

THE BROKEN NEST

Rabindranath Tagore

(1901)

Story

Tagore begins this novella by introducing Bhupati, the main male character. He is wealthy, English-educated and passionate about his journalism. Unfortunately, he has neglected his young wife, Charulata, who is deeply interested in reading and writing. In order to give her some company, since they had no children, Bhupati arranges for his brother-in-law (Charulata's brother), Umapada, to bring his wife, Mandakini (or Manda) to live with them. Another key character is Amal, who is Bhupati's cousin. Amal is a third-year student at university who becomes a sort of informal tutor to Charulata. Their intimacy grows through a series of innocent incidents. First, Amal asks Charulata to sew him a special pair of shoes, or woollen slippers because Amal is jealous of a fellow-student who comes to university wearing these special shoes. At first Charulata says no because she doesn't know how, but then she manages to make them and presents them to him in a mock grand event. Next, they plant a tree together in the inner courtyard of the house and then expand their plans to encompass a whole garden, full of spices and plants. Amal and Charulata also enjoy listening to music in the house, which again creates a rapport between them. This is followed by Amal sharing his writing with Charulata, which becomes more and more intimate.

Amal becomes a popular author, while Bhupati and Umapada are faced with financial losses in their newspaper business. Slowly, it emerges that the losses are caused by Umapada embezzling the funds. Umapada has run off, and when Bhupati reveals these secrets to Amal, he tells him not to tell Charulata about her brother's misdeeds. Hearing all this, Amal is shaken and realises that he has become closer to Charulata than is appropriate. The only solution he sees is to go away from the house and from her, which hurts and confuses Charulata. She pleads with him not to leave, but he does. Meanwhile, Bhupati continues to pursue his journalism goals, thinking he is supported by Charulata. But when he sees how heartbroken she is at Amal's departure, he realises what has taken place between them. Bhupati tries to comfort her by sharing writing and music with her, but his attempts to recreate what Amal shared with her fail. In the sad ending, Bhupati decides to leave Calcutta and accept a job far away in south India. He tries to convince Charulata to come with him, but she stays and they part forever.

Themes

Tradition and modernity As was typical of nearly all late nineteenth-century Indian literature, and especially the Bengali novel, the predominant theme in this story is the conflict between tradition and modernity. This was the overwhelming social, cultural and political issue of the day, so it is hardly surprising that it also dominated fiction. The particular genius of this novella, however, is that this conflict is dramatised in terms of the literary tastes of the characters. The three main characters—Bhupati, Amal and Charulata—live as an extended family in a house that has been inherited and by means of an income that has also been inherited. This, then, is a traditional set-up. The characters and the means of their livelihood represent the *bhadralok*, that is, the privileged, middle-class and English-educated society. Within this trio of characters, however, lurk deep divisions. Bhupati is the Anglophile, who writes essays and publishes a newspaper in English, and has little appreciation for the 'flowery' tradition of Bengali literature, that is, the poetry and epics that dominated Bengali writing prior to the late 19th century. Amal, the young student and cousin, wants to revive this tradition of writing but fails and thereafter looks to European classics as a model for his own compositions. Then there is Charulata, the neglected wife, who is confined to the domestic space, and whose writing has an authenticity that the others lack. She struggles to find and then to appreciate her 'own voice,' although others praise it as carrying a conviction of 'true life'. This intense and conflicting set of literary tastes is a microcosm of the more widespread dynamic that was reshaping Bengali (and Indian) culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. The three characters attempt but

ultimately fail to find an accommodation of their 'literary voices', just as the new English-educated elite tried but did not succeed in forging a culture that retained tradition within the unstoppable progress of modernity.

Illicit love A second, and equally powerful, theme in this novella is that of illicit love, or the shades of love that might transgress social norms. Again, this theme was very common in novels written at the time, in all Indian languages, including English, and it only reflects the contemporaneous debate on the issue in the public sphere. As social critics of the time explained, Tagore's story dramatises the potential for extra-marital love inherent in a joint-family household, where unmarried but closely related men and women, or men and women united only as in-laws, lived in close proximity. In our case, it is Charulata and Amal who fall into this trap. Both (unlike Bhupati) are artistically inclined. They love music, they appreciate poetry and they delight in the natural world. Ironically, it is workaholic Bhupati who brings them together, when he naively asks Amal to keep his bored wife company. Charulata finds inspiration and admiration in Amal's aesthetic response to the world and to her own burgeoning literary talent. They read poetry aloud to each other and revel in the emotions and passions expressed. Slowly, but inexorably, this shared sensibility evolves into shared sensuality, never physical but always personal, nevertheless. The point where this aesthetic bond mutates into love, or romance or sexual desire, is difficult to pinpoint. It is only after it has crossed that line that Amal and later Charulata become aware of that fact. Amal is ashamed, withdraws and finally leaves the house. Charulata, who suffers more, does not repudiate her love. She confesses it to her husband, who then wants to take her away with him, but she refuses and remains on her own. Thus, the novella asks difficult questions. Where does admiration end and desire begin? When does sharing a love for romantic poetry become romance itself? Can love of someone's mind be illicit love?

