

Rabindranath Tagore's Kabuliwala: Fatherhood and Otherness from A Postcolonial Perspective

Dr. Sushma Brahmadevara

*¹Associate Professor of English, Humanities and Mathematics Dept, G. Narayanamma Institute of Technology and Science
Hyderabad, India*

Abstract— Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Kabuliwala* (1892), is often read, analyzed and interpreted as a saga of childhood innocence and cross-cultural bonding. Yet it risks being read in isolation from the complex and shifting socio-political structures of which it is a part. The aim of this paper is to suggest that *Kabuliwala* can be more meaningfully understood through a postcolonial lens, in which the Afghan protagonist, Rahamat, becomes an interpellated other within colonial Bengali society. The paper uses Edward Said's concept of "othering" and Homi K. Bhabha's ideas of cultural hybridization and ambiguity. The study portrays how suspicion, class structure, gender differences, anxiety, stress, and colonial fears contribute to Rahamat's inferior status. It aims to subvert these structures by depicting through a power of acclaim in fatherhood. Rahamat and Mini seek comfort and solace by being emotionally close with the other side; their bond depicts resistance from harsh divisions of self and other. This paper demonstrates that Tagore maps a space between discrimination, humanity and familial love against colonial segregation.

Keywords— Fatherhood, Identity, Otherness, Postcolonialism, Tagore

I. INTRODUCTION

Kabuliwala stands up there among the most celebrated works in Indian literature for its nuanced portrayal of human relationships that transcend boundaries between disparate cultures; a work where, without being preachy, Tagore takes us to the brink. On the surface, it is a tale of Mini, a young Bengali girl, and Rahamat, who hawks fruits from Afghanistan. Yet there is much more beneath the surface of this seemingly simple story, for at the core of it all lies a swirling mix of cultural difference, social hierarchy and colonial consciousness.

Set in British imperial India, the story is located within a culture formed by both an internal stratification and the larger imperial world. The social structure of Bengal denies Rahamat its Bengali-ness and thus situates him as an ethnic outsider—deeply suspect, observed with the one-eyed gaze that looks him up and down simply to satiate its curiosity. This paper lays out Rahamat himself as a kind of 'colonial other' whose marginalization is both socially constructed and narratively disputed.

This study examines how Tagore both reaffirms and undermines polarities of othering through a postcolonial reading. Although Rahamat is framed as terrifying and foreign, his identity as a father reaches above the fray. The paper argues that Tagore deploys paternal love as a humanizing force in order to contest colonial binaries and foreground a shared emotional reality.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical readings of *Kabuliwala*, capitalizing on its emotional charge, often juxtapose childhood innocence against the sorrowful effect of nostalgia and postcolonial family bonding. Scholars such as Malashri Lal explore how the notions of familiar and alien run in opposition to each other in the text. Other studies discuss all-pervading human emotions, concentrating mainly on the father-daughter relationship as the dominant theme.

Earlier studies, however, have not depicted the complexities involved in colonial discourse in influencing such portrayals. The 'other' is certainly visible but is not created in a postcolonial context. They do not address the fears and anxieties that arise due to colonialism, nor the social hierarchies that define the discernments of Rahamat, and these are conveyed through the narrative strategies used by Tagore.

This paper aims to fill this gap by situating *Kabuliwala* within postcolonial theory so as to provide deeper insight into identity, difference and emotional association in the text.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTCOLONIALISM AND OTHERING

Postcolonial theory provides a critical tool to engage with issues of power, identity and representation in colonial and post-colonial settings. It remarkably encompasses Edward Said's explanations on 'othering' in *Orientalism*. As Said explains, dominant cultures construct the 'other' as inferior, exotic and threatening to gain ideological control over their own societies.

This logic of othering operates within the colonized society itself in Kabuliwala. Rahamat is outside the Western colonizer but inside Bengal—as alien as any other outsider. His race, way of speaking and work mark him as a deviant, and this deviation equals precariousness, for he is in a way uncontrollable.

