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The Tender and the Tragic: Exploring Childhood Innocence and Pain in Selected Short Stories

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Abstract

Children are full of innocence. In a way they are blessed that they do not have to carry the burden of worldly pain and worries. But what happens when such innocent children face horrible reality of death or loss of the loved ones. This paper examines how children face the harsh reality of the death of their near and dear by studying three short stories, first story is *Let's Go Home* by Kewlian Sio, second story is *A Shadow* by R.K. Narayan and the third is *The Portrait of a Lady* by Khushwant Singh. In these short stories, the emotions of children in the face of the reality of death are expressed in a wonderful manner. Their innocence about the pain they are going to face in future due to the death of their loved ones is presented in such a way that makes these stories all the more tragic.

Key Words: Children, Innocence, Death, Parents, grief.

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The Tender and the Tragic: Exploring Childhood Innocence and Pain in Selected Short Stories

Introduction:

Children are full of innocence. In a way they are blessed that they do not have to carry the burden of worldly pain and worries. But what happens when such innocent children face dreadful realities of death or loss of the loved ones. This paper examines how children face the harsh reality of the death of their near and dear by studying three short stories, first story is, *Let's Go Home* by Kewlian Sio, the second story is *A Shadow* by R.K. Narayan and the third one is *The Portrait of a Lady* by Khushwant Singh. In these stories, Their innocence about the pain they are going to face in future due to the death of their loved ones is presented in such a way that makes these stories all the more tragic.

The pain of death is reacted differently by children of different age-groups as well as by different elderly people. In his 1917 paper, "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud pointed out that there is a distinct psychological process normally exhibited by individuals who experience the loss of death of an emotionally important person. Freud wrote,

"Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person....although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment." (Freud 243-244)

The first story *Lets Go Home* by Kewlian Sio is about a school boy who lost his mother. His mother was his only parent as he already had lost his father earlier. He used to spend quality time with his mother and share everything with her. After his mother's death he was staying with his aunt. One day on his way to school he forgot about his mother's death as other students in his bus were talking about his favourite marbles. He spent the entire day very happily and at the end of the day, which was also a weekend he felt excited to spend time with his mother as usual. But on reaching near home he is suddenly reminded of the death of his mother and cries. Kewlian Sio has artistically represented an innocent child's mind that how a child can easily forget the severest kind of tragedy though temporarily during their play. The child's plight make the reader emotionally touched.

In the beginning of the story readers are told that a little talk about marbles makes him forget everything. Sio writes, "Someone started to talk about marbles, and he was so interested in marbles that, as he listened, he began to forget. Kewlian Sio further reveals his character by describing "And afterwards, he did not know how he could have forgotten like that. But perhaps it was not so strange after all; everyone had always said he was 'too sensitive' and 'so absent-minded at this age.' Perhaps it was he who was strange." (22)

It was Saturday and Saturday evening meant a lot to him. Saturday and Sunday were the day when he can spend more and more time with his mother. He felt excited because he had completely forgotten. He attended his periods as usual. That day also he fell asleep during the Arithmetic class as usual and expected the punishment of writing fifty lines, but that day, Miss Moss did not assign him a task and only asked him to rouse him and he wondered why. Here the teacher knows the truth that the child has lost his mother and she is becoming gentle to her.

He had so completely forgotten that when he visited library, he read a comical story, and he enjoyed it so much that he decided to tell it to his mother. "...she would like it, and he could enjoy it all over again with her." (24)

Even while going back home, he is completely out of the sad memory and is thinking: "He would go home, and after a quick wash there would be lemon pie on the table, with a large slice ready on a plate for him. The thought made him want to hurry. His mother always made lemon pie on Saturdays." (24) He was so excited to meet his mother that he took the shortcut.

But just before he started he heard someone say 'But he doesn't live...!' and then someone saying 'Sh-sh-sh!' and then a lot of giggling. But he did not mind them as "...his mind was so full and happy with anticipation of home and his mother, of the lemon pie and the plants in the garden." (25)

He expected that "In a little while more he would see the white sides of the house, the curtains flying in the windows and his mother waiting and waving from the kitchen." (25) But all of a sudden he felt something wrong. At first it was only a feeling, a suspicion; then it grew and thickened in him; it began whispering in his ear, 'Don't go!'. It swelled in him and became heavier and he had slowed down. He slowed down to a snail's pace and then came to a dead stop, thinking. Everything was so quiet and strange; a bird chirped in a tree and after the sound had died away, it seemed quieter and stranger."