Characters

Bhupati Bhupati is the wealthy and workaholic husband of Charulata. He dreams of running a radical newspaper and begins one, but the business is ruined by his brother-in-law, Umapada. Having neglected his young wife, he then tries to make amends, but it is too late.

Charulata Charulata is Bhupati's young and very beautiful wife, whose artistic tastes and talents are ignored until her husband's cousin, Amal, comes to live in their house. As they share music, literature and gardening, she becomes emotionally dependent on him (whether she is 'in love' with him is the question at the heart of the novel).

Amal Amal is Bhupati's cousin and a final-year university student, who brings out Charulata's latent talents and love for the arts. When he realises that their 'relationship' has crossed a line, he leaves the house, which leaves her crestfallen.

Umapada Umapada is Charulata's brother, who assists Bhupati in setting up and running a newspaper. He, however, steals money from the business and runs off, leaving the newspaper a financial failure.

Mandakini Mandakini (or Manda) is Umapada's wife, who is originally brought to the house by Bhupati as a companion for his wife, Charulata. She is loyal to the family, unlike her husband, and is shocked at his behaviour.

Bhupati (Preoccupied)

Character A great deal of Bhupati's character is revealed in the opening sentences of the story. Tagore writes, 'Bhupati had inherited a lot of money and generous ancestral property, so it was quite natural if he didn't bother to work at all. By sheer destiny, however, he was born a workaholic. He had founded an elite English newspaper and that was how he decided to cope with the boredom that his riches and time, which were endlessly at his disposal, brought to him.' What is missing in this synopsis is that he is married, to the young, beautiful and talented Charulata, with whom he does not know how to form a deep relationship. He is a kind man and an affectionate husband, who makes no demands on his wife—he's really too busy with his newspaper for that—and that is the problem. His neglect, combined with her loneliness and youth, plus the presence of an equally young and equally artistically inclined male cousin, all add up to the failed marriage that is described in this novella. The

tragedy is all the greater because, apart from his workaholic tendency, Bhupati is a likable character, with no obvious character flaws, none of the pomposity, or the egotism or the pride that afflict so many male protagonists in Indian literature of the time and later. He is dedicated to his work, which might be a vanity project, as he is wealthy anyway, but he is also a sensitive person, who is deeply hurt by betrayal (from his brother-in-law). The only thing he lacks is an aesthetic response to art, which is precisely what his wife and cousin share and what brings them together. This subtle portrayal of Bhupati is a testament to the literary talents of Tagore.

Activities Bhupati spends most of his waking hours working on the newspaper he has founded with his brother-in-law. He edits the articles, commissions stories, writes editorials and agonises over the finances. He buys all the literary and journalistic publications in Bengali and English and reads them conscientiously, looking for information and trends. Only in the evenings does he relax and perhaps listen to his wife read poetry out loud to him.

Illustrative moments

Preoccupied *The Broken Nest* is an examination of the breakdown of a marriage, in which all parties share blame. Bhupati's responsibility for the domestic tragedy lies in his preoccupation with his own plans and work. The opening sentences of this novella are explicit about this characteristic by mentioning that he has inherited great wealth and property and therefore had no need to work. However, the author adds, he was by nature a 'workaholic.' Soon, he is running his own newspaper with his brother-in-law, Umapada, spending day and night in his office, and this is when we understand that he is neglecting his young wife, Charulata. The problem is illustrated in the second chapter, when Charulata comes into his office, sees he is busy and withdraws. She waits for half an hour and enters again, fuming with frustration. 'Still not finished with your work?' she says in a sneering tone. 'I wonder how you spend all your life with this newspaper of yours!' Hearing the tone of her voice, Bhupati smiles to himself and thinks, 'Yes, it's too bad that I can't pay attention to her needs. She is so lonely. Nothing to occupy herself with.' He says something flippant about missing her tutor (Amal, with whom she is slowly developing a romantic attachment, but only because Bhupati is so preoccupied.). However, his attempt at levity, in order to diffuse the tension between them, strikes the wrong note with her and she storms out of the room, more angry than ever. Workaholic Bhupati does not change, and the emotional rapport with his wife, which was never deep, slowly erodes and disappears altogether.

