



LONELINESS AND YEARNING FOR COMPANY IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *THE POSTMASTER*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper studies loneliness in the characters presented in Rabindranath Tagore's The Postmaster. It draws instances from the short story to cite how loneliness plays a major role in the lives of its central characters. The research paper also explores how expectations always end in dismay with reference to the short story of Rabindranath Tagore.

Keywords: Indian literature, Isolation, Loneliness, Love, Family, Rabindranath Tagore.

Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore, born on May 7, 1861 in Calcutta, India, is a Bengali poet, short-story writer, song composer, playwright, essayist, and painter. Tagore introduced new prose and verse forms, and used colloquial language into Bengali literature freeing it from traditional Sanskrit. He was mainly responsible for introducing Indian culture to the West and vice versa, and he is seen as the greatest of creative artists of early 20th-century India. In 1913, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Some of his works are *Manasi* (1890), *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*)(1912), *Gora* (1910) and *Ghare-Baire* (1916). *Gitanjali*, which won him the Nobel Prize was lauded by W.B. Yeats and Andre Gide. Many of his later works expresses his sadness due to the death of his wife and two children.

INTRODUCTION

To kill a person, isolate. Simple as it sounds yet it is so deep when it comes to the results that isolation produces. It either drives a person insane or to the extreme of committing suicide.

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Even the worst form of punishment a convict can have is nothing but solitary confinement. It has been contemplated for ages and labeled as the cruelest of punishments a person can ever receive. Loneliness and longing play a huge role in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Postmaster*. The characters Ratan and Postmaster experience loneliness at different phases of their lives. They long for company, a loving heart which can wash them ashore from being isolated.

The postmaster is a young man from Calcutta who shifts to Ulapur as he lands up the job as a postmaster in that village. Ratan is a little girl of twelve or thirteen and she is an orphan. Ratan works as a maid for the Postmaster in turn for some food. She is a small girl who is left to be cared by none and only has postmaster for company in the village of Ulapur which is of no consequence. She takes a liking towards the Postmaster, considers and treats him as a family member. Postmaster talks about his family members to Ratan, and the little girl starts to address his family members as her family members as she has no one in her family remaining. Her family members, her father, mother and her brother are no more, and Ratan considers the Postmaster as her only hope. How her hope and belief is broken by the Postmaster during the course forms the rest of the story.

The postmaster with his Calcutta background is bad at social skills; he is like a fish out of water at the village of Ulapur. He doesn't mingle with the local people and it cannot be mistaken as arrogance, maybe he hadn't anything to say at this place which is so unfamiliar to him and it is brought out by the lines "Or rather, his Calcutta background made him a bad mixer – in an unfamiliar place he was either arrogant or ill-at-ease." (75) *The Postmaster*

His effort to escape loneliness and boredom is to write poems and it doesn't do anything good to keep him occupied in this village of no consequence. He neither has work nor has anyone to talk to in Ulapur. The postmaster in his poems sketch a colorful and happy life which is nothing but a way of escaping loneliness filled reality. He, on a deeper level expects for someone to sweep him away from this village. A person turns to nature only when he is alone which is expressed in the following lines. "Sometimes he tried to write poems. The bliss of spending one's life watching the leaves trembling in the trees or the clouds in the sky – that was what the poems expressed." (75) *The Postmaster*

Marriage to Ratan seems more of a distant dream as there's none to support her in the village of Ulapur. She is an orphan and she has lost her parents and her brother at a very young age of thirteen. Ratan is left to fend for on her own as there is no one to take care of this abandoned little girl. Who will care for this child, who will get her married, who will help her to survive in this world and many are unanswered questions. "Her name was Ratan, and she was about twelve or thirteen. It seemed unlikely that she would get married." (75) *The Postmaster*



Ratan remembers more of her father and her brother than her mother. She has fond memories of playing alongside her brother by the pond; the memory of playing a make-believe fishing game comes back and forth in her mind all the time. Ratan treasures the moments spent with her brother like nothing else. The following lines give readers the idea of how Ratan misses a brother-like character in her life. She feels that the Postmaster may well play the role of the brother she has been longing for in her life. “She remembered her little brother: one distant day, during the rainy season, they had stood on the edge of a small pond and played at catching fish with sticks broken off trees – this memory was far more vividly fixed in her mind than many more important things.”(76) *The Postmaster*

Ratan’s longing for a family like environment is fulfilled to a certain extent with the arrival of the Postmaster. The Postmaster talks to none but Ratan in the village of Ulapur. It is with her he shares his family affairs and details about his family members. This, to Ratan, is a welcome relief from her life as an orphan. Ratan has finally found someone with whom she can talk to, speak about her family and listen to. The Postmaster sharing about his family members makes Ratan to think and refer to them as her family members which can be seen in the following lines. “Eventually Ratan referred to the postmaster’s family – his mother, sister and brother – as if they were her own. She even formed affectionate imaginary pictures of them in her mind.” (76-77) *The Postmaster*