He saw that "there were no flying curtains beckoning to him and all the windows were closed". And he had a sudden and full recollection that he was not living there anymore but up the hill at his aunt's, that the house was empty and his mother had died one week ago. At this sudden recollection of memory he doesn't know what to do and stood still. "There was a big lump in his throat and he felt like crying. Tears came out into his eyes and he wanted to cry a lot. But he could only cry quietly. (26)

The Emotional Aspects Studied:

This story shows that children are so innocent that they can easily forget such a terrible event of their life. This is quite opposite of what we find in elders. The story also shows that the innocent mind of a child is so much filled with the memories of her mother that it is indeed difficult to be erased. The child's mind still remembers the happy days with his mother.

Regarding the event of death, generally children are less involved in the funeral procedures, and may be because of that he easily forgot what happened. But when he gets his memories about his mother back, he exactly knows that his mother is not going to be with him and so he becomes sad. He wishes to shout, but he only cries. This line is effective because it suggests that he somewhere knows that now his mother is not there to respond to his cries. This end of the story makes the story all the more tragic.

The second story *A Shadow* by R.K. Narayan is about a boy who lost his father who was an actor. The boy not understanding the final loss of his father insists on watching the movie casting his father which would be released soon. He also insists that his mother should also watch his father's movie not realizing her pain. For her mother it is unbearable and she thinks "How could people bear to see him on the screen when they knew he was no more?" But on insistence of her son, she at last agrees and goes to watch the movie but she faints while watching the movie. The boy finally realizes the pain of losing his father and of her mother's inner anguish.

For the mother, the loss of her husband was unbearable. She had hoped that the producers might not release the picture out of consideration for her feelings, but it did not happen and the film got released. Now "Her husband was going to speak, move, and sing, for at least six hours a day in that theatre three streets off." (1)

Her son Sambu was as delighted as if his father had come back to life. Sambu wish to spend as much time as possible with his father on screen. He insisted that her mother also should accompany him watching movie. The mother explained to him that it was utterly impossible for her to see him in picture, but the boy had a ruthless logic, "Why should it be impossible? Aren't you seeing his photos, even that big photo on the wall, everyday?"

At this point, the readers are conveyed the fact that the mother understands the loss of her husband to be final, but for Sambu, watching his father on screen means his father's coming back to life again. He was excited on the day of the release of the film. He waited eagerly for the picture to begin because "It was six months since he had seen his father, and he missed him

badly at home.” (2) In a short duration of the movie, Sambu lived a life with his father and when the movie ended, “Sambu turned about and gazed at the aperture in the projection room as if his father had vanished into it. The world now seemed to be a poorer place without father.” (3) In the similar way, for a week more, three hours in a day, Sambu lived in his father’s company, and felt depressed at the end of every show. Every day it was a parting for him. He wished to spend more and more time with his father this way, and ‘longed to sit down and see the night show too, but mother bothered too much about school lessons.” For the innocent boy Sambu, watching father was so important that he feels, “mother did not seem to understand it; lessons could wait, but not father.” (4)

On Sambu’s strong persuasions, his mother agreed to see the picture on the last day. She sat in the women’s class by gathering all the courage she could. But when the picture began, her heart started pounding heavily.

“Her husband talking to his wife on the screen, playing with his child, singing, walking, dressing; same clothes, same voice, same anger, same joy, - she felt that the whole thing was a piece of cruelty inflicted on her. (4) All these were painful for her, but the last scene came as a test of her power of suffering. It was a scene where her husband is reclined in a chair reading a newspaper. In their years of married life, she had frequently quarreled with her husband for absorbing in a newspaper. And even on the last day, he had sat thus after dinner and she had lost temper and said, “You and your newspaper! I could as well go and sleep off the rest of the day,’ and left his company. When she saw him later, he had fallen back in his chair with the sheets of newspapers over his face...” (4) This was an unbearable scene and she becomes faint. There was a burst of sobbing, scramble of feet and a cry heard in the women’s class.

