



HUMANISTIC VALUES & CONCERNS: A STUDY OF TAGORE'S FAREWELL MY FRIEND

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ABSTRACT

Humanism is a non-religious philosophy based on liberal human values which lays emphasis on the dignity of man and his perfectibility. In his numerous writings, Rabindranath Tagore has given the vision of humanism. The present paper focuses on his novel Farewell My Friend where he tries to bring mankind closer through humanity. Tagore guides the destiny of humanity through the bond of love and affection. He equates love with truth and truth with beauty. He elaborates that it is only when one can detach from the boundaries of selfishness, can one have a true vision of beauty. He believes that moral development lies in man's growth to his unselfish and true self through good deeds. Tagore suggests that morality directly is connected to our conduct, so the action of human-beings decides the level of humanity.

Keywords: Humanism, Bengali Culture, Marital Bond, Sacrifice, Forgiveness

Human society is for the best expression of man, and that expression, according to its perfection, leads him to the full realisation of the divine in humanity.

- (Tagore, *Creative Unity* 25-26)

Humanism is a comprehensive life stance that upholds human reason, justice and ethics:

Humanism in its broadest sense is a concept as old as classical Greece and as modern as the twentieth century. Subject to a wide diversity of expression, it is basically a philosophical outlook centred on the authority of human being as a dignified, rational being, possessing the source of truth and right... Humanism may or may not be linked with religion, science or any specific political system. Its spirit is secular, liberal and tolerant; its method, education, free enquiry and enlightenment. (Anand 11)

Farewell My Friend (Sheshar Kobita, 1946) by Rabindranath Tagore is yet another novel which promotes the concept of humanism. Tagore's humanism is visible in his awareness of life and the problems related to people around him. His assertion of the importance of man and human values above everything else is exhibited strongly in this work. The novel is different and unique among the novels of Tagore because of its plot and content. The form of presentation adds to the artistry of the author. The combination of prose with poetry adds to the artistic brilliance. Another feature which makes this novel distinct is its half- mocking tone of the narrative. Krishna Kripalani gives the reason for its popularity as "its modern setting, its playful mocking tone, its challenging style, the author's trick of introducing himself as the butt of the hero's merciless criticism, the scintillating wit of the dialogue..." (334). Iyengar expresses that "it is doubtless a witty and entertaining story, but it has also a core of serious purpose which lifts it high above the level of romantic comedy" (85).

The story begins with the description of Calcutta city to which the protagonist Amit belongs. An Oxford educated barrister, Amit is obsessed with style - "not only in his literary preferences, but in his dress outfit and manners as well" (Tagore, *Farewell My Friend* 7). In the beginning of the story, Amit Rai is seen as a talented young man who depicts the sophisticated culture of Bengali society. Amit Rai is a character which "exemplifies the very acme of sophistication and mental culture but whose proneness to romanticism and narcissism will prevent him, in the ultimate analysis from manifesting any true love for anyone" (Raj 75).

Tagore has portrayed such characters in the text who are over-powered by the fashion and the latest style. These characters are being sarcastically depicted by Tagore as they develop pseudo-images. They are only concerned with their appearance, neglecting the growth of human concerns. Obsessed with looking fashionable they lose their values of respect, compassion and love. Tagore has shown his sarcasm through the description of the

ultra-modern females. Amit Rai's two sisters, with their modern pet-names Cissie and Lissie, are portrayed in the following words:

From head to heel they are absolutely the latest brand smartly wrapped ware in the showcase of fashion. They fancy high heels and dangle over their lace-trimmed, low cut blouses beads of amber and coral, while their saris cling and slant serpent wise across their limbs. They trip when they walk, and squeak when they talk, their laughter is measured in a crescendo of squeals; they tilt their heads, smiling winsomely, daring quick side long glances; they can look soulful too. (Tagore, *Farewell My Friend* 8)

Katie Mitter or Ketaki Mitra (love interest of Amit during the Oxford days) is portrayed as even more sophisticated. While at Oxford, she gets attached to Amit but loses all hopes of marriage with him. Tagore gives a sketch of her character thus:

...In her spite against the average Bengali girl's pride in her long hair, she had with equal pride applied the scissor to her own, so that her hair, like the tail of a tadpole, had been transmuted into the bob of the evolved model. Her naturally fair complexion was well coated with enamel.... Her lips, once sweet and unaffected, were set by constant sneering in the hard curve of a twisted goal... when she puffed at a cigarette held between her manicured fingers, it was less for the sake of the smoke than for the decorative effort. (144-145)

