

International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies



ISSN Print: 2664-8652
ISSN Online: 2664-8660
Impact Factor: RJIF 8
IJAHS 2024; 6(1): 01-02
www.socialstudiesjournal.com
Received: 03-11-2023
Accepted: 07-12-2023

Rituparna Chakraborty
Assistant Professor and HOD,
Department of English, Swami
Vivekananda University,
Barrackpore, West Bengal,
India

Rereading “The Postmaster”: Resisting gender, caste and class dichotomy: In Rabindranath Tagore’s short story “The Postmaster”

Rituparna Chakraborty

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2024.v6.i1a.75>

Abstract

This paper seeks to depict the gender, caste and class dichotomy depicted in Tagore’s short story “The Postmaster”. At the same time, the paper attempts a comparative study on Tagore’s short story “The Postmaster” and Satyajit Ray’s film *Postmaster*. The research methodology includes a close reading of the text.

Keywords: Gender, class, caste, film, juvenile

Introduction

In the myriad domain of short stories, Rabindranath Tagore strides about as majestically as any other accomplished short story writers in the world. We find him to have displayed an amazingly unique deftness in implementing stylistics and enriching his stories with wonderfully diverse strands of human experiences and emotions. With the consummate skill of a time-tested diver, Tagore picks up from within the fathomless abyss of human epic, glimmerings of unexplored emotional possibilities and weaves them into a beautiful tapestry of sagas of joy and sorrow, of love and languishment, of hopes and hopelessness, leaving in our minds a desolate sense of incompleteness, even when we have finished reading them. One such story is “The Postmaster”, the thematic appeal of which is a never ending music of “sorrow, loss, and pain”.

The unnamed youth, featuring as the male protagonist of the story, came to a remote village (Ulapur) as a postmaster. Raised and nurtured in Calcutta, the postmaster was either arrogant or clumsy amid unknown faces. His education, his middle class identity, and his nourishment in urban culture insulated him from the unsophisticated village-folks. The postmaster found Ratan, a thirteen-year old orphan girl to do the domestic chores in exchange for food and lodging. A juvenile, Ratan was marriageable in the late nineteenth century colonial/patriarchal set-up; there was none, however, to launch Ratan in the marriage-market.

Romanticizing a rural set-up in connivance at its malaises, is customary with a city-bound youth, and so naturally our postmaster superficially viewed the rural surroundings and Nature with a romantic perception, and even took to writing poetry involving “leaves trembling in the trees, or the cloud in the sky” (Tagore 35) However, the fact remains that, the Calcutta boy pined for his urban life; “God knew, however that if a genie out of an Arab tale had come and cut down all the leafy trees overnight, made a road and blocked out the sky with rows of tall buildings, this half-dead, well-bred young man would have come alive again.” (Tagore 37)

As gloomy dusk loomed over the village, the postmaster would ask for Ratan’s company to alleviate his solitude, and engage in a homely chat with her. The village girl then sank into a fond retrospection, reminiscing the demised loved faces, and the postmaster reciprocated her, telling her the story of his own family. The girl, surely enraptured at being treated so affably by the postmaster, not only developed a close affinity with him but also dared imagine herself a part of his family, and “formed affectionate imaginary pictures of them” on the canvas of her mind. Personal history became mutual relationship.

Corresponding Author:
Rituparna Chakraborty
Assistant Professor and HOD,
Department of English, Swami
Vivekananda University,
Barrackpore, West Bengal,
India

In a rain-bathed afternoon, the postmaster was poignantly afflicted with solitude, and tormented by a wistful desire to pour out “the heart’s most intimate affections” to a close female companion.

That was the day on which the postmaster took to teaching Ratan who navigated through the sea of ‘vowels’, and ‘consonants and conjuncts’ very quickly, obviously in an eagerness to win her dadababu’s accolade and, more importantly, the warmth of his company, which gave her marginal existence a meaningful dimension.