Sambu went to see what happened and saw that his mother was lifted from the floor. He shouted, “That is my mother! Is she also dead?” Someone told him that she had just fainted and nothing had happened to her. After a while, her mother opened her eyes and said to Sambu to go home. Sambu agreed. When they were climbing the stairs, Sambu heard the dialogue by his father for the last time. It makes him burst into tears. “...he was affected both by his mother’s breakdown and by the feeling that this was the final parting from his father. They were changing the picture next day.” (5)

The Emotional Aspects Studied:

In this story, R.K. Narayan has shown a contrast in the reaction of the child and his mother. Seeing his dead father on screen, the son feels thrilled; but the mother feels it unbearable. The implied contrast in the two attitudes indicates that how adults take death and how innocent children take death.

The story shows that children do not understand death as the final loss immediately. It takes time for them to understand this situation. So here, the boy does not understand that his father’s death is the final loss. For him, he would enjoy the company of his father again by watching the movie acted by him. For the entire week he remains happy in his father’s company. It is only at the end of the week when the theatre was changing the movie that he realizes that he has finally lost his father permanently. It is only at this time that he becomes very sad and he can also understand the pain of his mother also.

The third story *The Portrait of a Lady* by Khuswant Singh is about the death of a grandmother in a family. The important thing is that the character sketch of the grandmother is portrayed by the grandchild. This grand-child has observed the grandmother minutely and he artistically portrays her as the one who has become one with nature.

In the beginning he describes her grandmother to be “old and wrinkled for twenty years. People said that she had once been young and pretty and had even had a husband, but that was hard to believe.” (17) According to the child “She could never have been pretty; but she was always beautiful” (16) For the child, an old woman, wrinkled and bent, with silver locks of hair

scattered untidily was beautiful as he describes, “ She was like the winter landscape in the mountains, an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment.” (18)

The child and the grandmother were good friends. The grandmother used to help the grandchild in bathing and dressing up and accompany him to school. She used to sing prayers to him and expected that the child learn them, but the child did not bother to learn them. The grandmother used to accompany the child to the school because the school was attached to the temple. But when the child’s parents settled in the city, the grandmother could not accompany the child to the school. In this way, the first link was broken between the grandchild and the grandmother. But still they shared a room and the grandchild used to share his school learnings with his grandmother. With the passage of time when the child joined the University, he was given a room of his own and thus another common link of friendship was snapped. The grandmother “accepted her seclusion with resignation.” (19)

In her seclusion, she used to spend her time in spinning wheel and reciting prayers. In the afternoon she used to feed sparrows. In this way, she had developed a wonderful friendship with sparrows.

“While she sat in the verandah breaking the bread into little bits, hundreds of little birds collected round her creating a veritable bedlam of chirrupings. Some came and perched on her legs, others on her shoulders. Some sat on her head. She smiled but never shoo’d them away. It used to be the happiest half-hour of the day for her.” (19)

One day, the grandchild decided to go abroad for further studies. He was sure that his grandmother would be upset and indeed she was, but while leaving him at the station, she did not show any emotion. Her lips moved in prayers. And when after completion of his studies, when he returned, he found her grandmother unchanged.

One day she was taken seriously ill and while telling her beads and praying she peacefully died in her bed. When her body was laid in the verandah, where she used to feed the sparrows, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor, as if they had come to say final goodbye to the grandmother.

The Emotional Aspects Studied:

This story presents the memories of grandmother of a person since childhood. The descriptions that “People said that she had once been young and pretty and had even had a husband, but that was hard to believe” (17) and “As for my grandmother being young and pretty, the thought was almost revolting” (17) show that for the grand-child it is almost impossible to imagine other picture of the grandmother than the present one. For the grandchild the grandmother cannot be pretty but she is beautiful.

The grandchild exactly identifies his gradual separation from his grandmother. This shows that he is emotionally attached with his grandmother and feels pain while separating from her. This grand-child has observed the grandmother minutely and when she dies, the grandchild can artistically portrays her as the one who became one with nature.

Conclusion:

All the three short stories describe the emotions of children. They reflect how children feel when their near and dear ones pass away. The stories studied here show that children take the reality of death differently. For them it takes time to erase the memory of their loved ones. Unlike elders who feel pain when reminded of the dead immediately after the loss, children wish to remain in the company of their loved ones in any form, either in their imagination or memory or in films or any other form.

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