

**Twentieth Century Fiction**  
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**Lecture - 01**  
**The Postmaster - Part 1**

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**The Postmaster**

**Rabindranath Tagore**



The postmaster first took up his duties in the village of Ulapur. Though the village was a small one, there was an indigo factory near by, and the proprietor, an Englishman, had managed to get a post office established.

Our postmaster belonged to Calcutta. He felt like a fish out of water in this remote village. His office and living-room were in a dark thatched shed, not far from a green, slimy pond, surrounded on all sides by a dense growth.

The men employed in the indigo factory had no leisure; moreover, they were hardly desirable companions for decent folk. Nor is a Calcutta boy an adept in the art of associating with others. Among strangers he appears either proud or ill at ease. At any rate, the postmaster had but little company; nor had he much to do.

At times he tried his hand at writing a verse or two. That the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky were enough to fill life with joy—such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expression. But God knows that the poor fellow would have felt it as the gift of a new life, if some genie of the *Arabian Nights* had in one night swept away the trees, leaves and all, and replaced them with a macadamised road, hiding the clouds from view with rows of tall houses.



So, hello and welcome to this course NPTEL course entitled Twentieth-Century Fiction. And in this particular lecture, we will start with what is the first text in this course, which is Rabindranath Tagore's short story, The Postmaster. So, we will start with this text, but it is important as always to give a background to the cultural conditions that we will see in this text. So, this is obviously, written at the time of this colonial Bengal, Bengal under the British rule. And the post office becomes a very symbolic space in this particular story, and a postmaster of course, is a professional, but when I will see how the professional persona and the personal persona the existential persona are you know dialoguing with each other in this particular story.

So, the backdrop is colonial Bengal, and the post office and a postmaster are obviously, symbolic functions of that colonial machinery, but inside this colonial machinery we find a very human short story a very human tale a very human experience which is captured in this particular story. There is also the very symbolic presence of the indigo plantation, the indigo factory which is again a very very colonial machinery, because entire idea of

the indigo was to produce a certain crop, a certain product a certain commodity which is quite colonial in quality and that indigo would, obviously, be transported away into the industries in England.

So, the post office in an indigo plantation a very interestingly a place apropos of one another and its massive colonial machinery that we see in the story. And a postmaster becomes a very symbolic presence in this in the story. As I mentioned he is a colonial servant is he servant a function, a functionary inside the colonial machinery, but equally and this is a story about memory, this is story about human emotions, this is story about gender because when you find a very interesting relationship which grows which brews between the postmaster this young man, and his very very small girl who does odd jobs for him. Ratan in this particular story. Ratan is obviously, a village girl a rural girl illiterate, and he is she is taught with a postmaster, and they began to form a human bond which is very tragically truncated at the end of the story.

So, there are lots of issues we will touch upon as we move on, but you know these are some of the general broad brushed themes that we keep coming back to the colonial machinery. The postmaster has a white collar a servant in the colonial machinery, and it is very interesting gender perspective that we see in this particular story and also symbolic sides, the post office and the indigo plantation, the indigo factory that we see in the story.

And the other thing that we will touch upon a little bit is the relationship or the contrast that is shown in between the city and the country, because we have told that the postmaster is a Calcutta person. He is a person in the colonial capital Calcutta, and he obviously, has a an urban background, he has an urban mind, he has an urban sort of habits which are completely non-synchronous you know in congress where the rural setting in which the story is you know is described which is that of Ulapur the village of called Ulapur which is where the story takes place.

So, let us dive in the story and see what takes place in this short story called The Postmaster by Rabindranath Tagore which we obviously be reading in translation. So, the postmaster, this should be on your screen now. The postmaster first took up his duties in the village of Ulapur. Though the village was a small one, there was an indigo factory nearby, and a proprietor, an Englishman, had managed to get a post office established.

So, we see immediately how the colonial presence, colonial condition, the colonial culture is established, in the very inception of the story that we are told is the village called Ulapur. And although the village was a small one, there was an indigo factory, and then indigo factory becomes very symbolic site of colonial control of colonial production you know industrial colonial industrial production.

