



## Tagore's *Kabuliwallah* and the 'Credit Cosmopolis' in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal



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### **ABSTRACT**

*Tagore's critique of nationalism stresses on the necessity to focus on the higher instincts that are inherent in the individual. In his famous short story 'Kabuliwallah', Tagore brings to note the necessity of understanding the need to look beyond the political walls of nation towards the greater goals of humanity, compassion and brotherhood-in short towards his idea of 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam.'" The article tries to show how Tagore intended to present the economic condition of Bengal during the turn of the*

*century and the Indo-afghan relationship through the bond between a Bengali Family and an Afghan moneylender. Thus "Kabuliwallah", that has repeatedly been read as a narrative of pain and separation demands to be re-read as a document of the failing economic condition of 19<sup>th</sup> c Bengal and the role of the Afghan money lending networks that thrive even to this day.*

### **KEYWORDS**

*Atmiya, Afghan, Antahpur, Money lending, Empathy, Tyag, 19<sup>th</sup> c Bengal*

## RESEARCH PAPER

At a time not very long ago when the world was almost divided upon the question as to whether Taliban rule in Afghanistan was to be recognized or not, the discourses about Afghanistan resurfaced, Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Kabuliwallah* (1892) began to be used as a referent or trope in various articles and news items- almost competing with the novels of Khaled Hussaini for that matter almost a century after its publication. The resurgence of the interest of the world in Afghanistan is due to political reasons and justly so. The Afghans have been the regular migrants from their home country to various countries in South Asia over the centuries and have been an integral part of the history of South Asia. They contributed to the two way trade- bringing in nuts and raisins and taking back tea, sugar and textiles- thereby keeping the commerce going throughout the sub-continent. However they rarely settled down and compromised their mobility. In Tagore's *Kabuliwallah* too, Rahamat expresses his desire to return to Kabul. Tagore brilliantly captures the poignant mood of longing and separation that resides in the hearts of migrants and this short story can actually be called a prequel to the genre of diaspora studies.

*Kabuliwallah* has been through various lenses by critics over time and most of them have used western methodologies to understand a text that is rooted in nineteenth century Bengali middle class sensibilities and values. On the one hand, it has been studied from the perspective of the "other" (Malashri Lal), while on the other hand it has been treated as a treatise on "separation" (Khaleeluddin). In Lal's paper titled "Tagore, Imaging the 'Other': Reflections on The Wife's Letter & Kabuliwala" (2010), the emphasis is on Tagore's ability to be the "other" and to understand the angst and pain of being the other. It is based on empathetic portrayal of the characters that Tagore could read in depth and portray them with realism.

"Rabindranath Tagore's projection into other worlds, whether that of the bereft Kabuliwala or the determined Mrinal is a remarkable feat of encompassing the Other. While it is known that his concept of the 'Jiban Debata', a 'divine life force' enjoined right action and a deep spirituality, it is seldom that one finds philosophy transferred to action." (Lal 7)

Lal however does not delve deep into the identification of this character by Tagore whose observant eye and keen knowledge of contemporary issues did not fail to cast a foreigner and yet

a regular, the money-lending Afghan, as the central character of the story. Dr. Khaleeluddin's paper titled "The theme of pain of separation in Tagore's short story *Kabuliwala*"(2021) deals with pain of separation of the father from his infant daughter and deals with this trope of loss. The paper is basically a summarization of the story with emphasis on the bond. He states, "The story *Kabuliwala* is a realistic presentation and the title is also very appropriate to a great extent. The author has emphasized the relationship of *Kabuliwala* with Mini. He perhaps becomes closer to little girl than her own parents." ( Khaleeluddin 34) S. Nancy Jaya also delves into the filial bond as she attempts to unravel the story. This paper will be an attempt to look at the story from the perspective of the concept of "outsider" as a part of the 'insider' – the "atmiya"- who arrives as a stranger with commercial motives and becomes family.

