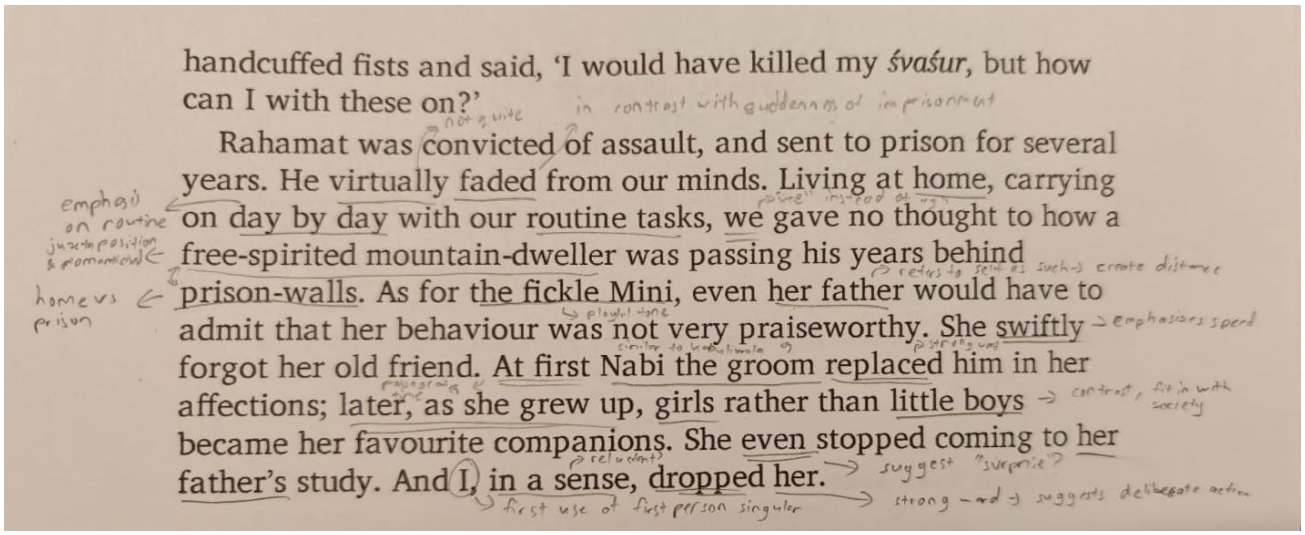
Chosen Excerpt:



handcuffed fists and said, 'I would have killed my *śvaśur*, but how can I with these on?'

Rahamat was convicted of assault, and sent to prison for several years. He virtually faded from our minds. Living at home, carrying on day by day with our routine tasks, we gave no thought to how a free-spirited mountain-dweller was passing his years behind prison-walls. As for the fickle Mini, even her father would have to admit that her behaviour was not very praiseworthy. She swiftly forgot her old friend. At first Nabi the groom replaced him in her affections; later, as she grew up, girls rather than little boys became her favourite companions. She even stopped coming to her father's study. And I, in a sense, dropped her.

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The Unspoken Tragedy of Kabuliwallah

At first, Rabindranath Tagore's "Kabuliwallah" is a series of pushes and pulls as we struggle to decide whether Rahamat is a figure of warmth or danger. He is affectionate to Mini but feared by her mother. He is trusted by the child, but a foreigner to the narrator. This delicate balance collapses in a single moment—his imprisonment. In one instant, the ambiguity surrounding Rahamat is seemingly resolved. The narrator's wife was right. Yet, rather than soothing tensions, this moment drives an irreversible wedge between our three central characters.

The passage that follows compresses years into a single paragraph, as we witness three simultaneous estrangements that mark both an ending and a beginning. The apparent resolution of early tensions about Rahamat's trustworthiness, is simultaneously joined by the setting up of a more personal conflict: the narrator's growing estrangement from his daughter. Mini forgets Rahamat, but she also drifts away from her father, and most notably, she never speaks again for the rest of the story. The narrator too, admits that he has "dropped" his daughter (117). In this essay, I will argue that this passage reveals the story's true conflict—the growing distance between father and daughter—and suggests that the narrator's later act of reuniting Rahamat with his daughter may be understood as an unconscious attempt to grapple with his own estrangement.