Tagore argues that even the artists can be shallow and cover their pseudo image with fashionable life-style. Amit Rai favours the style for the artists and says, "Style is for the literary aristocrats, whose way wait on no will save their own, while fashion is for the underlings who cater to others' taste" (5). Katie's brother Naren Mitter, a close friend of Amit, a self-proclaimed art expert also lives a frivolous and fashionable life. He too comes under Tagore's scorn during the narration of the story for his shallowness:

If he could not improve the art of painting, he could at least confound it. The ends of his moustache were carefully pointed upwards French fashion, and equally carefully was his shaggy hair neglected. He was handsome enough, but in the assiduous endeavour to make himself more so, he had loaded the dressing table with all sorts of Parisian beauty-aids. (143)

Amit Rai's ultra-modern attitude reveals that he cannot evince any genuine love for anyone but the unexpected happens. Amit chooses Shillong for a holiday and while he drives along a narrow road, he hits car against another car coming from the opposite direction. From the other partially damaged car emerges Labanya who is described by Tagore as:

Amit saw a rare vision, as though a Lakshmi had risen from the ocean which the gods had churned and stood poised above the foaming and raging waters. Had Amit seen this same girl in a city drawing room in the midst of half a dozen others, he might have noticed her but would have missed this revelation of the full splendour of her being. (24-25)

Labanya has come to Shillong for the summer along with Yogamaya as a tutoress to her daughter, Surama. Yogamaya is introduced in the text as Vardashanker's wife who is the grand-son of Gianadashankar. Gianadashankar belongs to the old generation by birth but becomes an integral part of new generation with the introduction of English education in Bengal. The narrator elaborates his character as "born before his time, neither in outlook, nor in speech, nor in habits did he contemporise with his contemporaries" (29). At one point of time, Labanya loved Sobhanlal, her father's student. But a misunderstanding between them takes Sobhanlal away from her. She feels shattered after the incident. When her father remarries, she leaves the home. Her inclinations towards human love are based on her unpleasant experiences of life, but her meeting with Amit gives her a hope, "In a moment Labanya was awake. At long last she was aware of herself" (42).

Amit gets attracted towards Labanya not only by her beauty but also by her intelligence. Both Amit and Labanya do not belief in genuine love because of their experiences but still both hope for something worthwhile. He discovers a volume of Donne's poetic works on her table which has been the subject of his critical studies at Oxford. He tries to find the similarity between the both through the book. His restless spirit finds peace in Labanya's serenity:

Amit himself had intellect but no forbearance, judgement but no patience: he had read much and learnt much but of tranquility, he had achieved nothing. In Labanya's face he saw a picture of serenity, born not of emotional self-complacency but of the profound poise of a calm and balanced mind. (48)

Labanya accepts Amit's proposal of marriage because of Yogamaya's persuasion. Labanya has no faith in love and marriage but Yogamaya convinces her to get into the relationship.

Yogamaya wants to see her happy and does the best for her. Amit sends an engagement ring from Calcutta but deep in her heart, Labanya has some doubts about this relationship: “When I listen to your words, I am overwhelmed with fear, Mita” (74). Her reply to Amit about the basis for her fear is:

I beg of you, do not wish to marry me.... You are not the one to set up a household. You are in quest of whatever will quench your fancy’s thirst. That is why you flit from literature to literature and this is why you have come to me. Shall I speak the truth? In your heart of hearts you consider marriage, as you are always calling it vulgar. (75)

Through the relationship of Amit and Labanya, Tagore supports the importance of compatibility in a marital bond. Labanya argues, “the tragedy of love is brought about where the two are not content to accept the fact of each other’s individuality” (83). Labanya thinks that Amit likes her intellect but he, “does not seem even to have noticed - me the everyday person, me the girl at home” (85). Labanya has a firm faith that marriage means accepting each-other as they are “which leaves little room for moulding on the potter’s wheel” (85). At this Amit argues that his outlook is bound to change after marriage but Labanya is sure about the fact that he does not love her but an idealised image of her in his mind. She tells Yogamaya:

... he does not want me.... with words he seeks to remould me.... I want to remain a dream as long as I may, blended with his words, with the play of his fancy. Indeed, why should I call it a dream, when it is for me a unique rebirth, a unique revelation of self in a unique world? (85)

But finally Labanya gives her consent to the wedding. Amit’s friends and sisters make a hurried visit to Shillong when they hear the news of the wedding. As Katie, Amit’s former fiancée, is about to upbraid Labanya, Amit turns up with the ring and slips it on Labanya’s finger. At this moment, Katie reminds Amit about the ring, he had given her seven years ago at Oxford and which she has not taken off for a single second. “She removes it, throws it on the table and storms out with tears pouring down her enamelled cheeks” (164). Amit does not feel awful about the whole episode rather he is confused about what he really wants in life.