Tagore's idea of home and the world worked on various levels. When he created Bimala of *Ghare-Baire* as an emancipated woman, he portrayed the females of the upper middle class Bengali society who imitated the memsahibs (or were asked to do so by their husbands). When he wrote *Chandalika*, he worked his pen against the custom of untouchability. However in both the above mentioned works, the basic concept was to show the social change or the need of it. In *Kabuliwallah*, Tagore is seen practicing what he preaches in his lectures on nationalism- spiritual unity or "atmiyata". The short story transcends the reductive readings of "othering" in literature and becomes a benchmark of Tagorean thought of universal brotherhood or "bhratritwabodh"- the bonding between men and nations and the creation of the world where the spirit of unity scores over the limited western concept of nation- the creation of the "vishwa- nagarik" or the world citizen. Tagore called nationalism a "menace" and blamed Europe for having descended from its journey towards a superlative entity to a greedy and power hungry conglomeration of nations that victimized anyone who did not fit into their concept of "race". However the essence of Bharatiyata/ Indianness ( I prefer "ness" to "hood" because the latter has the essence of rigidity which is not a part of our assimilative culture) can be seen in the spirit of inclusion of every race, tribe, culture or language that ever set foot on this soil. *Kabuliwallah* demonstrates how a completely strange man can become an "atmiya" in the Indian system of hospitality that of course strums on the tune of "vasudhaiva kutumbakam" - the world as a family.

Who is an ‘atmiya’? Any bilingual dictionary would state that the word means someone who is “intimate” (Collins) and is very close to someone. The word “atma” means the self and the spirit because in India the self is “advaita” or undivided. So anyone who is related to one’s “atma” is one’s “atmiya”. Tagore blends his idea of a cosmopolis with the idea of the personal through the creation of this character called Rahamat who becomes an “atmiya” in the course of the story. Tagore is very realistic in this creation of the money- lender who becomes an insider as it precedes the door to door money lending services offered by various banks /individual bankers during the time. Afghan money- lenders were the backbone of what Warner calls the “credit cosmopolis” of British India- “a geographically non-specific realm of sociocultural relations, formal and informal, tied up around finance.”(Warner 173). He deals at length on the importance of the Afghans in the working of the economics of India under the British rule and their constant influx in Bengal (read Kolkata). It sees into their importance in the international trade in entire South Eastern region.

“The pervasiveness of Afghan moneylending points to the ways in which frontier people were very much involved in greater regional migration, which in turn resulted from the same processes that created the modern South Asian diaspora. In this way, Afghans were similar to the banking networks comprising individuals who travelled great distances from their homes in South India and Sind, and established lucrative financial operations in host societies around the world, as explored in the work of David Rudner, Claude Markovits, Scott Levi and others.” (Warner 173)

The “credit cosmopolis” is the “imagined community” (Anderson) where characters like Rahamat and Mini meet. Tagore’s genius lay in creating sympathy for the money lender who was believed to be a tyrant in popular imagination.

As the title goes this paper would like to explore the two aspects of individual life- ghare/ inside/ antahpur and the baire/ outside. In Tagore’s portrayal of the middle class life in Kabuliwallah, the two worlds of family life are separate in the beginning. The narrator, who is a writer, sits by a window in the room that was on the side of the main street and Mini cried out of



it to the *Kabuliwallah*. This unplanned action of a five year old child precipitates the entire action of the story.

“A tall, shabbily clothed Afghan street vender, with a turban on his head, a bag over his shoulder and a few boxes of dry grapes in his hands was passing through the street slowly. I have no idea what flashed through my daughter’s mind at the sight of this man, but the moment she saw him she began yelling. I thought, this nuisance with a sack over his shoulder will show up in a moment and I won’t be able to finish writing the seventeenth chapter of my novel. “ (Quayum 1)

