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The Notebook

English Translation of Rabindranath Tagore's Short Story *Khata*

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Ever since she learned to write, Uma started great trouble. On the walls of each room of the house with the help of a piece of coal she continuously wrote in curved lines—*jal pare, pata nare* (leaves nod as water drops).

There was 'Haridas's Secret' under the pillow of her sister-in-law, she found it out and with a pencil wrote on its every page—black water, red flower.

From the ever-useful new almanac she almost abolished most of the star-signs with large letters.

In her father's daily-account-book in the middle of debits and credits she wrote—*whoever studies hard gets a car to ride in future.*

In this type of literary pursuit she did not get any resistance, however, one day a serious mishap happened.

Uma's elder brother Gobindalal looked very innocent, but he regularly writes in the newspapers. Listening to his words, his relatives or his familiar neighbours never doubted him as a thinker.

Some grave errors about physiology were prevailing among the European scientists, which Gobindalal refuted forcefully without taking any aid of reason and only with the influence of language composed a dainty essay.

One day in a desolate afternoon Uma, taking her elder brother's pen and ink, wrote on that essay big and bold—*Gopal is a very good boy, whatever is given to him, he eats.*

I don't believe that by the name Gopal she especially aimed the readers of Gobindalal's essay, but her elder brother's anger knew no bound. First, he beat her; at last he snatched away an outstanding portion of her pencil, a blunt pen smeared with ink, her very little instrument of writing kept with utmost care. The defamed girl, not wholly understanding the reason of the great reprimand so far, continued crying in a corner of the room with a grief-stricken-heart.

The span of disciplining being over Gobindalal with a bit of penitence in his heart returned Uma her things, and moreover, tried to console her pain by giving a well-bound notebook with lines drawn on the pages.

Uma was of seven years then. From now on this notebook stayed under Uma's pillow at night and during daytime always in her lap.

Tying the little braid, taking the maid along with herself, when she used to go to the girls' school in the village, the notebook used to accompany her. Noticing that some of the girls felt wonder, some felt greed, some even felt jealous.

On the first year she wrote with much care—*pakhi sab kare rab, rati pohailo* (all the birds chirp, the night is over). Sitting on the bedroom clutching the notebook she used to read aloud rhythmically and write. In this way many prose pieces and poems were collected.

On the second year sometimes one or two original compositions came to be seen; very short but very serious—no introduction, no conclusion.

In the notebook where the story of the tiger and the egret from the *Kathamala* is copied, at a place below that a line was seen, which was never seen before in the *Kathamala* or anywhere in contemporary Bengali literature. The line went like this—I love Jashi very much.

Readers please don't think that I am here to pen a love story. Jashi is not an eleven or twelve-year-old local boy. But an old maid of the house, her real name is Jashoda.

However, this one line is no sound evidence of what the girl's real feeling for Jashi is. One who wishes to write a reliable history on this subject would find a strong protest of the aforesaid word just after two pages.

Not one or two like this, at every step in Uma's composition this flaw of self-contradiction is found. At a place it is observed—friendship with Hari is terminated once and for all. (It is not Haricharan, but Haridasi, a fellow student of her school.) Not at a great distance from this there is such a word from which it is easily believed that there is no other friend of hers in the whole universe.

The next year when the girl is nine, one day at her home the hymeneal music started to play from the morning. Uma's wedding. The bridegroom's name is Piyarimohan, Gobindalal's associate author. Albeit his age is not much and he also studied a little, new liberal ideas did not at all enter his mind. For this, people of the locality valued him wholeheartedly and Gobindalal tried to imitate him, but could not be totally successful.

Wearing a Benarasi sari, covering her little face in the veil and crying, Uma went to her in-laws' house. Her mother said, "My child, respect your mother-in-law's words, perform the household duties, don't spend time in studies."

Gobindalal told her, "Look, don't scratch on the walls there; not in a house like that. And, do not ever scribble on any of Piyarimohan's writings."

Palpitation started in the girl. Then she understood that nobody would forgive her there where she was going; and that she has to learn through a long period, after many rebukes, what they call a vice, a crime, or a shortcoming.

The wedding music played also on that morning. But, it is doubtful whether there was anybody in that crowd who would properly understand what went on in the pounding heart of the little girl decorated with that veil and the Benarasi sari and ornaments.

Jashi also went with Uma. It was fixed that she would return after staying a few days there to settle Uma at her in-laws' house.

The affectionate Jashi took Uma's notebook along with them after much consideration. This notebook is a part of her father's house, a memento of her momentary stay at her birthplace; a short history of her parents' love-nest, written in a very crooked immature letters. A taste of the affectionate sweet liberty of the girliness in her untimely housewifery.

In the first few days after going to her in-laws' house she did not write anything; in fact, did not get time. At last after a few days Jashi went back to her old place.

That day Uma, closing the doors of her bedroom in the afternoon taking the notebook out of her tin-box, wrote while crying—Jashi has gone home, I too shall go to my mother.

