

**PORTRAYAL/TREATMENT OF CHILDREN & ITS CONTEMPORARY  
RELEVANCE IN THE SHORT – STORIES OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

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**Abstract**

*Rabindranath Tagore was almost the pioneer or the first Bengali writer to put on a pedestal the short story to a serious art-form. He wrote about 100 short stories. Most of his short stories were written in the 1890s and published in many periodicals. His 36 short stories appeared in Sadhana. He amalgamates bleak realism and poetic idealism in his stories which reflected the contemporary life in rural and urban Bengal. In Tagore's writings, children are portrayed in varied ways as he is a master of child psychology. He has treated children with utmost sympathy highlighting their miseries and longings in his stories like The Post – Master, The Home – Coming, The Castaway, Kabuliwalah, Inheritance, The Ghat's Story and The Exercise – Book. Ratan, Phatik, Nilkanta, Mini, Nitai Pal, Kusum and Uma are the memorable child – characters ever created by short story writer. The recurring theme of the stories is the 'tears in things', the heart-aches at the core of life; also the beauty that is sometimes refracted by tears, the truth that defies the lie or the perpendicular mad thrill of pain. Rabindranath Tagore has drawn these characters with utmost care, psychological depth and sympathy. Thus this article is an attempt to investigate Tagore's perception on children through his short stories.*

Rabindranath Tagore is a master of child psychology. He has treated children with utmost sympathy highlighting their miseries and longings in his stories like The Post – Master, The Home – Coming, The Castaway, Kabuliwalah, Inheritance, The Ghat's Story and The Exercise – Book. Ratan, Phatik, Nilkanta, Mini, Nitai Pal, Kusum and Uma are the memorable child – characters ever created by short story writer. Rabindranath has drawn these characters with utmost care, psychological depth and sympathy.

The Post – Master is a pathetic tale of an orphaned village girl named Ratan. Ratan was about twelve or thirteen. It seemed unlikely that she would get married. When a Calcutta boy posted in a village post – office as a Post – Master, Ratan did housework for him in return for

a little food. Once the Post – Master fell ill, Ratan served him like his mother. She called the doctor, gave him pill at the right time, cooked him food, stayed at his bedside all night and made enquiries about his health from time to time. After getting well, the Postmaster made up his mind to go back to Calcutta. He offered some money to the girl but she declined to touch it. She clung to his feet and begged him to take her home with him but when he failed to oblige her, the girl fled away weeping. She wandered near the post office every day with tears in her eyes with a faint hope that “Dadababu might return; this was enough to tie her to the spot, prevent her from going far.”<sup>1</sup>

The Home – Coming is a story of Phatik Chakravarti who lived in his village with his mother and younger brother, Makhan. It is a psychological study of two growing young boys whose egos were so strong that they always clashed with each other for their self – importance and became nuisance for their mother. The story narrates how Phatik was badly treated in his uncle’s family at Calcutta when he was sent with his uncle by his mother for getting education in the city. When he joined his uncle’s family at Calcutta, he was treated as an unwelcome guest and an additional burden to the family by his aunt. The rough treatment he received from his aunt gave him a feeling of physical oppression. He was treated in his class as the most backward boy. Failing to get congenial atmosphere at his uncle’s home and also at his school, he longed for his village home and the company of his friends in the village. One day when he was returning from school, he got a headache and the malaria fever. He thought that in that sick condition he would be a great nuisance to his aunt. So he escaped. Next day he was found by the police in a very critical condition. He was badly drenched and covered with mud. He was delirious and muttering something. When his mother arrived, she flung on him saying, “Phatik, my darling, my darling.” Phatik rolled his eyes but could not recognize anyone. He just uttered: “Mother, the holidays have come.” He died there unloved and longing for his home.

