



The Girl Child Characters and its Interrelation to Adolescent and Child Psychology in Rabindranath Tagore's Fiction

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Abstract: This article explores Tagore's insight into human psyche and behavior, especially the child psychology. The characters which linger longest in memory are those of children and adolescents. It seems that Indian girl child steps straight to adolescence and is expected to be responsible and wise. This review is all about Tagore's most heart touching girl characters that he created in his short stories. Moreover, Tagore's girl child characters appear either as child wives, child brides or widows and seldom as little children. In fact, she is deprived of the limitless joy of childhood experiences. However, nineteenth century literature had numerous girl characters between the age of two and ten. Yet there are no counterparts to the most memorable and unforgettable female characters such as Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, Flora in *Little Dorrit*, or Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*.

In many of his short stories the character of girl child before becoming a wife, is presented as a child and daughter, uninitiated into the realities of life. She is often the favorite of her father, the pupil of her mother, the playmate of her siblings. She is innocent in looks, in thoughts and in behavior as a friendly child, she is pleasant and cheerful; and, as a pampered child, she is stubborn and subject to tantrums. The delineation of girl child in his fiction shows Tagore's powers of observation which contribute to his understanding of child and adolescent psychology.

Keywords: Human psyche, child psychology, adolescence, girl characters, Tagore's power of observation.

1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), pioneer of Bengali short stories, has produced some magnificent work of art through his life. He contributed in all kinds of literary branches including poems, novels and short stories. Tagore's novels and short stories are of various kinds. The characters are drawn from several classes and walks of life. They are remarkable for their blend of observation and imagination, of pity and irony, of nature and life, and bear wide humanity. Among all these creations, his short stories created strong emotional attachment among readers. Stories are well crafted, evocative and sympathetic tales of life, which are full of deep understanding and compassion for the humankind.

Tagore's realistic portrayal offers a new insight of his characterization. His stories identify the pathos of children mainly girls which makes the study an enriching experience (K. V. Dominic, 2009).

As described in Wikipedia, girl is a young human from birth through childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Whereas, psychology is the study of human behavior and mind.

This article presents some of the most memorable girl child characters from his short stories, which include, the agony of a dumb girl in "*Subha*" who seeks refuge and a lasting relationship with nature. The poignant story of



Kusum as told by an inanimate object in “*River Stairs*”. The tantrums of a pampered girl in “*Quest*”, the dilemma of a motherless girl in “*Editor*”. The issue of girl education in “*The Exercise book*” and the novella “*Four Chapters*”. And the unforgettable character of five years old, an energetic, lovable and garrulous little girl, Mini, in “*Kabuliwalah*”. The latter is a short story of a tale of human relationships and the effect of time on human emotions.

Almost all his short stories show a remarkable insight into the child psychology, their success and failures, their joys and sorrows, their hopes and disappointments, and are portrayed convincingly in his work. (Sharda Iyer, 2003).

2. Literature Review:

The Indian novel in English has retrieved sad situations by creating some unforgettable girl children, such as Raka in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountains*. Character of Estha and Sophie in Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* And Evie Jamila and Tony Catrack in Rushdie’s *Midnight Children* (Sharda Iyer, 2003). However, we cannot forget some memorable child characters in the work of Rabindranath Tagore, R. K. Narayan and Kamla Das. They too identify that children have an ability to create their own space. Children have strong imagination and are instinctive, they have a vivid perception. They see life as black or white where their enemies are demons and friends as angels. Their joys and sorrows are absolute and eternal. Therefore, it’s not easy to perceive the world from the point of view of children. Nevertheless, Tagore through his short stories and novels has shown such an outstanding insight of child psychology. (Sharda Iyer, 2003).

Prof. K.V. Dominic (2009) offers a new insight into the unexplored zone of Tagore’s characterization to identify the pathos of man, women and children. As a result, these poignant characters arise out of Tagore’s realism. The analysis of the short stories and the character reveals the futility of capitalistic desire and the weakness of the social structure in Tagore’s time.

His stories expose the sad predicament of women in the contemporary Bengali society against the odds of feudal system draws attention to the unjust suppression of feminine rights. Children are shown as the victims of prevailing system of education and parental upbringing that constrain the natural genius of children and which make the learning a painful experience.

