

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

Abstract

Man always relates his existence with consciousness. He forgets that the secret of the true self rests in the unconscious. The unconscious forces are active all the time, whether one knows it or not makes no difference. Though in adulthood the conscious self of the psyche becomes distinct from the preconscious and the unconscious, in childhood the division of the three selves does not develop fully. That is why the demand of pleasure of the unconscious appears most prominently at the early stage of life. As an infant, a person enjoys the pleasure of proximity with mother. But as the infant becomes a child, the development of consciousness in him begins, and with that his distance from mother. At this stage, the child seeks other means to compensate the loss of his infantile pleasure. One of those ways is listening to stories, something that enables him to escape from the conscious world to the pleasurable world of day-dreams. As pleasure is the primary need of the unconscious, and as day-dreams provide a child with pleasure, there lies a close relationship between stories and the unconscious demands. Tagore realized this truth, and accordingly composed the story ‘*Tell Me a Story*.’

Keywords: Unconscious, Consciousness, Fantasy, Desire, Story, Childhood.

I. 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*’ (bartleby.com).

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 lead 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: The yen of the incredible is an indivisible part of a child’s psyche. To unearth the significance of the answer, we need to probe deep into the human mind. It is because 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’* (Jung, *‘On the Nature of the Psyche,’* 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’* (Jung, 151) to signify the objective wishes of the unconscious. The collective unconscious falls *‘phenomenologically into two categories.’* One of those is *‘instinctual,’* consisting of *‘natural impulses’* (Jung, 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’* (Eagleton, *‘Literary Theory: an Introduction,’* 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’* (Eagleton, 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’* (Mitchell, *‘Introduction, Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne,’* 23). It is the child’s *‘natural impulse.’* But as with time the child grows up, the *‘Oedipus system’* (Easthope, *‘The*

Unconscious,’ 33) is introduced in his life. Before, the child had only the image of mother before him. But now the image of ‘father’ also appears. The new image is a metaphor of what Freud calls ‘*repression*’ (Easthope, 31), a process through which society is constructed. ‘*Repression*’ means the repression of natural wishes related to fulfilment through pleasurable experiences. It breaks ‘*the asocial dyadic unit of mother and child*’ (Mitchell, 23). This is how the child enters into the world of consciousness. With this entry, there is a ‘*split*’ (Easthope, 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*’ (Easthope, 5, 6).

The birth of drive ensures the increasing separation from mother and nearness to the ‘system’ (father). Separation from mother means a symbolic separation from pleasure and fulfilment. But the child cannot accept such separation without getting 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*’ (Easthope, 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*’ (Easthope, 19). In fact, the child exchanges the pleasure of stories with the pleasure of nearness with mother. In other words, stories serve as a ‘*substitute*’ of mother. In this way the ‘demand’ of pleasure of the unconscious is fulfilled at this stage (for the unconscious is dominated by a single principle, the ‘*pleasure principle*’).

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*’ (‘*Nobel Prize in Literature*’). 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, namely ‘*The Golden Boat*.’

II. 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 he imparts: we derive enjoyment by savouring it and not by analysing it.*' 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*' (Mukherjee, '*Mind's Eye*'). 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' (Quoted in Roy, '*Tagore, Freud and Jung on Artistic Creativity: a Psycho-Phenomenological Study*').

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 point of view 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 Chakrevarty 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*' (Mukherjee). '*Tell Me a Story*,' which is being discussed in this paper, 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.

III. 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*' (Easthope, 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 – (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*' (Easthope, 35). We become sure that the '*Oedipus system*' is in work in his life. 'Father' 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.*' The appeal of the unconscious wishes appears in the story of the prince and his friend, told by grandmother. 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*' (1). But the child does not pay heed to their censor, and listens to the story 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*' (1). The '*well-wishers*' try to affirm that what they tell the child is a '*fact,*' while grandmother's stories are '*fiction*' (1). The child needs to follow their directives to build his future, and his listening to the stories would make him '*absolutely spoilt*' (1). But the child prefers to live in the world of fantasy, and shows 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 be 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*'. 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*' (Freud, '*Pelican Freud Library,*' Vol. 4, 705). The '*stories*' of grandmother is an unfailing 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 haply 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. (Lines 35-50, *Poetry Foundation*)

It is the state of ecstasy when the unconscious rediscovers the lost happiness of nearness with mother 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 intentionally, to universalize the significance 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*' (1). That means, stories have served as a source of pleasure for a child through the ages. Tagore says, '*The well-wishers have never cred 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*' (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 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). Freud's theory implies that one's true self is situated in the unconscious. If this 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' (2).

For Freud '*the origins of art lies in childhood*,' when a person remains '*unself-conscious*' (Easthope, 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*' (Easthope, 8). The '*questions and commands*' symbolize social norms. The social-effort is materialized only when a person comes to adulthood, as, it has been told 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).'

IV. 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 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’ (2).

So, what is necessary for consciousness is to ‘bring about terms of peace’ with the unconscious. However, the coexistence of the two opposite forces (of the conscious and the unconscious) cannot be permanent. Knowing that Tagore says, ‘But the two meet only to hack at each other’ (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 for ever, and in this way ‘pile of waste [would] mount up in heaps’ (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 conflict between the ‘reflective’ and the ‘non-reflective’ (Sartre, ‘*The Transcendence of the Ego*,’ 8, 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 focussed 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’ may be said to aim at that completeness. But as consciousness cannot be reflective and non-reflective at the same time, the ‘terms’ can never be arrived at.

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