The story brings home the point that no parents should leave their adolescent child to any other family for a longer stay because no child at his growing age is tolerable to any other family. His own home is a paradise for him. It is at the adolescent age that a boy or girl longs for love and recognition. Phatik could not get any good treatment in his uncle’s family on account of his drawbacks which are normally found in every boy or girl passing through adolescence. The author writes:

To leave home and mother, and go to a strange place is hell for a boy of this age. To live with loveless indifference all around is like walking on thorn. This is the age when normally a conception forms of women as wonderful, heavenly creatures; to be cold – shouldered by them is terribly hard to bear.<sup>2</sup>

The Castaway is one of the best short – stories of Tagore. It presents an Interesting insight into the psychology of an adolescent boy, Nilkanta. It deals with the psychological reactions of an orphaned boy to his favorable and adverse circumstances of life. Nilkanta was a parentless boy of seventeen. He had long curly hair and big expressive eyes. He had no sign yet of hair on his face. Innocence and youth shone in his large eyes. He had been a member of theatrical party. He knew singing, dancing and acting. Once in a stormy night, his theatrical troupe was sailing in a boat in the Ganges. The boat capsized and only Nilkanta

could escape death. After his miraculous escape from death, Nilkanta reached the garden of village house where he was given dry clothes and milk. The members of that village house were Sharat, his mother and his wife, Kiran. Kiran had been brought to that village for the recovery from her illness. Kiran lacked company in that house. As soon as she got little well, she pressed her husband to take her back home. But the arrival of Nilkanta gave her some relief because she got company and fun from him. She felt happy, and Sharat also felt relieved. Her mother - in- law, too, was pleased to see a Brahmin boy being helped and served.

Nilkanta used to sing devotional songs, dance and play the part of a lady in a female dress in order to entertain Kiran. So Kiran loved him and treated him as a member of her own family. Kiran's too much fondness of him made him naughty. He started taking liberty with her. He took pleasure in smoking Sharat's 'hookah'. He often used to go out with Sharat's best silk Umbrella. He made friends with all those he met and invited them to Sharat's garden. So he was beaten up by Sharat but he was used to beating. He had known in his whole life only two things – beating and eating. He was a glutton. He had “an immense capacity for eating.” He never refused a good thing however often it was offered to him. So Sharat and his mother wanted to send him back but Kiran did not allow this to happen. Under the loving care of Kiran, Nilkanta grew up fast. His age was fully revealed. He felt ashamed when he was treated as a boy of Kiran. He was also unwilling to put on a lady's dress and play her part because he was in puberty.

After sometime Satish, the young brother of Sharat came to spend his vacations with them. Kiran got a new companion. She began passing her time talking and laughing with Satish. Nilkanta felt neglected. So he got jealous of Satish. He neglected his food; he developed a bad temper, and started roaming about in the streets. Now the time came for Kiran's departure from that place.

She asked Nilkanta to go back to his native place. Nilkanta burst into tears. Satish had a very pretty and costly inkstand. A day before the departure of the family, it was found missing. Satish charged Nilkanta with its theft. Kiran questioned Nilkanta but he only shed tears. Kiran declared that Nilkanta had not stolen the inkstand.

Feeling a pity for Nilkanta, Kiran took some clothes and money and went to Nilkanta's room to put them into his box. To her great surprise, she found the inkstand in his box. Unnoticed by Kiran, Nilkanta came at that instant and saw Kiran holding the inkstand. He went out without uttering a word. Kiran put her presents and inkstand back into the box. Next morning, Nilkanta was found nowhere. Kiran took out the inkstand from the box and threw it into the river. The whole family left the place. Only Nilkanta's dog was seen whining along the river bank as if its heart would break.

The Kabuliwallah is a moving story of a fruit – seller from Kabul and a little Bengali girl named Mini. Tagore has created a tragedy out of their simple and innocent lives. In those days, the Kabuliwallahs were not allowed to enter any middle class Bengali family because they were regarded as child – lifters. Mini who was five – year – old was very talkative. She was very fond of Rahamat, the Kabuliwallah. So Rahamat, too, was very fond of Mini because he saw the image of his own daughter in Mini. He used to offer dry fruits like raisins

and apricots. Whenever Mini saw him walking on the streets before her house, she used to shout and shriek at him. The Kabuliwallah came nearly every day to Mini and bribed her eager little heart with jokes and dry fruits. Rahamat would often say to her. "Little one doesn't ever go off to your 'svasur-bari.'" Though they were unequal in age, the usual innocent jokes always passed between the two friends. Once, the Kabuliwallah had a brawl with his debtor in Calcutta. He stabbed him. He was imprisoned for eight years. After he was released from prison, he came to Mini's house with his hands full of fruit-gifts. It was Mini's wedding day. So the Kabuliwallah was not allowed to see her. While parting, he offered fruits to Mini's father saying:

Just as you have a daughter, so do I have one, in my own country? It is with her in mind that I came with a few raisins for your daughter. I didn't come to trade with you.<sup>3</sup>

Mini's father could understand that the Kabuliwallah was as much a father as he himself was. Mini dressed as bride came timidly into the room. As soon as the Kabuliwallah saw her, he sighed deeply understanding clearly that his own daughter would have grown up too since he last saw her, and he would not find her exactly as she was before. He pictured to herself the barren mountains of Afghanistan.

Inheritance is a heart-breaking story of Nitai Pal who became a victim to the selfishness, superstition and greed of his grandfather, Jagananath. Jagananath Kunda was so miser and ruthless that his daughter-in-law died without medicine, and his son, Brindaban Kunda left his house with his son, Gokul. It was difficult for Jagananath to live in his empty house without any one to talk to. He persuaded his grandson Gokul to stay with him but he did not listen to him.

One day Jagananath noticed a strange boy by the mango trees commanding over the village children and directing them in a new variety of mischief. The old man approached him and asked him his name. The boy told him that his name was Nitai Pal. When the old man made further enquiries about him, the latter told him that since his father sent him to school by force, he had run away from home. The boy agreed to go and live with the old man without any protest. Whenever the boy threatened the old man to leave his house, the latter tempted the boy saying, "Little brother, I'll leave all my property to you."

One day the old man heard the news that a man called Damodar Pal was coming to his village to look for his missing son. Nitai was very much troubled by this news. He got ready to run away. Jagananath assured him that he would hide him in a secret place where no one would ever find him. When the whole village was asleep at night, the old man accompanied by Nitai reached a derelict idolless temple in a forest. The old man removed a stone slab from the floor of the temple and went down by the ladder. There was a sort of room below. There was a reed mat in the centre surrounded by brass pitchers, vermilion powder, sandalwood paste, a garland of flowers and other objects of ritual worship placed before the mat. The pitchers were full of gold and silver coins. The old man told the boy that he would give them all to him that night.

The old man anointed the boy with sandal paste, put a vermilion mark on it and placed the garland round his neck. He sat facing the boy and started muttering mantras. He dragged the brass pots one by one before the boy and made him repeat each time: "I shall count and hand

over every coin to Brindaban Kunda or his son Gokul Chandra Kunda or legal heir” On account of the lamp smoke and their heated breath, the boy could not breathe. The old man climbed up the ladder and replaced the stone slab on the floor. He faintly heard Nitai calling him and his father. In order to muffle the voice of Nitai, the old man piled more and more soil. When he came out of the fields, he faced his son, Brindaban who had come in search of his son. He told him that his son’s name was Nitai Pal, and he renamed himself Damodar out of shame. The old man dragged his son to the temple and asked him if he could hear anyone calling “Baba”, but no sound was heard. Four years later the old man died. Before his death, he was in his delirium. The author writes:

He groped in the air with both hands and asked: “Nitai, who took away my ladder?”<sup>4</sup>

The Ghat’s story is a tearful tale of a child widow, Kusum. This was Tagore’s first story inspired in 1884 by the memories of the ghat at Chandra Nagar and the sad and untimely death of Tagore’s sister-in-law, Kadambari Debi. Kusum was widowed at the age of eight. Her husband used to work in a far – off place. She had seen him only for a day or two. She received the news of her widowhood by post. She returned again to her native place on the bank of the Ganga. She began to grow day by day with youthful beauty but her growth and beauty were veiled over by her sad face, faded clothes and quiet nature. Ten years passed in that way.

Once, a tall, fair young ascetic with grave and radiant face came to take shelter in the Shiva Temple of the village. The news of his arrival spread through the village. The women crowded the temple to touch the holy man’s feet. Within a short time, men and women came to visit him every day with various purposes. A few more months passed in that way.