And of course, with the colonial production this there needs to be this entire administrative network around, the bureaucratic network around, then the information network around it. And a post office at that time this is obviously, pre email, pre anything that we know today as technology. The post office over here becomes the very symbolic site through which a colonial control is exerted and consolidated, okay.

So, the post office becomes the site of information exchange. So, we on one hand we have the indigo factory as a sort of production, and a post office over here as a sort of dissemination right. So, dissemination of information regarding related to presumably the production, politics, the production control production reports of this particular indigo factory right. And we are also told immediately that the proprietor happens to be an Englishman who was obviously, a colonial person in control of this indigo factory you know with the own indigo factory, okay.

Our post master belongs to Calcutta. And this is mentioned this is also story about the tension or the contradiction and culture and mindset between a city mind and an rural mind. And we have shown the binary in very interesting terms. He felt like a fish out of water in this remote village. His office and living-room were in a dark thatched shed, not far from a green, slimy pond, surrounded by on all sides by a dense growth. So, we have a very well taken rural setting over here.

We are told his office and his living-room is part of a dark thatched shed and has a pond nearby, and there is a dense forest around the pond and the office which is obviously, very different presumably from the kind of conditions that he is habituated to, he is used to in Calcutta. So, we are told he felt like a fish out of water which is to say he felt completely you know out of his comfort zone, he felt very very like a misfit in this particular setting.

The men employed in the indigo factory had no leisure; moreover, they were hardly desirable companions for decent folk. So, the labourers in indigo factory we are made

told that you know we are told that they had no leisure which is to say that they were, you know, obviously, overwrought. And one of the things which you will find in this particular story written by Tagore is that very characteristically he gives a lot of hints, a lot of suggestions in terms of you know what is really going on without spelling it out.

So, we get a sense of how the indigo factory via is essentially a site of exploitation, is essentially a site of you know unregulated production, unregulated labour, and they had no leisure; the labourers had no leisure whatsoever. And this is complete exploitation, complete unregulated exploitation, unregulated production, unregulated control of work as we are told.

So, the men employed had in the factory had no leisure; moreover, they were hardly desirable companions for decent folk right. So, the whole idea the decent folk of the Bengali term for that is 'bhadralok', which is the gentleman, the genteel person who was educated presumably has had English education etcetera. So, we you know those of you who are interested in the history of colonial education would know that you know the entire idea of educating the Indians especially in the presidency towns like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras was intended to create this generation of Indians who would be a very handy and convenient go-between, you know, between the colonial machinery and the colonized natives.

Someone, people who know English people who know a basic modern education according to the western education, you know, template in order to carry out the machinery of colonialism more effectively right. So, and obviously, the inception of that particular enterprise began to happen, had its point of origin from the Macaulay's Minutes of Education 1835.

As some of you have known that entire minutes of education by you know Lord Macaulay in the British Parliament in 1835 was to propose a bill wherein you know Indians to be educated, Indians to be given western education English education, primarily to produce a generation of people generation of Indians who would be Indians in colour according to Macaulay, but British in taste and temperament and education and they would be a very handy buffer, so to say, between the colonial machinery, the colonial master and the colonial servant the colonial subjects.

So, the English the Bengali person over here the bhadralok ah decent gentlemen over here, he happens to be a very direct product a very direct progeny of that enterprise that exercise the experiment of Macaulay education, Macaulay minutes on Indian education. So, he gets a job as a postmaster in a in a British post office set in India of course, but the entire purpose of the post office we are told is to be another information centre, information ah point around the indigo factory.

So, we see as I mentioned already how the indigo factory and the post office are all very colonial positions, very colonial sites. And the man over here who is just joined the job as a postmaster is very much part of the payroll of the colonial machinery. Okay, so, we are told that the indigo factory workers had no leisure and they are not really any decent folk, they are not really the bhadraloks or the gentleman with whom the Calcutta person would have a you know normal cultured cultivated conversation.

Nor is a Calcutta boy an adept in the art of associating with others. Among strangers he appears either proud or ill at ease. At any rate, the postmaster had but little company; nor had he much to do.

So, he was stationed, he was positioned in a place which is a very far away from anything and knows, does not have any company does not have a society, and we are told he gets more and more alienated. So, we have a sense of the alienation of the worker over here. And it is very interestingly comparable to the fact that indigo factory workers have no leisure at all. So, there too there is a degree of alienation in Marxist terms and over here we have an alienation in the sense of more existential terms okay, so that the two kinds of alienation interestingly dialoguing with each other over here.

