

The Castaway

-Rabindranath Tagore

'The Castaway' depicts the emotional journey of a young orphan Nilkanta who seeks to win the undivided affection of Kiran, the lady of the house where he sought shelter, soon after his boat foundered in a storm and he swam ashore. As a young actor in a theatrical troupe, he had lived an unsettled life which had not allowed his personality to grow to the fullest. The story beautifully captures the emotional turbulence of the youth, who on encountering warmth, vitality and kindness of Kiran, sees the promise of a new and alluring life before him. The story also reveals the cross-currents between the various members of the household which Nilkanta's presence provokes. The author's skilful description of the upper class Bengali lifestyle of the time and his exploration of an adolescent's psyche make this a very powerful, evocative and moving story.

Kiran was a universal favourite with her family and neighbours and had come to Chandernagore for a change of air, after she had fallen ill. Extremely fond of society and amusement, Kiran wished to escape the loneliness of the riverside villa.

There was no fun in measuring doses and making fomentations.

Sharat, her husband, was on the point of 'surrendering unconditionally' to her whines when the news of Nilkanta's sudden arrival in their garden was announced. Kiran soon found a new occupation and dismissing the thoughts of returning home, she was 'at once her own sweet self', attending to the boy. The boy's narrow escape from a terrible death made Kiran take keen interest in him. Thus N received a warm welcome in the household-Sharat was relieved that he would no longer have to persuade his wife to stay longer & Kiran's mother-in-law was eager to profit by kindly serving a Brahmin guest.

Nilkanta was himself delighted at his double escape from his master and from the other world, as well as finding a home in this wealthy family.

It was generally believed that Kiran indulged Nilkanta and spoiled him. The boy found a secret pleasure in smoking Sharat's hookah, went for a stroll in pouring rain with Sharat's best silk umbrella and with a band of boys, never allowed the mangoes on the trees of the neighbourhood to ripen that season. The mongrel that he petted recklessly followed him into the house and stained Sharat's spotless bed. Undoubtedly, Sharat and his mother soon began to long for his departure.

But Nilkanta was Kiran's favourite and entertained her during the long afternoon hours, reciting pieces out of his repertory. Kiran made a dandy of him with Sharat's cast off clothes and all the warnings of not to spoil the boy fell on deaf ears.

The boy often got his ears boxed or pulled by Sharat, but he was conditioned that

Life was made of eatings and beatings, and that beatings largely predominated;

And didn't take any offense to them. Infact he had suffered greater abuse at the hands of his former master of the theatrical troupe and the hardships he had endured had etched an impression on his appearance.

He was either a man too early or a boy too late.

He looked gaunt, as if his growth had suddenly stopped. In what seemed to be a cruel twist of fate, a thoughtful providence so arranged things that he grew to the exact stature that his manager required, and then growth ceased.

Either because he smoked or because he used language beyond his years, his lips puckered into lines that showed him to be old and hard; but innocence and youth shone in his large eyes.

In Kiran's household, Nilkanta however swiftly shed his adolescence to embrace his youth. Now he was unwilling to wear a women's dress or play the role of a girl as he used to earlier. Naively, he began to fancy himself as a part of Kiran's family; little realizing that he was no more than a temporary guest, still a lad-of-all-work in a strolling company. He desired to pick up a little education from Sharat's factor, but remained grossly unsuccessful at it. However, he enjoyed the glory of holding a book in his hand or reading aloud to an audience.

The songs he used to sing remained only as faint memories stirring in the mind and humming their tunes, he was transported to another world of beauty and glory. In the realms of imagination, his mind sprang free from the bonds of poverty & misery.

However, once the singing ended, the mirage would faint and Nilkanta, the mischief monger would be reprimanded for bringing down the mangoes of the orchards in the neighbourhood. The twist in the story came with Satish's arrival on the scene. Nilkanta's life turned topsy-turvy when Satish, Sharat's younger brother came home to spend his college vacation. As he was of the same age as Kiran,

Time passed pleasantly in games and quarrels and makings-up and laughter and even tears.

Nilkanta was possessed with bitterness, thrashing his devoted boy followers for no fault, littering the path with twigs and leaves beaten from the roadside shrubs, and kicking his pet mongrel till the skies resounded with its whines.

On several occasions, Nilkanta felt neglected and hurt. Having less time on hand, Kiran seldom supervised his meals and she never got to know that Nilkanta would often abandon them. The boy felt that Satish was poisoning Kiran's mind against him. With all the fervour of his hate, he took to praying to gods to make him at the next rebirth Satish and Satish him, convinced as he was that a Brahmin's wrath would never go in vain. Not daring to show his enmity openly to Satish, Nilkanta began to cause him annoyance by creating petty inconveniences for him like taking away his soap without his knowledge when he went for a swim or throwing his favourite tunic into the water and letting it float away. He refused to recite the verses he had learned to entertain Satish too.

Finally the time came for the family to depart. While Satish would accompany them, no one said a word about Nilkanta. Kiran sent for the boy and kindly advised him to go back home, but the pent up feelings of neglect poured out in the form of tears and Satish added insult to injury by commenting sarcastically-

Naturally the tiger has no wish to become a mouse again. And he has evidently discovered that there is nothing like a tear or two to soften your heart.

In a desperate bid to take revenge, Nilkanta stole Satish's favourite inkstand

The inkpod was set in a mother-of-pearl boat drawn by German-silver goose supporting a penholder.

Satish suspected Nilkanta and charged him to bring it back at once, but Nilkanta would not yield. Kiran prevented further interrogation and humiliation of the boy, not allowing his bag to be checked.

However, when Kiran went to keep the parting gifts- two new suits of clothes, a pair of shoes, and a banknote, in Nilkanta's absence, she discovered the inkstand and felt greatly distressed. Nilkanta who observed it all from behind, without her knowledge misunderstood the situation, thinking that Kiran had come to spy on him.

How could he ever hope to convince her that he was not a thief and that only revenge had prompted him to take the inkstand, which he meant to throw into the river at the first chance?

The gaunt young adolescent who had once turned up in the household out of nowhere to find bliss for the first time ever in his life, once again became the abundant, wandering lad. He disappeared the next day.

Kiran stood her stand that his box should not be checked and quietly threw away the inkstand into the river. The whole family left home and Tagore leaves us with the lingering picture of Nilkanta's starving mongrel that seemed to reflect its master's deep agony and helplessness.