

A Comparative Study of the Various Influences on the Writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Munshi Premchand

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore and Premchand, the prodigious writers of the colonial India, distinguish themselves as prolific writers of fiction- novels and short stories. Since a writer is essentially the outcome of his age, as Tagore, in the context of his novel, Ghare Baire (The Home and the World), is purported to have said himself, "The period during which a writer is born gets reflected through his writings, may be, for a purpose.... The writer's period plays a role, deliberately or otherwise, in a writer's mind." (Mukhopadhyay, 1970, II: 546, quoted in Ray, 2010: 72) Reiterating the point Sharma (1977) has also remarked, "...each writer is affected by what happens to him and around him." (16) In view of the above, the present paper aims at having a comparative analysis of the various factors that influenced both the personality and writings of both Tagore and Premchand.

Tagore's thoughts and works were influenced by various factors, of them the liberal atmosphere of the family, which conceded adequate freedom to women to get educated and pursue their own hobbies, enabled him to grow into a humanist as also a supporter of gender equality and women's freedom. Tagore was born in an enlightened family of Calcutta, which was a blend of traditional Indian and the western culture. The children in the family were imparted the best possible quality education and were allowed to pursue the vocation of their own choice, enabling them to distinguish themselves in diverse fields of creativity, like poetry, music, painting, dramatics, plays and fiction. Tagore in a natural course imbibed these traits from his brothers and sisters, which helped him to take interest in all these spheres. Although he was very much influenced by all his sisters and elder brother, but it was his sister Kadambari Devi who as pointed out above influenced him the most. (cf. Dhar, 2013) The Tagores contributed towards the introduction of western education and the study of science and medicine, which "explains the combination of tradition and experiment that came to characterize Rabindranath Tagore's attitude to life." (Jha, 1994: 603) Besides, the elders in the family were involved in various kind of social activities at the national level, for instance, his grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore was a philanthropist, while his father Debendranath Tagore "was one of the leading figures of the newly awakened phase of Bengali society", who had cast "a profound influence on his son's mental and practical attitudes" (603).

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In fact, it was his father who ensured Rabindranath a good education and groomed him largely into what he later became in life. He was first taught at home by private tutors and was then admitted into a variety of choicest English medium schools one after the other that included Bengal Academy Calcutta, where he studied history and culture. However, he did not like the teaching method of English-speaking schools and had also distaste for the foreign language. However, when Tagore was about 12 years his father took him to Santiniketan, a centre for meditation and learning established by him in 1863 (Jha, 1994: 603) There he introduced young Tagore to his own way of learning, who was greatly impressed by his father's one to one method of teaching, as unlike the modern style of teaching it marked a close and affectionate contact between teacher and the pupil. As a result, Tagore completely withdrew himself from the school to carry out his studies at home on his own, obtaining at times the help of tutors in various subjects. However, later, as per the craze of the Bengal aristocracy he went to England for higher education and got admission in University College, London, to study law, but after a year he dropped it on account of ill health. But back home he made it a mission of his life to promote Santiniketan as a centre for learning and in 1919 opened a new school at Santiniketan named as Visva-Bharati to give a tangible shape to his ideas, where he himself taught and managed its affairs. He even contributed his Nobel Prize returns to meet its financial exigencies. (Roy, 1977: 175) Besides, to promote female education he "also laid the foundation of co-education by starting it at Santiniketan." (Kaur, 2013) Later, he opened a university at Santiniketan taking inspiration from the west to "make it a connecting thread between India and the world [and] a world center for the study of humanity somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography." (Dutta and Robinson 1995: 204) It leads Tagore to grow into a visionary, a reformer an educationist and a champion of feminist cause. Thus, the upbringing of Tagore in an enlightened family, his early education and the lessons imparted by his worthy father at Santiniketan and his family legacy, substantially contributed to transform his personality and helped him grow into a creative genius.

