



## ‘The Cabuliwallah’- A Story of Complex Human Relationships

Rabindranath Tagore was not only a poet of international stature but also a great short story writer in his own right. ‘The Cabuliwallah’ is one of his most famous stories in which he portrays a genuine relationship between a small child and a total stranger. It is a much celebrated short story by Rabindranath Tagore in which he explores the complexities of father- daughter relationship. The writer vividly projects the feelings of a father towards his daughter which are universal and perpetual. The economic, geographical, social framework can’t affect such a pious relationship. The paper aims to explore the writer’s feelings for her daughter and the poor Cabuliwallah and the humanistic approach reflected for them.

The narrator of the story tells how his innocent young daughter gets afraid of the peddler in the beginning but gradually begins to like the visitor who brings dry fruits for her, irrespective of different social and geographical backgrounds and vast difference in their age; they become close companions within no time. It has been rightly said:

If pathos had another name, Rabindranath Tagore's short story “Kabuliwala” would have earned it.” (Siddiqui Zaman)

Like any other doting and loving father, the writer has a special corner in his heart for his naughty daughter Mini. She enjoys freedom to disturb him at any time and for any reason. She often puzzles him by asking ridiculous questions and the poor father tries to satisfy her curiosity as far as possible. But the entry of the Cabuliwallah in the family brings an important change in the relationship between the two. The writer vividly describes the appearance of the Cabuliwallah and his first meeting with Mini. Mini’s first encounter with the Cabuliwallah is not pleasant as it brings fear in the mind of hers. The writer describes it thus:

The window of my room overlooks the road. The child had seated herself at my feet near my table, and was playing softly, drumming on her knees. I was hard at work on my seventeenth chapter, in which Pratap Singh, the hero, has just caught Kanchanlata, the heroine, in his arms, and is about to escape with her by the third storey window of the castle, when suddenly Mini left her play, and ran to the window, crying: "A Cabuliwallah! A Cabuliwallah!" And indeed, in the street below, there was a Cabuliwallah, walking slowly along. He wore the loose, soiled clothing of his people, and a tall turban; he carried a bag on his back, and boxes of grapes in his hand.

I cannot tell what my daughter's feelings were when she saw this man, but she began to call him loudly. "Ah!" thought I, "he will come in, and my seventeenth chapter will never be finished!" At that very moment the Cabuliwallah turned, and looked up at the child. When she saw this, she was overcome by terror, and running to her mother's protection disappeared. She had a blind belief that inside the bag, which the big man carried, there were perhaps two or three other children like herself. The peddler meanwhile entered my doorway and greeted me with a smile. (GL 72)

Mini's initial fear vanishes when she comes in contact with the Cabuliwallah; she now converses with him without any fear and hesitation. Both of them become close friends. Mini spends more time with this person so far unknown to her. She enjoys his company. Mini's mother has her own doubts. She looks at the Cabuliwallah with doubt. She has her own misgivings and is afraid that he might kidnap her. Her fear is not altogether groundless. But the Cabuliwallah is made of different clay. For him, Mini is as important as his own daughter on the other hand Mini's father has full trust in this old man who is like a God sent angel whose mission is to keep this small child in a cheerful mood.

By giving Mini dry fruits voluntarily frequently and generously, the Cabuliwallah is not marketing his good but intended to open all the doors of affection, reserved for his own daughter. The distance between Cabul and Calcutta remains on map only and the tough looking Pathan behaves like a child himself while in company with Mini. The very sight of Rahman—the Cabuliwallah fills Mini's heart with joy. He is nothing less than a father figure for her. The writer describes the cordial relationship between Mini and Cabuliwallah in the following words:

Once a year, in the middle of January, Rahman, the Cabuliwallah, used to return to his own country, and as the time approached, he would be very busy, going from house to house collecting his debts. This year, however, he could always find time to come and see Mini. It might have seemed to a stranger that there was some conspiracy between the two, for when he could not come in the morning, he would appear in the evening.

Even to me it was a little startling now and then suddenly to surprise this tall, loose-garmented man laden with his bags, in the corner of a dark room; but when Mini ran in smiling, with her "O Cabuliwallah! Cabuliwallah" and the two friends, so far apart in age, subsided into their old laughter and their old jokes, I felt reassured. (GL 75)

The bonding between the two comes to end due to an unfortunate event which disturbs the schedule of Cabuliwallah and he is forced to separate himself from this lovely child. Losing temper, he has made fatal assault on the person who refuses to repay his debt. Consequently, he is imprisoned. Even at the time when the police take him to prison, he does not lose his sense of humour and tries to please Mini, saying:

Rahman's face lighted up as he turned to her. He had no bag under his arm today, so that she could not talk about the elephant with him. She therefore at once proceeded to the next question: "Are you going to your father-in-law's house?" Rahman laughed and said:

"That is just where I am going, little one!" Then seeing that the reply did not amuse the child, he held up his fettered hands, "Ah!" he said, "I would have thrashed that old father-in-law, but my hands are bound! (GL 76)

Several years in jail brings an abrupt end to his selfless, sweet relationship with Mini. Years pass one after another. Mini is no more a playful, mischievous, small doll like child. She is now of marriageable age. The chapter of the Cabuliwallah is almost closed and nobody, including Mini, remembers him any longer. Wedding preparations are going in full swing and Mini- the light of the house- will leave her house forever. Her parents feel sad to send her away but that is the destiny of each parent of a daughter. The writer brings out the pain of separation in the following words:

Years had passed away. It was once more autumn, and we had made arrangements for our Mini's marriage. It was to take place during the Puja Holidays. With Durga returning to Kailas, the light of our home also would depart to her husband's house, and leave her father's in shadow.