At times he tried his hand at writing a verse or two. That the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky were enough to fill life with joy – such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expression. But God knows that the poor fellow would have felt it as a gift of a new life, if some genie of the Arabian Nights had in one night swept away all the trees, leaves and all, and replaced them with a macadamised road, hiding the clouds from view with rows of tall houses.

So, we have a sense of you know very tongue in cheek humour that Tagore very characteristically depicts in almost all of his short fictions, that coming out here is wrong. So, we see that the postmaster because they had a lot of time in his hand, he had

almost nothing to do, he had no society to converse with. So, he tried his hand in writing verse again you know this is something that you know is told that you know he would do as a man of culture and a man of cultivation.

And then we are told that what were the themes that he wanted to write on, and the themes were obviously, nature when the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky, and you know those things filling his life with joy – such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expressions. He wanted to give expression to those sentiments you know looking around him, you can just see trees, and breeze, and sky.

But we are told immediately after that actually in his own heart he hated this place. And you know he would have been very happy if the all the trees and leaves were taken away by some genie of Arabian Nights, and the solution this reference is very interesting, because the genie of Arabian Nights as we are told is the archetypal desire machine. So, he is someone who can get a job done whatever you desire, whatever you wish for, he can make that happen, he can materialize it and that is an interesting you know presence in this particular short story.

Because we are told that he is very, very unhappy, and in his job he is very unhappy as a person in the British payroll, working in a very alienated and lonely post office in the middle of this place Ulapur, and he is trying to write poetry, he is trying to write short fiction based on his experiences with nature, but then in his heart he hates everything. And he longs for things such as macadamised road which is to say you know roads which are built with proper cement, roads which are built with proper tar etcetera or pakka road as the British will say it and then rows of tall houses.

So, he is more keen, he is more habituated, he is more atuned or aligned for seeing pakka houses, macadamised roads, and tall houses, rather than seeing trees and nature and rivers and skies around him. So, although he wanted to write about those things about natural settings, about the beauty of nature, he could not get around to doing it because in his heart he is never been related to it right, he related only to more urban settings.

So, we have this town versus or village country versus city tension creeping and already in the story, because we were told this is a person who is very much a city person, and he can he feels completely out of place, fish out of water we are told when he is stationed

almost tragically, in his post office in middle of this place called Ulapur, which is a village in the middle of nowhere .

And he does not have any company, does not have any society, does not have any recreation or any work for that matter right. And he tries his hand in writing poetry, seeking to draw inspiration from the natural beauty around him in his heart he is completely cut off from any understanding of nature. And he is longing to see macadamised roads and tall buildings, and sort of leaves and clouds and skies for that matter okay.

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At times he tried his hand at writing a verse or two. That the movement of the leaves and the clouds of the sky were enough to fill life with joy—such were the sentiments to which he sought to give expression. But God knows that the poor fellow would have felt it as the gift of a new life, if some genie of the *Arabian Nights* had in one night swept away the trees, leaves and all, and replaced them with a macadamised road, hiding the clouds from view with rows of tall houses.



The postmaster's salary was small. He had to cook his own meals, which he used to share with Ratan, an orphan girl of the village, who did odd jobs for him.

When in the evening the smoke began to curl up from the village cowsheds, and the cicalas chirped in every bush; when the mendicants of the Bāṭī sect sang their shrill songs in their daily meeting-place, when any poet, who had attempted to watch the movement of the leaves in the dense bamboo thickets, would have felt a ghostly shiver run down his back, the postmaster would light his little lamp, and call out "Ratan."

Ratan would sit outside waiting for this call, and, instead of coming in at once, would reply, "Did you call me, sir?"

"What are you doing?" the postmaster would ask.

"I must be going to light the kitchen fire," would be the answer.

And the postmaster would say: "Oh, let the kitchen fire be for awhile; light me my pipe first."

