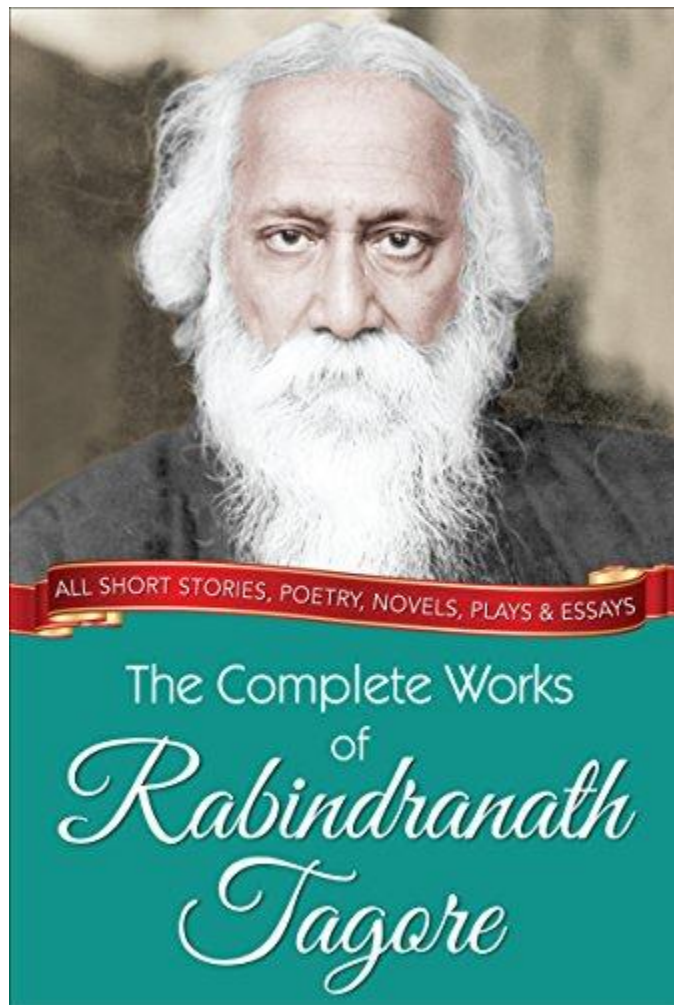


## **Rabindranath Tagore's Insight into the Psychology of Children and Adolescents in His Story World**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper is an attempt to show how short story as the modern genre has captured a permanent place in man's heart from times immemorial with a focus on Tagore's story telling skill and literary insight into children's psychology and adolescents' mentality and

his treatment of women and emotional aspects of human beings reflected and projected effectively in his short stories.

**Keywords:** Short story, Rabindranath Tagore short stories, emotional aspects, human relationship, children's psychology, adolescents' mentality.

### **Short Story and Tagore**

It is generally held that from time immemorial, short stories have captured a permanent place in man's heart. There is no doubt, Tagore's insight into children's psychology, his treatment of women and emotional aspects of human beings in his short stories have won quite a lot of readers for him and these aspects have stayed for ever in the readers' minds. It is understood out and out by all that Tagore's stories are stories of human relationships, humanity being represented in the concrete endowed with elemental emotions as also with those which are bred through social ties. Tagore himself said rather evidently as:

“If I do nothing else but write short stories I am happy and I make a few readers happy. The main cause of happiness is that my characters, become my companions, they are with me. When I am shut in my room on a rainy day and on a sunny day, they walk about with me on the bright banks of the Padma” (qtd in Kripalani 159).

The short story is one of the earliest literary forms. Over the last one hundred and fifty years, the short story has come to figure conspicuously in the literature of several countries. Short stories are the most widely read of all modern genres, even from ancient days. Stories were told for the intrinsic value and entertainment.

### **World in a Capsule**

Short stories are found to have captured the attention of children and adults alike. Generally speaking, a short story is a world in a capsule and varied strands form the texture of a short story. In this busy world, one may lose continuity while reading a novel but one is quite impressed while reading a short story. The short story has firmly established itself as a favourite

form in modern literature. Its immense popularity is the result of many co-operating causes; among them, the rush of modern life which has made men impatient of those ‘great still books’ as Tennyson called them, which were popular in the past.