Apart from the family atmosphere, the locale and his early exposure also influenced the views of Tagore to a great extent. Being born in a wealthy zamindar family of Calcutta, Tagore had little exposure to rural life in his childhood days, but since early in his career he was appointed as the caretaker of his father's estates, it also afforded him the opportunity to deal with the rural people and to gain the experience of the village life. It is due to this that in his fiction he was able to treat the village life with the same realistic approach as the city life. In fact, during his stay among the village people Tagore was shocked to behold their poverty and distress to the extent that he "became restless to do something about it, instead of spending his days as a landlord, concerned only with money-making and with his own profit and loss." (cf. Dasgupta, 1978: 354) Accordingly, in his fiction particularly the short stories he has often chosen the rural Bengali locale and the people residing there, belonging mostly to the underprivileged class of the society and has frequently depicted their pathos with sympathy. It is also noteworthy that his earlier stories contain the themes of the village, as Sidhanta says, "After years of city life, he was now in the midst of the bounties of Nature, with plenty of opportunities of admiring natural scenes and surveying the panorama of rural life." (Sidhanta, 1961: 285) However, his narratives provide a spectacle of the entire Bengal life, rural as

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well as the urban, mainly dealing with “the disintegration of joint families, the family quarrels, the conflict in love and affection, the conflict between religious superstitions and humanistic values, contemplating the final triumph of humanism” (Bandyopadhyay, 2004: 60) Thus, Tagore’s exposure and experience as also his education, erudition and aptitude, as evident from his works, helped him grow into a liberal humanist and the champion of women’s emancipation in the true tradition of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and in accordance with the spirit of the age. Tagore has portrayed women mostly in their traditional roles, but keeping pace with the temper of the new age, he has also visualized them in strong and even rebellious roles, hence his campaign for women’s liberation is aptly treated “ahead of its time (and his) portrayal of women in his work ... as one of his most important contributions to the society.” (Kaur, 2013)

Premchand, on the other hand, came totally from a rural background, as he was born and brought up at Lamahi, a small village near Benaras, in “a family of shabby-genteel Kayasthas who owned some six bighas of land and ran a large family.” (Gupta, 1998: 7) Besides, his life was fraught with manifold challenges, problems, inadequacies and setbacks from the very beginning. As a child he was ‘sportive and lively’ and was fond of playing and stealing things from the fields and “had a sweet tooth and was particularly fond of raw sugar.” (Gupta, 1998: 7) Curiously, some of his stories like ‘Gulli-danda’, ‘Chori’, ‘Holi’ and ‘Kazaki’, based on his childhood memories reflect his above childhood traits. (Gupta, 1998: 7ff) However, from the very beginning his life was fraught with manifold challenges, inadequacies and setbacks. He came from a humble background, as his father Ajaib Lal was merely a postal clerk and mother Anandi Devi a simple homemaker. He lost his mother at the age of about eight years and he was so closely attached with her that he created some of his fictional characters after her name, as for example ‘Anandi’ in his short story ‘Bade Ghar Ki Beti.’ (Gupta, 1998: 7) His father too died prematurely in 1897, but before that, he had remarried himself and had also got married Premchand as well. Premchand’s experience about both the events proved bitter, which he regrets saying, although his father was a sensible person, “yet in his last days he stumbled and fell down himself and pushed me also down by the same blow. When I was fifteen, he had me married, and passed away hardly a year later.” (Premchand, u/d: 28-42). As it usually happens, he did not get proper care from his stepmother and feeling lonely, he turned to fiction in search of peace, interestingly the story of stepmother became the “recurring theme in his works.” (Gupta, 1998:10) Besides, to add to his predicament, being the senior most surviving male member of the family, he had not only to maintain his wife, but also the entire joint family. However, since his wife was ugly, uncultured and quarrelsome, “the promised romance lay in ruins, broken and shattered at the very outset.” (Gupta, 1998: 11) Consequently, sometime after he abandoned her and later when he was already settled as a teacher, he married a child widow Shivrani Devi in 1906, which was indeed a revolutionary step at the time. Shivrani Devi, who proved to be an ideal wife, mother and homemaker, supported Premchand all through his struggles in life, and after his death also wrote a book, Premchand: Ghar Mein, in which “A picture of Premchand’s home-life emerges vividly.” (17) It is, in fact, due to the support of his wife and the carefree atmosphere she provided to him that Premchand was able to produce several literary masterpieces, one after the other.