The Postmaster’s longing for a loved one by his side is referred to by the imagery of a lonely bird. His tryst with loneliness is felt heavily in the village of Ulapur where he is no more than an alien. He is not more than a lonely bird sitting on a tree which chirps time and again for the care of a loved one. The postmaster could relate his condition to the condition of the bird. He experiences solitude in the village which is expressed in the forthcoming lines. “Gradually it seemed that the bird was saying precisely this, again and again; that in the afternoon shade and solitude the same meaning was in the rustle of the leaves.” (77) *The Postmaster*

To ward off boredom, the Postmaster takes up the role of a teacher for the little girl Ratan. He has no letters to deliver in this village. He talks to no one other than Ratan. The Postmaster feels that teaching Ratan will keep him busy in this otherwise not so busy village. Ratan also is very eager to learn and build a rapport with the Postmaster. This plan of teaching Ratan works very well for the Postmaster who is kept busy in a small way. With this Ratan too builds a relationship with the Postmaster. “‘I’m going to teach you to read, a little bit each day,’ said the postmaster.” (77) *The Postmaster*



The Postmaster's wish for a loved one by his side during his illness is a natural wish of every human being. All that he wished is for a maternal care and that was fulfilled with the entry of Ratan. The little girl Ratan was no more a little girl and she played the role of a mother and a sister which the Postmaster wished for with ease. Ratan never rested; gave postmaster the right food, brought in the village Doctor and gave medicines at regular intervals, enquired about his current state all the time. With Ratan his expectations of being cared by a feminine heart was fulfilled. "He wished his mother or sister were sitting here next to him, soothing his illness and loneliness with feminine tenderness. And his longings did not stay unfulfilled."

(78) *The Postmaster*

Ratan couldn't digest the fact that Postmaster is leaving Ulapur. She considered him her only hope and when he says that he is to leave Ulapur she is shell-shocked and cannot come out of that for a long time. Ratan is in no mood to give up on Postmaster, she wants to accompany him to Calcutta. She is shocked and restless but she holds her anxiousness to an extent and pops the question if he could take her to Calcutta with him. The Postmaster laughs at the idea of taking her with him; to him she is not a family member, whereas for Ratan, he is everything. The Postmaster cannot connect with Ratan the way she feels for him, he means the world to him, but to the Postmaster she is no more than a servant. "When the postmaster had had his meal, she suddenly asked, 'Dadababu, will you take me home with you?'" "How could I do that!" said the postmaster, laughing." (79) *The Postmaster*

The laugh of Postmaster kills Ratan and it brings her to reality. Before she was in a dreamy state where she considered that the Postmaster was everything to her. Now she knows what her place is considering the life of the Postmaster. She is just a phase in his life and not a part of her life as she dreamt. Reality seems to have hit Ratan so hard and she loses sleep as the words of the Postmaster refusing the idea of taking her home with him keeps ringing in her ears which is further explained in the lines. "All night long, whether dreaming or awake, Ratan felt the postmaster's laugh ringing in her ears. 'How could I do that!'" (79) *The Postmaster*

"Ratan had meekly suffered many scoldings from her master, but these kindly words were more than she could bear." (79) *The Postmaster* Ratan previously has tolerated many a sharp remarks from the Postmaster; But the Postmaster being kind to her by making arrangements with the next postmaster doesn't go well with Ratan. All that she wants is to be with the Postmaster and she yearns for a place in his heart. Ratan expects a family like setting to be in and not some makeshift arrangements for the time being.

"But Ratan sank to the ground and clung to his feet, saying, 'I beg you, Dadababu, I beg you – don't give me any money. Please, no one need bother about me.' Then she fled, running."

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(80) *The Postmaster* Ratan sees receiving money for her services as an insult. She cooked, took care, was there in the time of need on her own will and liking. Ratan seems to have no interest for money; she yearns for love, care and affection from the Postmaster. She flees the place as she cannot hold herself from breaking out before the Postmaster. The Postmaster is stunned by the behavior of Ratan as he has never seen her behave like that.

The Postmaster feels that he has to go back to Ratan to take her to Calcutta. His feeling to go back to fetch the girl dies off soon when he realizes the fact that everyone has to part with someone at some point of life. The world has abandoned the little girl, should he too abandon her? The question lingers in his mind but he understands how the world functions and realizes the philosophy of life which is shown in the lines that follow. "He felt a sharp desire to go back: should he not fetch that orphaned girl, whom the world had abandoned?" (80) *The Postmaster* Even after the Postmaster leaving the village Ratan believes that he will come back to take her to Calcutta. That hope is what which makes everyone to live in this world. Ratan embraces that hope and stays near the post office waiting for the Postmaster. This short story is a classic example of how expectation hurts. We all live in a dreamy state until reality gets the better of us. Reality getting the better of us doesn't have any impact, even if it has an impact; we recover from it and continue to live in the world of dreams all over again.

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