Short story has become so popular that extraordinary claims are at times put forth on its behalf. Modern age is, no doubt, noted for its hectic activities, its speed. Everything is available in a condensed form. Hence the popularity of the short story is growing. Though short in its span, this genre packs a lot of punch in it. In fact, a writer can be very emotive while writing a short story. Short story is the only outlet for a large and varied experience for those who cannot read a novel or watch the television with sustained interest. As a result, people prefer the short story to novel or television.

### **Charmed by Short Story**

Truly speaking, short story intends to entertain and describe an interesting event. It is almost as old as man himself. It began very early in human history. Our ancestors, getting bored with the strenuous struggles of daily life, thought that concocting a tale would amuse them. Children and grown-ups, all alike, are charmed by the short story. It caters to two of the strongest and deepest human instincts – the desire to amuse and the desire to teach. The custom of narrating in the ancient ages was popular in the East as well as in the West. A. C. Ward points out that Jesus Christ told many short stories. Some of the earliest stories are found in the Vedas and the Upanishads. Stories in the *Old Testament*, in the Buddhist *Jatakas*, in *Panchatantra* and in the *Katha Sarit Sagar*, *The Fables of Aesop* and *Mythological Stories* have always been a source of knowledge and delight. Brief and short stories are found in the Sangam Literature as well. The short story has now established its identity as a distinct art form demanding the greatest care and constructional skill on the part of the writer.

### **Principles of Modern Short Story and Modern Originators of Short Stories**

It is said that the principles of modern short story were first of all formulated by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe and both are said to have laid stress on the

“singleness of effect” and “final impression” as the hallmarks of a good story. Washington Irving was the first great American writer who in the midst of his periodical sketches, produced stories like *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. In seeking the inventor of the modern short story, a clearer case might be made for Hawthorne or Poe. In 1830, both of them started their work in the field of short story about ten years after the publication of Irving’s *Sketch Book*. During the nineteenth century, publication of magazines increased greatly, giving an impetus to this genre. The history of the modern short story embraced diverse tendencies.

Nineteenth century critics often insisted on the need for a firmly developed plot design in any short story. H.G. Wells in his definition of the short story emphasizes on its brevity and calls it,

“The jolly art of making something very bright moving; it may be horrible or pathetic or funny or profoundly illuminating, having only this essential, that it should take from 15 to 30 minutes to read aloud” (Sengupta 292).

In brief, it may be said that a short story is nothing but a recital of events and any piece of brief functional prose can be regarded as a short story, provided it retains a plot. A good short story may be written on almost any theme dealing with any kind of motive and material.

Though the short story flourished on the Indian soil, it is the West which gave it a perfect literary form. The short story took the form of literature once it started reflecting the happenings in real life. Though Gautama the Buddha and Christ were master story tellers, they did not seek to shape it into a perfect art form, as their focus was primarily teaching the people around morals, etc. Only through modern writers like Poe, Hawthorne, R. K. Narayan and Tagore and great writers in Indian languages, such as Pudumaipithan in Tamil, short story came to stay carving a niche for itself as a literary form by perfect character-portrayal, neat plot construction and picturization of interesting incidents.

In the words of Anima Bose, "... the essential ingredient of a short story is a particular moment amidst the monotony of routine daily life called out by the author's own experience and sensitivity" (P 52).

### **A Distinct Place for Short Story in Bengali Literature**

In Bengali literature, the modern short story is a unique product of the nineteenth century during which Bengal witnessed many upheavals in politics as well as in social customs. It made its appearance rather suddenly and just as in Europe it was given importance through the numerous magazines which gave a tremendous boost to this genre.

### **Rabindranath Tagore and Short Story**

With the arrival of Rabindranath Tagore, short story writing received the impetus it was in need of. Tagore's first story *Bhikarini* was published when he was only sixteen years old. As Krishna Kripalani puts it,

"... in the short stories, he showed himself a master almost from the very beginning. He followed no known model or pattern. There was none in his own country and its literary tradition. He was the first Indian to attempt this form proper" (P 153).