Mini flees from the spot when the *Kabuliwallah* actually arrives because she had the unfounded fear that there were children of her age held captive inside the large cotton cloth bag of the Afghan man. The idea of the “*chheledhora*” or the kidnapper of children is being placed here by Tagore who subtly places the prevalent distrust of the locals for the money lenders. “Fears of kidnapping and slavery at the hands of the street-seller expounded by the hyper-protective little girl’s mother’ (Foschini 2018) were based on reality. However Rahamat soon wins Mini’s heart – not only through the regular gifts of nuts and raisins but also by becoming her ardent listener – “In her short five-year life, Mini had never found a more intent listener before other than her father. I also noticed that she had lots of nuts and raisins tied up at the loose end of her small sari.” (Quayum 2) Mini had unconsciously formed a bond with an outsider- an “*anatmiya*” had started to become her “*atmiya*” because her childish world had found a friend. Commerce had given way to camaraderie and the *Kabuliwallah* started visiting this Bengali home not with a motive for economic profit but for meeting his “*atmiya*”- so it was a two way friendship – albeit between two people of immense age difference. Soon the narrator learns that Rahamat is a regular visitor at his home. He is not upset by this information but is rather pleased at this innocent bond of friendship between Mini and the *Kabuliwallah*.

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The economic condition of lower middle class in nineteenth century Bengal was far from satisfactory. The “*baire*” or the outside world was strictly separated from the “*antahpur*”/ghar/inside of the house. Though the *purdah* system was not there, yet women remained in the “*antahpur*” and ran the day to day jobs of the household. Mini comes out of this

“antahpur”, calls out to the Kabuliwalla and returns. In spite of being an infant, Mini has identified “antahpur” as a zone of safety and shelter. The narrator has to coax her out of the “antahpur” to meet Rahamat. At the end of the novel, again the narrator does the same. Mini is symbolic of innocence and time. The friendship that had prospered between Mini and Rahamat was apparently a borderless meeting of two “atmas” – both longing for companionship. Language, age and culture – all signifiers of civilization-could not disturb this beautiful relationship.

In Kabuliwallah Tagore realistically brings to the fore the terrifying relationship between the money lender and the debtor. The incident of Rahamat wounding a man with a knife when he denied having borrowed money from Rahamat, for the purpose of buying a “Rampuri shawl” (Quayum 4) is significant. The incident reflects largely two things- primarily the violence associated with the Afghans trading in India (Warner 2020). Warner’s article titled “The Kabuliwalas: Afghan Moneylending and the Credit Cosmopolis of British India, c. 1880–1947” (2020) delves deeply into the practice of the Afghan money lenders . He writes about these people who would sit in front of the houses of the debtors in a sort of ‘dharna’ and not leave until the debt was paid. Warner states that this was a common scene in nineteenth century Bengal. He also states that this practice was endorsed in the economic dictates of Manu but was actually practiced by the Afghans. This often led to altercations between the debtor and the creditor and in Rahamat’s case he was imprisoned. Interestingly, it may be noted that Rahamat used to sit at the feet of Mini while she went on speaking to him. The position would be like the creditor waiting for the debtor to pay him the debt of filial love. Economic motive disappears and Rahamat returns the coin offered to him by the narrator, showing the large heartedness of the Afghans (that has been utilized as a popular trope in Bollywood films as well till the seventies.)

Secondly, Warner studies the commercial background of the travels of the Kabuliwallas and points to the fact that Tagore had purposely mentioned the ‘Rampuri shawl’, “a reference to a garment associated with the north Indian capital of a Pathan princely state” probably Rohilkhand where they had been travelling since centuries. Their advent into Bengal and other parts of India began in the times of Tagore .These Afghan moneylenders would lend cloth on credit to the merchants of Bengal.

“First the peasant is persuaded or coerced into buying some article of small value, and the vendor lightly tells him that he can pay at some other time. This suits the purchaser admirably, providence not being his strong point, and he cheerfully ignores the transaction until one day the accommodating merchant re-appears in the character of the insatiate creditor, who tells him that he owes him twenty rupees, perhaps for a piece of cloth on which one rupee would have yielded a handsome profit, and proceeds to enforce payment by the processes of insult, torture, squatting at his door and refusing to go away, or others of the countless devices which do such credit to Oriental ingenuity.’(Warner 175)

Not once does Tagore try to venture into the background of the crime for which Rahamat has been arrested. The narrator does not try to find out the truth behind the incident but is afraid at the sight of Rahamat’s blood stained clothes and the entire spectacle of him being taken to prison. This shows the commonality of the incident. Warner notes how these cases of violence was one of the causes behind the decline of the money lending trades of the Afghans and mentions that British had to make laws to curb this practice. Tagore does not create a melodramatic piece that delves only with the Kabuliwalla’s longing for vicarious pleasure of fatherhood in Mini but also raises this short story to the level of a socio – historic piece of colonial Bengal.