At last Ratan would enter, with puffed-out cheeks, vigorously blowing into a flame a live coal to light the tobacco. This would give the postmaster an



So, the postmaster's salary was small. He had to cook his own meals, which he used to share with Ratan, an orphan girl of the village, who did odd jobs for him. So, we are told we are introduced to the character called Ratan, who we are told is an orphan girl of the village who would just do this errand jobs for him, you know and postmaster salary was not very nothing the right term about was very modest salary. And he had to cook his own meals, because he could not hire a person who could cook his meals for him. And then he would share the meals with a girl called Ratan, who was orphan girl of the village who did odd jobs with him.

Now, from for him, so from this point of time in the story, we we have this relationship between the postmaster and Ratan described to us in in very very aesthetic terms. And we are told how they almost I mean there is very interesting parental relationship that

they managed to construct. So, on the one hand, the postmaster becomes a sort of a father figure for Ratan, and then we are also told that in the course of the story when postmaster falls sick, Ratan heals him back to health, and so she becomes a mother figure at that point of time.

So, this entire politics and performance of parenting is very interestingly a very complexly you know depicted and described in this particular section. And they sort of parent each other in very very complex ways and very existentially enriching ways right, and therein lies a bond that is shared in the course of the story.

When in the evening the smoke began to curl up from the village cowsheds, and this the cicadas chirped in every bush; when the mendicants of the Baul sect sang their shrill songs in their daily meeting-place, when any poet, who had attempted to watch the movement of the leaves in the dense bamboo thickets, would have felt a ghostly shiver run down his back, the postmaster would light his little lamp and call out Ratan.

Now, if you take a look at the descriptions over here, cicadas chirping in every bush, Baul song sang in their daily meeting-places. Baul songs are the rural folk songs which are sung in rural Bengal. They can be religious in quality, but they also carry a lot of you know community message. So, the Baul songs tell about community about the conditions of life, about the conditions of dailyness which sometimes cowers on religious metaphors or mystic metaphors. But Baul songs are very very, they are very symbolic of rural Bengal, so that that particular symbolic presence is there to describe the ruralness of this particular setting.

And we are also told that you know any poet who had attempted to watch the movement of the leaves in the dense bamboo thickets would feel a shiver run down his back. So, there is something almost ghostly about how lonely this place is how alienated this place is, and the ghostliness is something which is described in rural terms. And when this particular twilight moment happens every day when the and the birds come back and smoke begins to curl from the village cowsheds which is say that you know it is probably you know people are cooking the evening meals or maybe they are burning dung and their Baul songs which is sung at the end of the day. And you know when any poet presumably an urban poet wants to write about nature will actually feel the shiver run down his spine you know looking at the you know hearing the rustle of the leaves in



dense bamboo thickets. At this time every day the postmaster would light his little lamp during twilight and call out Ratan.

Ratan would sit outside waiting for this call, and, instead of coming in at once would reply, Did you call me, sir?

What are you doing? The postmaster would ask.

I must be going to light the kitchen fire. So, you know the kitchen fire over here is the earthenware oven which would be you know used with coal. So, the whole point was to put the coal on fire which would create this temperature inside the earthenware oven on which you can cook your meals right. So, this is again a very very typical object in rural Bengal, the earthenware oven. And Ratan's job would be to set fire to the coals in order to warm up or heat up the earthenware oven which we use in turn to cook meals for the postmaster.

So, I must be going to light the kitchen fire, would be the answer.

And the postmaster would say, oh, let the kitchen fire be for awhile, light me my pipe first. So, the pipe would be a cigarette. So, you know not exactly cigarette in the British sense, but tobacco rolled into you know you know a leaf like thing which is again something which you know the rural people you know would smoke, but the pipe could also be a metaphor of urbanity over here.

So, we are not quite sure what pipe has been talked about, it could be an urban metaphor an urban signifier, the pipe smoked by the city people. We are not entirely sure because we are also told the postmaster's salary was very modest, so you know affording a pipe. So, pipe is normally a signifier of the colonial masculinity, as someone who is obviously, positioned in you know in the position of prestige in a site of prestige, in a site of privilege, but we are not quite sure.

But the point is the postmaster over here he would more often than not ask Ratan to you know light up the pipe instead of the kitchen fire which is to say, he is not really keen on his meals. It is not really related or connected to his meals because there is no sense of home that he has in this particular setting. So, you know he would just wile away his time smoking his pipe.

