



“THE HUNGRY STONES” – A STORY AROUND THE IMPRESSION

Apurba Saha
Dept. of English, SKB University, Purulia, WB.

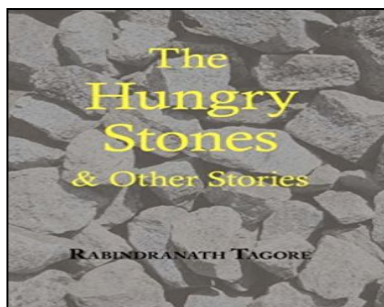
ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore has written a number of short stories but only four short stories on the supernatural theme. They are “Kankal”, “Nishithe”, “Manihara”, and “Kshudhita Pashan”. The location of the short story “The Hungry Stones” is set in a dilapidated palace by the banks of the river Susta. In “The Hungry Stones” the readers do not come across any ghost in the course of the story. But the atmosphere becomes mysterious because of the presence and remarks of Meher Ali. He used to live in this palace once and he has turned mad because of his stay in this palace. But he is no ghost or supernatural being. So it can be said that “The Hungry Stones” is a story around the impression. An intermingling of the present self and the past self is noticed in this story. Past becomes an inseparable part of the present living self. There is an amalgamation of the dream self and the real self throughout the story. With the advent of evening the supernatural powers take a complete control over the real self. But to return to the real self from the world of the supernatural is the natural rule. The frantic cry of Meher Ali: “Stay away! Stay away! It’s a lie, all of it’s a lie” – is actually a warning.

KEYWORDS : *The Hungry Stones, demolished, strange and peculiar human craving.*

INTRODUCTION :

There are a number of stories which have been written on the theme of supernaturalism not only in the eastern countries but also in the west. Belief in the supernatural has entered into man’s blood, it has almost become consonant with the heartbeats. The thoughts which can be demolished in a moment by reason, when they fix their roots into our ancient belief, and then there is no other way but to believe: “There happen more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are reported in your newspapers” (Tagore,10). Virginia Woolf comments that belief in the supernaturalism is a strange and peculiar human craving for feeling afraid. Rabindranath Tagore is undoubtedly the greatest writer not only of Bengal but of India. He has written a number of short stories but only four short stories on the supernatural theme. They are “Kankal”, “Nishithe”, “Manihara”, and “Kshudhita Pashan”. The short story “Jibito o Mrito” should not be classed in the supernatural group according to the true features of supernaturalism. It might be mentioned that short story in Bengali literature actually begins with Tagore. “The Hungry Stones” is the English rendering of “Kshudhita Pashan”. This short story was translated by C.F. Andrews and Tagore himself had assisted in the translation. This short story along with other short stories was first published by Macmillan, London in 1916.



Tagore himself writes about the source of the story in a letter to Hemendabala Devi. He also refers to the source in his *Chelebela (My Childhood)*. While he was 17, prior to his being sent to England, he was sent to Ahmedabad to stay with his second eldest brother Satyendranath Tagore so that he could be equipped in style, manner and sophistication for the foreign tour. Satyendranath Tagore was a judge at Ahmedabad. Tagore’s sister-in-law (mejo bouthakrun) was already in England. As a

result of which Tagore used to be alone when Satyendranath Tagore used to go to the court. Tagore used to spend the whole day in the palatial building. Tagore himself had said that the palatial building had left an impression on him which is reflected in the story.

When Satyendranath Tagore was in Karwar of Karnataka, he was acquainted with a man called Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay. Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay and Dr. Agharnath Chattopadhyay were the two Bengalee stalwarts in the court of Nizam during that time. Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay was sent back to India from Russia on the suspicion of being a spy. It had been reported by Satyendranath Tagore himself. Nishikanta had intended to join the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India as a diplomat. Rabindranath Tagore has drawn the character of the story teller based on the description of Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay as was provided to him by his brother Satyendranath Tagore. The second listener in the story who is referred to as the “theosophist kinsman”(Tagore, 27) is Mohini Mohan Chattopadhyay, son-in-law of Dwijendranath Tagore.