Affectionate Although Bhupati neglects his wife for his work, he is very much in love with her. This age-old contradiction that has ruined so many marriages in world literature is the running sore in Tagore's novella. We know that Bhupati is an affectionate person, toward everyone in the story, but we feel the pain of his affection when it is directed toward his wife, because we know that it is an insufficient display. A good example of this bruised affection occurs when Bhupati comes into Charulata's room just after he has discovered a big hole in the newspaper business's finances. Distraught, he goes to his wife seeking solace from the only person he loves. He goes to her much earlier than is usual—it is only late afternoon and he would typically be hard at work in his office—which surprises her. When he sees her, he himself is taken back by the sadness of her face (because she has had a tiff with Amal). As the author describes the scene, 'No lamp was burning in the room. Bhupati looked at Charu's dim figure in the faint light that streaked through the window near the verandah. He approached and stood behind her. But Charu didn't turn, even after hearing his footsteps.' Alarmed by seeing her so despondent, Bhupati softly strokes her hair and then asks in an affectionate voice, 'Tell me, Charu, what's happened to you. Did I do anything wrong to you? I know I am occupied with the publication of the newspaper. If I did hurt you in any way, please know that I didn't do it wilfully.' When Charulata does not respond, he speaks again, now in tears. 'I am really guilty of staying far away from you, but I promise I will make things better. From now on, I won't remain busy with the newspaper always. You will get as much of my company as you want.' Those promises are sincere but unfortunately are never honoured.

Bereft Bhupati experiences great loss in this short novel, in personal and financial terms. Perhaps the most poignant moment of his loss comes midway through the story. He has just discovered that his brother-in-law, Umapada, has been embezzling funds from the newspaper business and that he faces a mountain of debt with no extra money to pay it off. He then goes to a man to whom he had loaned several thousand rupees not long ago, but that man refuses to remember the transaction and Bhupati leaves empty-handed. As Tagore describes it, 'In Bhupati's eyes, the world outside and its

visage were going through a sudden sea-change. The abrupt unmasking of his familiar world shook, jolted him greatly. Like a terrorised flood victim running to cling to the highest peak to save himself from the water, Bhupati ran towards Charu's room in the inner apartments of the house to hide himself from the dubious outer world. "The world may betray me, but Charu will remain ever-faithful," he thought to himself.' But he finds no solace from his wife either. She is busy writing a short story and hides it from her husband, when he bursts upon her. She is annoyed that the flow of her writing has been disrupted and shows him an unhappy face. This is the final straw in his distress. 'The silence between them in the room grew stronger and crushed them.' Bhupati, the wealthy and ambitious literary man, is now bereft of everything. His business is failing, and he is shut out of his wife's usually caring heart.

Charulata (Confused)

Character Charulata is the emotional core of this beautiful story of frustrated love and remorse. She is a young and beautiful wife, sadly neglected by her otherwise admirable husband. Her interests in poetry and music, which lay dormant for so long, are then awakened by her husband's cousin, Amal, who shares her artistic sensibility. Now, the immature and unformed flower of Charulata's deeper self begins to grow and unfold. She is drawn into a relationship with Amal that, for her, goes beyond friendship and into love. When Amal realises this and withdraws, she is confused and hurt. Charulata is thus a very sympathetic character. Neglected, she finds rapport with a young man, who is innocently enough her husband's cousin. Her literary talents and musical tastes are now appreciated, but the cost for that development is a growing emotional distance from her husband. We watch as the young woman is transformed into a bitter wife, who, when her husband tries to make amends, is too hurt to accept. By the end of the story, she is a sad and lonely person.

Activities Charulata loves to read poetry and fiction, and even more to have it read aloud to her by Amal. She also begins to write her own stories, which she hides and then reveals to Amal. Together, she and Amal also like to listen to classical music played on a new machine, called a gramophone. Charulata spends most of the day inside the house, sometimes tending a little garden she has established in the inner courtyard. She does few domestic chores.