So, this particular preference is important that the preference for the pipe rather than the kitchen fire would know it would indicate that the smoke, the postmaster over here smoke looks in his place as more of a place of leisure, a place of inaction, a place where he has a kill time rather than a place of nourishment. Because the entire idea the entire metaphor of the kitchen fire it can be seen as a symbol of nourishment, a symbol of homely intimate nourishment, which he does not want. Rather he wants to light the pipe and smoke the pipe and that is what he instructs Ratan to do.

At last Ratan would enter would enter, and puffed-out with puffed-out cheeks vigorously blowing into a flame a live coal to light the tobacco.

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opportunity of conversing. "Well, Ratan," perhaps he would begin, "do you remember anything of your mother?" That was a fertile subject. Ratan partly remembered, and partly didn't. Her father had been fonder of her than her mother; him she recollected more vividly. He used to come home in the evening after his work, and one or two evenings stood out more clearly than others, like pictures in her memory. Ratan would sit on the floor near the postmaster's feet, as memories crowded in upon her. She called to mind a little brother that she had—and how on some bygone cloudy day she had played at fishing with him on the edge of the pond, with a twig for a make-believe fishing-rod. Such little incidents would drive out greater events from her mind. Thus, as they talked, it would often get very late, and the postmaster would feel too lazy to do any cooking at all. Ratan would then hastily light the fire, and toast some unleavened bread, which, with the cold remnants of the morning meal, was enough for their supper.

On some evenings, seated at his desk in the corner of the big empty shed, the postmaster too would call up memories of his own home, of his mother and his sister, of those for whom in his exile his heart was sad,—memories which were always haunting him, but which he could not talk about with the men of the factory, though he found himself naturally recalling them aloud in the presence of the simple little girl. And so it came about that the girl would allude to his people as mother, brother, and sister, as if she had known them all her life. In fact, she had a complete picture of each one of them painted in her little heart.

One noon, during a break in the rains, there was a cool soft breeze blowing; the smell of the dango grass and hawthorn in the hot sun felt like the warm breathings of



This would give the postmaster an opportunity of conversing. So, you know the whole idea of the opportunity of conversing is important because we are told at the beginning of story that he does not really get a chance to converse people on the on equal wavelength because he cannot converse with the factory workers, and obviously, he cannot converse with the British proprietor or the factories, he is completely alone. So, he ends up talking to this girl called Ratan who did odd jobs for him.

Well, Ratan, perhaps he would begin, do you remember anything of your mother? That was a fertile subject. Ratan partly remembered and partly did not. Her father had been fonder of her than her mother; him she recollected more vividly. He used to come home in the evening after his work, and one or two evenings stood out more clearly than

others, like pictures in her memory. Ratan would sit on the floor near the postmaster's feet, as memories crowded in upon her.

So, the whole idea of the memory coming back, this is a very almost Wordsworth-ian kind of a setting where there are two people, two human subjects who otherwise are not occupied with anything, they recollect emotions in tranquillity. And then the question about her father or mother would remind Ratan all the many memories he she had with the father. And she would narrate those to the postmaster and that is the way they would pass time every evening.

So, Ratan would sit on the floor near the postmaster's feet, as memories crowded in upon her. She called to mind a little brother that she had – and on some bygone cloudy day she had played at fishing with him on the edge of the pond, with a twig for a make-believe fishing-rod. So, again the whole idea of a make-believe game with a brother, we do not know what is wrong with him maybe you know at this point we cannot guess, but you know there is a very strong hint very strong suggestion, maybe they are all dead, maybe they died of poverty, maybe they died of a disease and maybe they died by not being you know nourished enough we do not know, but she recollects his hearings in a very flashback kind of a in a very flashy way, the some image has come back to her with some flashy vigour, and she narrates those to the postmaster as and when those come back.

Such little incidents would drive out greater events from her mind. You know thus, as they talked it would often get very late, and the postmaster would feel too lazy to do any cooking at all. Ratan would then hastily light the fire to toast some unleavened bread, which, with the cold remnants of the morning meal, was enough for their supper. So, this is what I meant earlier when I said that the postmaster does not feel connected to this place as a home.