A. Bhabha's Notion of Ambivalence

This complexity is further complicated by Homi K. Bhabha's notion of ambivalence. It integrates the 'other' but only partially, leaving a space where tension around identity negotiation persists. It is through this ambivalence that Rahamat—part human and not-quite-belonging in the Bengali household—is simultaneously feared, accepted, othered and humanised.

B. Colonial Discourse and the Construction of the Outsider

Colonial discourse operates not only through political domination but also through the regulation of cultural identity. In colonial Bengal, the construction of the outsider follows a familiar pattern: the unknown is automatically equated with the threatening. Stereotypes obscure Rahamat's identity as a person. The narrator, to a slight degree reasonable himself, initially adopts the same stereotyping—a standard deviation of bias which indicates how far the biases of mainstream society extend.

IV. RAHAMAT AS THE COLONIAL 'OTHER'

Rahamat is composed of points of difference from his opening introduction. His dress, physique and non-Bengali roots set him apart from the Bengali middle-class milieu immediately. The response of Mini's mother, in particular, hints at deeper-seated fears that mark the transition from the familiar to the unknown. This anxiety around kidnapping and violence reveals a wider social distrust of outsiders.

This mirrors the postcolonial notion of otherness: that which is unknown is to be feared. Stereotypes obscure Rahamat's individual identity. The narrator, too, initially describes Rahamat through the lens of received prejudice—an indication of how deeply colonial biases have penetrated Bengali social consciousness.

V. FATHERHOOD AS THE SUBVERSION OF OTHERNESS

Tagore destabilizes the framework of othering through the ongoing relationship between Rahamat and Mini. The two share lighthearted in-jokes and gentle emotion, continually reminding the reader of Rahamat's humanity beneath the constructed identity of the outsider.

The narrative turns when Rahamat is revealed as a father. The unearthing of his daughter's handprint is a climactic moment that bridges intimacy, closing the gap between him and the narrator. By this point, social and cultural differences fade away behind a common experience of fatherhood.

This transformation demonstrates that Tagore was a critic of overly restrictive categories of identity. The narrator no longer sees Rahamat as an outsider; he sees Rahamat as himself. The notion of fatherhood becomes a universalizing force that transgresses the boundaries of class, nationality and culture, in bold defiance of colonial binaries of self and other.

VI. GENDER, PATRIARCHY, AND SOCIAL NORMS

The story also depicts inter-gender relationships within colonial Bengali society. The characterization of Mini reflects patriarchal values from an early age, as they are so deeply seated in her by the thought of marriage and taking care of her family. Her parents represent different ideological positions, succinctly demonstrating how different parenting approaches lead to parents grappling with their role as authority figures—inducing fear or expressing emotion.

Mini's father embodies empathy and openness; her mother embodies caution and conformance. Studying these gendered roles within a postcolonial framework helps us understand such practices as being controlled not only culturally but also by structures of social regulation and expectation. Indian society, as a patriarchal and stratified society, regulates women's behavior in order to maintain social order.

VII. MEMORY, TIME, AND DISPLACEMENT

Time itself impacts the emotions of the characters. The loss of innocence that comes with adulthood for Mini is signified by the fact that Rahamat has been absent, imprisoned, and thus separated from his own daughter. Such displacement only strengthens the emotional toll that marginalization takes.

Rahamat awakening to the fact that he has been absent while his daughter grows up illustrates how common a theme loss is, yet also draws attention to the specificity of that loss based upon his social position. His experience is indicative of the status of the 'other' in general, who is likewise deprived of continuity and belonging.



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VIII. CONCLUSION

A postcolonial reading of Kabuliwala reveals much more about identity, difference and human connection. Rahamat is seen as the 'other,' a term denoting the anxieties and prejudices of colonial society, while his relationship with Mini becomes a quest to challenge such constructed identities through a commonality of emotional resonance.

Fatherhood emerges as a discursive tool for countering othering in Tagore's presentation. He offers a radical vision of shared humanity that rises above cultural difference through the value of empathy.

The narrative interrogates the underpinnings of identity and belonging, asking whether genuine connection is possible in a world that seems irreducibly divided.

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