Illustrative moments

Bewildered As she is still a young woman, Charulata does not always understand what goes on around her. People, their words and actions, often leave her bewildered. This is especially true of her relationship with Amal, her husband's cousin, with whom she builds an intimacy based on shared interests in music, literature and the natural world. A good example of her incomprehension of Amal's actions occurs midway through the story. Amal has begun to feel that their rapport has tipped over into romance and he is anxious to halt it. Charulata, on the other hand, feels more and more inspired by Amal to do her own writing, which is itself becoming more and more sensual, although she is unaware of this trend. Amal goes to her room, ready to use harsh words to end their relationship, but on his way he speaks with Bhupati, who tells him of his financial loss, and this softens his heart. When he enters Charulata's room, she is confident that, as usual, he will want to see her writing. She coyly hides it for a second and then whips out from behind her and opens the first page. She is about to speak when she sees that he is looking at her with 'fierce sympathy.' When he suddenly turns and leaves the room, Charulata is dumbfounded, unable to gauge his thoughts. As Tagore describes it, 'She felt like a bewildered traveller trudging the mountains, startled to discover a bottomless pit at the end of the mist, in which she was just about to step her feet. Amal left her room silently, and an astonished Charu could not fathom the significance of such an awkward gesture on his part.' Later, when she discovers that he wishes to leave her and Calcutta altogether, she falls into a depression, but in this earlier moment, we glimpse the beginning of her despair.

Hurt From the very beginning of the novel it is evident that Charulata can be easily hurt. She has little self-confidence, and even when she begins to gain some self-respect through the encouragement by Amal for her writing, she remains fragile. A brilliant illustration of this two-sided emotion—her joy that she is becoming a writer and her susceptibility to pain—occurs in one of the middle chapters. Unbeknownst to her, Amal has taken some of her stories and submitted them to a Bengali literary journal, where they are printed. When her husband, Bhupati, shows her reviews of her stories, which are very positive, she has two reactions. On the one hand, she is overcome with happiness that her talent has been recognised by others. On the other, 'her heart was filled with

unexplained pain.’ The source of her pain is the realisation that Amal has schemed behind her back, taking her writings and getting them published. She is upset that their private world of shared reading and writing had been exposed to the bright glare of the public world. As the author puts it, ‘The little, humble sanctuary of literature, that Charu had built as their own clandestine world, had been shattered by a hailstorm of praises. Charu felt as if an enormous storm had attacked and destroyed that world entirely, and it pained her immensely.’ This is Charulata’s tragedy: she craves appreciation, but her writing is so intimately aligned with her relationship with Amal that she cannot enjoy its public exposure.

Sarcastic Toward the end of the novella, we see that Charulata’s confusion and hurt have bred a sarcasm. This is something we did not anticipate but which makes perfect sense when it does emerge. The best example of Charulata’s hurtful humour comes in a conversation with her husband, Bhupati. He tells her that he has a marriage proposal for Amal, and she replies, ‘Why? Didn’t he like *me* enough?’ This is a daring reply, since both she and Bhupati know that Amal has become too close to her. After more banter, Amal is summoned and told of the proposal. When he accepts without a word of protest, Charulata is amazed and taunts him, ‘Look at the dutiful cousin. He will agree to anything the older man says!’ Amal is silent, but Charulata continues to dig at him. ‘So, you’re eager for marriage! How you hid it so well! What pretence. Hunger in the belly, coyness in the face, isn’t it?’ Again, this hints uncomfortably at their own intimacy. She fires her final barb when they mention that Amal will have to go to London to see the bride. ‘I never knew that you were so eager to escape to the land of the foreigners. Did we treat you so badly here? Are you so dissatisfied with your life here that you will transform yourself into a *sahib* with a coat and a hat? And would you even recognize us poor black souls after returning from London?’ All of this spiteful talk, we readers understand, is the result of Amal’s having distanced himself from Charulata. The liaison between unmarried male and female relatives, so common in the extended family set-up (at least, in literature), is dangerous indeed.

Amal

Character Amal is the young cousin of Bhupati. He is a final-year student at university in Calcutta, where, like Bhupati and Charulata, he is interested in writing poetry and short stories. As a young person inspired by literature, he is something of a romantic, a little pretentious and wholly self-absorbed. At first, his writing shows no promise because it is haphazard and disorganised, but he does become a popular writer, which goes to his head. Amal is said to have a good ‘ear’, however, and is able to discern good writing in others, especially in Charulata, his cousin Bhupati’s wife. He is generally a likable character, who loves music and poetry and loves to share these interests with Charulata. Although he finds joy in the aesthetic experiences he shares with Charulata, he has enough sense to realise that their intimacy is straying close to an illicit love affair. He is also admirable in withdrawing from the relationship, from which he derived so much pleasure, and initiating his painful departure from the house. It would be easy to criticise him for not realising what was going on in the relationship with Charulata, but he is a young man, a student, and passionate about the literary world that also fascinated Charulata. His final departure from the house is also honourable, executed without fanfare or self-pity.