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Premchand had a chequered career as a student, as his studies were frequently impeded for some reason or the other. He received his elementary lessons in Urdu and Persian at the village madarsa, then attended a missionary school to attain proficiency in English and then joined the Queen's College Benaras as a day scholar, where his life was quite arduous. (Gupta, 1998: 11) Although he lost his father in 1897, he could still pass his Entrance examination (matriculation) in the second division in 1899, but due to financial constraints he had to stop his regular studies and had to become a private tutor. Meanwhile, he appeared twice in the Intermediate Examination, but failed being poor in Mathematics, which in his own words for him was as tough as "climbing the peak of Gaurishankar." (Premchand, u/d: 28-42). In 1899 he got a teacher's job in a Missionary School for 18/- per month with the help of its Head Master with whom he had a chance meeting at a bookshop, where he had gone to sell his book to raise some money as an instant succour. (Premchand, u/d: 28-42) In 1900 he joined the Government service as an assistant teacher, thereby beginning his career as a teacher, which with "breaks in time and shifts from place to place remained his profession." (India Heritage, 2012) It was as a teacher on deputation that in 1903 he obtained the Junior English Teaching Certificate (1903-04) from Central College, Allahabad. He passed his Intermediate privately in 1916, when Mathematics became an optional subject and his B.A. in 1919 both in second class. While in Government service he was shifted to various places one after the other, notable among them were- Allahabad, Kanpur, Mahoba, Gorakhpur, Basti, etc., and before quitting his service on Mahatma Gandhi's call for non-cooperation with the British he could rise to the position of a Deputy Inspector of Schools. Thus, Premchand's life was fraught with various kinds of adversities and his academic career suffered frequent breaks and pauses, which in 'Jeevan Saar' he sums up, saying figuratively, "My life is a flat, level plain. There are pits here and there, but no cliffs, mountains and jungles, deep ravines, or ruins. Gentlemen who have a taste for mountaineering will be disappointed here." (Premchand, u/d: 28-42)

Obviously, it is due to various factors, including the adversities of his personal life and those around him, that Premchand was able to give an eyewitness account of the rural life in its various manifestations. However, more than anything else his own aptitude played the major role in his emergence as a great writer of fiction. In fact, he had an inborn fascination for myths and legends, which after the death of his mother turned into a great passion for reading works of fiction. Thus, Premchand seems to be hugely influenced by his own experiences in life.

Premchand's works and ideas were influenced by various factors, as Sollars observes, "...the social and political conditions of his time determined his literary objectives." (Sollars, 2008: 632) He was greatly opposed to colonialism and its political and socio-economic ramifications, but of them the prevailing political atmosphere of the country is perhaps the foremost, which really played a decisive role in shaping the course of his creative journey. As an educated Indian, Premchand was hugely influenced by the rise of nationalism, and he followed the policies and programmes of the Indian National Congress closely. His writings from the very beginning, therefore, bear the imprint of his nationalist feelings as in his first published story 'Duniya Ka Sabse Anmol Ratan' (The Most Precious

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Jewel in the World) he “brings out his tough stance against the colonial rule, wherein the last drop of blood, shed for achieving freedom has been regarded as the most precious jewel in the world.” (Agrawal, 2001: 5-9) Similarly, in his stories, ‘A Little Trick’ and ‘A Moral Victory’, he has ridiculed, though obliquely, the Indians cooperating with the British Government. (Rubin, 1994: 168-177) Premchand drew inspiration from various political leaders and social reformers of the time, as “In the background of his work we hear constant echoes of the voices of Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekanand, Dayanand, Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad and European fighters for freedom and human emancipation like Mazzini, Garibaldi, Karl Marx, Lenin and others.” (Gupta, 1998: 6) In fact, the high moral ground that he often takes in his writings is supposed to be inspired by the teachings of Swami Vivekananda (Sigi, 2006: 25) Among the leaders of the National Movement, initially he was an admirer of moderate Congress leaders Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Feroze Shah Mehta, but was later drawn towards the radical leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak. (cf. Gupta, 1998: 17)

