

A study of “The Wreck”

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The Wreck

The Wreck, Rabindranath Tagore’s second novel in English, may be viewed in the humanitarian perspective for many reasons. Love is the main penetrating theme in this novel and minor incident like boat wreck complicated the love story of Ramesh and Hemnalini, the main characters of this novel. The main characters of *The WRECK* undergo a lot of suffering and mental agony for no fault of them, like the characters in the books of Thomas Hardy. Tagore has depicted the psychological doubts and conflicts of the characters with great sympathy and skill.

The Wreck is a novel based on a series of accidents and coincidences, interwoven together and of them the boat wreck is the pivotal incident. It has to be studied as a purely romantic novel, where everything has to be taken for granted without applying the laws of probability and human psychology. Even though the foundation of the novel is weak and full of accidents and coincidences, yet the characters by and large are solid and stand out as men and women of flesh and blood. In this novel, a minor incident like a boat wreck complicates the love story of the main characters, Ramesh and Hemnalini. With the introduction of the Character of Kamal, the love triangle ensues. The major characters of this novel undergo, a lot of suffering for no fault of theirs, like the characters in the novels of Thomas Hardy. This novel deals with the emotional and psychological conflicts of the hero, Ramesh who is mentally tormented by his divided loyalties towards his beloved Hemnalini and his sincere of responsibility towards Kamala who is thrown into his life boat by a quirk of fate. Being Weak-willed, irresolute and sympathetic, he cannot extricate himself from his love entanglements. His brooding and indecisive nature brings complicated unhappiness to both his beloved Hemnalini and Kamala, who mistakes him to wreck. Ramesh takes three months to discover the fact that Kamala is not his wife, but he does not reveal the truth to Kamala. Moreover he allows. Ananda Babu, the father of Hemnalini to make preparations for Hemnalini’s marriage with house and plot played by Akshay whose overloves

of love were re-buffed by Hemnalini, complicates matters. As a result the marriage between Hemnalini and Ramesh is postponed.

Kamala realises her position vis-à-vis Ramesh only after reading the unposted letter of Ramesh to Hamnalini, Wherein he makes a clean conscience of his relations with Kamala. Thereafter, the main story is concerned with the efforts of Kamala to find her husband Nalinaksha and later her reunion with him. Hemnalini's wedding with Ramesh is completely sidelined to the background. Thus the story is developed through a series of errors, accidents and is based on the Dilemma of mistaken identity, resulting in an exchange of wives delightfully and novelistically told. The novel is an enactment of the Hindu notion of the Sacredness and inviolability of marital ties. It describes dramatically the social and emotional imbroglio that results from the accidental exchange of a bride, a situation not wholly unknown even in modern times as the bride and bridegroom meeting as strangers for the first time, may fail for some reason or the other to identify each other immediately. Even though the story ends with the affirmation of marital sanctity, the inviolate bride Kamala restored to her true husband, it perceptively records the disappointments, embarrassments Hindu society's rigid observance of the marital sanctity.

What sustains the interest of the reader is once, again the realistic and vivid portrayal of characters. There are Ramesh, the conscientious young lawyer and his friends, Jogendra and Akshay, Akshay acts the part of a well-meaning and semi-villain, who is up against Ramesh Jogendra is a flat character, whose only job, is to be to act the part of the heroine's brother. Hemnalini is an educated and well-bread charming and homely young Brahmin girl, who sincerely loves Ramesh inspite of inexplicable change in his behaviour towards her. Kamala is the innocent and unsuspecting young bride who though more experienced in household affairs, reminds one of the Asha of Eyesore what Ramesh feels on seeing her for the first time is sufficient evidence of her Sweetness⁷. (Finding his efforts fruitless Ramesh sat down again. The girl's face (Susila Kamala) was now buried in her hands and she was trying to keep back the tears, but her bossom was raising and falling. Some instinct told him (Ramesh) that mere words of consolation would be useless, and he sat chose up to her and stoked her bowed head and neck very gently. She could no longer restrain her tears and grief burst forth in a torrent of inarticulate utterance.

Tears flowed from Ramesh's eyes in sympathy. (Page 12 -13). As a painter enthrones in his heart perfect picture, and then lavishes all his devotion on it, so Ramesh enshrined this slip of a girl in his fancy as his heart's delight and the bringer of joys and property to his home.

