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Social Reflexivity through Self-Portraiture: An Exploration of Rabindranath Tagore's *Boyhood Days*

Dr. Patil Sangita Sharnappa

Assistant Professor, Department of English, LBS Government First Grade College, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Abstract

Though the basic intention of an autobiography is to narrate the life, it, simultaneously, emanates the social milieu of that particular period. It is a study of landscape and mindscape. Placed in this context, the present paper is an attempt to explore Rabindranath Tagore's *Boyhood Days* (1940) as a discourse of social reflexivity through self-portraiture. This paper discusses Tagore's account of childhood days emphasizing three basic social aspects which influences his later life. First, his contention is to the school education system and rote and parrot teaching method where there is no scope for children's potent talent. Second, it projects many social norms, rational and irrational beliefs, culture, trends, and artifact of that particular period. Third, though the text is a simple narration of childhood reminiscences, it is juxtaposed comparison of the traditional and modern views in various aspects. Therefore, it is a representation of two social milieus.

Keywords

Autobiography; Social Reflexivity; Self-Portraiture; Traditional Views; and Modern Views.

**Specific Background to Literary Genre**

The autobiography is a literary genre. It is an evaluative and evolutionary appraisal of actions and a disposition of life; the annals of literary history recounts a few excellent examples as Yeats wrote multiple autobiographies, whereas Moore wrote volume after volume and constantly and rigorously revised his autobiography, *Confession of Young Man* (1889), with a new preface each time (Olney 1993). Many well-known writers and philosophers have shed light on the conceptual understanding of this genre: a pioneer writer on autobiography George Gusdorf (1956) considers it as ‘to create and in creating to be created’ Paul de Man (1979) puts forth that it is, ‘self-portraiture’, Montaigne observes ‘a book consubstantial with its author’, Barret Mandel (1980) says, ‘an artifact’ James Olney (1980) proposes ‘some version of Bios’ and so on. These writers’ understanding of this genre sums up and theorizes that it is basically a narration of a self in the form of an artifact.

Autobiographies are written by people from all walks of life. Though it is life narrative and reflection of life, it is represented by various writers in various ways. The history of autobiographies can be traced in a series of masterpieces from the St. Augustine’s *Confessions of St. Augustine* (Volumes), Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782), Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From my Life: Poetry and Truth*), William Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris* (1823), Chateaubriand’s *Mémoires d’outre tombe* (1849), Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (1925), George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Anne Frank’s *The Dairy of Young Girl* (1947), Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Mahatma Gandhi’s *My Experiments with Truth*, Jawaharlal Nehru’s *An Autobiography*, and so on.

These are a tip of ice berg to have critical overview of the narrative techniques and thematic underpinnings of the genre of autobiography. Each autobiography has a linchpin and the narration revolves around it rather merely reeling the life, for example, the aforementioned autobiographies represent: St. Augustine's and Rousseau's show confessional and self-justification tone; William Hazlitt's is a painful study of the writers love life; Frank's narrates her response to genocide; Angelou's documents a racial discrimination, trauma of rape, and poetry is means of freedom; Gandhi's is confessional and spiritual journey; whereas Nehru's is more the political awakening of nation rather than personal.

Introduction

Though the basic intention of autobiography is to sketch the life, it, simultaneously, emanates the social milieu of that particular period. It is a study of landscape and mindscape. Placed in this context, the present paper is an attempt to explore Rabindranath Tagore's *Boyhood Days* (1940) as a discourse of social reflexivity through self-portraiture. Rabindranath Tagore, one of the celebrated writers of India, won the Nobel Prize for *Geetanjali*. He was the first non-European who won such a prestigious prize. He penned down many short stories, poems, novels and dramas, a few among them are *Valmiki Pratibha* (1881), *Dak Ghar*, (1912), *Chokar Bali*, *Ghare Baire*, etc.

Rabindranath Tagore had written *Boyhood Days* (1940), on the request of litterateur Nityanand Goswami, for the students of Shantiniketan. Tagore recollected his reminiscences for young generation, "Tagore recollects his childhood through vivid descriptions and colourful anecdotes interspersed with musings and reflections upon the past. The memories he recounts are often linked to one another by association of ideas rather than by chronology (Tagore 93)." However, the present paper is not only an attempt to sketch the anecdote of the author but also it tries to show how Tagore had represented the reflection of two different social milieu—19th and 20th century—through his life.