So, he does not really think of cooking a meal which would be symbolic of a home, a homely meal, but rather he is more keen on passing time with a conversation. So, he smokes his tobacco, he smokes his pipe and listens to Ratan talking about her father and her family. In the end, when it will get very late, he would just make some bread it is an unleavened bread we are told which they will have for supper, with the cold remnants of the morning meals. So, there is a degree of staleness about this existence that we can see

with a reputation of the food. It is not really fresh food, it is not really warm food, the lack of warm, the lack of freshness, it is something that we see quite palpably present in this particular setting.

On some evenings, seated at his desk in the corner of his big empty shed, the postmaster too would call up memories of his own home, of his mother and his sister, of those for whom in his exile his heart was sad – memories which were always haunting him, but which he could not talk about when the men of the with the men of the factory, though he found himself naturally recalling them aloud in the presence of the simple little girl.

So, interestingly we find that the postmaster connects much better much more organically to little girl Ratan over here than to the men of the factory. So, this degree of cultural gap over here presumably that he cannot recollect, he cannot narrate, he cannot share his recollections with the men of the factory, although they are men. So, there is gender affinity that he presumably has to them, but there is this wavelength mismatch, which causes him not to confide to them.

But, on the other hand, he talks to the little girl in terms of telling her about his memories, you know memories of his home his mother and his sister, okay. So, and so it came about that the girl would allude to his people as mother, brother and sister, as if she had known them all her life. In fact, she had a complete picture of each one of them painted in her little heart. So, this is very very interesting.

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of the simple little girl. And so it came about that the girl would allude to his people as mother, brother, and sister, as if she had known them all her life. In fact, she had a complete picture of each one of them painted in her little heart.

One noon, during a break in the rains, there was a cool soft breeze blowing; the smell of the damp grass and leaves in the hot sun felt like the warm breathing of the tired earth on one's body. A persistent bird went on all the afternoon repeating the burden of its one complaint in Nature's audience chamber.

The postmaster had nothing to do. The shimmer of the freshly washed leaves, and the banked-up remnants of the retreating rain-clouds were sights to see; and the postmaster was watching them and thinking to himself: "Oh, if only some kindred soul were near—just one loving human being whom I could hold near my heart!" This was exactly, he went on to think, what that bird was trying to say, and it was the same feeling which the murmuring leaves were striving to express. But no one knows, or would believe, that such an idea might also take possession of an ill-paid village postmaster in the deep, silent mid-day interval of his work. The postmaster sighed, and called out "Ratan." Ratan was then sprawling beneath the guava-tree, busily engaged in eating unripe guavas. At the voice of her master, she ran up breathlessly, saying: "Were you calling me, Dada?" "I was thinking," said the postmaster, "of teaching you to read." And then for the rest of the afternoon he taught her the alphabet.

Thus, in a very short time, Ratan had got as far as the double consonants. It seemed as though the showers of the season would never end. Canals, ditches, and hollows were all overflowing with water. Day and night the patter of rain was heard, and the croaking of frogs. The village roads became impassable, and



How kinship is established through memory, or how kinship is established through you know recollection of memory. So, the postmaster would recollect memories or narrate memories of his mother, sister, and presumably other members of family to the little girl and also his brother. And he would tell more and more stories every single day to the point till the point came that a little girl Ratan imagined herself to be part of the family.

So, we can see here how one might say kinship is established, generated through a storytelling in this particular in this particular section. Storytelling or consuming stories makes you akin to the characters in the story. It makes you somehow related organically, existentially, emotionally with the characters in the story right. So, this is a very interesting little image that Tagore is creating over here.

And if you visualize it little girl listening to the story is told by an older man, who is very lonely, very sad, and he is telling her stories about his family, his relatives, his brother, his sisters, mother, and she is consuming all the stories with great delight till the point that he she finds herself planted in that particular setting, she finds herself situated in that particular setting as per the family of the postmaster. It is very very organic kind of a consumption of stories, organic consumption of memory so to say.

One noon, during a break in the rains, there was a cool soft breeze blowing; the smell of the damp grass and leaves in the hot sun felt like the warm breathing of the tired earth on one's body. A persistent bird went on all the afternoon repeating the burden of its one complaint in Nature's audience chambers. So, again the natural descriptions they are very very evocative in quality. We are told that this cool breeze which is coming after a rain, and the song of a bird which is coming all afternoon repeating the burden of its one complaint in Nature's audience chamber. So, you know instead of dialogic description over here, the little bird talking to the nature the rain falling on earth all very dialogic entanglement, very organic entanglement between or across different natural signifiers.

