

Representation of Children in the Select Children's Narratives of Rabindranath Tagore

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'Childhood shows the man, as morning shows the day'—Milton

'Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man. On the seashore of endless worlds children meet. They build their houses with sand, and they play with empty shells. Tempest roams in the pathless sky, ships are wrecked in trackless water, death is abroad and children play'- Here is the Tagore's concept of children for you. The greater majority of Tagore's fiction was composed in order to be enacted by the pupils of the school at Shantineketan. The themes are never childish, but always of an idealistic and inspiring nature, providing the highest and best material for growing minds. It is often been said that the world of Tagore's children's literature fails to reveal normal boys and girls. They are mostly meditative creatures with inward life, or wild and wayward in their rebellion against the prison regime of society. It is said that he did not understand real children, normal and ordinary, but was so engrossed in his poet's idea of what a child might be, that the delicate and sensitive creatures, have no counterpart in actual life and are quite alien to a child's conception of children. There is some truth in this allegation, for it is the elders who perhaps enjoy his children's literature more than children themselves.

Tagore and Children

Tagore wrote a great deal for children. Tagore was attracted to children's literature generally. He must have known the work of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, and no doubt much else. His writings show their traces and memories. More importantly, he had a deep life-long interest in children's rhymes and tales from Bengal: in fact it was largely owing to his efforts that these began to be recorded and studied seriously. He wrote an enthusiastic introduction for a classic collection of fairy tales called 'Grandmother's Bag of Tales', written in wonderfully lively and original style by a great children's writer, Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. Tagore's works are full of adult fairy tales. He knows that adults go on being children, while children are already adults. Hence his writing for children reflects various styles, sometimes in a very serious vein, because he thinks children should be taken seriously. Many poems, stories and playlets make satirical points. Besides moralizing, Tagore tried to teach his young readers all kinds of other matters. As an educationist, Tagore believed that learning should be pleasurable, that it brought the children in contact with nature, and blended with a natural and productive way of life. The children should be taken round the countryside, shown the stars and planets at night, told about plants and animals. Tagore's writings for children express empathy. Throughout his long writing career, Tagore never gave up writing for children and his inner youthful spirit never deserted him. These writings span a spectrum of genres, from fiction and poetry to drama, satire, essays, letters and autobiography. Tagore does not take his young readers lightly. To be full of wonder and curiosity, with a vivid fancy, a free-ranging intellect and a bold and questioning spirit that for him is the essence of childhood. Young people, he realizes, are neither foolish nor drawn only to happy things. The child's inner world is not only full of joy and innocence, but also haunted by fear, destruction, violence, rage and jealousy.

Tagore's writings for children are not confined to a naïve fairy-tale world; they also take life's darker side on board. Sometimes, the line dividing children's literature from adult literature is thin, even non-existent. Tagore does not assume that children can't discriminate between the truth and falsehood, good and bad, justice and injustice. Many of his writings for the young have a strong ethical core. Some works such as 'Bolai' highlight the beauty of nature and also its fragility and need for care and protection. In other, more somber pieces, he dwells upon social

evils such as the gap between the rich and the poor [as in 'Two Bighas of Land] or the exploitation of workers by the owners of industry ['Madho']. In heroic poems such as 'The Supreme Gift', he foregrounds the legendary courage of our forebears. Tagore is against hollow book-learning; he remembers having chafed at the discipline of formal education when he was child. 'The Parrot's Story' satirizes the stifling of the child's imagination by enforced textbook-oriented learning. In contrast, 'A Feast for Rats' presents the ideal schoolmaster: gentle, forbearing and attuned to the playful spirit of his pupils.

Not all the children in Tagore's works are happy. Many are lonely, sad and full of yearning. Some are misfits in the worlds they inhabit; others victims of unjust social and personal circumstances. A few like Amal in 'Post Office', possess a gravity and wisdom far beyond their age. Some, like Bolai or Sudha, are more at home in the world of nature than in their family circles. The clue to this lies perhaps in Tagore's own childhood, recalled vividly in 'Jibansmriti and Chhelebel'. For he was a lonely child, lost in the world of his own imagination, longing for love, haunted by irrational fears and unable to conform to the traditional system of education.

Representation of Children

This section ponders over few children representatives in the short stories written for children. They are Kusmi, the granddaughter in fantasy stories, Ratan in 'The Postmaster' and Uma in the 'Exercise book'.

Kusmi in 'The King's Palace', 'The Big News' and 'The Fairy':

The King's Palace is a heartwarming story of childhood and fantasy. The story has three characters Kusmi, Grandpa and Aunt Iru. It begins with Kusmi questioning Grandpa. She thought it was Aunt Iru who was cleverer than the Grandpa, who managed to cast a spell on and charm him. But Grandpa clarifies that in order to be charmed, one need not be clever but should be silly. That's why love is called the art of charming. Grandpa turns nostalgic and narrates his childhood reminiscences to Kusmi. Aunt Iru kept Grandpa amazing all the time though she was younger to him. She told him about the secret palace, a King's seven- mansioned palace present right inside the house. When asked about its whereabouts she would say 'you can't see it unless you know the magic words'. She made him imagine about all fantastic things as she would never

reveal any secrets from her magical bag. She had even seen fairies keeping house and not very far from the home. She had made friends by gathering flowers for them. She never took Grandpa with her to meet the fairies as she thought they would turn into butterflies. One fine day she got married and the secret too went with her. So Grandpa could never see the King's palace. After listening to this story Kusmi fancies the King's palace. Tagore portrays a beautiful and fantastic childhood through this story by creating Kusmi.