Activities Amal spends most of the day reading poetry and writing verse himself. He likes to share both his books and his writing with Charulata, who also shares his interest in the natural world and music. Amal is often shown in conversation with Charulata, but also with her husband and others in the novel. During these conversations, Amal satisfies his need to chew betel nut, which he meticulously prepares for himself, using special leaves and other ingredients.

Illustrative moments

Self-promoting Amal admires literary talent and desires fame for himself in the burgeoning literary culture of late-nineteenth-century Calcutta. Driven by this ambition, he is a little pretentious and not above promoting himself if possible. A clear demonstration of the self-promotion takes place in an early chapter when he and Charulata are together in her room. Before he went to her, he very carefully placed a copy of a literary journal in his coat pocket, so that it stuck out and she could not miss it. After they sit and talk for a while, he is upset that she has not noticed the journal, so he makes sure that it falls on the floor. She stoops down, picks it up and asks, ‘What is this?’ He says, ‘Oh, nothing, nothing at all.’ He speaks in a mock, teasing voice, which, as intended, draws her

attention. When he finally agrees to tell her, he shows her the copy of a high-quality, Bengali literary journal. Inside, he then points out to her that his essay has been published. Charulata has an intake of breath but keeps silent, as Amal explains that '[t]hey do not publish mediocre writings.' This is not true, as Amal knows that the editor publishes almost everything sent to him that is readable. But Amal goes on to say how tough the editor is, how he carefully selects the best writing from the slush pile on his desk. We do not judge Amal too harshly, though, because his attempt to promote himself is so transparent as to lack any real sinister quality.

Needy Amal's self-promotion also reveals another aspect of his character: his need to be liked and admired. He is ambitious and pretentious, both of which require some confirmation from the outside world. For Amal, that world consists of Charulata, his aesthetic soul-mate. Again, as in the above example, Amal plays a little ruse in order to win Charulata's approval of his literary talent. They are together in the evening, listening to music, having finished their literary discussions. Then Amal discreetly drops a few pieces of paper from his pocket. Charulata sees them and asks to know what it is. When Amal prevaricates, she grows interested, as he knew she would. When he admits, with false modesty, that it is a draft of his new essay, she demands that he read it to her (this has been their habit, to read one's writing aloud to the other). He is desperate to read it to her and to have her appreciate his writing, but he also wants her to beg him to read it. He then ritualistically rearranges the paper, clears his throat and reads it to her. And when she smiles admiringly, he is choked with emotion, so great that he has to stop every few sentences. This scene reveals the depth of Amal's need for admiration, the little scheming plans he lays, the way he draws it out and then the rapture he feels when his writing is admired. His neediness which makes him a little desperate and vulnerable, also makes him sympathetic.

Remorseful Given his sensitive nature, his deep love of art and his even deeper need for admiration, it is not surprising that Amal can feel great remorse, too. That sentiment is the inevitable result, it seems, of the innocent relationship that he forms with Charulata. She herself is lonely and unappreciated, while he craves attention and recognition. Too late, he realises that their intimacy has become, at least for her, a romantic love. His own feelings are more confused, but he is wracked with guilt at having led her, or having letting himself be led, into this bond with his cousin's wife. There is a moment, toward the end of the story, when Amal goes to Bhupati weighed down by a sense of the wrong he has done to him and to his wife. The author describes his mind as 'a tempest of remorse that sweeps him forward, like a prisoner going to the gallows.' When he comes face to face with Bhupati, he shakes with fear and loathing, unable to speak, and waiting for his cousin to condemn him. 'Surely, he must know,' Amal thinks. But Bhupati appears unruffled, which disconcerts Amal even further. Finally, Amal opens his mouth and says something that he had not at all intended to say. 'Dear cousin, do you have any reason, whatsoever, to suspect me of any vice?' Bhupati is surprised to hear this and says, 'Suspect you, of all people?' Then, in that moment, Amal knows that he is free from censure, that his transgression has gone unnoticed by the person it would hurt most. He is relieved, but then, strangely, his remorse is even greater because he receives no pardon and will have to live with the knowledge of his wrongdoing forever.