Reader* edited by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2006) 562, 563.

example, a poet or story-teller describes the behaviour of real or invented people in a humorous fashion'.¹⁸ In either instance, the person who adopts the humorous attitude behaves towards the subject of his or her humour 'as an adult behaves towards a child, by recognising the nullity of the interests and sufferings that seem great to the child, and smiling at them',¹⁹ thus placing him or her in the superior position of an 'adult' or a 'father', vis-s-vis the subject of the humour, who is reduced to a 'child'. In the case where the individual 'directs the humorous attitude against his own person',²⁰ it is his superego that adopts the role of the adult while the ego is reduced to the child.

In light of these ideas from Freud, I would like to argue, firstly, as mentioned above, that these stories are characterised by 'innocent,' 'harmless' and 'non-tendentious' humour in which Tagore employs gentle irony and sympathetic tone to playfully criticise certain inherent human weaknesses such as excessive piety, self-righteousness, vanity, jealousy, impetuosity and overweening arrogance, and that there is no strident, abrasive or scornful quality in the narrative. In other words, Tagore's intention in the stories is not to ridicule or express indignation against any of his characters or their practices, but rather to laugh light-heartedly at the ridiculous and the ludicrous in their behaviour, with the intention of providing pleasure or comic relief to his readers. Any tendency to moralise or instruct remains carefully disguised and is not allowed to overshadow the objective of diverting or entertaining the readers. My second argument is that, as pointed out by Freud in the case of 'innocent' humour, the quality of pleasure derived from these stories is 'moderate' or 'non-intense,' as they are more likely to evoke 'a slight smile' in the reader, than a 'sudden burst of laughter' as in the case of 'tendentious' comedy. Finally, I would like to suggest that although much of the humour in the stories occur from the author's representation of 'real or invented people' in them, in which the author acts as an 'adult' vis-à-vis the characters who are treated like 'children', in 'The Professor', in making fun of his own adolescent writerly self, Tagore allows his superego (or adult self) to take charge of the ego (or adolescent self) and treat it like a child.

Of the four stories, 'The Path to Salvation' was the first to be published. It came out in 1892, and Tagore liked the story so much that he later developed it into a comic play, which was published in 1948, seven years after the poet's death. The story is about a Hindu mendicant ascetic or a hermit, who renounces his family and society to find salvation, but ironically finds salvation only through the intervention of his wife when he is trapped in the life of another family owing to an error of identity. The hermit's name is Fakirchand (or Fakir, which literally means a spiritual mendicant²¹); he is excessively sombre and, although young, he likes the company of old men. He is averse to fun, humour and all worldly pleasures, and is so spiritually inclined that he forces his fun-loving adolescent wife, Haimabati, to read the *Bhagavad Gita* every night. If she is found reading a novel, Fakir heckles her and makes her cry all night. In this way, he shatters the wife's youthful exuberance and peace of mind, and eventually brings her to what he thinks is the right path.

As the story progresses, we see Fakirchand absconding from society in search of God and going to a neighbouring village. There, as he is singing heartily sitting under a tree absolved of all worldly responsibilities and worries, he suddenly sees his father who has come there to look

¹⁸ Freud, 'Humour' 561.

¹⁹ Freud, 'Humour' 563.

²⁰ Freud, 'Humour' 564.

²¹ The term is however used more frequently to describe Muslim mendicant ascetics.

for him. To avoid his father he takes shelter in a nearby house which coincidentally is the house of a person, Makhanlal, who too has left his family. Fakir and Makhanlal are very different from one another; their physical appearances, personalities and temperaments are all different; yet the moment Fakir steps into Makhan's house, he is taken for Makhan by the latter's father and gradually forced by the villagers to accept the role against his wishes. The rest of the story is Fakir's unsuccessful attempts to come out of that role, until he is rescued by his wife at the end.

This role reversal between Fakir and Makhan is what makes the story humorous, turning it into a situational comedy, in which Fakir finds himself in the state of a fish out of water. Fakir is a serious person, while Makhan is frivolous; but now Fakir has to fill Makhan's shoes; and the man who left his own family of one wife and two children because he saw them as an encumbrance to his quest for God now has to deal with Makhan's family of two wives and seven children. Besides, the wives are fierce compared to his own wife and are in a competition as co-wives, which makes Fakir's circumstance even more difficult. He repeatedly tries to come out of this precarious situation, but the more he tries the more people force him into accepting the role, accusing him of hypocrisy and deception for not acknowledging that he was in fact Makhan. It is amusing to see how Fakir struggles to cope with Makhan's family and his villagers, who not for once question that there could be a mistake. This irrationality of the villagers also contributes to the story's humour, as we see how people can be so rash and blind in their conviction.