The Big News is again a story narrated by Grandpa to Kusmi. She pesters him to tell her the big news in order to be educated through it. But Grandpa replies the bag of big news is too heavy as it is stuffed with rubbish. So he promises to tell her real news which is better than big news. He begins narrating a story of oars, sail and the boatman. A violent quarrel had taken place between the oars and the sail. The oars complain about the fight to the boatman that 'we shan't put up with this anymore. That sail of yours all puffed up with pride calls us a vulgar mob. He thinks he is superior. You must decide once and for all who's worth more to you. Boatman sensing the trouble whispered to them that they must not pay attention to the sail's words and without them the boat wouldn't move at all. The oars were happy at his reply and continued their work. Then the boatman afraid of the sail whispered in its ears, 'who says you only run a boat? That's just a crude labor, quiet unworthy of you. But the boatman was sure that one day the world will learn that it's the oars that move the boats through tide and storm and rain. The Grandpa ends the story by saying that the really important news is always tiny, like a seed. This way Tagore educated the children about how one should avoid and ignore the rubbish news and learn lessons from the real news which is tiny yet powerful.

The Fairy is indeed a fairy tale dealing with the fantastical elements. In the story, Kusmi asks the Grandpa to tell her a true story for a change as she is bored with unreal ones. Grandpa replies 'there are two classes of things in this world. One is the true, the other is the more-than-true. I deal with more-than-true'. When Kusmi asks what is more-than-true, he tells her that she is a fairy from a fairyland and that's more-than-true. Kusmi jumps with delight and asks him how did he find out. Then Grandpa narrates the story that one night when she was fast asleep moonlight came pouring through the window and fell on her face. He saw a scout sent by the Fairy king and

the king himself with his white shawl sweeping into her room. The king looked at Kusmi but couldn't decide whether she was a runaway fairy. He thought she must be a fairy of this very earth and went back. Kusmi reached the earth from the fairyland when she was sky riding on a butterfly's back in a forest of asphodel. She caught sight of a ferry-boat moored at the horizon. It was made of white clouds, rocked in the wind and drifted off till the earth, where Kusmi was picked by her mother up in her arms. Kusmi after listening to the story asks, is the fairyland faraway? The Grandpa replies it is very close by and says your truth will remain here on the earth, while your more-than-true soars up, up and away, where none of us can reach. He also promises Kusmi that he would tell her, the way to fairyland as he is a very good dealer in things more-than-true. Through this story Tagore narrates that every child is indeed a fairy or an angel sent to the earth by the above fairy land.

Ratan in 'The Postmaster': **The Postmaster** is a heart touching story of Ratan. The story begins with the postmaster's transfer to a remote village Ulapur. His stay at the village was uncomfortable and he felt lonely. He had the only company of Ratan the village girl, who would cook for him and do errands. He would listen to her stories at night and wonder about his solitude of exile. To spend his time he started teaching Ratan. But one day the master fell sick and Ratan takes very good care of him until he was alright. After few days the postmaster decides to leave the village as he fell sick and ill often. Ratan could not bear this. She feels left out suddenly and grows sad. Though she requests the postmaster to take her along, that was impossible for the master. She bursts into tears as he leaves. The master in his transient detachment asks himself, 'there are so many separations, so many deaths in one's life. What is the point of going back? In the world who is really one's own? Tagore depicts the reality and absurdity of life through this philosophical story where Ratan too had to experience the bitter pains of life and realize.

Uma in 'Exercise Book': **The Exercise Book** is a beautiful tale of a girl obsessed with her exercise book. Her name is Uma. Since her childhood, she had a fancy for scribbling along the wall, in the books and on floor. Once she overwrote in one of the books of her elder brother

Gopal. She was punished for it by her brother but very soon she was also consoled by his gift, the exercise book. From that day the book became her possession and was accompanied everywhere. She would write few rhymes, prose, poems, original compositions and fables. She also would express her personal feelings in the book about her friend Hari, and the maid Jashi. But one fine day she was married off to Pyarimohan. She had to leave her exercise book at home. But her Jashi had taken it along as she was supposed to stay with Uma for few days. The exercise book was a part of the heirloom of her father's home; a loving memento of her very brief association with her birthplace; a brief chronicle of the days spent under her parent's care and a promise of a taste of girlish freedom amidst her premature housewifery. After marriage she did not have time to spend for the book. But soon she began writing as she missed it. She wrote 'Jashi has gone back home; I want to go to my mother too, if Dada takes me back home for once, I'll never spoil his writing again, Dada, I fall at your feet, take me home just once; I will never make you angry'. But one day she was caught writing in her book by her husband Pyarimohan. The book was seized and destroyed by him. This story by Tagore narrates the suppressed world of the girl Uma and how she becomes the victim in the dominating patriarchal world.

'Feast of delight is more an inward than an outward matter' was the first lesson of Tagore's childhood. A child's possessions are few and small, but he needs no more to give him delight. His short stories contain motifs from fairy tales reworked into real life, adult experiences. Some of them have a moral but are written in a playful manner that satirizes any serious message for the young reader.

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