Theoretical Framework

Autobiography is a genre of self-reflexivity. But no text can be read in isolation. A text espouses multiple sub-texts, as Eliot says, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (Eliot 15). In this context, the sub-text of *Boyhood days* (1940) is to portray social discourse. Therefore, this paper discusses Tagore’s account of childhood days emphasizing three basic social aspects which influenced his later life. First, his contention to the school education system and school rote and parrot teaching method where there was no scope for children’s potent talent. Second, it focuses on many social norms, rational and irrational beliefs, culture, trends, and artifact of that particular period. Third, though the text is a simple narration of childhood reminiscences, it is juxtaposed comparison of the traditional and modern views in various aspects. Hence, it is representation of two social milieus.

Social Reflexivity through Self-Portraiture

Tagore’s remembrance of childhood days is a reflection of society. His contention was those days school education system even it is applicable to contemporary era also. He thinks that the formal education mars the personality of students by confining them into four walls and making to study prescribed subjects. The drilling of education starts at dawn and ends at dusk. He says that he used to parrot absent-mindedly the prescribed subjects which never give him any knowledge. He thinks real episteme can be gained by empirical way, “In the pursuit of knowledge, nothing held my attention for long: this was my weakness. I filled my bag of learning with pickings from here and there, as the fancy took me. If diligent pursuit of learning had come naturally to me, the ustads of today would not have taken my work so lightly” (Tagore 40). Not only it is in the context of education system but even in the case of music, he never liked traditional rote method of learning musical notes, as he says, “Then, when I was a little older, a major ustad Jadubhatta ensconced himself in our house. He made a big mistake, for he insisted on training me in

music. That is why I never learned music at all. I garnered a few things in secret” (Tagore 42).

Further, he argues that rote method has loopholes and drawbacks, “I began to learn the Sanskrit grammar book *Mugdabodh*, without understanding a word of it” (Tagore 45). As a student, it was very heavy for him the daylong pressure of learning variety of subjects; his mind secretly throws some weight of this. Many times he feels that he would have to be born a girl because those days’ girls were not insisted to go to school. He is unwilling to go to school. He feels it is boring and no gain of any knowledge:

Days passed by in his monotonous fashion. School would gouge out a large chunk of the day, the remaining hours scattered across the morning and afternoon. As soon as I entered the classroom, the tables and benches would seem to prod my mind with their dry, angular elbows. Day after day, they looked as stiff as ever. I would return home at dusk. In the study, the oil lamp shone like a signal directing me to prepare my lessons for the following day.
(Tagore 56)

He considers intellectual episteme gained by mobile lessons in open environment which sustain naturally; this insisted him to establish a school (Shantiniketan) where students can get an opportunity to learn lessons in open air away from confinement and the major focus is given to art–music, painting, dance, etc–and creativity. It is very apt to observe Amartya Sen’s opinion:

Rabindranath passionately disliked the schools he encountered, and as a drop out, he educated at home, with the help of tutors. Already in his childhood he formed some views on what precisely was wrong with the schools he knew in the Calcutta of his day, some, as it happens, with fairly distinguished academic records. When Tagore established his own school in Shantiniketan in 1901,

he was determined to make it critically different from the schools he knew. (Tagore x)

Tagore went to England to be barrister, but he didn't complete his university education. He shares his experiences as, "During those three months, my intimacy with the English heart had produced such a mingling of elements. I had been assigned the task of reciting instalments of verse, drama or history every evening, until eleven. In the short time, I read a great deal. Such reading did not belong to the classroom. It was a union of literature and the human heart" (Tagore 90).

Second, the text focuses on life—the social norms, rational and irrational beliefs, culture, trends, and artifact—in nineteenth-century Calcutta. Women used to travel in closed *palkis* to the Ganga to take a holy dip in the river. It shows how women were either lived behind closed doors at home or covered linen *palkis*. They were not able to look a man face to face, "If ever a woman came face to face with a man from another family, her veil would instantly descend over her countenance, down to the very tip of her nose..."(Tagore 8).

As the evening falls, the day ended for them, there were no electric lights. The lights come only from castor oil lamps. These lamps omit more smoke than light. He projects the irrational and superstitious beliefs through the episode of existence of the ghosts. Those days theatre performance was popular which is called *jatra* (in Bengal). The *jatra* performance was based on the legend of *Nal and Damayanti* which means it was way to familiarize with our culture and tradition.