Initially, Rahamat's imprisonment seems abrupt, severing his relationship with both Mini and the narrator in a single moment. However, Tagore's language indicates otherwise. Rahamat does not vanish decisively, rather "he virtually [fades] from [their] minds" (117). The diction "virtually faded" combines the tentative "virtually" with the gradual process of fading, suggesting an incomplete, passive forgetting rather than an intentional distancing (117). Tagore reinforces this passivity by drawing our attention to the passing of time. He contrasts how Rahamat "passes his years" in prison, while the family exists in smaller increments, living "day by day" doing non-descript "routine tasks" (117). He repeatedly draws attention to the almost mechanical passage of time experienced by the narrator's

family, emphasising how Rahmat's years of enduring imprisonment is not acknowledged–his absence is simply absorbed into their forgettable routine. The narrator does not recognise Rahamat's fading as it happens, just as he later fails to notice Mini's growing distance. When she eventually stops coming to his study, it is not a sudden betrayal but only the final step in a pattern he was blind to all along.

In contrast to Rahamat, Mini's estrangement from her father is framed not as a sudden break. Instead, her transition from childhood to adulthood is characterised as a series of replacements, each marking her slow assimilation into more structured social expectations. Tagore notes that "at first Nabi the groom replaced him in her affections; later, as she grew up, girls rather than little boys became her favourite companions" (117). The parallel phrasing of "at first" and "later" in the same sentence compresses years into a single breath, depicting how childhood imperceptibly yields to adolescence. The "[replacement]" of Rahamat the Kabuliwallah with Nabi the groom, both members of a lower socioeconomic status that Mini likely encounters only on occasion, suggests that her relationships were initially circumstantial rather than chosen. However, this changes when Mini begins to favour "girls rather than little boys". For the first time, her relationships are shaped by personal preference rather than mere proximity. Yet, it also signals her increasing conformity to gendered expectations that demand a greater separation between men and women. Perhaps, in this time she also grows closer to her mother and the narrator, too, has been replaced. Regardless, the culmination of Mini's growth is given by a single devastating line: "She even stopped coming to her father's study" (117). This is not a passing observation–it is the first time the narrator explicitly acknowledges her absence. The diction "even" suggests that this was a shift that the narrator had not anticipated, distinguishing it from her earlier substitutions. Here, the story comes full circle: the study where Mini was first introduced as an inquisitive, talkative child interrupting her father's work, now becomes the space that confirms her growing distance. Her absence from the study is not merely physical–it symbolises the end of the closeness they once shared.

Both Rahamat's disappearance and Mini's withdrawal follow the same narrative pattern—loss that is recognised only in retrospect. Indeed, for much of the passage, the narrator maintains the distant view of an observer. Yet Tagore's use of pronouns portrays the narrator gradually confronting his own

role in this estrangement. At first, the narrator uses the collective "we" in "we gave no thought," turning his personal lack of attention to a more generalised forgetting. He distances himself again, when he uses the impersonal third person "her father" to refer to himself (117) as he judges Mini's behaviour to be "not praiseworthy." This distancing is especially ironic, as Mini's fading affections for the Kabuliwallah mirror the narrator's own quiet withdrawal from her. The passage culminates in a moment of realisation with an abrupt, jarring shift to the first-person singular: "And I, in a sense, dropped her" (117). In doing so, the narrator concedes that he too played an active role in his estrangement from Mini. He attempts to soften his confession with the qualifying phrase "in a sense," but instead it betrays a reluctance to acknowledge the changed nature of their relationship. The narrator's use of the active verb "dropped" is perhaps the most damning admission in the passage. While Rahamat "faded" through passive forgetting, and Mini's changes in affection were framed as natural childhood development, the narrator's chosen verb "dropped" suddenly breaks this pattern of passivity (117). It conveys a deliberate action and betrays a deeper awareness that the narrator's estrangement from his daughter was not just something that happened to him—but something he allowed to happen.

This passage serves as the hinge upon which "Kabuliwallah" pivots, turning from a story about Rahamat's nature to a meditation on fatherhood. Its progression from Rahamat fading from memory to Mini's withdrawal, and finally to the narrator's own reluctant self-awareness draws to attention the story's true conflict: the estrangement between father and daughter. The narrator, who once saw himself as distinct from Rahamat, ultimately shares in his loss. Mini, in retrospect, can be read as a stand-in for Rahamat's own daughter. While Rahamat bides his time in prison, his daughter, like Mini, is growing up without him, moving on just as effortlessly, replacing him with new companions. The key difference, however, is that while Rahamat did not have a choice, the narrator let his slip away. Perhaps this guilt is what stirs him when he realises that Rahamat, too, has a daughter—one who, like Mini, has grown up in his absence. And perhaps this is why, for the first time, the narrator chooses to act—reuniting Rahamat with Mini in an unconscious attempt to bridge a distance that, in his own life, he had only allowed to grow.

Works Cited

Tagore, Rabindranath. “Kabuliwallah” Global Narratives Course Pack AY2024-2025, compiled by Carissa Foo. National University of Singapore, 2025.