

‘Story’ as a Substitute of the *Dyadic Unit* and Rabindranath Tagore’s *Tell Me a Story*

Biswarup Das^{1*}

¹*Department of English, J. T. D. H. School, West Bengal, India.*

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ABSTRACT

Story has allured a child since time immemorial. It has provided him with unadulterated pleasure by making him soar in the sphere of mysteries and fantasies. Pleasure, according to Freud, is the controlling force of the unconscious, the abode of one’s true self. As the infant develops into a child, he enters into the conscious world. But this development initiates, too, a separation from mother with whom he was related in an asocial pleasurable unity until the present. Consequently, the child seeks at this stage of life other means to compensate the loss of his primary necessity, pleasure. One of those ways is listening to stories, something that enables him to escape from the world of reality (consciousness) to the delightful world of day-dreams. As pleasure is the primary need of the unconscious, and as day-dreams provide a child with pleasurable experience, there lies a close relationship between stories and the unconscious demands. Tagore realized this truth, and conveyed the same in the story ‘*Tell Me a Story*.’

Keywords: Childhood; consciousness; desire; fantasy; story; unconscious.

1. INTRODUCTION

The celebrated 19th century essayist Charles Lamb begins his timeless classic '*Dream Children, a Reverie*' (from '*The Essays of Elia*,' 1823) in the following manner:

Children love to listen to stories about their elders, when they were children; to stretch their imagination to the conception of a traditionally great-uncle or granddame, whom they never saw [1].

The main issue here is not the content of the story the imaginary children love to listen to, but that they love to listen to '*stories*' that enable them '*to stretch their imagination*' to something they have never experienced themselves. In other words, they crave to listen to something fantastic. The fascination for the imaginary, however, is not a characteristic exclusive to the dream children of Elia, but something universal to children in general. A child loves to listen to incredible stories incessantly. The external influence, that is, the influence of the society in the form of social-directives, of morality, or of a dream about a bright future, can distract a child from the world of fantasy but only momentarily. The 'elders' and 'well-wishers' try to direct him to the 'right path' by sending him to school, or by prescribing the rules he needs to follow to be a 'good,' an 'ideal' youngster. However, in spite of their effort, the craving for the fantastic is not completely eradicated from a child. One might ask curiously: Why such yearning is present in a child? The answer to the question would be this: It is because the liking for the fanciful is an inseparable part of a child's psyche. To unearth the significance of the answer, we need to probe deep into the human mind, for the existence of an individual depends as much on the psychical self as on the physical. Or we can step further and say with Jung that the *psyche is the world's pivot . . . [it is] the one great condition for the existence of a world [2, p.151].*

It is the Austrian neurologist, Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) who first brought into light the concept of human psyche. In his topographical model of the mind, he described the features of its configuration and operation. He used the analogy of an iceberg to explain the triadic structure of human mind. The 'conscious' part lies on the surface, and is involved in the thoughts of the present. The 'preconscious,' though a part of consciousness itself, is dissimilar with the latter in that it comprises only those psychical attributes that one can recover from

memory. The third region of the mind, the 'unconscious,' is, however, the most important one. The secret behind the real cause of human behaviour lies here. If compared to the iceberg, this part of the mind is that one which a person cannot 'see.' The unconscious mind is the repository of all wishes. Both the subjective wishes of an individual and the primitive objective ones rest here. Carl G. Jung used the term *collective unconscious [2, p.151]* to signify the objective wishes of the unconscious. The collective unconscious falls *phenomenologically into two categories [2, p.151]*. One of those is *instinctual*, consisting of *natural impulses [2, p.151]*.

In infancy, the *pre-Oedipal* stage of life, one is *anarchic, sadistic, aggressive, self-involved and remorselessly pleasure-seeking, under the sway of what Freud calls pleasure principle [3, p.134]*. The 'unconscious' as such, finds its greatest satisfaction at this stage. The little child sucks its mother's breast and satisfies its narcissistic instinct, the instinct of survival. But at the same time *in doing so the child also finds that this biologically essential activity is also pleasurable; and this, for Freud, is the first drawing of sexuality [3, p.133]*. This is how the second fundamental instinct of the unconscious, the sexual, gets generated. Together with mother, the child forms an *asocial dyadic unit [4, p.23]*. It is the child's *natural impulse*. But as with time the child grows up, the *Oedipus system [5, p.33]* is introduced in his life. Before, the child had only the image of mother (symbolizing pleasure) before him. But now the image of 'father' also appears. The new image is a metaphor of what Freud calls *repression [5, p.31]*, a process through which society is constructed. 'Repression' means the suppression of natural wishes related to fulfilment through pleasurable experience. It breaks '*the asocial dyadic unit of mother and child [4, p.23]*'. The relationship in the life of the child now becomes triadic – the child, mother and father. However, to relate father only to repression is not right. A father plays a significant formative role in the upbringing of a child. But here 'father' has been used as an image of authoritarianism, for the society has conventionally been thought of as 'male dominated' (the truth or falsity of the belief is another issue, which the present study does not intend to concentrate upon). Besides, Freud relates the image of father to the threat of castration, the threat leading the child to suppress his natural desire(s). The social system gets associated with the image of father as both

