

Aristotle's Concept of Anagnorisis Exemplified in Tagore's *The Wreck*

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore is a prolific writer and multi-faceted genius. The variety and richness of his writings are breathtaking. His works are mines of beauty, wisdom and truth. He is recognized as one of the World's immortal poets and one of the best writers of all ages. The term anagnorisis stands for the realization of truth, the opening of the eyes, and the sudden lightning in the darkness. From trials and tribulations emerges a new perception, insight, understanding, perhaps even wisdom. It means recognition – a change or a shift that helps a person to come out of ignorance to knowledge. The present paper gives the definition of Aristotle's concept of anagnorisis and investigates how far this concept of anagnorisis is exemplified by Rabindranath Tagore in his popular novel *The Wreck*. Aristotle's concept can be perceived in the title of the novel itself. It is an investigation or the discovery of one's truth and its relationship with one's identity. The characters act as change and change agents and suffer only to face a change of fortune. They strive to search the identity through psychological probes and intuitions. The story ends with the discovery of joy which comes after many trials and tribulations when all their problems are solved.

KEYWORDS

Anagnorisis; Change; Discovery; Journey; Peripety; Recognition; Wreck

Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian Nobel Laureate, is a prolific writer and multi-faceted genius. His dynamic mind and work ever continued to blossom and sprout in new directions. His contribution to Indian literature covered a wide range of genres including poems, novels, dramas, literary criticism, polemics, travelogues, memoirs, letters, children's literature and essays. He achieved spectacular success in all the genres. The variety and the richness of his writings

are quite breathtaking. He was not of an age but of all ages. He deals with powerful elemental passions, with joys and sorrows common to all humanity. As human nature is the same in all ages and all climes, his works have a universal appeal. Generations after generations, many have loved to read and research his works, not only for countless passages of poetic beauty but also for moral truth and practical guidance in day to day affairs of life. His works are mines of beauty,

wisdom and truth and hence can never grow stale. He is truly the world's immortal poet and one of the best writers of all ages.

Aristotle's Concept of Anagnorisis

Aristotle defines the term anagnorisis thus: "Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune" (S.H. Butcher 2). The term anagnorisis stands for recognition or discovery of a person's identity or of things unknown before. Developments in the literary world have widened its scope and now the term is defined as: "the realization of truth, the opening of the eyes, and the sudden lightning flash in the darkness" (F. L. Lucas 99). It is a kind of recognition or realization gained by tragic characters through their sufferings. From these sufferings or trials and tribulations emerges "a new perception, insight, understanding, perhaps even wisdom--for which we can use Aristotle's term anagnorisis" (James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver, eds., 19).

Many modern plays and novels take discovery as the main theme, the discovery of something or someone, their mental status, the truth behind something. Maxwell Anderson says:

The element of discovery is just as important as ever. For the mainspring in the mechanism of a modern play is almost invariably a discovery by the hero of some element in his environment or his own soul of which he has not been aware or which he has not taken sufficiently into account . . . The leading character, let me say again, must take the discovery, it must affect him emotionally and it must alter his direction in the play. (Anderson 116)

The progress of the storyline and the development of the incidents lead the main

character from the unknown to the known, from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge or self-awareness, self-recognition. It is named 'recognition,' 'discovery' and 'unveiling.' At the end of chapter 7, the details of changes that have been defined by reference to good or bad fortune are mentioned. Another simple definition related to this idea has been provided by John MacFarlane thus: "a length in which, while things are coming about in sequence according to what is likely or necessary, a change occurs from bad fortune to good fortune or from good fortune to bad fortune " is a sufficient limit of the length of [a triangle] (373).

The Wreck: A Novel of Discovery

The Wreck is a novel based on the play of chance and coincidence interwoven together and one of them, the boat wreck, is the pivotal incident. The plot and the complexities issue out of this incident--the wreck, the simultaneous wreck, of two wedding parties, resulting in an erroneous change of bride. Such an accident is neither improbable nor unbelievable.