However, although the story is funny, it is not outrageously comic; throughout we enjoy Fakir's unwieldy situation and the way he tries to wriggle himself out of it. It evokes a sustained smile in the reader but not a hearty laughter. What adds to the humour, however, is that the 'holy', puritanical Fakir himself has no sense of humour; therefore, what could have been merely an odd situation turns out into an excruciating ordeal for him. Freud says, 'Incidentally, not all people are capable of the humorous attitude. It is a rare and delightful gift, and many lack even the ability to enjoy the pleasure of humour conveyed to them.'²² Sombre, solemn and single-mindedly religious, Fakir certainly is one of them.

Freud said, only tendentious comedy is capable of achieving a 'sudden burst of laughter [which is why it is] so irresistible'.²³ 'The Path to Salvation' obviously does not belong to that category because it is not written in the vein of satire or in a spirit of hostility, but rather in a playful manner in which Tagore is making fun of those who believe that to find divine joy one has to shun worldly pleasures and espouse a life of renunciation, self-abnegation and austerity. In fact, Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, a sage and saint in his own right, adopted a similar view in his youth, sharing an aversion to wealth and an equal enjoyment in renunciation. His spiritual hunger often took him to many places away from home, including the Himalayas. It is believed that, overcome by the feeling that 'the world is too much with us', he had left for the Himalayas at the end of 1856, to spend the rest of his life there in penitence and meditation and not come back to the family any more.²⁴ But he changed his mind and returned home when he heard a voice within him that said, 'The truth thou had gained, the devotion and trustfulness thou has learnt here, go, make them known to the world.'²⁵ Later Tagore's father

²² Freud, 'Humour' 566.

²³ Freud, *Jokes* 96.

²⁴ See the chapter entitled 'Family Background' in Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962) for further details.

²⁵ Kripalani 31.

came to accept that ‘Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.’²⁶

It is quite possible that in the portrayal of Fakirchand, the misguided mendicant, Tagore is affectionately teasing his god-intoxicated father in the latter’s youthful days, as well as many such spiritually inclined people in the subcontinent, who genuinely believe that piety requires one to disavow work, wealth and family. Tagore himself didn’t believe in such a philosophy of escapism. His view was that it should be perfectly possible to attain godhead by keeping one’s feet firmly planted on the earth; spiritual bliss did not require one to be impractical, dreamy, other-worldly or to deny one’s own family and social ties. Unlike the popular image of the mystic and the romantic in the subcontinent, Tagore was deeply immersed in the affairs of the world; he was actively involved with the practical problems of education and rural reconstruction in India. As Aldous Huxley once said, ‘Tagore’s enormous merit consists in this, that he was at once a great idealist and a practical man of action.’²⁷ His view that one need not forsake family and society for the sake of God is expressly articulated in the following poem, entitled ‘My Religion’:

In the deep of the night, the man averse to worldly pleasures said,
‘I shall leave home to seek my desired God.
Who is it that has kept me here, tied?’
God said, ‘It is I,’ but the man paid no heed.
Clasping the sleeping infant to her breast
The loving wife lay at one end of the bed in deep slumber.
The man said, ‘what are you all – the trickery of illusion?’
‘It is I,’ said God. No one paid any heed.
Leaving his bed, ‘Where are thou, my Lord?’
God said, ‘I am here!’ Still His words were not heard.
The child cried out in his sleep hugging his mother;
God said, ‘Turn back.’ But His words were lost.
God heaved a sigh and said, ‘Alas! Deserting me,
Where goes my devotee to find me.’²⁸

However, if in ‘The Path to Salvation’ Tagore is playfully taunting the excessive piety of his father during the latter’s youthful days, in the next story, ‘The Professor’, the author seems to be laughing at the exaggerated image of himself as a writer during his own adolescence. Thus, in the Freudian perspective, if Tagore is the ‘adult’ author in ‘The Path to Salvation’ smiling at his father in his younger years as the ‘child’, in ‘The Professor’, he is playing the role of both the ‘adult’ and the ‘child,’ treating his younger self as the ‘child,’ while at the same time, using Freud’s expression, ‘playing the role of the superior adult towards the child’.²⁹

‘The Professor’ is about a young writer, Mahendrakumar, who is extremely full of himself. He is so big-headed, ostentatious and vain – so abounding in bravado – that he keeps comparing himself with great Western writers such as Shakespeare, Goethe, Carlyle and Lowell, as well as

²⁶ Kripalani 29.