### **World Literature and Short Story**

In world literature, we have a good number of eminent short story writers like Maupassant and Balzac in France, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Zurgenev, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and Gogol in Russia, Edgar Allan Poe, O'Henry and Hawthorne in America and Maugham and Chesterton in England. In the words of Anima Bose,

"in the pre-Tagorean era imagination and fancy pre-dominated. Reality, flesh and blood had not yet engaged the attention of Bengali writers..." (P52).

### **Tagore's World**

It is said that the Russian classics have the candour of the soul, the French classics have the candour of the mind and Tagore's stories have the candour of feeling. Kripalani comments:

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“he was a poet in the traditional Indian sense of the world, Kavi, a seer, an intermediary between the human and the divine. His genius enriched whatever it touched” (p. 2).

Tagore was highly imaginative and deeply sensitive. Kripalani observes:

“like the sun after which he was named . . . , he shed light and warmth on his age, vitalized the mental and moral soil of his land, revealed unknown horizons of thought and spanned the arch that divides the East from the West” (P 2).

Tagore explored every field of literary activity. He even created new literary forms. His stories reveal the perennial springs of life. His short stories are woven around a variety of themes and his stories probe the inner recesses of mind. Hence, his stories have a universal appeal. Every story Tagore has written shines like a gem.

Even though a short story is narrated, the characters in his stories play an active and dramatic part in evoking pity in the reader’s heart. No doubt, Tagore was a keen observer of the life of men and women with its spontaneity and its problems, its joys and sorrows, its happiness and tragedies and its motives – potent or underlying and he described it all in his poems, novels and short stories. He wanted not a political but a social revolution.

Tagore appeals for the unity and consolidation of all the people of India, regardless of race, language and religious beliefs. He feels that only friendship and cooperation with all people could serve as a firm basis for the progress and well-being of India. His stories make us understand how we must live in unity, eradicate racial discrimination and fight against violence and exploitation.

### **Tagore and Children and Women**

Variety, it is believed, is the spice of life. Tagore in his own competent manner captured the nuances of life and placed them before us crystallized in an artistic form. Krishna Kripalani observes,

“Always seeking the great in the small,  
he found ample material in the lives of  
the common folk for his short stories” (153).

Tagore was sensitive to the joys and sorrows of the common man. He understood the feelings and psychology of the people he met every day. He was deeply interested in children and when we approach the question of characterization in his stories the figures that flit before us are mostly those of women and children. Tagore was interested in the education and upbringing of children. His own childhood was austere and, as a shy boy, he shrunk into an isolated corner indignantly reacting against his sheltered life. Tagore was full of sympathy for children who were forced to lead a constricted life, whose zest for life was stifled by the overprotected adults. Truth and love are the only values that find acceptance in the child’s world, which is neither different from the world of grown-up men and women nor unaware of the false standards of the letter. A child loves and longs for affection and recognition. One should not think of children as underdeveloped and unintelligent title models of adults incapable of judging between good and bad, true and false. There is no doubt that cruelty to children is the greatest of all evils. Children are tender, sensitive, generous, imaginative, sometimes fierce and often sad.

Tagore’s child characters are mostly meditative creatures with an inward life, wild and wayward in their rebellion against the prison regime of society. Tagore, the greatest writer, wrote for children and about children, presenting rather vividly problems faced by the children, their loneliness, the cruelty experienced by them and their longing for love and affection. His stories tell us about unhappy children – orphans living with relatives, misunderstood by them, their childish pranks too severely punished, unattractive adolescent children longing for love, dependent child whose pride is humbled to dust. The focus is on these miserable creatures who long for freedom, love and happiness.

To be a writer for children, one must come down from adult height and merge with the children. Tagore had a keen insight into a child’s psyche. An ordinary aspect would assume a

great significance for Tagore. The child's inviting look and its longing for love and affection provide the themes for Tagore's stories. He is not a passive observer of children's outward nature but a deep analyser of their feelings.

Being a keen student of child's psychology, Tagore enters into a world of the child's own making, sympathises with his unspeakable joys and ununderstandable sorrows and catches the child's fancies in all their vividness and description.

