

SHORT STORIES

THE EXERCISE BOOK

Rabindranath Tagore



Little Uma was considered a troublesome person by her family when she started learning how to write. She scribbled on every wall of the house with a piece of coal words from a Bengali nursery rhyme. Finding a copy of the novel Haridas's Secrets, she wrote a phrase "Black water, red flower" on every page. She wrote on the pages of the family almanac, as well as in her father's account book.

Initially, she was not scolded or checked for writing here-and-there. But one day Uma made the mistake of writing on her brother Gobindlal's essays. Gobindlal used to frequently write for newspapers.

Though he did not appear to be capable of deep thought, nor did he use much logic in his writing, nevertheless, using the power of rhetoric, he often wrote and published.

Uma's brother was beside himself with rage. He beat her and then took away from her writing tools. Deeply hurt and humiliated, Uma wept and rightly felt that the punishment she received was much more than she deserved.

After a period of time, Gobindlal returned her writing tools and also gifted her Exercise Book. From that day, this exercise book assumed great importance in Uma's life. Many of her individual thoughts, lines from poems and prose found a place in this exercise book.

Very soon however, such opportunities for reading, writing and quietly expressing herself came to an abrupt end when Uma was married off at the tender age of nine to Pyarimohan, a friend and literary associate of her brother. Child marriage was a prominent social evil of the times. The parting advice that Uma received from her mother and brother was to refrain from reading and writing. Such statements point to a clear gender bias in society at the turn of the nineteenth century in India, when literacy in females was considered an offence. The child-bride's heart was full of fear and misgivings as she left her parent's house. Her trusted servant Jashi accompanied her to her in-laws house, and stayed there for a few days to settle Uma in a new environment. The day Jashi returned to Uma's parents' house, Uma shut the door of her room and poured out her heart in her previous exercise book: "Jashi has gone home, I want to go back to mother too." This little act reveals several facets of the girl-child's plight—shutting the door shows how much a simple act of literacy was forbidden for girls, that is why she had to write secretly. Also, her longing to go back to her parents as soon as her servant went back, shows how

little emotionally and psychologically prepared was this child for marriage. Through such a presentation of a child-bride's point of view, Tagore exposes the social evil of child-marriage and holds it up for social scrutiny and reform.

Her heart-rending outpourings in the exercise-book, such as, "If Dada comes to take me home just once, I will never spoil his writings again", "Dada, I beg of you, take me home just once, I'll never make you angry again", demonstrate the child's deep longing for her parents as well as for her parental home, and the curtailment of the child's freedom and basic human rights.

Writing the exercise book became a source of creative self-expression for Uma. Being literate was virtually a taboo for women in those days. One-day Uma's three sisters-in-law observed her through a crack in the door when she was writing. Reading and writing amongst women was so frowned upon at the turn of the nineteenth century in India that the writer ironically comments, "The goddess of learning Saraswati, had never made even so secret a visit to the women's quarters of their house." Uma's husband was duly informed about her "misdeed". Pyare Mohan, the typical male chauvinist, was very disturbed to know what had happened. He believed in the viewpoint that education was solely the prerogative of the male sex.

After the scolding and mockery she received from her husband, Uma did not write in her exercise book for a long time. However, one autumn morning, when she heard a beggar woman singing an "Agamani" song, the homesick little girl was so emotionally moved that she could not restrain herself from writing. According to Hindu mythology, goddess Durga visits her parental home once during autumn. A traditional Bengali song called "Agamani" is sung to welcome her. Uma identified her longing to be with her mother with the goddess Uma's (another name of goddess Durga) reunion with her mother. Calling the singer to her room secretly, she wrote down the words of the song in her exercise book. Her sisters-in-law again observed what she was doing through the crack in the door and, despite Uma's pleadings to the contrary, her husband was informed about it. Pyare Mohan took a very serious view of what was regarded as a grave offence by the community. He snatched the exercise book from her and humiliated the little girl by mockingly reading aloud from it while his three sisters laughed.

Subsequently, Uma did not receive her exercise book back. Pyare Mohan too had an exercise book in which he wrote his lopsided views about life. But, says the writer regretfully: “there was no benefactor of human kind to seize that book and destroy it.” In other words, the gender bias against women in society gave men the prerogative to demand and snatch away a woman’s writing (which was a mode of intelligent self-expression). But there was nobody to snatch and destroy a man’s writings, which may be full of nonsense and prejudices. Rabindranath Tagore strongly felt the need for social reforms, particularly in the areas of education, gender equality and child marriage. The short story exposes inequality between men and women in pre-independent India. Women were denied education and treated as being intellectually inferior to men. They were expected to stay at home and have no say in the outside world.