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“THE HUNGRY STONES” – SUPERNATURAL OR PSYCHIC?

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Abstract: This article explores several layers of tension presented in the story “The Hungry Stones” by Rabindranath Tagore. Using a unique narrative technique of storytelling through multiple narrators the writer here describes the uncanny experiences of an unnamed educated Bengali gentleman (‘Babu’) while working as a cotton tax collector in the middle province of British colonial India. Spending lonely nights in a deserted marble palace far from the neighbouring locality, this man experiences the presence of women around him wearing clothes as described in the famous book *The Arabian Nights*. But these women are invisible to him. He mostly feels their presence while being asleep. So they appear supernatural to him. These experiences come to him in the forms of dream. This man is Indian inside but dressed and educated in Western style outwardly. By using Freudian theory of psychoanalysis this article is trying to explain the reason behind this nocturnal experiences completely rejecting the idea of supernatural.

Keywords: Narrator, supernatural, frame, conscious, unconscious, id, ego, superego.

“The Hungry Stones” a short story written by Rabindranath Tagore is a frame tale. In such a story, there are two narrators. The first narrator presents a scene with characters. The second narrator—who is one of the characters introduced by the first narrator—then tells a story. “The Hungry Stones” begins when the first narrator says that he and a companion are returning to Calcutta on a train from their holiday. They sit near a man whom they first mistake for a Muslim from Northern India due to his style of dress, but who they quickly realize is a Bengali gentleman (Babu). They are struck by his eloquence and worldliness, and can’t tear themselves away from listening to him talk. He keeps them up all night telling them a story. Thus he becomes the second narrator. After the train for Calcutta arrives, the second narrator departs and the first narrator takes over to complete the story. In this way the story resembles a framed picture or painting. The first narrator is the frame, and the second narrator is the picture or painting. Both narrators present their stories in first-person point of view. So the main story is actually told by the second narrator and job of the first narrator is to introduce second narrator to him.

The second narrator and the real storyteller recounts a time when he took a job in the Indian Hyderabad region, collecting cotton tax in the town of Barich. He describes the town as the most romantic place, cut through by the river Shusta. On the outskirts of the town is a towering white palace built by Shah Mahmud II, impressive to look at but long abandoned. Local people tell the storyteller not to live in the palace, and it has such a bad reputation of haunted nature that even the thieves stay away from it. Despite the warning, the second narrator decides to lodge there and after a week regularly experiencing strange hallucinations mostly in the forms of dreams at night in his sleep. These experiences were of encountering beautiful harem women dressed in Arabian clothes who are trying their best to allure the narrator mentally and physically. The narrator also tries hard to reach and stay with these women but always remain unsuccessful as they only appear in his dreams. At first the narrator ‘Srijut So-and- so’ thinks these experiences as something uncanny, mysterious. But after awakening from sleep these experiences become only ‘illusions’ or ‘queer fantasies’ to him. Whenever the readers suspect one such experience as supernatural, the narrator explains it as natural. Feeling the fall of two drops of water at his cheek the narrator first imagines them as tears of a crying women, but at the very next moment he looks up and finding the sky overcast with black clouds realizes them as raindrops. However he feels drawn to this palace and develops a craving for these dream experiences. Even he prepares himself wearing silk gown, velvet cap, loose pajamas and embroidered vest like the badshah (king) described in *The Arabian Nights* for these nocturnal experiences.

Apparently one may consider this story as a supernatural or gothic story. But a deep reading will definitely reveal the fact that there is no trace of any supernatural element in this story, rather there are several complex layers of contemporary social, cultural and psychological problems embedded in this framed narrative. First of all the story explores the crisis of split identity of a colonial educated Bengali gentleman (Babu) who being representative of this class is not given any name in the story but only referred as 'Srijut So-and- so'. The irony is this knowledgeable character 'Srijut So-and- so' appears to be a perfect blend of East and West. But in the story he tells, we find the depiction of his personal struggle with these two polarities which in his youth nearly cost him his sanity. This conflict between his persona as a western dressed cotton tax-collector wearing hat, coat, breeches by the day and a would be badshah (king) wearing silk gown, velvet cap, loose pajamas by night dreaming the harem girls and eunuchs is dramatized exposing the problem split identity.

The strange nightly experience that comes regularly to the narrator however does not make him afraid at all. At first he takes it casually and describes it humorously as the experience of one of The Arabian Nights. Gradually, he becomes eager to experience them more frequently and feels drawn to the palace during the time near sunset.

But what is the cause of such attraction and why do 'Srijut So-and-so' dream of such beautiful women every night? The answers of these questions are not provided in the story explicitly. One of the major characteristics of Tagore's short stories is also present here and that is the incompleteness. This open ended nature of his stories leaves the readers in an uneasy state of the mind. Again this technique he uses here with the framed narrators definitely reminds us of the narrative technique of the stories of The Arabian Nights. Told by the frame narrators each story of it does not end properly, only leaving a cue for the next one.

