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## FREEDOM, CREATIVITY, EDUCATION: EXPLORING CHILDREN'S PSYCHE IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S SHORT STORIES

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### Abstract

Tagore's philosophy of education defies all those conventions of imparting education that hinder the natural development of a child's personality, and, by not allowing freedom necessary for proper vernalization of the inherent talent in a child, defeat the very purpose of education. Education, according to Tagore, must encourage / promote free imagination and creativity in children so as to enable them to have a sense of fulfillment in life and making them humane and most potent leaders of humanity. The present paper aims at exploring the children's psyche and its actual needs, requirements and aspirations through an analysis of select short stories of Rabindranath Tagore. The stories in discussion include "The Parrot's Training" and "The Exercise-Book", which quite perceptively delve into the highly sensitive psyche of children and very subtly suggest the ways to deal with it. Tagore's concept of schooling embarks on recognition and promotion of creativity in children by giving individualized attention to their talents and aptitudes, instead of imposing a curriculum that lay emphasis on rote-learning and does not provide space for their natural ability and creative expression. The short stories chosen for analysis and discussion amply and substantially offer the material for working out Tagore's stance on education for children.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Education, Short Stories, Indian English Literature, Creativity, Children, Schooling

A child's mind is highly fertile with imagination and curiosity, which are quintessential for the development of hidden talent and creative skills. A child does need freedom to imaginative thinking and creativity besides pedagogical tutoring for wholesome development of his or her personality. Noted littérateur and educationist, Rabindranath Tagore, the recipient of the Nobel Prize in literature from India, has quite charily dealt

with these psychological issues in several of his writings *for* or *about* children. His viewpoint of education for children cannot be had in any single volume, but rather it can be assayed in diverse genres of his literary oeuvre. Particularly, Tagore's plays and short stories, which are serious explorations into the children's psyche and its basic needs and requirements, have to be examined intensively for his stance on education for children.

The present paper focuses on two of Tagore's short stories including "The Parrot's Training" (alternatively entitled "The Parrot's Tale" by some translators) and "The Exercise-Book". Tagore's philosophy of education defies all those conventions of imparting education that hinder the natural development of a child's personality, and, by not allowing freedom necessary for proper vernalisation of the inherent talent in a child, defeat the very purpose of education. Education, according to Tagore, must encourage and promote free imagination and creativity in children so as to enable them to have a sense of fulfillment in life and making them humane and most potent leaders of humanity. The stories in discussion quite perceptively delve into the highly sensitive psyche of children and very subtly suggest the ways to deal with it. Tagore's concept of schooling embarks on recognition and promotion of creativity in children by giving individualized attention to their talents and aptitudes, instead of imposing a curriculum that lay emphasis on rote-learning and does not provide space for their natural ability and creative expression. The short stories chosen for analysis and discussion amply and substantially offer the material for getting at Tagore's stance on education for children.

"The Parrot's Training", originally written in Bengali in the form of a fable, translated into English by the author himself, is highly critical of the contemporaneous education system, especially the methodology of instruction for children. Although Tagore particularly refers to the schooling system of his times, but it is relevant even today. The issue of understanding and dealing with children's psyche is still alive. Policy makers have hardly seen through the actual needs of the highly sensitive and delicate minds of children while framing the curricula in schools, colleges and universities. "The Parrot's Training" is an astringent satire on the system of education, which, with its callous formality and lumber of information, suppresses and stifles the creative impulse of a child. It ridicules rote-learning and reinforces a methodology of instruction that is capable of stimulating a response or reaction and imaginative rejoinder in a child's mind. And it is possible only when a child is allowed freedom to

interact with nature and experience and understand his surroundings on his or her own terms.

At the very outset, the story denounces the imposition of accepted beliefs on a child's mind without realizing the actual requirements of children's psyche. The author recounts the tale of a parrot who "sang all right, but never recited scriptures" and "hopped pretty frequently, but lacked manners". Here, the author lampoons conditioning of a child with orthodoxy, instead of allowing creative self-determination and independent thinking. 'Singing' and 'hopping' are natural instincts of a parrot, but in an effort to educate and sophisticate it, its natural disposition has been completely ignored, which eventually leads to the death of its real self. But, without any considerate concern for the inherent propensities of a bird, the kingship is intent on training the parrot with its own yardstick. Raja considers those singing and hopping creatures as foolish, ignorant and inutile. He opines, "Ignorance is costly in the long run. For fools consume as much food as their betters, and yet give nothing in return." And, so he ordered his nephews to get the parrot educated. The nephews engage "the pundits" to detect the cause of the parrot's ignorance and idiotic behaviour. After long discussions, they reach a conclusion that "the ignorance of birds was due to their natural habit of living in poor nests" and told the king that "the first thing necessary for this bird's education was a suitable cage." Therefore, according to the advice of the pundits, "A golden cage was built with gorgeous decorations," and "Crowds came to see it . . ." Some grudgingly remarked, "Culture, captured and caged!" while others extolled, "Even if culture be missed, the cage will remain, to the end, a substantial fact. How fortunate for the bird!" Also, a large number of men were employed and several supervisors were appointed for proper execution of the king's orders. The pundits did their best to train the bird and the people praised the progress. All teachers, supervisors and others deputed for the job got ample rewards from the king and became affluent and raised palatial buildings for themselves.