Tagore developed a creative unity between the form and the theme. The form is impersonalized narrative and at some places, he uses dramatic devices, which induce a mellow meditative reflectiveness and bring the novel close to his distinctive poetic style. Aristotle's concept of anagnorisis can be perceived in the very title of the novel, which suggests the nature of the symbolism involved. The true nature of the action of the novel is conveyed through a profusion of images and symbols. The major thrust of anagnorisis is discovery. The central characters of the novel in a way lose their truth. All of them struggle to discover the nature of truth, its intrinsic quality and the basic cause of their disharmony. They are wrecked. They lose their identity and remain wrecked till they re-evaluate and re-investigate the balance of

their relationship. *The Wreck* is an investigation into the discovery of one's truth and its relationship with one's identity.

Another concept of Aristotle's, peripety, which means a reversal of the situation, has some correlation with the concept of anagnorisis. Both these concepts are well illustrated in this novel. The combination of recognition and peripety adds effectiveness to the story. Aristotle says, "The best form of recognition is coincident with a reversal of the situation" (Aristotle 2).

As for the presence of chance and coincidence in the novel, one has to accept the interplay of inexplicable factors in human life. There can be and there is a place for them in any ordinary human being's life. The central characters of the novel in a way lose their identity in the midst of unexpected changes that happened in their living circumstances. What is to be looked for in the novel is whether the novel deals with a succession of accidents and coincidences or whether it gives scope for the characters to manipulate the circumstances which shape their lives. Hedged in by circumstances over which they have little control, the characters of the novel seem to take refuge in the belief that somehow things will sort themselves out to help them if they have unflinching loyalty and commitment to the time-honoured values of marital sanctity. The novel has to be read as a sensitive study of the complex problems and dilemmas which the central characters Ramesh and Kamala face after the wreck against the background of the Hindu ideal of marriage.

Ramesh, the only son of Braja Mohan Babu, who is an orthodox Hindu, and Jogendra, the son of Anand Babu, a Brahmo Samajist, are friends. Ramesh is in love with Jogendra's sister Hemnalini. Though deeply in love with Hemnalini, he has neither declared his love to her nor given a thought to any likely impediment to their marriage. When his father suddenly settles his marriage with a girl from

a far-off village, he makes a feeble protest. But, when his father questions him, he admits his non-commitment to Hemnalini. Though he submits to his father, he protests in his own way, ineffective as it is: "The wedding duly takes place, but Ramesh refused to recite the formula correctly, closed his eyes when the time arrived for the 'auspicious look'." (Tagore 7).

The way in which he projects his protest against his father and society shows his naïve and childish behaviour. He feels a sense of guilt at deviating from his ideals, wherein loyalty and love are in harmony. The absurdity of his action can only be realized by the symbolism of the placidly flowing river, which has brought him to the bride's place. His journeys up and down the river repeatedly emphasize Tagore's use of the symbol as a means of conveying the movement of the physical reality of life in sharp contrast to the still reality of the inner being.

A storm strikes the wedding party during their return journey by boat, killing all except Ramesh. The storm has already taken possession of Ramesh's mind as he struggles to find a way out of his dilemma. The storm proclaims the refusal in him, his cowardly acceptance of the living pattern which he wants to reject and but cannot. It also conveys the weakness of human will and human defiance. The simultaneous wreck of two wedding parties, resulting in an erroneous exchange of bride is the pivotal action of the novel.

On regaining consciousness, he looks around for his people and can find only the seemingly lifeless figure of a maiden clad in the crimson clothes of a bride. Mistaking her for his bride, he feels a new sense of commitment to her though she meant nothing to him a little while before. The storm in him and that around him abates as he arrives at his decision.

The next incident in the novel is the discovery of the fact that the bride Ramesh has rescued is not his wife. But he is unable to come to terms with the situation. After carefully gathering information about her former life, Ramesh is convinced beyond doubt that Kamala is not his bride. Ramesh now sets himself to think out a future plan of action. He hopes that he can find a solution to his problem in the anonymity of Calcutta. So he takes Kamala there, and, as a temporary solution, admits her to a boarding school, declaring her his wife.