However, the entry of Gandhi in the National Movement proved to be a turning point in the life of Premchand, as he found him closer to his heart. He, in fact, shares many things in common with Gandhi, as for instance, like Gandhi he also wanted the poor and the ignorant masses, especially the Indian women, to come out of the morass and join the mainstream and “take an active part in the Nationalist struggle and even to lead the men— the theme of several of his short stories.” (Orr, 1957: 33) Like Gandhi, he too “felt pride in India’s heritage...sympathized with the Indian peasant...opposed the large-scale industrialization of India...believed “in the goodness of man and in the nobility of the poor and downtrodden, the victims of an unjust and unequal economic system.” (33) Obviously, it is under the spell of the above that in Premashram (1922) he focuses on the exploitation of the peasant under the zamindari system; in Rangabhumi (1924) pleads for the economic liberalization of the peasantry and the working class and criticizes the wild growth of industrial sector, which he thought detrimental to the interests of the peasants and the workers. (Gupta, 1998: 6) Also in Godan (1936) and short story Kafan (1936), written at the fag end of his career, his focus again has been mainly on the village life. (Rubin, 1994: 168-177) Similarly, he also deals with various women’s issues, like dowry and mismatched marriage in Sevasadan (1919) and Nirmala (1925) and political oppression and need of educational reforms in Karmabhumi, (1931), etc. (cf. Rubin, 1994: 168-177) Again like Gandhi, “He was genuinely and strongly secular in his attitude towards the Moslem contribution to Indian culture.” (Gupta, 1998: 6) However, Premchand’s ideas were quite resilient, which he altered according to the need and situation, as later “he was furiously thinking in terms of the economic liberation of the peasantry and the working masses. In those later years, he stood by the side of Nehru rather than Gandhi.” (Gupta, 1998: 5) Nevertheless, Gandhi perhaps still inspired him the most and he is given the credit of supplementing “Gandhiji’s work in the political and social fields by adopting his ideas as themes for his literary writings.” (Features, 2001, Press Information Bureau) Apart from the above, Premchand drew inspiration from the writings of various contemporary writers, of them Russian writers Tolstoy and Gorky perhaps influenced him enormously. Commenting on the influence of Tolstoy Amrit Rai observes:

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He had already read Tolstoy's moralistic stories and Tolstoy's influence was already noticeable upon his writing long before he was attracted by Gandhi's magnetic personality. Both technically and intellectually, Premchand was a faithful pupil of the Great Russian writer. The technique of his stories he improved after the model of his teacher. (Rai, 1962: 162)

In fact, much like Tolstoy Premchand also abhorred the enslavement of men by the industry, as Gopal says, "Premchand--ever a disciple of Tolstoy's theories--opposed the large-scale industrialization of a predominantly agricultural country like India, with her huge surplus labour." (Gopal, 1944: 77) Being a reformer and social historian, Tolstoy exposed in his works the plight of the Russian peasants who were prone to the excesses of the rich, which Premchand did in the Indian context. Maxim Gorky was perhaps the next Russian writer whose works Premchand loved and admired, and shared his passion for independence and social change. Both of them championed the cause of suffering and the exploited masses, but with the difference that "Whereas, Gorky emphasized the strategy of revolution, Premchand preferred evolution--a peaceful evolution. Gorky's stage was the marketplace and the factory; Premchand was the village." (91) Nevertheless, some of his contemporary critics criticized Premchand that his novel Rangabumi was a replica of Vanity Fair of William Makepeace Thackeray; while Premashram of Resurrection of Count Leo Tolstoy and Kayakalp that of The Eternal City of Sir Hall Caine. (Rai, 1962: 360) However, Premchand refuted the charges vehemently, saying it was a matter of pride for him if Premashram reflected the idea as contained in Resurrection. He also declared rather indignantly, that he shall write many more such books as may contain the idea of some or the other great writer and that "Whichever good book you read may seem resembling with some book of mine. The reason being that I take my plot from life and not from any book and that, the life everywhere is the same." (364-365) Nevertheless, he admitted that in writing Sevasadan he might have taken inspiration from Vanity Fair, but "he had neither taken the cue from Vanity Fair, nor copied it to any extent whatsoever. The outlines of the two bear resemblance, but the two are of very different types." (Gopal, 1944: 132) Among the Indian writers who inspired Premchand special mention can be made of the Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore. In 'Jeevan Saar', an autobiographical piece, he confides that in his early days he used to read fondly the English translations of Tagore's stories, dealing with the social and cultural issues of the time, and had their Urdu versions published in Urdu magazines. (Premchand, u/d: 28-42). In fact, Premchand has the credit "to have further developed the literary heritage of Tagore in the direction of socialism," though infusing into it the element of radicalism as per the need of the hour. (Gupta, 1998:6)