Kamala's later tragedy is summed up like this: If only she had a little home somewhere? But where?. Her consolation during her grief is Umesh, the orphan child, who looks at her as his mother. The fascinating ideal characters in the novel are three. Trailokya Chakarbarthi, better known as 'Undi Chakarbarthi' comes to Kamala's rescue in her distress and difficulty. Dr.Nalinaksha is the surprising youngman who marries Kamala, at the word of a friend, and then loses her for nearly a year, in the boatwreck. He is a convincing speaker on problems of social reform. But his mother, Kohemankari guards her Brahmin caste with absolute rigidity. The Charm of her personality is revealed best in her relationship with Kamala, when she does not know her as the wife of her son. Hemnalini's kind and gentle father, Ananda Babu, could be another ideal character, but for his weakness not to upbraid Jogendra and Akshay openly. In the enlightened reader of today, the incidents in *The Wreck* may seem implausible and impossible but it cannot be denied that viewed against the matrix of social and emotional life then obtaining, the novel does have both sociological and psychological truth Edward Thompson comments that THE WRECK shows how the Hindu family, relationships are based not on human feelings but on conventional respect and worship.

Sujit Mukherjee remarks how American reviewers of *The Wreck*, complained that the complexities of Hindu Character and behaviour left them too puzzled and confused to value the work highly. The novel needs to be reviewed not as a more episodic romance but 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.

The novel explicitly reveals that at no time did Kamala fall in love with Ramesh. It is true that she did feel drawn to him and wondered about the restraint that Ramesh observed in his relations with her. But once she comes to know the truth, whatever, tender feelings she has developed towards him in the mistaken understanding that he is her husband evaporate and she is shocked and repelled

by his letter, addressing her as “Dearest” and she considers it a “filthy thing², Tagore writes like this.

“Whether she understood the whole of it or not is possible to say, but she felt as though she were handling some filthy thing and once more she threw the letter away. It was a proposal that she should make a home for a man who was not her husband Ramesh had jumped at conclusions and pity for an unfortunate outcast had prompted him to write this love-letter. How could she now or ever-dispel the mistaken inference that he had drawn from her behaviour? Shame and disgust were destined to be her portion in life, though never since she came into the world had she sinned against soul.

To depict the mental agony of Kamala at this context, Tagore writes:

“Kamala recalled bit by bit the whole of her life with Ramesh from that first meeting on the sand bank to their arrival in Ghazipur, and what had been obscure before became clear as daylight. Shame pierced her heart like a dagger and as various incidents recurred to her memory she would cling to her all her life, there was no escape from its stigma. No avenue of escape from her misery opened before her mental visions. The psychological issue that *The Wreck* poses is beautifully, summed up by M.M.Bhattacharya.

Can a Hindu wife who has never seen her husband and under peculiar circumstances has come back to look upon another as such and adored him sincerely forswear her love and transfer it automatically, to the former when she knows the truth? Is it likely that love and the congenital idea of fidelity to marriage lies will have equal weight with her and the conflict will end in tragedy?

But, KH.Kunjo Singh writes “Judged from her reaction, it is clear that her conduct is no way illogical and the course of action she adopts follows logically from her ingrained faith in marital sanctity.”

The restoration and reunion of Kamala to her husband Nalinaksha is made easy by his compassionate nature and perspective and understanding on marriage. The main desire of his life is the joy of his orthodox, mother, who was separated from her husband who had joined the Brahma Samaj, and married a widow. Here it can be inferred that Nalinaksha inherited some liberal views from his Brahma Samajist father, regarding marriage. Nalinaksha is also

Brahmo Samaj member, but he disassociates himself from it to please her orthodox mother.

Tagore writes

“All right, I will marry the girl” I had always intended to give you a surprise by bringing you home an orthodox little Hindu daughter-in-law. I know quite well that I married a grown up Brahmin lady none of us would be happy.¹⁸

Here Tagore describes the inherent difference and hatred between orthodox Hindus and Liberal Brahmo Samajists.

Nalinaksha comes across Kamala in one of his trips and marries her, only to lose her in the tempest that toppled his boat the same that his Ramesh's party. Unable to locate her after the storm, he gives Kamala up as dead. Nearly after one year he comes to know that Kamala is alive through Ramesh's confession. Meanwhile Kamala has been inducted into his house as Haridasi and wins his mother's heart. Nalinaksha himself is highly and deeply impressed by her silent devotion to him and they are united, his brief engagement to Hemnalini proving no block to their reunion. Thus Tagore's humanism prevails in his solution of the love entanglement by giving sympathetic consideration on the character of Kamala.

Through the character, personality and experience of Hemnalini, Tagore reveals, the prevailing distance between the Hindus and the Brahmos and the emergence of a new type of womanhood under the influence of the progressive Brahmo Samaj and female education, just then coming into vogue. She exhibits a rare constancy of love and loyalty towards Ramesh inspite of letter's indeciveness. Though the mix-up of Ramesh and Kamala is successfully cleared at the end, no re-approachment is indicated between Ramesh and Hemnalini. Though outwardly tranquil throughout the story the latter is filled with and inward sorrow. Tagore writes, “Though she did not show it, Kamala's mind was by no means at ease about Hemnalini. Outwardly, the other's expression betrayed a degree of inward sorrow Kamala's compassion, and yet there was something unapproachable about Hemnalini which made one reluctant to speak to her and debarred one from asking questions. She wore an air of supreme melancholy and resignation that was like a permanent twilight on her features”.