Hemnalini who loved the cultured, orthodox Ramesh has an unshakeable belief in Shakespeare's verse, "Love is not love which alters its alteration finds". She believes in the sanctity of true love. Her devotion to Ramesh is like that of a married woman to her husband. She does not suspect him at all. She remains faithful to Ramesh refuses to marry another. Unfulfilled love transforms her into an ascetic. When she gets acquainted with Nalinaksha, she cultivates a serene and calm attitude. Nalinaksha is responsible for this transformation. His lecture influences her and prepares her mind to face adversity with equanimity and realizes the fact that one's happiness should not depend on any individual. In course of time, when Hemnalini comes to know of the proposal of Nalinaksha, she does not respond positively. She feels embarrassed and finds it impossible to love one and marry other. The moment she thinks of erasing her love for Ramesh she realizes how painful and unforgettable really it is. She respects her father more and is ready to sacrifice anything for his sake saying, "if dad orders me to marry anyone I shall do as he tells me" (Tagore 1) and thus gives her consent to marry Nalinaksha. However, this inconsistency with her previous behaviour does not mar or discredit her modest behaviour. The reason behind her change is crystal clear. She accepts to do so only with the

intention of serving Kshemankari, and Nalinaksha, whom she considers her Guru and that too as a work of piety. When she is caught in the conflict of emotions and mental torture, it is Nalinaksha who shows her a new path and direction to her life. So, she stables her mind by saying that as a devotee she wants Nalinaksha. By her grace and simplicity, she impresses Nalinaksha's mother Kshemankari. Though Kshemankari is a strong-willed woman, she is not willing to give up her religious faith even for her husband; she is so liberal in her outlook that she herself proposes Hemnalini a Brahmo girl as her daughter-in-law. It is a great surprise and wonder to all. Here Tagore wants to highlight the image of mother universally. There is an unspoken understanding between mother and her child. She will be ready to change her principle and willing to give up anything for the sake of her children. In this novel also Kshemankari is liberal and tolerant only with regard to her son not with her husband. This shows her love and affection for her son and her extent of sacrifice to the level of accepting the thing which she never likes or welcomes in her life.

Ramesh reestablishes his relationship with Hemnalini and goes to the extent of giving his consent to an immediate marriage to her. He hopes that all his problems can be settled with the help of Hemnalini. But all his hopes are shattered by Akshay Babu, who prematurely reveals Kamala's existence to Hemnalini's family. This makes Ramesh the idealist undertakes a long voyage on the river Ganges to discover a new reconciliation between his idealism and his action. This incident is associated with a series of symbols, which convey the attempt of these characters to establish a form of communication with each other and with the outside world.

Kamala's character is portrayed as a contrast to Ramesh's. She is remarkable for her clear thinking, perseverance, strong will and resolute behaviour, whereas Ramesh is

weak-willed, irresolute and clumsy in his thinking. Unlike Ramesh, she is never perturbed by crises. She plunges into the right action at the right moment without hesitation to carry out her decision. Her reaction to the crucial revelation of the true state of affairs is significant. She is typically the New Woman projected by the feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century. Sheshadri rightly states that "a new woman is assertive and self-willed, searching to discover her true self" (16). The new woman, clinging to her basic values, modifying herself according to the modifying circumstances, goes ahead on the way-seeking her own identity with a new depth of understanding and getting recognition at the end. When she accidentally reads Ramesh's unposted letter written to Hemnalini, giving full details of the happenings, she comes to know that she is not his wife and that Ramesh, in fact, is in love with another girl. Now she understands the real situation and shame pierces her heart like a dagger. For a moment she thinks of committing suicide by drowning herself in the Ganges. But soon she recovers her courage, self-will and composure and she decides to trace her husband with the help of the few details she has gathered from the letter. With her self-confidence, perseverance and unflinching devotion as her defence, she prepares herself to face all kinds of hardship, humiliation and austerity with a view to serving her husband, whose face she has never seen. She does not bother about the possible difficulties in the pursuit of her mission. This contrived situation gives Tagore plenty of opportunities to move his characters about and pile surprise upon surprise till Kamala meets her husband Nalinaksha. When Kamala meets her real husband Nalinaksha that too in a critical situation, that he is going to marry Hemanalini, she prepares her mind to sound better and take a resolution. "From tomorrow, I shall entertain no more regrets, I shall never