Prasad et al. (2015) further described that in India, girls are expected to acquire certain housekeeping skills such as, cooking, cleaning, knitting., as all these are recognized as feminine characteristics. Girls are expected to accept male domination and ignore their own needs, especially in rural areas.

Meenakshi Bharat (1998), states that the most notable and recurring feature, i.e. the theme of childhood and the use of child motif, was repeated in the English novel in the Indian subcontinent. In the past ten years, the women novelists such as Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man* (1998), Mrinal Pande’s *Daughter’s Daughter* (1990), and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) draws attention to the fact that the child and childhood have always been an issue of concern for the Indian novelists. They emphasize the necessity of using the child consciousness as the basic narrative technique, particularly the girl child that serves to focus the issue of gender.

In one of Tagore’s short story *The Editor*, the narrator seems to tell us that playthings with one’s baby daughter is one thing, and bringing her up is quite another, and that it is only mother who knows how to bring up a child:

When my wife was alive, I didn’t give much thought to Prabha. I was more involved with her mother than with her. I was happy to watch her play and laugh, to listen to her half-formed speech and respond to her affection, I would, whenever I was in a good mood, romp around with her; but the moment she started to cry I would return her to her mother’s arms and made a speedy escape. I never considered what care and effort were needed to bring up a child.

Her mother died when Prabha was aged



six years. It was for her father now to give her double affection—that of the father as well as that of the mother. In the end, however it turned out that Prabha had to shoulder the responsibility of running the house at a tender age. Circumstances robbed her of her childhood for no fault of her own. Her father says:

But with the sudden and untimely death of my wife, Prabha's upbringing passed to her father. He says in the following lines:

I don't quite know whose concern was stronger: mine to bring up the motherless daughter with the double affection, or hers to look after wifeless father. But from the age of six, she took charge of the house.

The narrator does not discharge his paternal responsibilities towards the child. He says it "tickled" him to give himself under her charge. This is pure selfishness on his part. He should have done most of his work himself. The reader expects him to pick up his clothes and umbrella himself, to feed his child rather than be fed by her, to dress her rather be dressed by her, to settle her down to sleep, and to be her sole guardian. It is improper that a six-year-old should become the guardian of her father.

The narrator is unemployed. He is worried about his daughter's marriage which, he says, "would cost a lot of money". He is too naïve to believe that writing books in Bengali would provide him the requisite money for Prabha's marriage with a "suitable groom."

The narrator wrote a satirical farce, which was performed on the stage. People said that it was good. This sudden taste of fame made him spend a whole day in writing farces. He is honest enough to admit that the result of whole-time writing is "dangerous", because he became irritable when he was disturbed in his writing work, so much so that even he would snub his little motherless daughter, which hurt her feelings. All the love and care, which Prabha had been bestowing on him, was being met with a rebuff.

The narrator says his farces earned him fame, but not the amount of money he desired

for his daughter's marriage.

He seems to have been so intoxicated with his limited and short-lived fame that the thought of money was not "uppermost in my mind." This shows that he was not loyal to and steadfast in his purpose. He is happy at the success of his farces. He has forgotten his paternal duty to his daughter and feels a sense of elevation by achieving what he calls "my fame".

The money earned was not at all proportionate to the hilarity of my farces or my fame. Nor, at the time, was money uppermost in my mind. Meanwhile, in unthought-of places, grooms suitable for Prabha were growing up who would set other fathers free from their duty to their daughters, and I failed to notice.

Prabha was now scared of me. She did not dare approach unless she was invited. She had come to see that a clay doll was a much better companion than a father who wrote satires.

The ending of the story is poignant if not satisfactory for several reasons. The narrator gives up his job as a salaried editor. He is penniless once again. We are not told what Prabha's ailment is. Her father does not talk of taking her to the doctor. Since she is so weak that her father has to lift her in his arms, a doctor has to be called. The narrator carried her indoors. Does it suggest that, in her fever, she was lying outdoors? Will she survive or die a premature death like her mother? The reader is left guessing.

When her mother died, I held Prabha in my lap. Now after cremating her stepmother, my writing, I lifted her into my arms again and carried her indoors.