However in the next part of this article I am trying to find out the reasons why the second narrator regularly encounters youthful and beautiful women in his dreams. And I think in this case Freudian theory of psychoanalysis will help us a lot to answer this question. Freud described a topographical model of the mind, consisting of the layers of the mind's structure and their function. Freud used the comparison of an iceberg to explain the three levels of the mind. On the surface is consciousness, which contains those thoughts that are in the focus of our attention presently, and this is the tip of the iceberg. The preconscious consists of all retrievable memories. The third and most vital region is that the unconscious. Here are the processes that cause the explanation for most behaviour. Like an iceberg, the most important part of the mind is that part one cannot see. The unconscious acts as a repository, a 'cauldron' in which primitive wishes and impulses are kept cornered. The preconscious area is the mediator. There is a barrier which separates the unconscious from conscious. It is known as repression barrier and functions to repress the unconscious from emerging in the conscious mind.

Freud (1923) later developed a more structural model of the mind having the components id, ego, and superego (what Freud called "the psychic apparatus"). These aren't physical areas within the brain, but rather hypothetical conceptualizations of important mental functions. The id, ego, and superego are three essential parts of the human personality. Freud assumed the id operated at an unconscious level consistent with the pleasure principle (gratification from satisfying basic instincts). The id comprises two sorts of biological instincts (or drives) which Freud named Eros and Thanatos. Eros, or life instinct, helps the individual to survive; it directs life-sustaining activities like respiration, eating, and sex (Freud, 62). The energy created by the life instincts is understood as libido. On the contrary, Thanatos or death wish is seen as a group of destructive forces present altogether (Freud, 70). When this energy is directed outward onto others, it's expressed as aggression and violence. Freud believed that Eros is stronger than Thanatos, thus enabling people to survive instead of self-destruct. The ego develops from the id during infancy. The ego's goal is to satisfy the stress of the id in a safe a socially acceptable way. In contrast to the id, the ego follows the truth principle because it operates in both the conscious and unconscious. The superego develops in infancy (when the kid identifies with an equivalent sex parent) and is liable for ensuring moral standards are followed. The superego operates on the morality principle and motivates us to behave in a socially responsible and acceptable manner. The basic dilemma of all human existence is that every element of the psychic apparatus makes demands upon us that are incompatible with the opposite two. Inner conflict is unavoidable. For example, the superego can make an individual feel guilty if rules aren't followed. When there's a conflict between the goals of the id and superego, the ego must act to mediate the conflict. The ego can deploy various defense mechanisms (Freud, 1894, 1896) to stop it from becoming overwhelmed by anxiety. Repression is an unconscious defense reaction employed by the ego to keep away disturbing or threatening thoughts from becoming conscious. Freud considered dreams to be the road to the unconscious because it is in dreams that the ego's defenses are lowered so that a number of the repressed material comes through to awareness, though in distorted form. Dreams perform important functions for the unconscious mind and serve as valuable clues to how the unconscious mind operates. Freud differentiated between the manifest content of a dream (what the dreamer remembers), and the symbolic meaning of the dream (i.e., the underlying wish). The process whereby the underlying wish is translated into the manifest content is named 'dream work'. The purpose of 'dream work' is to rework the forbidden wish into a non-threatening form, thus reducing anxiety and allowing us to continue sleeping. 'Dream work' involves the process of condensation, displacement, and secondary elaboration. The process of condensation is to join of two or more ideas/images into one. Displacement takes place once we transform the person or object we are really concerned about to somebody else. Secondary elaboration occurs when the unconscious strings together wish-fulfilling images as a logical order of events, further obscuring the latent content. According to Freud, this is often why the manifest content of dreams can be within the sort of believable events.

Now if we turn our attention to the clues given in the text, first we can see the second narrator describes his condition as a tax collector and resident of the palace as 'men oppressed with solitude and deprived of the society of women'(Tagore, 16). We can easily deduce the inherent desire for the company of women from the previous statement. According to the pleasure principle of Freud it is natural for a young healthy man to have sexual urge for women in the unconscious. So obviously he seeks company of women. But the problem here is that there is no scope to gratify this desire, also the Victorian morality of the period does not allow this kind of thoughts in the conscious mind and accordingly the narrator's mind has to repress it deep down to his unconscious by force. Besides, after dark he becomes lonely and "the solitude of the deserted palace weighed upon me like a nightmare" (Tagore, 18). So in the initial days of his job as tax collector and staying at the palace he has no dreams. But gradually these repressed desires with unbearable solitude create pressure

on the mind generating anxiety. Again the narrator after learning the history of the palace from his colleagues and entering it imagines “on the cold marble floors of its spray cooled rooms young Persian damsels would sit, their hair disheveled before bathing, and splashing their soft naked feet in the clear water of the reservoirs, would sing, to the tune of the guitar.”

So the solitude and unfulfilled libido of ‘Srijut So-and- so’ remained repressed in his unconscious. But in his sleep repression barrier becomes weak to release the pressure and his underlying wish for the company of women comes to his conscious mind in the distorted shape in the form of dreams. So these repressed wishes transformed themselves through the process of secondary elaboration which strings together wish-fulfilling images in a logical order of events. The narrator’s recent knowledge of the history of the palace and his awareness about the stories of The Arabian Nights provides the raw materials for the manifest in his dreams. As a result the second narrator finds his underlying wish (his urge for women) though remaining latent, fulfilled through his dreams which his mind experiences as logical sequence of events of beautiful Arabian women of harem act playfully with him beckoning, hugging, kissing him even appealing him to rescue.

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