represent (practically or symbolically) repression. The triadic relationship is the entrance to the world of consciousness. With this entry, there is a *split* [5, p.26] in the child's psyche, that is, a split between the 'conscious' and the 'unconscious.' The child becomes more and more aware of itself as a separate entity, both psychically and physically. His primary instincts (both narcissistic and sexual) give way to *drives*, for *drive originates when there is a separation between body and mind* [5, p. 5-6].

The birth of drive ensures the cumulative separation from mother and propinquity to the 'system' (father). Separation from mother signifies a symbolic separation from pleasure and fulfilment. But the child cannot accept such separation without procuring something in return. According to Freud *no one ever willingly gives up a pleasure they have once enjoyed, rather we simply "exchange one thing for another" so that what appears to be renunciation is really the formation of a substitute* [5, p. 18]. The 'lack' that is born in the child due to the loss of proximity with mother is fulfilled in various different ways – by playing with toys, by drawing or painting, by listening to incredible stories, or in his day-dreams. The last two ways of fulfilment bear close relationship among themselves. Listening to stories, a form of art, enables a child to be 'carried away' to the world of dreams (day-dreams), far away from the world of reality. According to Freud *there is a clear continuity between phantasy (fantasy) in dreams, day-dreams and art which makes it impossible to draw a line between conscious fiction and unconscious effects – every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish* [5, p.19]. In fact, the child in a sense exchanges the pleasure of nearness with mother with the pleasure of stories. In other words, stories serve as a 'substitute' of mother. Such a conclusion, however, needs to be qualified, for it is absurd to think that a story can compensate the position of mother. But we should look at the point from another angle. The 'asocial' unity with mother is the foundation of the sense of pleasure in a child. Pleasure is the driving force of the unconscious, the dwelling of the true self (as implied by Freud's theory). Because with the entrance into the conscious world the child begins to lose the pleasure he was acquainted with, he needs to counter balance the loss with some other gratification. Story here makes entrance in the scene as a skilful actor. It provides the child with pleasure with a promise of fulfilment of the longing for the fantastic. Thus, though a 'story' is not a

'substitute' of mother in the literal sense of the word, the two become interrelated with their individual relationship of pleasure with the child. So, substitution here means 'symbolic association' more than anything else. In this way the 'demand' of pleasure of the unconscious is fulfilled at this stage.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941), unquestionably the greatest literary figure of Bengal of all time, was awarded with Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for *his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse* [6]. However, he was also a notable story-teller who composed a number of stories of great worth. Tagore's deep insight into the human mind enabled him to realize the interrelation between the unconscious and the craving for the incredible. The result is a story like '*Tell Me a Story*,' which opens the collection of Tagore's stories translated in English by the Bengali writer Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906 - 88) in 1956 and published by Jaico Publishing House, India, namely '*The Golden Boat*.'

2. TAGORE AND FREUD

Tagore's relationship with psychoanalysis has an interesting history. It was during the middle of the 1920s that he came across Freud and the Freudians. Initially he was full of disapproval for the application of psychoanalysis in literary works. On May 29, 1927 he wrote to Kadambini Datta that *a poem is admired for the enjoyment it imparts: We derive enjoyment by savouring it and not by analysing it* [7]. The letter was actually a reaction to a paper presented by Sarasi Lal Sarkar, who argued that *structural peculiarities in the poet's verse were a reflection of his unconscious* [7]. Again in 1930 while delivering a lecture in Oxford, Tagore made the following remark about the relationship between psychoanalysis and art:

Men of our own times have analysed the human mind, its dreams, its aspirations – most often caught unaware in the shattered state of madness, disease and desultory dream – and they have found to their satisfaction that these are composed of elemental animalities tangled into various knots. This may be an important discovery; but what is still more important to realize is the fact that by some miracle or creation man infinitely transcends the component part of his own character [8].

The remark, quite obviously aimed at Freud and his followers, reflects once more Tagore's rejection of the relationship between art (creation) and psychoanalysis.