²⁷ *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: A Miscellany* edited by Sisir Kumar Das, Vol. 3 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996)14.

²⁸ Quoted in Indu Dutt, *A Tagore Testament* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing, 1969) 33.

²⁹ Freud, ‘Humour’ 564.

such Indian legendary figures as Dushyanta, Vikramaditya (or Chandragupta II) and Vidyapati. His ‘overshooting’ and ‘tall talks’ create, using Imanuel Kant’s words, ‘strained expectations’ in readers, which by the end of the story transform ‘into nothing’.³⁰

The story’s protagonist, Mahendrakumar, is a 21-year-old college student, dreamy, arrogant and outspoken. He writes poetry and plays and gives speeches that he thinks have a hypnotic effect on his audience. He believes that he is revered by all his fellow students for his literary talents, but in fact he commands their respect merely because of his brash and cocky ways – that is, of course, until the arrival of his arch-nemesis, whom he derogatively and dismissively dubs as ‘Bamacharan Babu’ and ‘Brahmin demon,’ but who, ironically, appears as the title character, or the professor, in the story, and similar to the *ieron* in Greek comedy eventually triumphs over the *alazon*, the self-deceiving, pompous young writer, Mahendrakumar. It is the professor who exposes Mahendrakumar’s exaggerated image of himself by revealing that he is not a true writer but instead excels by copying from the literary greats. After he is thus humiliated twice by the professor, his confidence is shaken and his following among the students begins to dwindle. Nevertheless, it is not enough to bring Mahendrakumar back to his senses. In the meantime, he has also sat for his BA examination and his father has invited him to return home and get married. However, instead of acceding to his father’s advice, he characteristically seeks to avenge his critic the professor by deciding to ‘write something sublime [on the theme of universal love] either in prose or verse, and provide a spectacular feast for the indulgence of Bengali critics.’³¹ This is the kind of high-flown language Mahendrakumar habitually uses to describe himself, his ideas and his intentions, thus giving rise to profuse verbal irony in the story.

With this towering objective in mind, Mahendrakumar withdraws from his usual habitat in Calcutta to a solitary village by the river Ganges.³² There, instead of writing the splendid piece, he whiles away his time in laziness. After a month, realising that such a literary feat is quite beyond his reach, he writes an acrid farce vilifying the love-life of the professor and then prepares to return home. Right then, at a restless moment, he catches a glimpse of a beautiful girl next door who, ironically, is the teen (she is only sixteen) the professor is in love with, and whom Mahendrakumar had unknowingly maligned in his farce. This results in structural irony in the story, since we as readers can see the author’s tongue-in-cheek intention in tangling his fallible narrator with the latter’s young neighbour, something that remains totally unknown to the speaker till the very end; it results in a triangular relationship in which, again, the professor emerges as the victor and the hapless Mahendrakumar has no choice but to accept defeat.

However, as the story progresses, Mahendrakumar falls head over heels in love with Kiron, who also has sat for her BA examination. Although he often sees Kiron with a book in hand or surrounded by books, he takes a condescending attitude towards her, regularly giving grandiose lectures or highfalutin advice with the intention of educating her in philosophy and literature. He thinks that Kiron is not intelligent enough or sufficiently cultivated in her tastes, but that in time

³⁰ Quoted in M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981) 207.

³¹ Tagore, *Selected Short Stories* ed. Quayum 82. Further references to this volume will be included in parentheses in the text.