Edward Thompson²¹ calls this novel and the next, *The Wreck*, “incredibly bad.” This charge is certainly not true of Binodini. Perhaps “The Wreck” (1903 -

1905) deserves the censure. Its popularity is out of all proportion to its intrinsic excellence. The whole plot of the story belongs to the type that Aristotle would have called the improbable possible. The boats in which Ramesh and his bridal party are traveling are wrecked in a storm. The bridegroom finds himself cast on a sandbank and near him he sees a girl in a bridal sari. He mistakes her as his newly-wed wife and he takes her home. Sometime later, however, he realizes his mistake, but he conceals it from the girl, kamala. It requires all his ingenuity to keep back the truth from her and others and also to prevent her from taking what she considers her rightful place as his wife. At last the true husband of Kamala Dr. Nalinaksha, is accidentally discovered. In the end Kamala and Nalinaksha are united.

The story is full of improbabilities. It takes three months for Ramesh to discover that Kamala is not his wife. But fortunately no mischief has been done. The reasons why Ramesh hides the truth from Kamala and Hemnalini who loves him are unconvincing. Whatever his reasons, he causes more pain to himself and to the two girls by this step than he would have had he told them the truth.

The reunion between Nalinaksha and Kamala is also needlessly put off. The unconscionable delay in bringing about the denouement has no excuse except that the novelist wanted his work to reach a pre-determined length. Ramesh's lack of courage which alone accounts for his dilatoriness brings untold suffering to all the principal characters. In the end 'poor Hemnalini who was on the verge of marriage first with Ramesh and then with Nalinaksha is condemned to what looks by long maidenhood. The novel has been appropriately named for the "Wreck" is not only the story of a wreck, but it is also the wreck of a story".

The Wreck, the second of Tagore's novels to appear in English, has received conflicting reviews from various critics. Some praise it highly while others condemn it as a novel of absurdities and inconsistencies. Some western critics, like Edward Thompson, find it "incredibly bad". And the American reviewers' of *The Wreck* complain that "the complexities of Hindu character and behaviour left them too puzzled to value the work highly". But Professor Lesny considers it "one of Tagore's best novels are homogenous and full of action, and the human interest is very powerful."

Among the Indian critics S.C. Sengupta is of the opinion that *The Wreck* “Although not free from defects, the plot is ingeniously conceived and carefully constructed” On the other hand, critics like Niharranjan Ray resent it, saying that it is a “romantic novel of flabby structure and poor substance. It is a story of a series of errors, accidents and coincidences.” In the same strain B.C.Chakravorty is of the opinion that “the development of characters is neither logical nor realistic. There are many absurdities and inconsistencies in this book.”²⁶ Masti Venkatesa lyengar too joins in condemning the novel as he feels that the foundation is weak and “its superstructure commonplace and one has not a feeling of much satisfaction in its art when laying it down.”

Though a majority of critics do not consider it worthy of Tagore’s genius, none can deny its popularity which can be “gauged from the fact that with the exception of *Gitanjali*, no other book of Tagore has been translated into so many languages.”

As in the case of *Binodini*, Tagore’s narration in *The Wreck* is simple, straightforward and effective and also free from poetical rhapsodies and intellectual discussions. Here, Tagore does not portray the psychological conflicts of the major characters, as in *Binodini*, *The Home and the World* and *Chaturanga*. Further, unlike in *Gora*, no topical, political and social problems are highlighted. Humayun Kabir rightly points out that “the plot gains at the cost of theme”. *The Wreck* is a novel based on a series of accidents and coincidences, interwoven together and of them the boatwreck is the pivotal incident. It has to be studied as a purely romantic novel, where everything has to be taken for granted without applying the laws of probability and human psychology. Though the foundation of the novel is weak and full of accidents and coincidences yet the “...characters are, by and large, solid and stand out as men and women of flesh and blood.”

The novel points out how a single accident, the boatwreck of the two marriage parties, plays havoc with the careers of Kamala. Ramesh and Hemnalini, leads to mistaken identities and causes them much mental anguish and turmoil. Tagore tries to highlight, through the novel, the problems of the newly emerging educated class and their conflicts with the traditionalists. Further, he points out the absurdities and complications that result from the orthodox Hindu, negotiated type of marriages. Tagore presents in the novel the first modern educated woman,

Hemnalini who is the precursor of the other modern women characters like Sucharita, Lolite, Labanya and Ela of his later novels. Lastly, he points out how the Brahmo and Hindu religious conflicts break up family relationships, as in the case of Kshemankari. This theme is further developed in his next novel, Gora.

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