The morning was bright. After the rains, it seemed as though the air had been washed clean and the rays of the sun looked like pure gold. So bright were they, that they made even the sordid brick-walls of our Calcutta lanes radiant. Since early dawn the wedding-pipes had been sounding, and at each burst of sound my own heart throbbed. The wail of the tune, Bhairavi, seemed to intensify the pain I felt at the approaching separation. My Mini was to be married that night. (GL 76)

On his release from the prison, the first thing Rehman does is to go to see Mini. He is under the impression that his little dear friend would still be looking the same as he found her during the last meeting. Who but the father or one showering fatherly affection would desire to keep the image of his dear one still intact? The writer is rather surprised to see Rehman comes back after such a long interval and that too, on the auspicious day of the marriage of his darling daughter. He is in no mood to allow him to see Mini and revives old memories. At the same time, he does not have heart to disappoint him. It is purely a coincidence that he arrives on the day of Mini's marriage. The writer is kind hearted and can appreciate the feeling of Rehman in right perspective. At first, he shows his inability to grant the wish of an old man presenting a convincing reason. Rehman shows him the impression of a little hand on the piece of paper. He clarifies that it is an impression of his own daughter from whom he would not have preferred to go away even for a single moment, has luck favoured him. Financial compulsions force him to try his fortune in such an alien country. The writer brings out the pathos through this incidence and moves the readers:

I took them, and was going to pay him, but he caught my hand, and said: "You are very kind, sir! Keep me in your memory. Do not offer me money! You have a little girl. I too have one like her in my own home. I think of her, and bring this fruit to your child not to make a profit for myself."

Saying this, he put his hand inside his big loose robe, and brought out a small and dirty piece of paper. Unfolding it with great care, he smoothened it out with both hands on my

table. It bore the impression of a little hand. Not a photograph. Not a drawing. Merely the impression of an ink-smeared hand laid flat on the paper. This touch of the hand of his own little daughter he had carried always next to his heart, as he had come year after year to Calcutta to sell his wares in the streets.

Tears came to my eyes. I forgot that he was a poor Cabuli fruit-seller, while I was\_. But no, what was I more than he? He also was a father. (GL 77-78)

Rehman wishes to compensate the loss by spending as much time as he can with Mini. The writer is moved to tears and ignoring adverse remarks of the members his family, calls Mini to meet her Cabuliwallah uncle for short and perhaps last time. The writer curtails the expenses of Mini's marriage in order to help Cabuliwallah saying:

I took out a hundred rupee note, gave it to him, and said: "Go back to your daughter, Rahman, in your own country, and may the happiness of your meeting bring good fortune to my child!"

Having made this present, I had to curtail some of the festivities. I could not have the electric lights I had intended, nor the military band, and the ladies of the house were despondent about it. But to me the wedding feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father was going to meet again his only child. (GL 79)

The Cabuliwallah may not have attractive personality. He might look fearsome to many but he possesses a sensitive heart which surpasses everything. Tagore aims to emphasis universal truth that sometimes we come across a Cabuliwallah in our tedious journey of life with whom we may not have blood relationship and yet it transcends our so called relations based on selfish motives. It has been noted:

This simple yet moving storyline appeals to people across all age groups and nationalities. Such is the power of Tagore's words that you seem to be immediately transported to the by lanes of Kolkata and tend to visualize the kabuliwala roaming around the streets selling dry fruits and other merchandise. (Moitra)

Tagore's story The Cabuliwallah bears a paramount importance in the world where all the relationships are based on the selfish grounds. The modern men's run after materialistic life has brought to an end to the genuine human relationships. In this so called developed modern world, the concept of **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam** (the world is one family) is almost forgotten. The residents of the world are so confined to their little world that they don't even know who resides to their next doors. It is very rare to find genuineness in the relationships of the people of this century. They are so engaged in their own world that they neither pay any attention to the problems, miseries or difficulties of their fellow human beings nor they show any concern for them. In such a scenario where the humanistic approach is almost dead, Tagore's story may provide an insight to the human beings of this world to recognize their real worth as human beings and the true worth of human relationships. It has been noted:

In this short story, Tagore has tried to present that friendship and love which bears no barriers of race, religion, age, education and social prejudice. It is also a study of parental love which is always and everywhere the same. The true friendship between the two persons of an age if takes solid soil in the human hearts, may survive, please, consulate for ever, to both of them. (Prasad, 28)

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