A sudden attack of malarial fever upon the postmaster brought about sweeping changes in the map of Ratan’s life. “The young girl Ratan was a young girl no longer. From that moment she took on the of a mother, calling the doctor, giving him pills at the right time, staying awake at his bedside all night long, cooking him convalescent meals, and saying a hundred times, “Are you feeling a bit better dadababu?” (Tagore 39)

After his recovery the postmaster applied for transfer, and when rejected, decided to be back home, and communicated it to Ratan. By then Ratan had begun to imagine herself as an integral part of the postmaster’s life. However, reality had in store a heart-breaker for her. She asked “Dadababu, will you take me home with you?” The postmaster simply laughed away this innocent appeal: “How could I do that!”

The scoffing note in the postmaster’s refusal rang in Ratan ear’s in her dream and wakefulness. While Ratan had bound herself together with the postmaster, he had for her no reciprocating hand, but just a recommendation for her upkeep and money, both of which Ratan turned down with blast of protesting tears.

The “generosity” of her “dadababu” bled Ratan’s blossoming juvenescence, rather her womanhood in bloom. Tagore shows in the end part of the story that, when the postmaster’s boat started sailing away, the postmaster oscillated between hesitation and desire to go back and “fetch that orphan girl”, but finally recoiled under pragmatic considerations, and rreflected philosophically that “in life there are many separations, many deaths”. For Ratan, there was no consolatory philosophy. Too naïve and innocent to see through the labyrinth of social politics, she sustained the heart-rending brunt of deceptive hopes.

Tagore’s “The postmaster” forms a part of Satyajit Ray’s 1961 triptych “Tinkanya”. Keeping the content untouched, Ray embellishes the film with delicate touches of his unalloyed originality, specially in the presentation of Ratan’s character. While Rabindranath Tagore’s Ratan exploded into tears, declined all help and money offered by the postmaser, and ran away in sheer grief, Ratan, as sketched out by Ray, maintains absolute silence, walks past the postmaster with a head bent, “as he stands on the path leading the river, holding the money he wants to give her”. She silently watches him leave, “and walks on turning her back on him. This is where the Film ends. We should not fail to notice the marked difference between the ways Tagore and Ray depict Ratan in their respective work of art. Darius Cooper draws an intriguing comparison between Tagore’s story and Ray’s film: “Ray’s 1961 Ratan is not Tagore’s 1891 Victorian waif abandoned in a cruel and merciless world. Ray’s Ratan is a contemporary child of suffering and endurance. She will somehow survive and subdue her misery...” (Cooper 82)

Scanning Ratan’s character from the postcolonial perspective of gender, caste and class issues, we explore that

she had had her initiation into bildung through two agencies. Under the postmaster’s tutelage, Ratan had cut her teeth with education, and again erotic passion must have flowered in her adolescent heart through her intimacy with her “dadababu”. The postmaster definitely had taken to teaching Ratan not really in order to enlighten her, but simply just to make less of his painful solitude in her company. Even if he had ever fancied romance with her, it was no more than effervescent. He typifies “the conventional man” who, in an uninterrogated conformity to the patriarchal society’s embargo of gender, caste and class, issues, found Ratan’s pleading to take her his home, a ridiculous idea.

The postmaster, however, contributed unwittingly significantly to harness the process of Ratan’s bildung. His tutoring her temporarily is most likely to have ignited in her hunger for knowledge. And knowledge is power. He had also effected the blossoming of love in that girl standing on the threshold of puberty. Satyajit Ray has most credibly shown in Ratan some power “to resist and claim dignity” (Dasgupta, Chakravorty *et al.* 249)

References

1. Cooper, Darius. *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; c2000.
2. Dasgupta, Sanjukta, Chakravarti S, Mathew M. *Radical Rabindranath*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited; c2013.
3. Ray, Satyajit. *Bishoi Chalachitra*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers; c2009, 1982.
4. Roy, Arunkumar. *Rabindranath O Chalachitra*. Kolkata: Chitralekha; c1986.
5. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Rabindra Rachanavali*, Vol. 8. Calcutta: Visva Bharati & Government of West Bengal Publications; c1961.