

Kabuliwala

Rabindranath Tagore
Translated by Mohammad A. Quayum

My five-year old daughter Mini is a chatty girl and likes to talk all day long. It took her about a year after being born to acquire the talent for language, and since then she has not wasted a single wakeful moment of her life remaining silent. Often her mother chides her to keep quiet, but I can never do that. Seeing the girl mute even for an instant seems so odd and unusual to me that I find it unbearable. That's why my conversation with Mini is often feisty.

One morning as I had just started writing the seventeenth chapter of my novel, Mini walked into the room and began, 'Dad, our sentry Ramdayal doesn't even know how to pronounce the word "crow." He is so backward.'

Before I could begin to enlighten her on the differences between languages, she launched into another topic. 'See, Dad, Bhola was saying that when elephants lift water with their trunks and spray it from the sky, it rains. Dear, oh dear! Bhola can speak such nonsense. He can rant day and night, without making any sense!'

Without waiting for my opinion on it, she asked me out of the blue, 'Dad, who is Mum to you?'

Sister-in-law, I thought to myself, but to Mini I replied, avoiding the complicated question, 'You go and play with Bhola. I have some work now.' At this, she flopped beside the writing table, close to my feet, and began to play a game of knick-knack with her hands and knees, rapidly chanting a nursery rhyme. In the seventeenth chapter of my novel, Pratap Singh was jumping off the high balcony of the jailhouse at this time, with Kanchanmala, into the river below in the dark of night.

Stopping her game abruptly, Mini ran to the window which overlooked the main road, and began calling out at the top of her voice, 'Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala!'

A tall, shabbily clothed Afghan street vender, with a turban on his head, a bag over his shoulder and a few boxes of dry grapes in his hands was passing through the street slowly. I have no idea what flashed through my daughter's mind at the sight of this man, but the moment she saw him she began yelling. I thought, this nuisance with a sack over his shoulder will show up in a moment and I won't be able to finish writing the seventeenth chapter of my novel.

But the moment the Kabuliwala, at hearing Mini's call, turned around with a smile and approached the house, she dashed inside and couldn't be found anywhere. She had this childish fear that if someone looked through the bag of this Afghan man, several living children like herself would be found in there.

Meanwhile, the Kabuliwala stepped into the compound and stood at the door with a smile and an Islamic salute. I thought, although the characters in my novel, Pratap Singh and Kanchanmala were in dire straits, it would be unseemly to call the man all the way to the house and not buy anything.

I bought a few items and soon I was involved in a rambling conversation with him on various topics including Abdur Rahman, the Emir of Afghanistan, and the Frontier Policy of the Russians and the British.

Finally, as he was about to leave the house, he asked, 'Sir, where is your little girl?'

To break Mini's unfounded fear, I called her from inside the house. She came and stood nervously, pressing against my body, and looking suspiciously at the Kabuliwala and his bag. The Kabuliwala took out some raisins and apricots from inside the bag and gave it to Mini, but she refused to take them and remained pressed against my knees with a redoubled suspicion. That was how their first meeting ended.

A few days later, as I was leaving the house in the morning for some important work, I saw my tiny daughter sitting on the bench next to the door and speaking non-stop with the Kabuliwala, who was parked next to her feet and listening to her with a grin and interjecting now and then in broken Bengali to give his opinion. In her short five-year life, Mini had never found a more intent listener before other than her father. I also noticed that she had lots of nuts and raisins tied up at the loose end of her small sari. Upon discovering this, I asked the Kabuliwala, 'Why did you give all these to her? Please don't do it again.' With that, I took out a half-a-rupee coin and gave it to him. The Kabuliwala took the money without any hesitation and put it in his bag.

On returning home, I found that a full-scale row had broken out over the coin.

Holding the white, round, shining piece of metal in her hand, Mini's mother asked her in a rebuking tone, 'Where did you get the coin?'

Mini replied, 'The Kabuliwala gave it to me.'

Her mother chided, 'Why did you take it from him?'

Mini answered sobbingly, 'I didn't ask for it. He gave it on his own.'

I stepped in to rescue Mini and took her out for a walk.

I learnt that this was not her second meeting with the Kabuliwala. He had been visiting Mini almost daily, and by offering her pistachio nuts he had already won a large part of the girl's childish heart.

The two friends had a few stock phrases and jokes which were repeated in their conversations. For example, the moment she saw Rahamat, my daughter would ask with a hearty laugh, 'Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala, what is in your sack?'

Adding an unnecessary nasal tone to the word, Rahamat would roar, 'Hanti.'

The essence of the joke was that the man had an elephant in his sack. Not that the joke was very witty, but it caused the two friends to double up in laughter, and the sight of that innocent joy between a little girl and a grown man on autumn mornings used to move me deeply.

Another routine exchange between the two was, whenever they met, Rahamat would tell the girl in his characteristic thick accent, 'Missy, you should never go to the in-laws'.'

