

Analysis of “The Parrot’s Training”

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In the short story, “The Parrot’s Training” Tagore narrates the story of a Parrot for whom the benevolent king builds a golden cage where it would be provided with all the facilities to be educated, civilised. The plight of the parrot who is caught in the system of formal education shows the restrictive, impersonal, crude nature of it.

The story begins with the introduction of the parrot who spends its days singing, hopping around just the way a bird is naturally supposed to behave like. But the Raja expects more from it and observes that it is ignorant as its hopping is not as refined as a civilized being or has never recited any scriptures. The Raja believes that if the Parrot is not taught refined taste then its ignorance will keep it a fool as it won’t be able to give away to the world anything in return and do greater things.

The Raja then calls for his nephews to whom he gives away the full responsibility for ensuring that the Parrot would receive proper education. For the purpose of teaching, several pundits who are the best in their streams are appointed. They would improve the Parrot’s basic knowledge. The first change which is made is that it would be shifted from its natural habitat of a ‘poor’ nest to an advanced cage which would fit the purpose and the curriculum that would be taught to it. However, it is seen that the ones who gain from this and become happy are the pundits.

The parrot symbolises a child who is forced into a rigid, normal system of education at an early age and is made to adopt to a new environment, system of education here represented by the golden cage. The golden cage although apparently seems to be a thing of luxury is shown to be actually being restrictive to the one who is subjected to it. The expression 'Culture, captured and caged!' expresses perfectly what Tagore thinks of the capacities of formal education. The formal education standing in opposition to natural education which he believed to be liberating, constructive. Tagore who also lays importance on the role of a teacher and his responsibility is being critical of not only the method of teaching but also of the teachers. He shows that those who gain from such transaction of formal education are the Pundits whose pockets are filled while the students wings are captured and bound.

Tagore’s criticism is also evident as he notes the reaction of the crowds, who represent friends and family of a child. They come and mindlessly appreciate how the child is ‘fortunate’. Tagore continues to point out the other people who are advantageous of this process of formal education except for the Parrot or the child itself. The goldsmith who builds the cage, the scribes who make huge number of books available, the nephews who are supposed to be the caretakers, the supervisors all are shown to become beneficial of this situation by filling up their pockets and living happily ever after.

The Raja who represents a child’s parent is also criticised. On hearing from some fault-finders that the bird has not been flourishing from this service he calls for the nephews for explanation. The

nephews turn to the testimonies given by the goldsmiths and everyone else who have so called participated in the process of educating the bird. Tagore condemns such approach of the parent. Instead of looking for answers from the bird's own experience, the parent keeps faith in the system without finding faults with it believing that they are doing the best for their children. Everyone is happy and from outside the cage looks shiny except that the bird itself is not flourishing. Tagore therefore points out that although from the point of planning, executing of the curriculum it looks perfect but it's rigidity, the impersonal nature fails to cater to a child's personality, growth and wellness.

The Raja however wishes to see for himself the way the Parrot is being taught. As the news of the Raja's visitation spreads, people arrange for a spectacle. "From the gate rose the sounds of conch-shells and gongs, horns, bugles and trumpets, cymbals, drums and kettle-drums, tomtoms, tambourines, flutes, fifes, barrel-organs and bagpipes. The pundits began chanting mantras with their topmost voices, while the goldsmiths, scribes, supervisors, and their numberless cousins of all different degrees of distance, loudly raised a round of cheers." The Raja is satisfied with the external pomp and show and completely forgets about the bird. Tagore here exposes the vanity of institutionalised formal education and how it fools everyone with its opulent plans. The plans of curriculum so grand that the bird for whom this service has been sought is found to be insignificant.

What happened to the bird then? The captured bird overburdened by the curriculum, overwhelmed by the vanity "was so completely choked with the leaves from the books that it could neither whistle nor whisper". Meaning that it loses its sense of selfhood. The bird, weakened, tries to escape from this life of captivity but the system has grown so large in comparison to it that it is unable to escape from it. The goldsmith overcome with his own ambition loots the king as he builds iron chains and clips the wings of the bird while ensuring the king that it would be good for the bird's development. On the other hand, the brothers-in-law of the Raja criticises the bird for not only lacking "good sense, but also gratitude!". Tagore continues to criticise the strict nature of formal education as the bird is taught lessons not with love or care but with the help of "text-book in one hand and baton in the other". The Raja instead honours those who torture and shackled the poor bird in the name of perfected education. Tagore exposes his own agony of being bound and made puppet in the hands of the system which he himself escapes from. The representation of the Raja might also be considered as Tagore expressing his disapproval of the shortcomings of his parents' belief and practice in this case.

At the end of the story, the life of the bird tragically comes to an end on an April morning. The nephew declares to the Raja that its education has been completed. But being unable to adjust to the regularity and severity of formal education which aimed to alter the nature of the bird, it dies of overburden. The bird has been only been overfed with bookish education. When the bird dies the only way to know of its death is by observing if it is hopping or flying as these are the things that the bird would naturally do. The bird's forced alteration is expressed in the phrase, "The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled." It reminds that one must not be forced to become someone that they are not supposed to be and that any form of education must aim at knowledge that is personal and taught with love.