look unhappy, I shall never allow myself to sign for the unattainable, I shall be content to serve all the days of my life. I shall never, never, never ask for anything more (Tagore 374). Kamala's final surrender to her husband Nalinaksha and his acceptance has been portrayed with soft-feather-touch words. "I am Kamala. I know it: you are my Kamala! Come with me." (Tagore 412).

The main characters of the novel meet some failures in their life and these failures lead them to take a long journey, a dark journey of the soul down to its very core, till they discover a relationship between manifested truth and inner truth. Before they arrive at any fruitful result of their search for reality and truth, they struggle so much, but, from the struggle, they learn to reiterate and reaffirm their faith and belief. Kamala believes that Nalinaksha is her true husband and that she can find him. Hemnalini believes that Ramesh loves her. Ramesh believes that the solution to the problem lies in rediscovering his commitment and integrity. All of them undertake a journey, which involves their withdrawal from the traditional, usual pattern of life into a reflective mode. This withdrawal is not an act of negation but an active and earnest attempt to rediscover the calm and ineffable rhythm of the universe.

The sequence of events in the fortunes of Ramesh and Kamala is directed in such a way that the institution of Hindu marriage appears to be wrecked by the intervention of chance and accident but ultimately triumphs, mainly because of Kamala's steadfast commitment to its ideal. There is a change from good fortune to bad fortune later; there is a reversal of bad fortune to good fortune in the course of actions. The reversal happened in all people's life. In all situations, women act as change and change agents. The love of women creates changes in the mind of the other people, particularly the other gender. They change according to the circumstances;

at the same time act as catalysts. They reacted as a catalyst to stimulate the action. The love depicted by Tagore in the novel is beyond mere physical gratification and self-centred possessiveness. Everyone cares for the happiness of others and are ready to give up their individuality, their likes and dislikes for the sake of good fortune for the loved ones. The one who is readily willing to change and give up is a woman. It is all out of their strong, unchanging and unaltered love and loyalty they possess. They change because they believe that fulfilment of love towards their beloved's demand that changes and sacrifices. "What is acquired through sacrifice becomes ours". (Tagore 411)

In the last chapters of the novel, Tagore shows all his characters in quest of their own truth. And knowingly or unknowingly they have assembled in Benares, the city which stands as a symbol of salvation, the last physical refuge of the sinning soul and the city of divine grace. Each of them comes there lonely and weighed down by bitter experiences and frustration, hoping for refuge and salvation. They seek to explore peace beyond the veil of human consciousness. Nearly a year after the boat wreck, all their problems are settled and their journey of discovery ends fruitfully.

Conclusion

The process of anagnorisis is well exemplified by Tagore in the title, theme and

the plot of the novel. Apart from the peripheral meaning of the title wreck, the overturning of the boats in the river, it is of Kamala's happiness being merely wrecked by unlucky circumstances and misfortune. It also means "the wreck" – breaking the relationship between Ramesh and Hemnalini. The plot is developed through a series of errors and accidents and is mainly based on mistaken identity. The characters undertake a long journey to find out the cause of their disharmony and to discover truth and peace. The extent to which these characters lose their identity they are wrecked. The succession of accidents and coincidences that happened gives a scope for the characters to mould the circumstances to shape their lives thereby identify their true identity. The situation shows slight resemblance with that of Thomas Hardy's novels. They suffer for no fault of theirs. They are merely controlled by fate and misfortune. The story ends with the discovery of joy which comes after many trials and tribulations when all their problems are solved. Tagore's themes are formed out of the matrix of socialized emotional life. He tries to expose, how the disagreement between the reformist and progressive Brahmo Samaj and the traditional conservatism of Hinduism recognize its new perception, insight, understanding and wisdom for which we can term it as anagnorisis.

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