Bengali girls were commonly familiar with the term 'in-laws' practically since birth. But being more modern, we chose not to load our daughter's mind with precocious thoughts at such a tender age. That was why Mini could never fully understand Rahamat's advice. But to keep quiet and not respond to a statement was contrary to Mini's nature. Therefore, turning the phrase into a question, she would ask, 'Will you go to your in-laws?'

Making a huge fist with his hand, Rahamat would pretend to punch at his imaginary in-law and say, 'I'll wallop my in-law.'

Thinking of the plight of the unknown creature called father-in-law, Mini would explode into laughter.

It was still early autumn – that time of year when kings in ancient days used to go out on conquest. Personally, I have never been away from Kolkata which is why my mind always wanders around the world. I am like an exile in my own home as my mind constantly likes to travel to other places. The moment I hear the name of a foreign country, my mind longs to visit that unknown place. Likewise, the sight of an alien person brings to mind the image of a lonely hut beside a river in the midst of a forest, and I begin to imagine an autonomous, exultant way of life.

Yet I am so dull and inert that every time I think of travelling out of my little world, I panic. That's why I used to mitigate my desire for travelling a little by talking to this man from Kabul in the morning, sitting in front of my writing table in my little room. The Kabuliwala blared out stories of his homeland in his broken Bengali and I fancied it all before my eyes: tall, rugged, impassable mountains on two sides, red-hot with torrid heat, and a caravan moving through the narrow, dusty passageway in between; turbaned traders and travellers passing by, some on camel back, others on foot; some carrying spears, and others outdated flint-stone guns.

Mini's mother is naturally a timid person. Whenever she hears a slight noise from the street, she thinks all the tiplers of the world are rushing together towards our house. After living for so many years in this world (though not many), she has still not been able to temper her fear that the world is full of all kinds of horrors: thieves, robbers, drunkards, snakes, tigers, malaria, cockroaches and European soldiers.

She was not free of suspicion about the Kabuliwala, Rahamat, and nagged me to keep a watchful eye on him. Whenever I sought to make light of her suspicions, she asked me a few pointed questions: 'Are there no such instances of child abduction? Isn't slave-trade still in practice in Afghanistan? Is it altogether impossible for a giant Afghan to kidnap a little child?'

I had to agree that those were not impossible, but were improbable. However, not everyone has the same capacity for trust, so my wife remained suspicious of the man. But I couldn't stop Rahamat from visiting the house either because he had done nothing wrong.

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Every year, in January or February, Rahamat would go back to his home country to visit his family. A money-lender, he was unusually busy during this period collecting dues from his clients before the trip. He had to rush from house to house to raise the collectibles, and yet he found time to visit Mini. It appeared as if the two were involved in a mischievous plot. The day he couldn't come in the morning, he came in the evening. To see that huge Afghan sitting in the corner of the house in the dark of evening in his baggy clothes and customary sack would create a sudden fear in my mind. But the moment I saw Mini rushing out of the house and greeting her friend, 'Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala,' and the chums of incompatible years engaging in their familiar bantering and innocent laughter, my heart would fill with delight.

One morning I was sitting in my room and reading some proofs. It was the end of winter, but for the last few days, before the season came to a close, the temperature was freezing and almost unbearable. I was enjoying the warmth of a strip of morning sun that had alighted on my feet under the table, travelling through the glass window.

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It was about eight o'clock, and most of the early risers had finished their morning walk with their necks wrapped in scarves and returned home. Just then, I heard some commotion in the street.

Looking out, I saw our Rahamat in handcuffs, escorted by two policemen, with a whole host of street urchins trailing after them. There were marks of blood on Rahamat's clothes and a policeman was carrying a blood-stained knife. I stepped out and accosted the policemen, demanding to know what was going on.

Putting together details from Rahamat as well as the policemen, I understood that one of our neighbours was indebted to Rahamat for a Rampuri shawl and when the man denied his debt, an argument broke out between them. In the heat of the argument Rahamat took out a knife and stabbed the man.

Rahamat was in the midst of hurling abuse in obscene language at the dishonest man when Mini came running out of the house, shouting, 'Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala.'

In a flash, Rahamat's face was filled with expressions of happiness. Since he didn't have the sling bag over his shoulder that day, their usual exchange on the subject could not take place. So Mini asked him straight off, 'Will you be going to your in-laws' house?'

'That's exactly where I am going,' Rahamat replied with a laugh.

When he noticed that Mini did not find the answer quite amusing, he pointed to his hands and added in his heavily accented, patchy Bengali, 'I would have beaten up the in-law. But what can I do, my hands are tied up.'

Charged with grievous injury, Rahamat was sent to jail for several years.

We almost forgot about him. Living our days through our daily routines in the security of our home, it never occurred to us once how this free-spirited man from the mountains was spending his years within the secluded walls of the jail.

And the way Mini's inconstant little heart behaved was embarrassing even to her father. She easily forgot her old friend and found a new one in Nabi, the syce. Then, as she continued to grow up, she replaced all her elderly male friends, one after another, with girls of her own age. She was hardly to be seen in her father's studio. In a way, I had almost ended all friendship with her.