The location of the short story “The Hungry Stones” is set in a dilapidated palace by the banks of the river Susta. For almost two hundred and fifty years the palace had been witness to not only many happy moments but also to the bitter pains of frustrated and unsuccessful lovers. The collector of cotton duties come to stay in this palace. He feels the presence of the century old young woman who had been forced to lead the life of a slave. He could feel her colourful life also. In “The Hungry Stones” the readers do not come across any ghost in the course of the story. But the atmosphere becomes mysterious because of the presence and remarks of Meher Ali. He used to live in this palace once and he has turned mad because of his stay in this palace. But he is no ghost or supernatural being. So it can be said that “The Hungry Stones” is a story around the impression. An intermingling of the present self and the past self is noticed in this story. Past becomes an inseparable part of the present living self. The unknown history of the Mughal Empire is expressed in literature through a wonderful admixture of reality and imagination. Literature is not history, but there is no harm in literature being based upon history. History is based on information but literature is not bound to be based on information. The artist fills up the unknown gaps through his or her imagination because the appeal of history is time bound whereas the appeal of literature is eternal. Human civilization has divided Eternal Time into Temporal Time, into small blocks like seconds, minutes, hours, days, years etc. Man keeps an account of this Temporal Time through the deductive process, but an opposite path is treaded upon, then through the inductive process man can be one with the Eternal Time. The philosophy of the Vedanta says that the world is false and the only truth is ‘Brahman’ which is based on this concept of Eternal Time. This is exactly the same thing that Sri Krishna says to Arjuna in the battle field of Kurukshetra. Whatever happens in this world – happiness and misery, love, affection, betrayal, pain – all are as temporary and short-lived as a dream. As the dream ends with awakening from sleep, similarly this life on earth ends with death. Death actually puts an end to the body, the body is destroyed but the soul is not because the soul is immortal. In *The Gita* (Book II, Verse 20) it has been said:

Na jayate mriyate ba kadachit
Nayang bhutwa bhabita ba na bhuyo
Ajo nitya saswatohayang purano
Na hanyate hanyamane sorire

(The soul is never born, nor does it die. The body is destroyed, the soul is not.)

One may look upon oneself as a spirit which may be incarnated at one time and translated out of reach of the senses at another.

The collector of cotton duties at Barich, drawing a monthly salary of rupees four hundred and fifty only came under such a spell that the “intangible, inaccessible, unearthly vision appeared to be the only reality in the world – and all else a mere dream” (Tagore,16). Everything appeared “to be such an astonishingly ludicrous illusion” (Tagore, 16) that he “burst into a horse-laugh” (Tagore, 16) and “stood in the gloom of that vast silent hall” (Tagore, 16). The next moment his servant entered with a lighted kerosene lamp and he returned to reality realizing his own self that he is “Srijut So-and -so, the eldest son of So-and-so of blessed

memory" (Tagore, 16). The dream or the illusion breaks in a moment. The story reaches the climax where the so called living are less living than very many of the so called dead.

There is an amalgamation of the dream self and the real self throughout the story. The collector of cotton duties loses the power to describe the marvellous incidents that unfolded themselves as the night deepened with its gloom. With the advent of evening the supernatural powers take a complete control over the real self. But to return to the real self from the world of the supernatural is the natural rule. The frantic cry of Meher Ali: "Stand back! Stand back!! All is false! All is false!" (Tagore, 25) – is actually a warning. But who is being warned? Is Meher Ali himself free from this supernatural web? Has he been able to move away from the invisible threads of the palace? He repeats this warning everyday at the break of dawn. Meher Ali is actually standing in the borderline between the worlds of belief and disbelief. What he believes in the night is gradually moved back to the world of disbelief with the advent of day break. Meher Ali is actually the guardsman at the borderline of the world of realism and supernaturalism. Meher Ali can also be taken as the symbol of that power which tries to break away from the dreamy, unreal and supernatural world.

Even the story teller is not free from the madness of this dual self because he cannot find out the only means of release as stated by Karim Khan. At the warning of Meher Ali, the truth of the night turns to be false at the end of the night. This is a fine instance of catharsis of supernaturalism. "The Hungry Stones" is different from the other supernatural stories of Tagore in one more aspect also. In this story it is noticed that there are two listeners, whereas in the other stories the writer alone is the listener. Here Tagore introduces one more listener to establish a link between the world of belief and disbelief. The writer is the listener who does not believe in the story whereas the other listener believes in the story. The other listener is Mohini Mohan Chattopadhyay, the son-in-law of Dwijendranath Tagore. Though they were close relatives, they were poles apart in mentality.

In this story the readers are carried to an imaginary dream world where there is neither happiness nor misery, nor even the terror of the world of supernaturalism. The reader moves to a different world, sometimes to the supernatural world. Then and there Tagore brings us back to this real world. There lies the greatness of Tagore as he constantly shuttles between the real world and the supernatural world. The story begins in the real world, moves to the supernatural world and ends again in the real world. The story begins in the waiting room of the station and ends there only in the midst of hustle and bustle. The story enters into the world of imagination and fantasy and the next moment returns to the real world through the shouting of Meher Ali. The real beauty of the story is missed if one cannot feel this strife between the real world and the world of imagination. Tagore had to be cautious so that the readers never think the story teller to be mad like Meher Ali. It is for this reason that Tagore creates a wise mad to tell the story who can create such an atmosphere. So "The Hungry Stones" is not a mere supernatural story but a story around the impression.

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