But, the fault-finders among the common masses "went about saying that every creature remotely connected with the cage flourished

beyond words, excepting only the bird." When Raja heard such a comment, he visited "the great Hall of Learning" to inspect how his Education Department busied itself with the little bird. He was impressed by the splendid arrangements. But, again, the fault-finder, from behind the bush, cried out, "Maharaja, have you seen the bird?" Listening to that, the king desired to see the bird. He was shown the bird and he was immensely impressed to see that the bird was enjoying superb amenities. In point of fact, as the author comments, "The method was so stupendous that the bird looked ridiculously unimportant in comparison." Nobody bothered for what the bird actually needed. As for the bird, it could not articulate its complaint inasmuch as "its throat was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper." However, the bird did try to register its complaint by pecking at the bars of the cage with its feeble beak. Its unwarranted flapping of wings was taken as a sign of bad behavior, and therefore, it was put in iron fetters and its wings were clipped. Further, the teachers made the process rigorous: "With text-book in one hand and baton in the other, the pundits gave the poor bird what may fitly be called lessons!" One day the bird died. The rumor was spread first spread by the fault-finder, and soon it reached the king. When the king asked his nephews about the legitimacy of the news, they informed him it was false and rather the bird's education had completed. Raja wanted to confirm and so he asked –

"Does it hop?" the Raja enquired.

"Never!" said the nephews.

"Does it fly?"

"No."

The bird was brought before the king. To see whether the bird really became sophisticated, when he "poked its body with his finger," it made no sound, no movement; "Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled". Raja exacted this refinement and composure from the bird, and he was happy to see that his plan was successful. He rewarded the nephews, the pundits, the attendants, and all the sycophants.

With this fable, Tagore satirizes the system and method of teaching, besides criticizing the apathy of teachers and concerned authorities toward the actual needs of children. The methodology of teaching is, in fact, teacher-oriented, not pupil-oriented. The authorities' view is lopsided. A child's brain is fed with printed word only, without due and proper illustration and without duly allowing a child to learn the way he or she wants. Such a mechanical form of education impairs the growth of the child's mind.

Here, the "cage" also reminds of the British colonial policy of education, imposing their ostentatious ways of sophistication on the indigenous Indians. The "cage" is a metaphor for the school that becomes overbearing, colonizing and coercive on a child's psyche, thereby marring the natural abilities, aptitudes and flairs of a child. The parrot's death signifies ejection of the blithe spirit of a child. What a child needs first and foremost is freedom, quenching of his thirst for knowing the things as he sees them and ample space for creative exploration and understanding of his milieu. In his essay entitled "A Poet's School", Tagore lays emphasis on a method of education that may generate in the mind of a child a sense of empathy with the surrounding world and help him or her understand the bond of symbiosis between nature and human beings:

The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence. But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored in schools, but it is severely repressed. From our very childhood habits are formed and knowledge is imparted in such a manner that our life is weaned away from nature and our mind and the world are set in opposition from the beginning of our days. Thus the greatest of educations for which we came prepared is neglected, and we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him grammar. His hunger is for the Epic, but he is supplied with chronicles of facts and dates . . . Child-nature protests

against such calamity with all its power of suffering, subdued at last into silence by punishment. (*Personality*: 116-17).

Tagore rejected rote-learning. He opined, "If exams are passed by learning by rote, is it not cheating? If we take the book concealed within our clothes it is cheating. But isn't it also cheating if we take the matter in our brain without understanding it?" (*The Nectar of Life*, p. 21). He believed, "Whichever route we follow, we will arrive at the conclusion that teaching is imparted by a teacher and not by a method." (*The Nectar of Life*, p. 22). Also, "Getting an education does not depend solely on the educational institution. It depends primarily on the student. Many students go to the university and get degrees but they do not get an education." (Ibid.) He observed that the reason for the development of distaste for education in students was not primarily because the subject was difficult, but because the method of instruction was dull. Tagore was in favour of a method that put children in close propinquity with nature that has its own educational value. He suggests:

Children need nature in their growing years while they are learning. Trees, clear blue skies, the breeze, clean water and panoramic views are as important as school benches, books and examinations. (*The Nectar of Life*, p. 21)

Besides, Tagore has a high regard for creativity and imagining strength in children. He feels that the imaginative freedom given to children may help bring out the best of them. He maintains that

The joy of children is the purest form of joy. They can take a trivial incident and turn it into something important using their imagination. They can breathe life into an ugly, ragged doll with their own joys and sorrows. One who can retain this power as an adult is said to be imaginative." *The Nectar of Life*, p. 55).