### ***The Postmaster***

In *The Postmaster*, Tagore portrays the love and affection of a small orphan girl for the postmaster. The postmaster, stationed in the village of Ulapur, feels like a fish out of water. Ratan, a young orphan worked as his maid. This orphan girl of twelve was his only companion. The postmaster chatted with Ratan about his own home, his mother and sister. The little girl Ratan also told him about her parents and a little brother with whom she had played. Their conversation about their past family life draws them nearer and the attempt of the postmaster to educate the child strengthens the friendship. One cloudy morning, she found the postmaster in bed. At once, she called in a doctor, gave him medicines, cooked his gruel and nursed him. The postmaster's illness and the care bestowed by the child who nursed him back to health deserve appreciation. When the postmaster recovered, he applied for a transfer to Calcutta. As his application was rejected, he made up his mind to resign his job. When he broke this news to the child, she was silent, but when he finished his supper, she asked him whether he could take her home with him. The postmaster only laughed and exclaimed, "what an idea". The whole night, the answer haunted the little girl. Before leaving, he offered her some money which she refused. Then the postmaster started for Calcutta. When he was in the boat,

"... the rain swollen river, like-stream of tears welling up from the earth, swelled and sobbed at her bows, then he felt a sort of pain at heart, the grief-stricken face of a village girl seemed to represent for him the great unspoken pervading grief of mother earth herself" (The Postmaster 168).



The postmaster reciprocated Ratan's feelings, but to him the idea of taking the girl, home with him was absurd. Musing over the girl, he had thought to go back and bring her along with him; but the boat was already in the middle of the turbulent waters of the river. The village was left far behind. The postmaster goes back to his old world, but what about the orphan girl? The young girl, who did not know any philosophical approach to life was only longing for the love of her companion. The idealistic approach of the girl to love is contrasted with the adult's practical approach. The story ends on a philosophical note:

“So the traveler, borne on the breast of the  
Swift flowing river, consoled himself with  
philosophical reflections on the numberless  
meetings and partings going on in the world...  
on death, to great parting, from which  
none returns” (The Postmaster 169).

### ***The Home Coming***

*The Home Coming* (chutti) reveals the keen insight of the author who probes into the mind of a fourteen-year old boy. *Home Coming* is the story of a boy of high spirits not yet subjected to the rigours of discipline. It is an excellent story of the adolescent mind of Phetik Chakravarty, the village lad who was the ring leader among the boys of the village. Phatik never get sympathy, understanding or love and as K. R. S. Iyengar, commenting on Phatik's fate writes;

“The one hunger that none can suppress  
not even the deaf and dumb, not even a backward  
child is the hunger for understanding and  
sympathy and love” (P 69).

The tragedy of Phatik was that he never got this understanding and sympathy from any quarters. Phatik was involved in some mischief every day, and he decided to shift a heavy log with the help of his friends. Makhan, his brother, acted as a barrier for Phatik's plan and amusement. Makhan was firm and did not get up from the log. The log was rolled along with

Makhan. To his mother, Phatik was an eternal nuisance... lazy, disobedient and wild. Makhan kicked Phatik and reported to his mother that Phatik had hit him. This resulted in Phatik's anger. Not able to accept his lie, he beat Makhan severely. Phatik's fate changed and his trouble started from this point. When her brother Bishamber offered to take Phatik off his sister's hands and educate him with his children in Calcutta, she was immensely relieved and she immediately agreed to the proposal. His aunt was by no means pleased to see Phatik as she had enough to manage, with her own three boys. As Tagore observes;

“In this world of human affairs, there is no  
worse nuisance than a boy at the age of 14.  
He is neither ornamental nor useful”

(The Home Coming 36)

Phatik felt like a fish out of water in the stifling atmosphere of his aunt's house. His tortured soul was full of anguish, as he realised that he was an unwelcome guest. The elderly lady despised him and insulted him on every occasion for,

“it is easy to excuse the shortcomings of  
early childhood, but it is hard to tolerate  
even unavoidable lapses in a boy of fourteen.