³² In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Tagore reminds us that he himself wrote much of his early work ‘in utmost seclusion in the solitude of an obscure Bengal village by the river Ganges in a boathouse.’ (Rabindranath Tagore, *The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, Gitanjali and a Collection of Prose Translations Made by the Author from the Original Bengali Manuscript* [New Delhi: UBSPD, 2004] 292).

he will be able to ignite her soul with his own effulgence. This male arrogance boomerangs on Mahendrakumar and becomes a further source of humiliation for him, as he eventually comes to know that he is the one who has failed in his examination while Kiron has passed with flying colours in both philosophy and literature. To add insult to injury, he also discovers that the beautiful girl of his desire actually belongs to his rival, the professor, and is correspondingly the same girl he had vilified earlier in his farce. With this reckoning, that he has no luck in writing or in love, he finally burns all his works and returns home to get married. Thus we see that by the end of the story, Mahendrakumar's illusive bubble has broken, prompting him to return to reality. What is remarkable, however, is that although Mahendrakumar turns out to be a failed writer, the story he narrates in his own voice reads most elegantly and eloquently. This makes the reader wonder as to how much of Tagore there is in Mahendrakumar, and if, like his creator, he too holds the potential of coming out of his doldrums and becoming a great writer sometime in the future.

The story is superbly humorous because of the wide incongruity between Mahendrakumar's grandiose words and his lacklustre actions. He thinks greatly of himself, but his feats are slight; he wants to write a grand poem on the theme of universal love, but his mind remains constantly trapped in his own narcissistic self; he criticises the professor for his inconsistency in opposing child-marriage and yet having an affair with a young girl, but he himself gets entangled with the same sixteen-year-old girl; he thinks that he is the most intelligent man on earth – 'The rare scholarship involved in our discussion was far too difficult for Kiron; who knew how high she had to look when she sought a mental measure of my mountain of knowledge' (91), he brags at one point – yet it is he who fails in his BA examination while Kiron, the girl he always underrates and wishes to enlighten with his deft touch, obtains a first class. However, Tagore's intention behind creating such an erratic and eccentric character, a braggadocio, is purely humorous, and he explores all the comic possibilities in the story without expressing any contempt or malice towards the young, boastful writer, or any intention of demonising him through the use of invective or 'aggressive wit'.

As I mentioned earlier, Tagore is perhaps laughing at his own adolescent oddities in the character of Mahendrakumar. Mahendrakumar appears as a lazy person; he spends his day lounging under a banyan tree, hoping that the epic he wants to write will suddenly emerge from his mind in a mysterious way. Besides, he likes to borrow or copy, and his most favourite theme is 'universal love'. He is also vain and arrogant. These are some qualities that Tagore himself shared in his earlier life. For example, one of Tagore's favourite anecdotes about himself is how he was once reproached by a tribal woman, who used to work for him, for spending his whole day sitting lazily by a window, gazing outside. Irritated by the poet's behaviour, the woman marched up to him one day and demanded, 'Babu, why don't you work at all? I have been noticing you for the last seven days! Whenever I see you, I find you stationed by the window side looking at the skies and wondering! Men at your age should keep on working, you know!'³³ Moreover, acknowledging his tendency to borrow from other poets in his earlier writings, Tagore once explained, 'What little of matter there was in it was not mine, but borrowed from other poets. What was my own was the restlessness, the seething tension within me' – not far from what the professor has to say about Mahendrakumar's writing habit in the story. Besides, recalling the effusive nature of his writing both in adolescence and adult life, Tagore wrote the

³³ Sen.

following words self-deprecatingly in *My Reminiscences* – words which are, again, likely to bring the image of Mahendrakumar to mind:

It was the product of an age when the writer had seen practically nothing of the world except an exaggerated image of his own nebulous self. So the hero of the story was naturally a poet, not the writer as he was, but as he imagined or desired himself to seem In it was a great parade of universal love, that pet subject of the budding poet, which seems as big as it is easy to talk about When I blush to read these effusions of my boyhood I am also struck with the fear that very possibly in my later writings the same distortion wrought by straining after effect lurks in a less obvious form. The loudness of my voice, I doubt not, often drowns the thing I would say; and some day or other Time would find me out.³⁴

These parallels should indicate that the story is written in a comic rather than a sarcastic vein; that it is designed to make readers laugh lightheartedly, rather than to share any disdain or vitriol directed against its main character, Mahendrakumar. In Mahendrakumar, Tagore is merely taunting his earlier self in a harmless spirit of jest, not ridiculing the overbearing nature of Mahendrakumar in a harsh, caustic tone. In other words, this story too belongs to Freud's category of 'abstract' or 'innocent' humour, which 'serves no particular aim'³⁵ except to give pleasure to the reader, as opposed to tendentious comedy which is always written with a specific purpose, and in a spirit of 'aggressiveness, satire, or defence'.³⁶