The postmaster had nothing to do. The shimmer of the freshly washed leaves, the banked-up remnants of the retreating rain-clouds were sights to see; and the postmaster was watching them and thinking to himself, Oh, if only some kindred soul were near – just one loving human being whom I could hold near my heart. This was exactly, he went on to think, what that bird was trying to say, and it was the same feeling that which the murmuring leaves were trying to express was striving to express. And look at the

way in which he establishes a dialogue with the natural objects around him, the bird. So, he is so guessing that the bird is probably trying to tell about loneliness, is probably trying to listen you know sing about loneliness and alienation.

The same with the leaves, maybe the murmuring leaves were trying to express you know that if only this wish of having a companion to talk to, a human companion that would be an interlocutor of his experience, of his memories right. So, that kind of a wish for an interlocutor that for that wish for someone to listen to his particular story is something which the postmaster is projecting onto the natural elements around him.

So, this is a very classic case of projection of the loneliness, a projection of a wish fulfilment. And he is sort of thinking that a little bird chirping away to nature is probably talking about his loneliness, and the rustling leaves talking, the rain on the earth probably also talking about his loneliness. So, it is all getting projected in a very, very organic natural kind of way.

But no one knows, or would believe that such an idea might also have might also take possession of an ill-paid village postmaster in the deep, silent mid-day interval of his work. The postmaster sighed and called out Ratan. Ratan was then sprawling beneath the guava-tree, busily engaged in eating unripe guavas. Again a very, very rural signifier, someone sitting under guava-trees, and eating unripe guavas, the unripe thing is interesting over here because that is it is sort of it is more rural in quality than a ripe guava, which is more consumerist which is bought in the market it is more you know commonly urban in quality right. So, this image of this girl sitting behind or sitting beneath a guava-tree, eating unripe guavas is a very rural image, a very ideally rural image so to say.

So, Ratan was then sprawling beneath the guava-tree, busily engaged in eating unripe guavas. At the voice of her master, she ran up breathlessly saying, were you calling me Dada. I was thinking said the postmaster of teaching you to read, and then for the rest of the afternoon he taught her the alphabet. So, again notice the transition between from Sir to Dada right, Dada is elder brother in Bengali.

So, you know that address of Dada or elder brother to the postmaster, it suggests a sense of intimacy, existential emotional intimacy that she is beginning to brew with the postmaster, and that is something that she is addressing him with. And then you know we

are told that the postmaster wishes to teach her how to read. So, you know they will start with the alphabets.

Thus, in a very short time, Ratan had got as far as the double consonant. So, she could read compound consonants, so double consonants. So, she was progressing, and obviously, she was very quick, because she was very clever and keen student of the postmaster. It seemed as though the showers of the season would never end. Canals, ditches, and hollows were all overflowing with water. So, there is abundant overabundance of rain form which is creating trouble for everyone around over here, because everything was going flooded, everything was getting spilled all over with water. Day and night the patter of rain was heard, and the croaking of frogs. The village roads became impassable.

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marketing had to be done in punts.

One heavily clouded morning, the postmaster's little pupil had been long waiting outside the door for her call, but, not hearing it as usual, she took up her dog-eared book, and slowly entered the room. She found her master stretched out on his bed, and, thinking that he was resting, she was about to retire on tip-toe, when she suddenly heard her name—"Ratan!" She turned at once and asked: "Were you sleeping, Dada?" The postmaster in a plaintive voice said: "I am not well. Feel my head; is it very hot?"

In the loneliness of his exile, and in the gloom of the rains, his ailing body needed a little tender nursing. He longed to remember the touch on the forehead of soft hands with tinkling bracelets, to imagine the presence of loving womanhood, the nearness of mother and sister. And the exile was not disappointed. Ratan ceased to be a little girl. She at once stepped into the post of mother, called in the village doctor, gave the patient his pills at the proper intervals, sat up all night by his pillow, cooked his gruel for him, and every now and then asked: "Are you feeling a little better, Dada?"