The lad himself becomes painfully self-conscious”

(The Home Coming 37)

Yet it is in adolescence that a young lad most longs for love and recognition and he becomes devoted to anyone who is kind to him. Thackeray said that nobody feels injustice or shrinks before a slight hurt and “has a sense of wrong so acute and so glowing a gratitude for kindness, as a generous boy” (P86). For Phatik, his own house is the only paradise. To live in a strange house with strange people is little short of torture for him. He yearned for love and understanding. It was painful to Phatik to be an unwelcome guest in his aunt's house. Phatik, repelled by his aunt's cruelty wanted to go back to his village. Phatik's heart craved for love and he longed to go back to the open country. It is true that nothing seems more engaging for the child's mind than being caressed in his mother's arms. Every night, he dreamt of his village

home – the lovely meadow where he played with his kite, the river bank where he wandered about singing and shouting joyfully and the brook where he dived and swam. And above everything else, “the true memory of that tyrant mother of his, who had such a prejudice against him, occupied him day and night” (The Home Coming 38).

Phatik was the most backward boy in the class and when he lost his text book, the teacher caned him mercilessly. When he informed his aunt about the loss, she shouted at him. The same night, he had an attack of malaria fever and feared that he would be a great nuisance to his aunt. The next morning, the boy had disappeared and Bishamber had to inform the police. At the end of the day, two constables carried him home. He was thoroughly drenched and was shivering. When the aunt exclaimed that he was a heap of trouble and Bishamber ought to send him home, Phatik sobbed out that he was just going home, but they dragged him back. A doctor was brought but the boy was delirious. He asked his uncle if the holidays had come and whether he could go home. His excited voice called out to his mother, imploring her not to beat him as he was telling the truth. The next day, his condition became critical. Later on, his mother arrived like a storm and began to lament. Phatik’s restless movements stopped as he turned his head and without seeing anybody said, “Mother the holidays have come” (The Home Coming 40).

A small event created a bitter feeling in Phatik. He was too young to bear too much of scoldings, abuse and face a change of life. Makhan’s lie, the brutality of his mother, the cruelty of his aunt ... everything had driven Phatik to a state of agony and sorrow. Phatik’s fun-filled days turned into a nightmare because of Makhan. Phatik craved for affection and love.

It is remarkable how Tagore has analysed the sensitivity of the boy’s mind. Thus, *The Home Coming* leaves an indelible mark on the reader’s mind. Tagore’s understanding of the thoughts and feelings of a fourteen-year-old boy is so amazing that one would imagine that he had done research in child psychology. Lila Ray Comments:

“Rabindranath discovered and lost his mother on the threshold of adolescence, between the ages of thirteen and fourteen. All this long repressed and neglected need of live and

affection, a need intensified by the first stirrings of an interest in women as woman rose to the surface only to be thwarted. The emotional ferment into which he was plunged made him exceedingly restless” (P 32).

Through Phatik, Tagore tells us what can happen to a child when he is nagged by a feeling of restlessness and insecurity. It is no wonder that he has given such a realistic picture of a child in the transitional stage. Tagore’s picturization of the agonies of adjustment faced by Phatik in his aunt’s house shows his deep insight into the psyche of children.

### ***Subha***

*Subha* is the story of a young dumb girl who is ironically named Subhashini (sweet-spoken) by her father. Tagore portrays Subha as a victim of the unjust customs of society. Her two elder sisters were married with some difficulty and Subha, the youngest was a source of worry to her parents. Banikanta, Subha’s father loved her more than his other daughters; her mother regarded her with aversion as a stain upon her own body. As for Subha,

“She had understood from her earliest childhood that God had sent her like a curse to her father’s house, so he withdrew herself from ordinary people and tried to live apart. If only they would all forget her, she felt she could endure it” (Subha 145).

Although Subha could not speak, her black eyes expressed all her feelings. Other children were afraid of Subha and did not play with her. Banikantha’s house was on the banks of a stream, the waves of which beat upon the restless soul of the girl. Nature seemed to speak for her,

“... beneath the west impressive heavens there  
were only dumb Nature and a dumb girl  
sitting very silent one under the spreading  
sunlight, the other where a small tree  
cast its shadow” (P 148).