This text is mosaic of nineteenth century Calcutta. He says though he was amidst joint family, he always felt isolated and alienated from the world because the house was divided into two sections that is interior portion was for women and outer for men. He was not able to spend much time with his mother. Those days, they had various sections for their aristocratic work, for example *toshakhana* (treasury), *dafterkhana* (office), *baithakhana* (sitting

room). Further, he acquaints reader with those days' games for boys. He says, "Very few games were available to us, those days. We could play marbles, or what was known as batball—a very distant cousin of cricket. And we could spin tops, or fly kites. All the games played by boys in the city were of this type, demanding no hardiness. Football, which required players to bound across the entire field, seemed ocean leagues away from our lives. And so my days, all of exactly the same measure, confined me in a circular maze of dry fence posts" (Tagore 57). For amusement, they used to cage the birds. There were many adventures activities, for the physical growth of children, for example, horse riding, hunting, and shooting. Even, they were passionate of music, playing guitar, reading, enacting in the play, dialogue composition, and many such activities which were useful to build a multi-dimensional personality, "Then, one day, he started working on *Swapnaprayan*. He started out by creating metrical forms, measuring the sounds of Sanskrit on the weighing scales of Bengali phonetics, and arranging them accordingly. Some he kept and others he discarded, scattering them about in torn scraps of paper" (Tagore 80). Therefore, he says, "Most of its ingredients were stored up within my own self, while some other elements were determined by the atmosphere and the people at home. Often, the process of character building stops at this point. Those who also undergo the special treatment of being pounded into shape in the education factory acquire the distinctive market value of a brand name (Tagore 87).

Self-Reflexivity: Recount of Two Social Milieus

This memoir is not only an account of his childhood days but also reflection of his later days. As Amartya Sen articulates, "This is an odd book. *Boyhood Days* is Rabindranath's own account of his childhood, written by him at a ripe old age, shortly before his death. His recollections are invariably sharp, and yet, as Radha Chakravarty points out in her 'Translator's Note', not in all cases in line with those factual matters on which other evidence exists" (

Tagore ix). It is recount of two social milieus which is more sharply juxtaposed, favours more the traditional rather modern, of culture, food habit, attire, health, etc. Let us have glimpses of the contrasting comparison of traditional and modern world. Most of his comparison shows that he is critic of modern attitude. Tagore's mother thinks that if her son missed a few lessons because of his ill health, it was not a great loss. Therefore, Tagore thinks that if he unfortunately might have fallen in the hands of today's mother, "I would not only have sent back to the tutor, but had my ears tweaked as well..." (Tagore 21). Tagore describes that he never had suffered prolonged fever. Malaria was a foreign word for them. They used to take home medicine and not touched of any allopathic medicine, "...but I have no memory of quinine. My skin never felt the touch of a scalpel used to lacerate a boil. To this day, measles and chicken pox remain unknown to me. My body was stubbornly healthy" (Tagore 22). This description is the projection of the health and medicine of those days. Their food was very healthy, "...especially in these days of mill-ground flour and adulterated ghee and cooking oil. We must remember that chocolate had not yet appeared in the market" (Tagore 22). Furthermore, he was posing question where those food items had gone which were so healthy, "Where has it gone, that paper bag full of fried masala? And the goja, that cheap sesame-flavoured sweet? Have these things survived?"(Tagore 22) Tagore says that they give much attention for hospitality. They attend everyone who will come to their house either acquaintance or stranger they take care of them. Next, he brings the difference in the attire of the past and present. Those days women used to wear sari and blouse and young girls used to wear long dress called the *peshwaj*; they had not been touched by these modern dresses even not frock also. To conclude the paper with the nostalgic note of the Tagore:

Those bygone days were like a prince, dispensing largesse occasionally, at their pleasure, at auspicious moments, in their own areas of jurisdiction. These present days are like merchants'

sons, displaying all sorts of glittering wares at the crossroads, to attract buyers from highway, and from the alleyways as well. (32)

Boyhood Days (2007) delineates his nostalgic feelings along with his craving which reels the norms and trends of the society. He chronicled his experiences along with it he pinpointed various social aspects.

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