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Several years passed. It was Autumn again. Mini's wedding match had been fixed. She was to get married during the *puja* holidays. This event will take the joy of our household to her in-laws' house, leaving us in darkness.

It was a sunny, resplendent morning. The rain-washed sun of early autumn took the hue of pure gold. Its brilliance made even the dingy, rundown brick houses in the inner lanes of Kolkata look beautiful. The wedding music had started playing in the house since dawn. Each note of that music seemed to come right from my rib-cage in a sobbing tune and spread the sorrow of an impending farewell to the world, mixing itself with the radiant shafts of the autumnal sun. My Mini was to get married that day.

There was a lot of hubbub in the house since visitors were continually loitering in and out. A tent was being put up on bamboo poles in the courtyard of the house, and the chimes of chandeliers being rigged in the portico of every room filled the air. There was no end to the rumpus.

I was going through the wedding accounts in my study, when suddenly Rahamat walked into the room and stood before me with a *salaam*.

At first I couldn't recognise him. He didn't have that customary sack with him, or the long hair and his burly look. Finally, I recognised him through his smile.

I asked him, 'Hello, Rahamat, how long have you been back?'

'I was released from jail last evening,' he replied.

The words gave me a sudden jolt. I had never seen a homicide before, so my heart flinched at the sight of the man. I wished he would leave the house immediately on this auspicious day.

I said, 'We have a wedding in the house today, and I am quite busy. It is better for you to go now.'

At that, he began to leave the house, but as he reached the door, he turned back in hesitation and asked in a faltering tone, 'Can't I see the girl for a moment?'

Perhaps he was convinced that Mini was still the same little girl and would come out of the house running to greet him, 'Kabuliwala, O Kabuliwala,' as in the past. Their happy, playful relationship of old had remained unchanged. Remembering their past friendship, he had even brought a box of grapes and a few raisins wrapped in a packet, which he must have borrowed from some Afghan friend because his own customary sack was not there with him.

I said once again, 'There is a festivity in the house today. It won't be possible to see anyone at this time.'

He looked a little hurt by the statement and stood stupefied for a time, gazing at me with a fixed look. Then he walked out of the room abruptly with a simple 'bye.'

I felt remorseful and thought I should call him back, but right then I saw him turning around.

Standing close to me, he said, 'I brought these grapes and raisins for the little girl, hope you don't mind giving it to her.'

I took the fruits from him and was about to pay some money when he grabbed me by the hand and said, 'You're a generous man, Sir, and I'll never forget your kindness, but please don't pay me for these fruits. Just as you have a daughter, I too have one back home. It is remembering her face that I bring these gifts for your child. I don't come here for business.'

With that, he shoved his hand inside his huge baggy shirt and brought out a grimy piece of paper from somewhere close to his chest. Unfolding it very carefully, he laid the paper open on the table.

I could see the impression of a very small hand on it; not a photograph, not a painting, but the trace of a tiny hand created with burnt charcoal daubed on the palm. Every year Rahamat came to peddle merchandise on the streets of Kolkata carrying that memorabilia of his daughter in his pocket, as if the soft touch of that little hand kept his huge, lonely heart fed with love and happiness.

My eyes filled with tears at the sight of that piece of paper. It no longer mattered to me that he was an ordinary fruit-peddler from Kabul and I belonged to an aristocratic Bengali family. In a moment I realised that we were both just the same – he was a father and so was I. The print of his mountain-dwelling daughter's hand reminded me of my own Mini. I sent word for her to come out to the study immediately. Many of the women objected, but I paid no heed. In her bridal dress and ceremonial makeup, Mini came out from the inner quarters and stood beside me coyly.

The Kabuliwala saw Mini and became confused; their good-natured humour of old also didn't work out. In the end, with a smile, he asked, 'Girl, are you going to the in-law's house?'

Mini now understood what 'in-law' meant. So she couldn't answer the way she did in the past. Rather, hearing the question from Rahamat, her face became purple in shame and she abruptly turned around and left. This brought back memories of their first meeting and I felt an ache in my heart.

Soon after Mini left, Rahamat slouched on the floor with a long, deep sigh. It became obvious to him that his own daughter had grown up as well and he would have to get to know her all over again. She would not be the same girl he had left behind. He was not even sure what might have happened to her in the past eight years. The wedding music continued to play softly in the courtyard on that autumnal sunny morning, and sitting there on the floor of my house in an alley in Kolkata, Rahamat continued to envision the images of the arid, hilly terrains of Afghanistan.

I took out some money and gave it to him. 'You go back to your daughter in Afghanistan, Rahamat, and may the happiness of your union bring blessings for my Mini too,' I said.

I had to cut out one or two items from the éclat of the festivities for gifting that money. For example, the lighting decoration was not as gorgeous as I had wanted it to be, and the band party had to be cancelled. This upset the women, but buoyed by a benevolent spirit, my auspicious ceremony became more luminous.