It was some time before the postmaster, with weakened body, was able to leave his sick-bed. "No more of this," said he with decision. "I must get a transfer." He at once wrote off to Calcutta an application for a transfer, on the ground of the unhealthiness of the place.

Relieved from her duties as nurse, Ratan again took up her old place outside the door. But she no longer heard the same old call. She would sometimes peep inside furtively to find the postmaster sitting on his chair, or stretched on his bed, and staring absent-mindedly into the air. While Ratan was awaiting her call the



And marketing had to be done in punts. So, you know the whole idea of going out to shop something was almost unthinkable. So, it had to be done in in different phases whenever there was you know the village roads were traversable or passable, because most of times they were impassable because of the rain.

One heavily clouded morning, the postmaster's little pupil have been long waiting outside the door for her call, but, on not hearing it as usual, she took up her dog-eared book, and slowly entered the room. So, we are told that Ratan would always sit outside the room every single morning, waiting to be called in, and then waiting to be taught by

the postmaster, but that particular morning she was not being called. So, she was sitting outside very patiently, but then when the call never came, she walked in and slowly entered the room.

She found her master stretched out on his bed, and, thinking that he was resting, she was about to retire on tip-toe, when she suddenly heard her name – Ratan. She turned at once and asked, were you sleeping Dada? The postmaster in a plaintive voice said I am not well. Feel my head, is it very hot. So, this is a fever in the story which becomes a very symbolic condition, because we find that the entire idea of fever where the postmaster become sick and unwell. It reverses the parental politics in the story, because Ratan then becomes a caregiver, Ratan becomes from this point the mother figure in the story as opposed to how the postmaster have been parenting her through education right.

So, on one hand we have parenting through education; on the other hand, we have parenting through care giving right. So, and both become very interestingly prominent in this in this short story. So, the postmaster is coming out of the fever, and he is asking Ratan to check his temperature by just feeling and by just touching his forehead.

In the loneliness of his exile and in the gloom of the rains his ailing body needed a little tender nursing. He longed for human contact for human compassion, he longed to remember the touch of the forehead of soft hands with tinkling bracelets, to imagine the presence of loving womanhood, the nearness of a mother and sister. So, he is remembering the tinkling bracelets on the hands of the mother and sister would touch him on the forehead when he was unwell.

So, those fond memories, those tactile memories keep coming back over here. And he is longing to enjoy or to have the presence of loving womanhood, nurturing womanhood right. So, care giving womanhood, the nearness of mother and sister, and exile was not disappointed.

Ratan ceased to be a little girl. She had once stepped into the post of mother, called in the village doctor, gave the patient his pills at the proper intervals, sat up all night by his pillows, cooked his gruel for him, and every now and then asked, are you feeling a little better now, Dada? So, look at the care giving that Ratan does over here.



Ah, so, you know she is called the village doctor, the village doctor comes in. So, she is a good, she is also got very good presence of mind, cooked his gruel for him, this food the sick food the comfort food for him, and every now and then would ask him are you feeling a little better now Dada again, big brother.

It was some time before the postmaster with weakened body was able to leave his sick-bed. No more of this, said he with division with decision sorry. I must get a transfer. He at once wrote off to Calcutta an application for a transfer, on the grounds of the unhealthiness of the place.

So, we will stop at this point today because there is a change in direction in the story, the change in argument and sentiment in the story from this point. But the what we have done so far we will see very clearly that the fever comes in and it completely decimates the postmaster health-wise, but also demoralizes him, and it almost makes him determined to leave this place, because he decides he cannot carry on you know staying in this place which is so non-conducive to his health, non-conducive to his social conditions or his you know social status or intellectual status or whatever it is. So, he applies for a leave, he applies for a transfer on the grounds of the unhealthiness of the place. He writes a letter to the Calcutta you know the headquarters presumably asking or requesting a transfer.

So, you can look at the way in which the entire colonial machinery especially an administrative machinery is controlled and distributed, and disseminated to the post office over here, which becomes a very important site of exchange in a colonial system. And we find from this point of the story that will change in human emotions as well, and there is an existential shift which will come in at this point which we will capture and carry on in the next lectures to come.

Thank you very much for your attention.