With time, however, Tagore's viewpoint on psychoanalysis underwent complete change. He not merely accepted the method in relation to literature warmly, but also applied it in his own works. By 1940, encouraged by Amiya Chakravarty who was more receptive to Freudian theory, Tagore began to explore the role of psychoanalysis in modern Bengali poetry in his essay *Nabajuger Kabya*. When he wrote the preface for *Nouka Dubi*, he chose to describe the narrative technique as *manobikalanmulak*, translating it as psychoanalysis [7]. 'Tell Me a Story,' which the present study focuses on, reveals Tagore's application of the Freudian psychological concept in creative literature. The story relates to the reader the desire of the fantastic of a child, and thus advocates the necessity of irrational in human life.

3. TELL ME A STORY

Psychology says that the unconscious *has no interest in conventional morality or the ethical obligations of civilization*, and that it *seeks pleasure, a demand often expressed in fantasy* (5, p.24). Tagore's 'Tell Me a Story' is based on this psychological truth. The story opens in the following manner:

As soon as the child learns to speak, he says: Tell me a story.

Grandmother begins: Once upon a time, a prince and his friend, the minister's son – [9, p.1].

The expression 'As soon as the child learns to speak' is very significant. It shows that in him the process of separation between the conscious and the unconscious is already active. Speech, a way of communication with others, is related to the world of consciousness. Speech is constituted by words arranged in proper order. Speech has its own rules. 'Rules' and 'order' are characteristics of consciousness too. What the child *loses by entering into language (speech) is its own direct self-identity, just being itself, as it seemed to be in the asocial, dyadic relation with the mother* [5, p. 35]. We become sure that the 'Oedipus system' is in work in his life. 'Father' (the symbol of repression) appears in the form of society. Society is here the metaphor of consciousness, the force operative in breaking 'the asocial dyadic unit of mother and child.'

The social-operation to break the 'dyadic unit' is seen is the endeavour of the 'well-wishers' and the 'schoolmaster' (father-figures). The appeal of the unconscious wishes appears in the story of the prince and his friend, told by grandmother

(mother-figure). The pleasure of the story (fantasy) is a 'substitute' of the pleasure of 'mother.' Now, the story is wholly unrealistic. This becomes evident when the 'well-wishers' express disapproval for it – *Those stories are not recorded in history. They are false* [9, p.1]. But the child does not pay heed to their censor, and listens to the stories spellbound. He is in love with the 'false' accounts of the prince, and literally hates the mathematical theories that *Well-wishers go on dinning in (his) ears: Three times four make twelve* [9, p.1]. The 'well-wishers' try to affirm that what they tell the child is a *fact*, while grandmother's stories are *fiction* [9, p.1]. The child needs to follow their directives to build his future, and his listening to the stories would make him *absolutely spoilt* [9, p.1]. But the child prefers to live in the world of fantasy, and displays no interest in 'the ethical obligations of civilization.' If the civilized world signifies consciousness, the teachings of the schoolmaster or the well-wishers are the 'syntax' of that conscious world. The 'syntax' enables one to become an ideal citizen.

The 'syntax' comes in full force in adulthood, as in this stage of life the conscious self stands distinct from the preconscious or the unconscious. It is obvious then, that when the child grows up, he would behave like the well-wishers. He would get detached from fantasy, at least consciously. But it is impossible at present. It is because, as Freud says, *in case of children . . . there is . . . no division or censorship between the preconscious and the unconscious, or . . . that division is only gradually being set up* [10, p. 705]. The memory of the pleasurable proximity with mother present in the preconscious leads him to his day-dreams as *an unfulfilled, unrepressed wish from waking life* [10, p. 705]. The 'stories' of grandmother is an unending source of pleasure to enable him to have those day-dreams. He can imagine himself in place of the prince killing monsters to protect the innocent, or sailing far away crossing the seven seas. His blissful state at that time can be compared to the 'intoxicated' state of joy of the speaker in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale.'

*Already with thee! Tender is the night,
And hapy the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes
blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding
mossy ways.*

*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the
boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each
sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer
eves [11, Lines 35-50].*

It is the state of ecstasy when the unconscious rediscovers the lost happiness of infancy through a 'substitute.'