In his story entitled "The Exercise-Book", Tagore deals with the imaginative and creative prowesses in children. He delves into a girl-child's psyche, bringing out her woes and latent wishes,

dreams and yearnings that remain unfulfilled, understood and un-communicated. In an attempt to condition a girl child in conformity with the societal norms, her natural urges and aspirations are repressed. This story quite perceptively explores the status and role of the Indian woman, particularly in the pre-Independence period, who had a strong urge to read and write, but had to strive hard against pressures of patriarchy to get a space for themselves in the world governed by men. The opening line of the story depicts the status of woman in the male-dominated social setup: "Uma became a nuisance as soon as she learned to write." Uma, a little girl and protagonist of the story, shows a strong urge for reading and writing, but she is snubbed and humiliated earlier by her brother and later by her husband. The author beautifully narrates how Uma, having a passionate desire to write, scribbled on the walls, on the new almanac, and right "in the middle of the credit columns in her father's account book". But her brother and husband disapprove of her writing as they believe that women's reading and writing might obliterate the whole rubric of the traditional family system by bringing in clash of views between men and women. Thus, as a feminist, Tagore underscores the subdued existence of a young woman, trapped in child marriage and not finding an outlet for her pent-up feelings.

Tagore depicts Uma squiggling her subconscious thoughts and feelings anywhere she finds a space. But her writing is taken as intrusion into the space owned by men, and therefore, called "a great nuisance". But the little girl is oblivious of what she writes and what reaction it would evoke in the minds of the others. One day she writes on the wall with a piece of coal: "Rain drops on tree tops" – which reflects deep romantic aspirations and ambitions of the girl child to go on top of the world with realization of her dreams and hopes. It is not just Uma, but even other women in the family who wish to read and write, but cannot express their desires. For instance, in the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions about Uma's sister-in-law, under whose pillow Uma "hunted out" the copy of *Harida's Secrets*, a sensational novel by Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay, which was popular, but at the same time, a 'forbidden' reading for

Bengalis in the 19th century. Uma does not lose the opportunity even to write in that book. She writes in pencil on every page of it – “Black water, red flower”, which seems to signify her wild and weird imagination and her mysterious and hidden desires effervescing in her heart. Her spontaneous expressions bespeak of a wellspring of creativity trying to find out an outlet in her words. But, every time she is discouraged by the elders in the family. One can find in her ambition and longing for a life of emotional freedom, autonomy and authority, achievable only by getting education, as is evident in the lines she inscribes “Right in the middle of the credits column in her father’s account book:

He who writes and studies hard  
Will one day ride a horse and cart

These lines beginning with the pronoun “He” clearly shows that education was primarily for boys; the girls yearned for education but their wishes remained repressed. In another instance, when her brother presented her with a “bound, ruled, stout exercise book”, Uma carefully writes a line in it – “The birds sing, the night is past”, wherein one can find her celebration of the departure of the night of ignorance and hopelessness and her keen anticipation of a bright prospect of an opening to education, expression and creative freedom. In her exercise book, she finds a space that is all hers, and where she might create a world of her own. She is shown as clutching her exercise book close to her breast, scribbling in it and keeping it with her most of the time. It becomes her most precious possession. Before her marriage, her brother snubs her badly, and after her marriage, her husband does not allow her to write at all when he discovers her exercise book. She is filled with a sense of guilty for trying to read and write, and therefore, apologizes to her husband, taking a pledge that she would never do that again. But, in all, a child’s natural instincts and talents are suppressed.

Tagore strongly felt that education for women is as much necessary as for men. Owing to his close experience of the women’s quarters, mainly his association with his older sisters-in-law had enabled him to realize the bondage, moderation and claustrophobia of women in his milieu. This

experience founded in him feminist proclivities with a strong appeal to social reforms, especially with regard to the positions and roles of women and children. That’s why, freedom became the hallmark of his philosophy of education. And it is not freedom in the physical sense, but rather emotional and spiritual kind of freedom. As he states elsewhere in his prose writings: “There is no independence outside of the independence of the soul.” (*The Nectar of Life*, p. 25). In both the stories in discussion, Tagore depicts the trouble, suffocation and psychological problems that children undergo because of the faulty education system and social evil like gender bias.

According to Tagore, “Freedom is not an external thing, but a thing of the mind. Therefore, we cannot get it from someone else. Until we get that independence through our inner, natural strength, external powers will bind us, harness and dominate us.” (*The Nectar of Life*, p. 27). Therefore, children ought to be encouraged and propped in a way that enables them to utilize their potentials and energies creatively with unreserved freedom of imagination, thought and expression. He holds that children’s subconscious minds are always at work; constantly imbibing something from the environment, and therefore, they need to be allowed freedom for interacting with nature to the fullest. Thus, founding education in the matrix of freedom, creativity and imagination, Tagore lays emphasis on harmonious and holistic development of a child’s personality.

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