

Whispers of the Dead: Psychoanalytical Study of Ravindranath Tagore's Short Stories '*The Living & the Dead*' & '*Skeleton*'¹

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Poet, novelist, painter & musician Ravindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is the very epitome of Bengali literature & in 1890s he focused primarily on writing short stories in his own magazine '*Sadhana*'. Many of his best stories were written during this period of relative isolation spent managing his family estates in the Padma river region of East Bengal & they have been highly praised as vivid portrayals of Bengali life & culture in all its aspects. Yet Tagore is a brilliant psychologist as well & in these stories he can be seen reaching beyond mere documentary realism towards a profound psychological realism.

Though Ravindranath Tagore was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), his stories are pre-Freudian as they were written in 1890s & Freud's full-fledged theory of psychoanalysis became public only in 1920s. Still like Shakespeare, Dostoevsky & other masters of literature having insights of human heart, Tagore anticipates Freud's theory of *Id*, *Ego* & *Superego* & dream analysis. Tagore regarded psychoanalysis as an activity that lent expression to & thus empowered the weak, mute & crippled thoughts imprisoned in the unconscious.

For my paper, I have selected two stories viz. '*The Living & the Dead*' & '*Skeleton*'. The female protagonists in both the stories are upper caste, upper class widows who suffer the ordeals of orthodox, oppressive, patriarchal society at the cost of their own psyche. Indeed Tagore has a very fine feminine sensibility which is reflected in many of his short stories & his famous novel

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'*Nashta Need*' (made into a film '*Charulata*' by Satyajit Ray). However these two stories are selected as they lend themselves to a through proto-Freudian analysis.

Freud's Theory of Psychoanalysis

Freud developed a model of the mind having three functional aspects: (1) the *Id*, which incorporates libidinal & other desires (2) the *Superego*, the internalization of standards of morality & propriety of society within the individual psyche & (3) the *Ego* which tries as best it can to negotiate the conflicts between the insatiable demands of *Id*, the impossibly stringent requirements of *Superego* & the limited possibilities of gratification offered by the world of reality. The unresolved conflict between *Id*, *Ego* & *Superego* leads to neurosis. Freud developed psychoanalysis as a means of analysis & therapy of neurosis but soon expanded it to account for many developments & practices in the history of civilization including warfare, mythology & religion as well as literature & the other arts. Literature, he believed, like dreams & neurotic symptoms consists of these imagined or fantasized, fulfillment of wishes that are either denied by reality or prohibited by the social standards of morality & propriety, through the mechanisms of *condensation* (omission of parts of unconscious material & the fusion of several unconscious elements into a single entity), *displacement* (substitution for an unconscious object of one that is acceptable to the conscious mind) & *symbolism* (representation of repressed mainly sexual object of desire by non-sexual objects which resemble them or are associated with them in prior experience).

The Living & the Dead

Kadambini, the protagonist is a childless widow having no direct blood relations & who as a result showers all her 'frustrated' love & affection on her brother-in-law's little son. However it did not satisfy her longing to be a mother, but rather intensified it. As there was no way for a widow to be a mother in the orthodox society, this tug-of-war between her desire for motherhood (*Id*) & its denial by the society (*Superego*) is too much for her *Ego* to bear. Her ego tries to solve this dilemma through a pseudo-death whereby 'Kadambini had not died: for some reason her life function was suspended—that was all.' (33) All the people assume that she is dead & she too considers herself to be dead when she regains consciousness. She says to herself, "I am my own ghost." (34) This ghost solution frees her *ego* from all constraints laid on it by the *superego*.

As this realization struck, all ties & conventions seemed to snap. It was as if she had weird power, boundless liberty—to go where she liked, do what she liked & with the onset of this feeling she dashed out of the hut like a madwoman, like a gust of a wind—ran out into the dark-burning ground with not the slightest shame, fear or worry in her mind. (34)

This also gives a free reign to her *Id* & she enters the forbidden zone. Roaming around as the ghost, she goes to her childhood friend Yogmaya's house instead of her own. Yogmaya is Kadambini's alter ego; she has everything that Kadambini lacks—husband, children, relatives, family, love & sex. Kadambini longs *to be* Yogmaya. Being a ghost she flouts all the social customs & formalities but this naturally baffles Yogmaya:

Then Shripati came into the room. Kadambini gazed at him for a moment, then slowly walked out without covering her head or showing any other sign of modesty or respect. Afraid that Shripati would take offence at her friend's behavior Yogmaya made apologies for her. But so little explanation was necessary—indeed Shripati accepted her excuses so easily—that she felt uneasy. (35)

Kadambini's exploration of her own libido brings her face to face with her repressed sexuality & it frightens her. She has nightmares in the daylight. However her ghost-status creates a paradox—on one hand, being a ghost herself she cannot further displace her fears & desires on an outside object & on the other being a living person she cannot '*possess*' & '*become*' Yogmaya.