In '**Tell Me a Story**,' however, Tagore does not narrate the story of a single child. The child of the story has no particular identity. In place of using a name, Tagore always denotes him as '*the child*.' He has done that deliberately, to universalize the connotation of the story. The child is every child. That is why Tagore says, *All over the world, in every home, stories pile up from year to year, in writing or by word or mouth, and outweigh every other heritage of man* [9, p.1]. That means, stories have served as a source of pleasure for a child through the ages. Tagore says – *The well-wishers have never cared to think clearly over one point: that, to compose stories has been a hobby of the Creator Himself. Unless you shake this habit out of the Creator, you cannot shake it out of mankind* [9, p.1]. The 'Creator' is nature and the 'hobby' is the metaphor of the natural impulse of man (here, of a child). Thus the hobby gets related to Jung's concept of the '*instinctual*' aspect of the '*collective unconscious*.' The '*hobby*' in relation to a child is there from '*the beginning*' (of consciousness). The corporeal '*birds and beasts and fishes*' procure a new colour, that of the fantastic, in stories, and in this way enable the child to see the unseen, to feel the unfelt in the familiar. The child unearths in stories more than is perceptible to him physically. Stories offer the child the potential to form in his own way a conception of the 'extra-conscious' through imagination. Whereas *the real history of man* [9, p.2] narrates the factual truth which has close kinship with the conscious world, the 'story' resonates the deep-seated wish of the heart for the mysterious. The encounter with mystery provides an individual with immense gratification. The questions, *What news? What happened then?* [9, p.2] when related to the conscious

world, are responded with logical, informative answers. But the same queries, in relation to the world of stories, find satisfaction in 'unrealities,' something which the conscious world does not permit, but which is an unfailing source of pleasure for a person. For the child, consequently, the mythical prince is more 'real' than the prince of history.

The repeated effort of the well-wishers to dissuade the child from listening to stories, and the child's resistance to all their attempts signify the age-old clash between culture (consciousness) and nature (the unconscious). If Freud's theory that one's true self is located in the unconscious is true, it is impossible to erase a natural instinct from a person completely. That is why the desire to listen to stories becomes an indivisible part of a child's psyche.

Tagore concludes the story in the following manner:

Man is a work of art. In his making the stress has been laid neither on the mechanical nor on the moral, but the imaginative. Man's well-wishers try to screen this truth, but the truth blazes up and burns the screen. At last, in dismay, schoolmasters and man's well-wishers try to bring about terms of peace between morality and fiction [9, p.2].

For Freud *the origins of art lies in childhood*, when a person remains *unself-conscious* [5, p.18]. Obviously, then, there is a close relation between art and the unconscious. But as society (*well-wishers*) acts wholly upon consciousness; it tries to 'screen' the importance of the unconscious in relation to human existence. To make a person a perfect social entity (nothing but a conscious being), the society tries to hypnotize him in a way that the unconscious wishes *are put to sleep* and he continues to *respond to questions and commands* [5, p.8]. The '*questions and commands*' symbolize social norms. The social-effort is materialized only when a person comes to adulthood, as, it has been mentioned earlier, in this stage of life the three parts of consciousness become independent of each other. But as it is not the case in childhood, the social hypnosis does not work on a child, and the desire to listen to stories (fantasy) emerge from the core of his being. So, at last '*schoolmasters and man's well-wishers* (agents of consciousness) *try to bring about terms of peace between morality* (consciousness) *and fiction* (the unconscious).'

4. CONCLUSION

What Tagore tries to tell in the story is that an attempt to break the bond of a child and story is futile. It is because for a person, and especially for a child, the existence of fantasy (the demand of the unconscious) is as necessary as the factual truth (the demand of the conscious world). A story satisfies the primordial urge of pleasure of a child's psychic self. Tagore suggests the same in these lines:

History and story combine to make our world. To man the history of Ashoka and Akbar is not the only reality; equally real is to him the story of the prince who crossed the seven oceans in search of the priceless jewel. To a man figure of the myth is as real as a figure of history [9, p.2].

So, what is necessary for consciousness is to 'bring about terms of peace' with the unconscious. However, the forces of consciousness and those of the unconscious, for their contrariety of property, cannot coexist permanently. Knowing that Tagore articulates – *But the two meet only to hack at each other* [9, p.2]. That means, the conflict between the child's desire to listen to stories and the endeavour of the society to bring him in the 'right path' will remain forever, and in this way *pile of waste* [would] *mount up in heaps* [9, p.2].

The conflict between the desire of the child and the effort of the 'well-wishers' can be looked upon from another angle. It is a clash between the *reflective* [12, p.8] and the *non-reflective* [12, p.9] levels of consciousness. The endeavour of the elders is concentrated outward, to the 'system' from where they seek the meaning of life. The craving of the child is focused inward, to personal pleasure in the form of fantasy which shapes his existence. However, experience is complete only when one has concentrated the consciousness first to an outward object, and then directed it inward (in the case of a child, the desire to listen to stories). The effort of the 'well-wishers' to 'bring about terms of peace between morality and fiction' is assumedly aimed at that completeness. But as consciousness cannot be reflective and non-reflective concurrently, the 'terms' can never

be arrived at. Accordingly, the diverging impulses within a person (or, a child) will remain forever.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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