Of the two writers in focus, Rabindranath Tagore was directly associated with the Bengal Renaissance, which is believed "to have begun with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and continued until the death of Rabindranath Tagore in 1941". (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali_renaissance) However, as against Tagore, who was a part of the Bengal Renaissance, Premchand's association with it had been through the former, whose stories, which dealt with the social and cultural issues of the time, he used to read fondly in his early days and even had their Urdu versions

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published in Urdu magazines. (Premchand, 'Jeevan Saar' in u/d: 28-42), naturally drawing inspiration from them in the process. Curiously, the age of the two writers also coincides with that of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), who was a renowned feminist writer of English fiction, associated with the first wave of feminism and who can easily be distinguished as a genuine spokesperson of the feminist movement in England of the time. (cf. Tiwari, 2012: 102).

Besides, both the writers were equally influenced by the socio-political developments in India during the age, characterized mainly by the rise of nationalism and the founding of the Indian National Congress, as also the social maladies like gender inequality, illiteracy, superstitions, etc. rampant in the society. They also drew inspiration from Swami Vivekanand, and the other heroes of the Bengal Renaissance and the National Movement, whose views on nation and society, particularly on the sufferings of women in the male dominated society became their guiding principle, which led them to realize that India could not progress without addressing the women's issues first. However, the most momentous event in the life of the two writers was perhaps the advent of Gandhi, who was destined to emerge soon as the sole dispensator of the affairs of the Indian National Movement. In fact, both of them were hugely impressed by the political and social agenda of Gandhi, particularly those directed towards improving the lots of poor, downtrodden and the women in the society.

The learned duo fully endorsed Gandhi's above characterization of women and wanted them to get proper education and avail freedom but only to the extent that it helped them to fit in their traditional familial roles, as any deviation from it was bound to wreak misery. Therefore, while opposing Purdah, child marriage and the dowry system and encouraging women to join the National movement, they viewed woman primarily as a dependent being, confined to home, rather than as an independent active entity seeking actualization, because the Indian concept of womanhood is strongly rooted in the traditional Indian Culture. Besides, they also wanted women to be self-sacrificing, loving, obedient, meek, religious and kind, who also adore their husbands, love their children and give due reverence to their in-laws. Therefore, they did not have any sympathy with women who were indifferent towards their traditional roles as mothers, wives or lovers, and were extrovert, immoral and promiscuous. Therefore, even though they wanted women to be self dependent and to have their own identity, yet felt that they ought to achieve it with the consent and support of men, while discharging all their familial and household obligations. However, Tagore while praising women in their traditional roles, as a mother, wife, lover and homemaker, supports the idea of women's emancipation, as conceived under the feminist ideology in accordance with the temper of the age.

To sum up, of the two writers, it appears that being born and brought up among the rural people, Premchand wrote with conviction about the rampant poverty and the exploitation of the poor under feudalism and colonialism. Besides he also deliberated upon the oppression and exploitation of women under the patriarchy, as being a social reformer he was greatly concerned with the plight of women. He, therefore, used literature to create public awareness about the above national and social issues of the time taking inspiration from the heroes of Bengal Renaissance like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekanand, Rabindranath Tagore, etc. as also the social

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reformers and the freedom fighters, like Swami Dayanand, Gandhi and Nehru and the world leaders like Mazzini, Garibaldi, Karl Marx, Lenin and others. Since he was also inspired by the feminist movement and feminism, he took up in his works women's problem vigorously and wrote profusely about gender discrimination, female illiteracy, child marriage, early widowhood, prostitution, etc., which come within the ambit of feminism. Similarly, the formative years of Tagore also had great the impact on his thoughts and works. His family background, education and training, the temper of the age, Brahma Samaj, Bankimchandra, and the Indian National Congress played vital role in his emergence as a writer.

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