These days there is no time to copy from *Charupath* or *Bodhodaya*, it seems that she does not even wish so. Hence these days there is no long gap between the girl's short compositions. Just after the aforesaid line it is seen written—if my elder brother once takes me home I shall never spoil his writings.

Uma's father often tried to bring Uma home. But, Gobindalal, united with Pyarimohan, became an impediment to that.

Gobindalal said that it is time of Uma's learning of devotion towards her husband, now and if she is often brought from her husband's house to her old affection of her father's home, her mind would unnecessarily be diverted. On this subject she wrote such a beautiful essay filled with advice and mockery, that all his similarly opinionated readers could not but acknowledge the irrefutable truth of that essay.

Hearing this from others, Uma wrote on her notebook—brother, I beg of you, take me home once, I shall never irritate you.

One day closing the doors Uma was writing such a meaningless word in her notebook. Her sister-in-law Tilakmanjari had great curiosity; she thought she had to know what Uma often does after closing the doors. Through a hole of the door she found her writing. She was astonished by seeing that. Never was there a secret arrival of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, in their zenana.

Her younger sister Kanakmanjari, she also came and peeped once.

Her younger sister Anangamanjari, she also penetrated the mystery of the closed door through the hole, standing on her toes and taking great trouble.

While writing, Uma suddenly heard the sound of giggling of three known voices. She understood the matter, and hurriedly keeping the notebook in the box she hid her face on the bed in shame and fear.

Piyarimohan became very worried with this news. If academic education starts there would be an import of plays and novels, and it would be tough to protect the sanctity of family life.

Apart from that, by special thinking he had discovered a very subtle theory on this. He used to say, nuptial power is born out of the union of the two forces of feminine power and

masculine power; but by study and learning, if the feminine power in the bride is defeated and downright masculine power appears, then in the clash of one masculine power with another one, such a destructive force is originated by which the nuptial power gets dissolved in an extinction-force; hence, the woman becomes widow. Till date no one has protested against this theory.

In the evening Piyarimohan came to the room and sufficiently rebuked Uma and mocked her too; he said, “Uniforms are to be ordered, the housewife would go to office with the pen inserted on her ear.”

Uma did not understand this well. She never read Piyarimohan’s essay, her sense of humour did not grow up to that extent. However, she was thoroughly reduced in her mind; she thought if the earth divides into two she would defend her shame.

For a long time she did not write any more. But, one autumn morning a beggar-maid was singing an *Agamani* song. Putting her face on the bars of the window Uma was listening to that. On one hand, in the autumn sun all things of the childhood days are remembered; moreover, she could not resist herself by listening the *Agamani* song.²

Uma could not sing; but no sooner than she learnt to write she has had such a habit, that she compensated her deficiency of not being able to sing by copying the song whenever she heard it. Today the indigent woman was singing—

The townsmen say, O mother of Uma
Yond comes back your lost star.
Maddened by this the Queen hurries—
Where is Uma, say, where.
Crying the Queen says, my Uma comes—
Come my child, come once,
Come once my child, let me take you in my lap.
Spreading her hands promptly, embracing her mother
The touchy girl weeps to the Queen—
Why? Did you bring me as your daughter?

Uma’s heart was filled with hurt feelings and her eyes were filled with tears. Secretly summoning the singer and closing the door she started to copy the song with strange spellings.

Tilakmanjari, Kanakmanjari and Anagamanjari saw everything through that hole, and then clapping suddenly they said, “Sister-in-law, we have seen all what you are doing.”

Uma hurriedly opened the door and prayed in a poor voice, “My good sisters, please don’t tell anybody dear, I beg of you—I shall never do it, I shall never write.”

At last Uma saw, Tilakmanjari was noticing her notebook. Then she ran and clasped the notebook to her chest. The sisters-in-law tried to snatch it forcefully: being unsuccessful, Ananga called their elder brother.

Piyarimohan came and sullenly sat on the bed. With a voice resembling the rumble of clouds, he said, “Give me the notebook.” Finding that his command was not complied he lowered his voice a little and said, “Give it.”

Keeping the notebook on her chest the poor girl looked at her husband's face with downright humble entreaties. When she saw that Piyarimohan has got up to seize the notebook by force, she threw it on the floor and covering her face with two hands fell on the ground.

Taking the notebook Piyarimohan started to read aloud the girl's writings; hearing that, Uma deeply embraced the earth again and again; and the other three girl-listeners became restless in boundless giggles.

Since then Uma never got her notebook again.

Piyarimohan also had a notebook of various essays full of thorny subtle theories; but there was no such benefactor of mankind who would snatch away and destroy that notebook.

Notes:

1. The Bengali short story is taken from Rabindranath Tagore's *Galpaguchcha* (Collection of Stories) published by Visva-Bharati Granthan Bibhag, Kolkata (2010).

2. *Agamani* is any of the songs about the coming of Uma (i.e. Goddess Durga), Shiva's wife, to her father's house as told in the Hindu legend. In Bengal it is generally sung by Bauls with the approach of the autumn season as the festival of Durgapuja is held in this period. *Agamani* literally means coming or arrival.