At the time of the solar eclipse in the month of Chaitra, people from far – off villages came to bathe in the Ganga and get a glimpse of the sannyasin. Among them were several women from the village where the family of Kusum’s husband lived. When some of the women of that village saw the sannyasin, they cried out that he was Kusum’s husband, the younger son of Chatterjee.

One late evening, Kusum came to the ghat to meet the sannyasin. When they met, they looked at each other as if they had known each other from a previous birth. Kusum presented herself at the feet of the sannyasin. Thereafter she began to visit the temple every day to listen the sannyasin’s discourses on religion. She carried out temple’s task every day. She picked flowers for the puja. She fetched water from the Ganga and washed the temple floor. She never neglected the service of the deity and never disobeyed the sannyassin. But after some days, she was no longer seen either in the temple or on the ghat. Sometime later, Kusum and the sannyassin met on the ghat one evening. When the sannyassin asked her why she had neglected the service of God, she replied: “Master, I am a sinful woman. That’s why I’m neglectful.”

She further said that she saw as the lord of her heart in her dream. Her dream ended but her trance did not. She again said:

“The image of that dream rose again and again in my mind. I fled in fear, but the image remained with me. Since then my heart has known no peace – everything has become dark to me.”<sup>5</sup>



Hearing this, the sannyassin made up his mind to leave that place for ever. He asked her to forget and never to see him. Kusum bowed before the sannyassin and descended slowly into the water of the Ganga. She ended her sport that evening. She took a sudden plunge into the river to relieve her of that curse of her child widowhood. This was irony even in her dream, nothing to say of her re-marriage in real life.

The Exercise – Book is a story of Uma was not allowed to read and write by conservative people in the family of her father-in-law. Shortly before the date of the story, the Age of Consent Bill had been passed with the object of stopping child marriages. The story reflected Rabindranath's opposition to the Hindu revivalism and to child marriages. This revolutionary movement aimed to prop up decadent religious and social orthodoxy, partly by grotesque scientific defenses of old customs and superstitions.

The story is concerned with three – note – books, belonging to Uma, her brother Gobindalal and her husband Pyarimohan. The note – books of the two young men resounded with the revivalist Hindu rhetoric. Uma's exercise-book, by contrast reflected nothing but her own heart. As soon as Uma learned to write, she became a great nuisance in the family. She made unsteady lines and wrote big unformed letters with a piece of coal. She wrote on every page of the copy of her sister-in-law in stubby pencil. She didn't spare even her father's account book. One day he took her brother's pen and ink and wrote across his essay in very large letters. Her brother beat her and confiscated her writing implements. After a day or so, he returned her looted property and presented her with a bound thick exercise-book. From that day on, Uma began to write on that exercise-book. At night she kept it under her pillow. During the day she kept it under her arm or in her lap. Uma was then seven years old. In the next two years, her exercise-book was her companion in her school. When Uma was nine years old, she was married to Pyarimohan, a literary associate of Gobindalal. She went to husband's house with her exercise-book. In the first few days, she wrote nothing. After her domestic servant was gone, she wrote that she wanted to go back to her mother. When the ladies of the house saw her writing with pen on her exercise book, they considered it a sure prelude to her widowhood because a Hindu wife was not allowed to wield pen and paper. The matter was reported to Pyarimohan who also believed that "the power of the female was vanquished through education and study and the woman concerned was likely to be a widow." Pyarimohan snatched the exercise-book, filled it with barbed essays expending his elaborate theories. "But there was" "writes the author "no benefactor of human kind to seize that book and destroy it."6

Thus, the boys like Phatik, Nilkanta, and Nitai Pal who were on the threshold of their puberty suffered on account of the emergence of their manhood and mishandling by their families and society. The girl children like Ratan, Mini, Kusum, and Uma were the victims of Hindu orthodoxy. On account of her orphanage and starvation, Ratan had no chance of getting married. Kusum and Uma without reaching their puberty were married and were deprived of their education and physical growth. Mini, too, was deprived of her proper education and sent to the house of her father-in-law at the age of thirteen. This was the plight of children in Bengal in Rabindranath's time. The writer has treated such children with utmost kindness and

sympathy and drawn the attention of social reformers of those days to the maladies which afflicted the Hindu society of Bengal.

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