In yet another story *the Quest*, Tagore introduces a pampered girl, the only child of her parents, and shows us her tantrums. It so happened that Matilal babu, Zamindar of Kathaliya, his wife Annapurna, and their little daughter, Charusashi, were returning home by boat. When their boat was moored near a riverside market, they took a boy Tarapada, aged fifteen or sixteen, who wanted to be dropped at Nandigram. The boy was fair-skinned and had



handsome looks. He was very helpful not only to Matilal and his family but also to the boat's crew. Everybody liked him, but Charu felt jealous of him and hated him, because he began to share her parent's love and affection like a son, of which Charu held the monopoly until he arrived.

Charu was her parents' only child, sole claimant on their affection. There was no end to her willfulness and obstinacy. She had her own opinions about food, clothes and hair-styles, but there was no consistency in them. Whenever she was invited out, her mother was terrified that she would make impossible demands over demands. If her hair-style displeased her, to do or redo it made no difference, and merely led to a tantrum. She was like this with everything. But if she was in a good mood, she was amenable to anything-and would show excessive love for her mother, hugging her, kissing her, laughing in an unbalanced way. The girl was a puzzle.

But now her volatile feelings began to concentrate in fierce animosity towards Tarapada, and she caused exceptional trouble to her parents. At meals, she scowled and pushed her plate away. She would complain about the cooking, slap the maid and object to everything. The more Tarapada's accomplishment impressed her and others, the angrier she became. She would not admit that he had any virtue at all. Undeniable evidence of them made her even more critical.

The beginning of Tagore's novella *Four Chapters* has for its theme the necessity of girls mixing with boys and the necessity of girl education. Indranath, a European- educated scientist, is obliged to accept the post of a teacher in a Government College where there is no laboratory. The door to advancement is shut against him, because of his meetings on a few occasions with an Indian political suspect. He has sent for publication an article in Ela's name, stressing the need that women must go among boys, even into the dens of intoxication, at the risk of being laid open to the fate of political suspects. Ela agrees with him on the basis of her own experience:

I do so love these horrid boys-where can you find their equals? I've been with them since we were in college and I lost my parents. At first, I confess, they used to write all kinds of things about girls on the blackboard. Their pranks made some of the girls angry, but I always sided the boys. I knew it was because they were unused to meet females in these surroundings They couldn't behave properly. When they got used to us, their whole tone softened down to naturalness, occasionally, perhaps to an even softer note.

In one of Tagore's short story "*Exercise-book*", he emphasizes on girl education. The story discusses the theme of it, when children learn how to write, they write whatever comes into their mind on everything they happen to find-the wall of the house, the page of some book even an account book, and the like. So was the case with Uma.

As soon as she learnt to write Uma caused tremendous trouble. She would write "*Rain patters, leaves flutter*" on every wall of the house with a piece of chalk, in childish, curving letters. In her father's daily account-book, in the middle of his calculations, she wrote:

He who learns to write

Drives a horse and cart.

One day she scribbled in the note-book of her elder brother:

So well behaved is young Gopal

Whatever you give, he eats it all.

When her brother saw it, he was filled with rage and anger, that he smacked Uma and took away her pencil box. The little girl cried her heart out. Later on, when her brother softened a little, he returned her pencil box and gave her a well-bound, nicely rules exercise-book

Uma was seven years old at the time. From then on, that exercise-book was under her pillow every night, and in her lap or under her arm all day long. When, with her hair plaited, Uma was taken along by the maid to the girls' school in the village, the exercise-book went too. Some of the girls intrigued by the book, some coveted it, and some begrudged her it.



The custom of child marriages prevailed in the Bengal of Tagore's day. Where child marriages still prevail, the hackneyed arguments commonly forward are-1) that a girl is *paraya dhan* (the property of the would-be husband's family).

In another story *Subha*, Tagore deals with a new theme, that of a dumb girl-child. The agony of a dumb girl who seeks refuge in the company of nature. Banikantha has three daughters. The youngest daughter was called Subhashini (Subha for short), which means one with sweet speech. But the word proves to be a misnomer: the child turns out to be handicapped, she is dumb.