Kadambini was terrified of herself. Yet she could not run away from herself. Those who are frightened of ghosts look backwards in terror—they are frightened of what they cannot see. But Kadambini was terrified of her inner self—nothing outside frightened her. Thus in the silence of a mid-day she would sit alone in her room & sometimes shout out loud; & in the evening the sight of her shadow in the lamplight made her quiver all over...Eventually in the middle of the night Kadambini came out of her bedroom wailing; she came right up to the door of Yogmaya's room & cried, "Didi, Didi, I beg you! Do not leave me alone!" (36)

When Shripati & Yogmaya inquire & come to know that Kadambini had died one day before she came to their house, Kadambini has no option but to leave their house. However her brief stay there does bring about a catharsis in her & paves the way to her return to her own household. When she comes back to her house & her nephew lovingly calls her '*Kakima*' she metaphorically comes back to life. She is able to acknowledge her true feelings & resolve the

dilemma of *Id&Superego*. However her alienation from other people again leaves her no option but to kill herself: ‘Kadambini had proved by dying that she had not died.’ (41)

Skeleton

‘*Skeleton*’ again is a story of a child-widow who falls in love with her brother’s friend & their family doctor, Shashishekhar. Obviously there is no possibility of their marriage. But when she comes to know that Shashishekhar is getting married to another girl, she poisons him on the very day of his wedding. Later she herself dresses up as a bride & consumes the same poison. She intends to be eternally united with her lover if not in life than in death. However finally what remains of her is the mere skeleton.

“My wish was that when people came & found me, that slight smile would still be intoxicatingly present on my red lips. My wish was that when I slowly entered my bridal-chamber of Eternal Night, I would take that smile with me. But where was the bridal-chamber? Where was my bridal attire? Woken by a clattering sound within me I found three boys learning anatomy from me. In a breast that had throbbled with joy & sorrow, where daily, the petals of youth had unfolded one by one, a teacher was pointing out with his cane which bone was which. And what trace was there now of the final smile I had formed with my lips?” (90)

Like ‘*The Living & the Dead*’, ‘*Skeleton*’ too is the story of repressed sexuality of a widow. But it is more than that. Unlike Kadambini who experiences death in life & unlike the silently suffering women of Tagore's realist fiction, the woman of *Skeleton* returns after death to protest and avenge her treatment in life & also after death. It is a narrative of the oppression of women, forbidden desire, and betrayal, told with deep irony and occasional moments of dark humor. And the greatest irony is it is not the skeleton-woman but the narrator himself who is neurotic. He uses the processes of *condensation, displacement & symbolism* to speak the unspeakable.

The whole story is imagined by the narrator as a dream. The narrator of the story is a medical student, frustrated in his studies as well as in his life. Recently there are a couple of deaths in his household & so darkness of night easily arouses morbid thoughts in his mind. (It is not mentioned exactly who have died—this detail is deliberately omitted by the narrator. But most probably it is his mother, wife or a forbidden lover. If it’s his mother, then his desire is undoubtedly Oedipal.) He imagines that the skeleton itself is telling its/her life story to him. What is interesting is he imagines the skeleton to be a young child-widow in love with her family

doctor. It is but obvious that he is projecting his own thoughts & emotions on the skeleton. He is an unsuccessful medical student while the lover in the story Shashishekhar is a successful doctor. The skeleton who is now a lifeless collection of bones was then a young beautiful maiden of sixteen. Yet as a child-widow she had tasted the sour taste of death just like the narrator has experienced the loss due to death. The skeleton tells him, “Love & death were the only things that were real to me.” (88) Indeed love & death are the only things that are real to him. Love is elusive while death is inevitable. The scary possibility of his own death propels him to project his longing for love on an object which is already dead—the skeleton. By making the girl (who is now the skeleton) love her doctor so much that she kills him as well as herself, the narrator tries to fuse the elusive love with the inevitable death & thereby make death elusive & love inevitable. In other words, he wants to transcend death by making love eternal. Yet he knows the futility of the whole effort. Death is final & irrevocable. Skeleton is its first & foremost symbol. Indeed skeleton symbolizes utter futility of life—its happiness & sorrow, its love & beauty, its desire & frustration—everything is futile. Even the death is futile as whatever the cause for which it is caused is also lost in its own nothingness.

The climax of the story comes at the end with the unexpected twist, irony hovering on the edge of dark humor. When the skeleton asks the narrator, “How did you find my story?” he replies, “Hilarious.” (90) At the same time, the first crow cawed, dawn-light broke in the room & the ghost of the skeleton disappears without trace. By categorizing this whole dream as *hilarious*, narrator once again displaces his conscious self (symbolized by daylight) from his unconscious (symbolized by the darkness & night) & sweeps away the unconscious in the realm of comic, not important, not to be taken seriously. However, the reality is the exact opposite—unconscious is not something which is to be taken lightly; it is very very serious which can greatly jeopardize one’s sanity if ignored totally. Sumangala Bhattacharya says, “Hauntings imply a layering of history, so that past and present, unfamiliar and familiar, become indistinguishable. Ghosts show that the present is always at the mercy of the past, so that laying a ghost to rest does not restore the original state of certainty.”

Conclusion

Freud asserted that artists possess special ability to *sublimate*, to elaborate fantasized wish-fulfillment into the manifest features of a work of art in a way that conceals or deletes their

merely personal elements & so makes them capable of satisfying the unconscious desires of people other than the individual artists & the ‘puzzling’ ability to mould the artistic medium into ‘a faithful image of the creature of his imagination’ as well as into a satisfying artistic form. The result is a fantasized wish-fulfillment of a complex & artfully shaped sort that not only allows the artist to overcome at least partially & temporarily personal conflicts & repressions but also makes it possible for the artist’s audience ‘to obtain solace & consolation from their own unconscious sources of gratification which had become inaccessible’ to them. Literature & art therefore, unlike dream & neuroses may serve the artist as a mode of fantasy that ‘opens the way back to reality.’

Ravindranath Tagore through his psychoanalytical short stories does exactly this. He gives his readers an opportunity to explore the unconscious fears & desires, so that they can have a better understanding of reality.

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