Tagore’s critique of nationalism stresses on the necessity to focus on the higher instincts that are inherent in the individual. In Kabuliwalla, the narrator displays the same. When Rahamat returns from prison - from the ‘Baire’ (prison/British domination) to the ‘Ghar’ (Mini’s home/ Indian hospitality) - he is initially avoided by the narrator. However the reference to his little daughter back home in Kabul and the sight of the paper with the soot stained hand imprints of his little girl implores the higher instincts in the narrator. He not only forgives Rahamat’s transgression into his home but also breaks the barrier of ‘antahpur’ and calls Mini to meet Rahamat. Mini, dressed as a bride, meets the ‘outsider’ Rahamat because she has forgotten her childish friendship. Mini no longer responds to Rahamat’s jokes about “sosur bari” but is ashamed at the mention of in-laws. This Mini is cultured and trained and has ‘become’ a woman, in the Beauvoirian sense. Time however had stopped for Rahamat in the prison and his

realization of its passage when he meets this grown up Mini is beautifully presented by Tagore. The “atmiyata” with Mini has ended for Rahamat but now he becomes an “atmiya” of the narrator- Mini’s father. Thus Rahamat no longer remains an “outsider”. The ancient Indian ideal of ‘tyag’ is highlighted by Tagore in the end of this short story. Tyag or renunciation need not imply a total separation from family. It means a sacrificial action on the part of the doer who chooses to perform it for a greater good of humanity.

Tagore’s ideals of humanity were influenced by the greater thinkers before him and most of all by the ideals of Sahitya Samrat Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Like Bankim he too emphasised on the necessity of renunciation. So when the narrator gives money to the money lender Rahamat so that he can travel back to his family in Kabul, line of demarcation between the insider and the outsider is completely demolished. It must be remembered that the narrator was not a rich man. His act of charity towards Rahamat cost him the fanciful arrangements that he had thought of for his daughter’s wedding.

“I took out some money and gave it to him. ‘You go back to your daughter in Afghanistan, Rahamat, and may the happiness of your union bring blessings for my Mini too,’ I said. I had to cut out one or two items from the éclat of the festivities for gifting that money. For example, the lighting decoration was not as gorgeous as I had wanted it to be, and the band party had to be cancelled. This upset the women, but buoyed by a benevolent spirit, my auspicious ceremony became more luminous. “(Quayum 6)

The ‘ghar’ and “baire” come together and the Kabulliwalla becomes a symbol of the supreme spirit of hospitality that is enshrined in our scriptures- “atithi devo bhava” – the guest is like God.

Tagore’s work therefore adheres to this spirit of spiritual unity that he had preached.

Tagore’s economic thoughts were centered on rural reconstruction. His creation of the facilities at Sriniketan corresponds to his desire for the self reliance of the village population. In *Kabuliwalla* however his attention is drawn to the economic structures of cities like Kolkata. The acute financial crisis of petty businessmen who had to take recourse to moneylenders did not escape his eye. The modern system of lending loans at the doorstep can be anticipated in the



actions of these Afghan moneylenders. Tagore's *Kabuliwallah* highlights the essence of tolerance that forms the benchmark of Indian ethics and aesthetics. In the words of Prof Hanifi, "Tagore leaves us with good questions about the cultural place of the Kabuliwala, the location of Afghan identity in relation to the Indian identity, or identities, and how these communities take shape through various migratory and mobility-based practices over the longue duree." (Hanifi 2)

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