Like 'The Path to Salvation' and 'The Professor,' 'Privacy' and 'The Auspicious Sight' are also written in a light, humorous vein. The two stories read like romantic comedies in which love relationships are interrupted momentarily by complications but are resolved at the finish for a happy ending. In both stories there is a shadowy third person whose passive presence results in an invasion of the relationship of the story's main characters – in 'Privacy' between Chitta Ranjan and Basanta Kumari, and in 'The Auspicious Sight' between Kanti Chandra and his newly wedded wife, Sudha – but by the end, the 'lovers' manage to overcome this momentary hiccup and reunite with the possibility of living a happily married life ever after.

'Privacy' is a story about a married couple, Chitta Ranjan, a zamindar, and his wife, Basanta Kumari, who are happy in their domestic life. After winning a court settlement, Chitta Ranjan decides to set up an amateur theatre company with the extra wealth he has acquired, and invites Bipin Kishore, a handsome young man with certain musical skills, to join his entourage. Bipin Kishore was once wealthy but has become poor and homeless after having squandered all his money. He therefore joins Chitta Ranjan's group and becomes a sheltered guest at his house. Soon, Chitta Ranjan develops a liking for Bipin Kishore and his music, and begins to spend much of his time in the latter's company. Previously Chitta Ranjan lived a routine life, having meals and going to bed at fixed hours. Now, however, his obsession for Bipin has overtaken his routine, and this infuriates his wife. She wants Bipin to get out of their life so that her husband may return to his previous routine. The husband feels amused by this 'jealousy' of his wife and thinks that only women are capable of such senseless envy, because they are blind, selfish and possessive in their love. To get more pleasure out of it, he even starts taunting his wife with open and extravagant praises of Bipin in her presence.

³⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *My Reminiscences* [1917]. Online. books.google.com.my/books?isbn=0766182665. 22 April 2013, 69.

³⁵ Freud, *Jokes* 90.

³⁶ Freud, *Jokes* 97.

Halfway through the story, the whole situation is reversed as the husband steps into the wife's shoes and vice-versa. After much rehearsal, a play, *Subbadraharan* – which literally means 'abduction of a woman', and results in Basanta Kumari's change of heart and her figurative abduction by Bipin Kishore – is staged in the zamindar's courtyard. Both Bipin and the zamindar perform as actors in the play. At night, when the couple withdraw to their bedroom, the husband asks his wife about his performance. Obviously, the husband expects some adulation from his wife, but sidestepping him, the wife starts praising Bipin. 'Bipin acted the role of Arjun brilliantly. He has the looks of a noble man, and his voice is celestial' (101), she replies. This makes the smug husband instantly feel envious and insecure. Previously he thought his wife was irrational in her jealousy; now he feels that she is irrational in her eulogies of Bipin, and the more the wife shows interest in Bipin's musical talent, the more angry the husband becomes towards Bipin. He even starts replicating the words his wife had used previously to disparage Bipin. Finally, unable to take it any more, one day the husband sends Bipin packing, and the poor fellow, an unsuspecting victim of their sexual jealousy, becomes unemployed and shelterless again. Thus the story ends with Bipin walking out of the house and the couple presumably returning to their erstwhile life of trust and routine.

Again, this is a light story in which the author is making fun of male affectation and male arrogance. At the beginning of the story, the husband appears vain, confident and complacent about himself; he thinks that only women are capable of sexual jealousy because of their inherently protective and possessive natures. Besides, they are selfish, parochial and narrow in their world views. But the author deconstructs this male hauteur through a clever role reversal, which demonstrates that men are as vulnerable, apprehensive and possessive in matters of love as are women. Jealousy is an inherent aspect of human nature, and despite gender differences, by and large all human beings behave in the same way when their love life is threatened. Male gallantry and fortitude is only a mask to establish their dominance over women; in reality, men are emotionally as brittle as women. The story is thus designed to trivialise male pretence and generate laughter in readers; it is written in a sympathetic tone, and there is no use of tendency wit or tendency comedy in the narrative, which are devices often used by writers in a satire, for intentionally derogating, diminishing or deriding the subject.