Subha had two friends who were dumb like her, Sarbashi and Panguli, the two cows in their stall. They understood her better than man could. When she was hurt, she would go to them for consolation and the dumb creatures understood the anguish of her spirit. Her only comrade among human beings was Pratap, an idle fellow. In the afternoon, Pratap loved to catch fish and he liked Subha's company. Subha longed to be of some help to Pratap. But that being impossible, she sat by him as he cast his line and prepared some betel leaves for him. As Subha grew up, she was filled with a new consciousness. One full moon night, she opened her door and looked out. As Nature, as lovely as Subha, looked down upon the sleeping earth, Subha was filled with an infinite sadness. Her heart was heavy with loneliness and she could not speak. Her parents were anxious about her marriage as people threatened to make them outcasts. So Banikanta went away for a few days and on his return said that they must go to Calcutta. Preparations were being made to go to that strange place but Subha's heart was filled with a foreboding. It was Pratap who informed her that they had found a bridegroom for her and she was to be married:

“As a stricken doe looks in the hunter's face, asking in silent agony; ‘what have I done to you?’ So Subha looked at Pratap” (P 153).

That afternoon, instead of sitting beneath her tree, Subha fell at her father's feet and gazing at him, burst out weeping. Banikantha, Subha's father, also wept and tried to console her. As they were to leave for Calcutta the next day, Subha went to the cow shed to bid farewell to her childhood playmates. She wept as she embraced them. Then she went to the river bank and flung herself on the grass. In Calcutta, the bridegroom came with a friend one day to see the bride and Subha wept copiously. He thought that one who had such a tender heart would prove to be a priceless possession. The wedding took place on an auspicious day. The bridegroom left with his wife for the west where he worked. Within fifteen days, everyone knew that Subha became dumb. She longed to see the faces familiar from childhood;

“In her silent heart, there sounded an  
endless, voiceless weeping, which only the  
searcher of hearts could hear”(P 155).

Her husband decided to marry a second time. He married a girl who could speak. One can neither forget the beautiful picture of Subha's silent friendship nor the biting satire of the social customs that condemned Subha to misery and loneliness. One has to blame the cruel society in the early twentieth century, a society which could not allow a helpless dumb girl to live in her familiar surroundings, but push her into an alien world. Subha's parents were only eager to get her married. They were not concerned about her happiness or welfare. Blind belief and superstition did not allow them to foresee the pain and misery which their beloved daughter would suffer in her new name. It was against such blind superstitious practices that a man like Raja Ram Mohan Roy revolted. Roy brought about "a crusade against institutionalized oppression and degrading social and religious practices such as Sati, Polygamy and idolatory" (Raj 6). For Tagore, rigidity and conservatism which resist progress and change are the greatest enemies of life.

### ***Cabuliwallah***

*Cabuliwallah* is a beautiful story of character and situation. The pen-portraits of the child, the sophisticated behaviour of the narrator and the simple manner of Rahman stand out distinctly. The story of Mini in *The Cabuliwallah* leaves one with numbness in the heart. The five-year-old girl was a chatter box and very much loved by her father who was a writer. Mini was afraid on seeing the Cabuliwallah because she had a belief that inside his bag there were two or three children like her. After some time, Mini got rid of her fear and friendship developed between Mini and the fruit seller. Cabuliwallah made frequent visits to Mini's house. To Mini's father, it was a strange sight to see this huge man at the feet of the little girl seated on a bench, laughing and talking. Mini's mother was apprehensive about the Cabuliwallah fearing that he would kidnap her Tagore has given a beautiful pen-portrait of her relationship between the little Mini and Rahman and the sophisticated behaviour of Mini's father. According to Kripalani,

"the friendship between the big truck of a man unlettered and uncouth from the rugged mountains of Afghanistan and the five-year-old Bengali girl Mini with her ceaseless Prattle and irrepressible mirth is one of the most moving torments of human relationship overriding all barriers of race, religion and social prejudice" (P 158).

## **Adept in Portraying Well the Helplessness of Children**

Thus, to conclude, it may be said that Tagore is an adept in portraying well the helplessness of children in the face of a cruel world dominated by grown-up men and women who fail to appreciate their tender feelings. The stories like *The Postmaster*, *The Home Coming*, *Subha* and *The Cabuliwallah* analysed here show Tagore as an able writer gifted with the power of knowledge and intelligence not only to understand and reveal life and its problems but also to understand the feelings and emotions of children. An analysis of the above stories shows Tagore's remarkable insight into the psychology of children and adolescents. No doubt, he is an adept in portraying their joys and sorrows, their hopes and disappointments, their success and failures, with a masterly touch so as to make them live in his pages for ever.

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