Labanya feels too upset after the incident and holds Amit responsible for the transformation of Katie into “a concentrated, superfine essence of foreign make” (144). The

strong human values of sensitivity and empathy are depicted by Tagore through the character of Labanya. Sensitivity in any person helps in strengthening the emotional reaction that is why Labanya understands Katie's situation. Labanya's sensitivity leads her to empathize with Katie, which is another strong human value in a person. Because of the sensitive and empathetic nature of Labanya, she requests Amit to amend his relation with Katie because she believes that Amit has not only betrayed Katie but disgraced her in the society: "She once gave herself completely into your hands, Mita. Why didn't you make her your own? You loosened your hold and let her go, no matter why, and since then a dozen hands have fallen on her and made her what she is" (168).

Tagore has portrayed the character of Amit whose "mind is like a will-o'-the-wisp which lures and misleads in the open but which can not be captured and brought indoors" (13). Amit believes that love is more flexible than marriage. Amit gets married to Katie but his love for Labanya does not fade away with time. He accepts her love for both Katie and Labanya. Despite his love feelings for two women, he has faith in the institution of marriage, thus, stays in marital bond with Katie only.

Tagore has also portrayed Amit as a strong character having the value of acceptance. He declares his love for Katie and Labanya with the argument that

"the love that freely pervades the sky is the mate of our souls; the love that blends with each little daily act is the help-mate of our homes. I want both of them" (175). Amit does not hesitate to inform Katie about his feelings towards Labanya. When Jatinshankar (Yogamaya's son) asks Amit about Katie's reaction to this feeling, Amit says: "She knows everything. Whether she fully comprehends, I cannot say. But I shall spend my life and show that I have not cheated her in any way. She must know too that she is indebted to Labanya" (177).

Amit believes that it is only because of Labanya that his union with Katie has become possible which fills Amit with the emotions of respect and love for Labanya. These emotions of Amit are portrayed through a note of farewell to Labanya with the concluding lines from Tagore:

Invisible, your image unchanging is in my eyes,
In the unseen chamber of my heart you abide forever.
I've found the stone that turns all into gold,
The void in me you yourself have filled.
Dark was life when I discovered in the heart's shrine
The lighted lamp you had left as your parting gift.
Separation, like sacred fire, revealed in the glow of sorrow.
Love's image divine. (178)

After the union of Amit and Katie, Labanya realises that Sobhanlal has been always misjudged by her. Earlier in their relationship, Labanya blames Sobhanlal for humiliating her and her father, Abinash Dutta in the society. But it was Sobhanlal's father, Nanigopal, who had insulted Abinash by alleging that "the professor had laid a trap in his house and was luring marriageable boys into it, on the pretext of teaching them" (36). Nanigopal doubts that Abinash wants to fix the wedding of Labanya and Sobhanlal in the name of learning and guidance whereas Nanigopal's mind calculates "exact estimate of Sobhanlal's current value in the marriage market" (36). After the whole incident it is Sobhanlal who "has been cruelly wounded, and he wants to deaden the pain by continual marches" (139). Labanya accepts and finds her true love in Sobhanlal and decides to get married to him. Labanya sends the invitation card of her wedding to Amit along with a reply to his note for the sake of their friendship:

No loss of yours in losing me,
An image of clay.
If of that mortal dust
You have fashioned a goddess,
Let the goddess remain for you to adore
With the evening star.
No gross touch of the actual me

Shall disturb the play of your worship,
No not breath of passionate ardour.
Sully its flowers consecrate....
O my princely, peerless friend,
What I gave to you was your own gift -
Fuller your acceptance, the deeper my debt,
My Friend, Farewell. (180-182)

The human emotion of jealousy also becomes the part of this novel through the character of Katie. “In an instant Katie’s glance swept Labanya from head to foot like a sharp broom” (150). When Katie comes to know about Amit – Labanya relationship she feels dejected and even finds it difficult to bear the sight of Labanya. Katie says in utter disappointment: “The famous Labanya! Delicious! What a volcano in the Shillong hills! What an earthquake to split as under Amit’s heart! Silly! Men are funny” (152). Katie even blames Yogamaya for encouraging Labanya in her attempt to woo Amit and believes that “it was Yogamaya who in the guise of an aunt had contrived to palm her off on Amit” (154). Despite all the allegations made by Katie, Labanya understands the emotions of Katie and Labanya’s sacrifice of her love for the union of Katie and Amit depicts her as a selfless individual.

The realisation of the right brings the transformation in human beings. Katie’s character is transformed when she realises the sacrifice made by Labanya for her. “Katie had changed beyond recognition, meaning that she was looking too much like her natural self” (172). *Farewell My Friend* is a novel which lays emphasis on the human values - love, forgiveness, realisation and sacrifice made for the well-being of other people.

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