If 'Privacy' is about male smugness and sexual jealousy, 'The Auspicious Sight' is about sentimentality and passionate love. It centres on one of the most powerful tropes in literature, love at first sight, or what the Greeks call *theia mania* or 'madness from the gods'. It is about Kanti Chandra, a young widower, who is rich and handsome, and enjoys travelling and hunting. One day as he was sitting on a boat cleaning the barrel of his gun at a nearby village, he suddenly catches glimpse of a young woman standing by the river bank with two ducklings pressed to her chest, and is instantly smitten by her. He sees shadows of both goddesses Durga and Lakshmi in the face of this young woman. Without a second thought, he decides to marry her. He is so charmed by the girl's beauty that he does not even feel the need to verify who she is. Through a series of misunderstandings he comes to conclude that the girl's name is Sudha and she is the daughter of a Brahmin villager, Nabin Mukherjee. So the next day, he proposes to the girl's father that he would like to marry Sudha. The man is baffled by this overhasty behaviour of Kanti Chandra and asks him to see his daughter first. Kanti Chandra brushes aside the advice, thinking in his mind that he has already seen the girl. But actually, the girl he has seen is *not* Sudha. That is where the twist comes in. The rest of the story is built on this error of identity, which also acts as the main source of irony and humour in the story.

After the wedding, Kanti Chandra is horrified to see that the girl he has married is not the girl he had seen earlier. He is first furious with his father-in-law, thinking that the man has cheated him; he has shown Kanti one girl but married him to another. But then, remembering that the father had insisted on showing his daughter, Kanti's anger shifts to himself. He then accepts the matter unequivocally, but loses all joy in the wedding. At this time, the girl by the riverside darts into the room, following a leveret, where the newly wedded couple are having their ceremonial 'auspicious sight'. This makes the other women jittery and they try to bundle her out of the place immediately. But the love-sick Kanti is still infatuated with the girl. He welcomes her and tries to begin a conversation with her – but to no avail. The girl does not respond to any of his questions and starts shaking her body in a senseless way instead, making all the women laugh. By and by he then comes to know that the girl is mute and deaf, and, unable to interact in society, she has become a friend of the birds and beasts in the neighbourhood. This instantly cures him of his intoxication and brings him back to reality. He now sees a new light in his wife's face, and a new ray of hope in his future happiness. He feels happy that he has married Sudha by mistake, and not the girl who had smitten him by her looks. The story ends with this recognition, and on a happy note. It is a simple story with nothing strident or acerbic in it. It is written on what Freud would call 'the pleasure principle',³⁷ in which the author is simply laughing at the recklessness of people like Kanti Chandra who are easily duped by the outer appearance of things and are willing to risk their entire lives without caring to know the truth that lies beneath.

Tagore has used humour in several other stories as well, such as 'Kabuliwala', 'The Editor' (Sampadak), 'Deliverance' (Uddhar) and 'Number One' (Paila Nombor). But the nature of humour used in them is different from those I have discussed in this essay. Whereas these four stories tend to be purely comic, written mostly in a spirit of jest or laughter, the other stories combine comic with the serious, and are intended mainly to correct or ridicule a particular moral or social vice. In other words, the kind of humour used in them is derisive humour, intended to generate laughter by mocking or berating an attitude or behaviour for satirical purposes, rather than expressing tolerance or sympathy towards the story's character and/or subject. In this sense these four stories are unique in their expression of humour and embody the lighter side of Tagore's character – his tendency to engage in *komos*, or good-natured ridicule and amusement, for its own sake, perhaps to find relief from his personal seriousness or the serious affairs of life that he often had to attend to in his writing, or perhaps as part of his realistic response to life in all its fullness. They belong to, in Freud's categorisation, 'innocent' or 'harmless' humour that is intended to give pleasure to the reader and also provide a stay against the sorrows of life vis-à-vis tendentious comedy that is written in a spirit of 'hostility' or satire, and often with the purpose of evoking a 'sudden outburst of laughter'.³⁸

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³⁷ Freud, 'Humour' 563.

³⁸ Freud, *Jokes* 96.

Stories (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2014), *The Poet and His World: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore* (Orient Longman, 2011) and *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* (Macmillan India, 2011). He is on the Advisory Board of *Transnational Literature*.