From her earliest childhood, the idea is ingrained in Subha that God has sent her like a curse to her parents. By a curious logic, her mother looks upon her dumb daughter as a deformity in herself:

"To a mother, a daughter is a more closely intimate part of herself than a son can be; and a fault in her is a source of personal shame. Banikantha, Subha's father, loved her better than his other daughters. Her mother regarded her with aversion as a stain upon her own body".

According to Tagore, words for expressing our thoughts are not found easily. A translation is not often exact, and so errors are possible. Tagore makes a generalization about Subha, the precise import of which gets in abstract similes and *metaphors*:

If Subha lacked speech, she did not lack a pair of large eyes, shaded with long lashes; and her lips trembled like a leaf in response to any thought that rose in her mind.....The dumb have a lonely grandeur like a Nature's own. Wherefore the other children almost dreaded Subha, and never played with her. She was silent and companionless as noontide.

After some time, she was married, but soon her husband realized that she is dumb and hence decided for second marriage. Tagore ends the story with a note of pathos. Readers are left speculating what will happen to the dumb girl.

And yet another short story '*The River*

Stairs', Tagore brings out the plight of a child widow, Kusum. The practice of child marriages sometimes leads to child widow, for whom the life of widowhood can better be imagined than described.

The narrator in the story is an inanimate object i.e. '*The River Stairs*' that misses Kusum, because she had been led away from the river, as she got married and went to her husband's house, which was far away from the river. A year passes. She returns as a child-widow. Kusum has to rub out the sindoor mark from her forehead and give up wearing bangles, as a mark of widow. The fact that Kusum had met her husband "only twice or thrice" shows that the marriage has not been consummated, and that Kusum, still an unravished bride, was unfortunately deprived of married happiness. It's a heart touching story that narrates the plight of a child widow.

In the story of '*The Kabuliwallah*' Tagore matures as a storyteller. The story begins with a child's merriment and ends in pathos. Tagore had a capacity to empathise with people in different situations, and his characterization shows his psychological insight. The narrator is the father of a talkative child Mini, aged five years, who developed friendly relations with the Kabuliwallah, Rahman. One morning, the narrator saw the Kabuliwallah being led away bound between two policemen. There were blood-stains on his clothes, and one of the policemen carried a knife. A certain neighbor owed the Kabuliwallah something for a Rampuri shawl, but had falsely denied having bought it. In the course of the quarrel, the Kabuliwallah had struck him.

Eight years passed away. The narrator was in his study room when the Kabuliwallah entered. He had been released from jail the previous evening. It was his belief that Mini was still the same five-year-old talkative girl. He brought out from his pocket a small piece of paper which bore the impression of a little hand. This touch of his own little daughter had always been on his heart, as he had come year after year to Calcutta to sell his wares in the streets. The idea had suddenly come to him that his own



daughter must have also grown. He would not find her as he used to know her.

The narrator gave the Kabuliwallah a bank-note and advised him to return to his country and rejoin his family. The narrator says:

The wedding feast was all the brighter for the thought that, in a

distant land, a long-lost father met again with his only child.

3. Conclusion

Tagore's understanding of child psychology is so perfect that his portrayal of the child world is as authentic as it should be. He had a soft corner for little girls. He presents woman as a child in various situations. He shows us a pampered girl and her tantrums, a motherless six-year-old performing the duties of a housekeeper for her father, a dumb girl whose feelings can be read in her eyes, an orphan girl who nurses her benefactor in his illness, a child widow and her isolation, a talkative girl who makes friends with a migrant fruit-peddler from Afghanistan, a girl playing the game of getting married and her interest in the marriage of her doll, the necessity of girls mixing with boys, the anxiety of parents to get their daughter married and the money problem associated with it. Tagore's fondness for and his rare skills in portraying girl child characters is visible in writings.

Even now in India, Girls are caught in the cycle of early marriage, childbearing and pregnancy, and poverty. Industrialization,

urbanization, and female feticide have altered the stereotyped gender roles, affecting family household composition, residence patterns, specific kinship relationships, and gender attitudes and behavior. Family and society together can lead girls toward the positive psychological optimism, strong social bonds, and self-confidence.

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