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ROOTLESSNESS AND FREEDOM: A POSTCOLONIAL AND  
PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF RABINDRANATH  
TAGORE'S *Atithi*

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Keywords	Abstract
<p><i>Rootlessness,</i> <i>Freedom,</i> <i>Colonial Education,</i> <i>Identity,</i> <i>Postcolonialism,</i> <i>Psychology,</i> <i>Tagore.</i></p>	<p>This paper offers a multidimensional reading of Rabindranath Tagore's short story <i>Atithi</i> ("The Guest") through postcolonial and psychological frameworks, foregrounding the themes of rootlessness, freedom, and resistance to institutional authority. The narrative of Tarapada, a wandering boy who resists domesticity and social containment, becomes a powerful metaphor for the modern subject caught between freedom and belonging. Situating the text within the socio-historical context of colonial Bengal, the paper argues that Tarapada's refusal to submit to family structures, education, and eventual marriage reflects a deeper resistance to colonial discipline and the imposition of normative identity.</p> <p>Drawing upon postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the study interprets Tarapada as a liminal subject who</p>



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	<p>destabilizes fixed categories of identity, belonging, and authority. Simultaneously, psychological frameworks—particularly Freudian and existential perspectives—help illuminate his compulsive mobility as both a symptom of internal conflict and an assertion of autonomy. The paper further explores the colonial education system as represented in the text, revealing how institutional pedagogy functions as a tool of control, which Tarapada instinctively rejects.</p> <p>A comparative reading with Tagore's <i>The Postmaster</i> extends the discussion, highlighting recurring motifs of displacement, emotional detachment, and the impossibility of stable belonging in Tagore's fiction. Through close textual analysis and critical engagement, the paper ultimately argues that <i>Atithi</i> is not merely a story of a restless boy but a profound meditation on the human condition, where freedom emerges as both a liberating and isolating force.</p>
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Rabindranath Tagore's *Atithi* occupies a distinctive position within his vast literary corpus, offering a deceptively simple narrative that unfolds into a complex exploration of identity, freedom, and existential longing. The story revolves around Tarapada, a young boy who arrives unexpectedly at a household and just as unpredictably departs, refusing all attempts to domesticate or contain him. His transient existence disrupts conventional social expectations and raises fundamental questions about the nature of belonging and the limits of human freedom.

At the heart of the narrative lies a tension between movement and settlement, between the desire for rootedness and the equally compelling urge for escape. Tarapada's repeated departures are not merely acts of rebellion but expressions of a deeper psychological and philosophical orientation toward life. His character challenges the normative frameworks of family, education, and social responsibility that structure colonial Bengali society.

This paper seeks to examine *Atithi* through an interdisciplinary lens, combining postcolonial and psychological perspectives to uncover the layered meanings embedded in Tarapada's character. By situating the story within the context of colonial modernity, it becomes evident that Tarapada's resistance is not only personal but also political, reflecting a broader unease with imposed structures of authority and identity.

Scholarly engagement with Tagore's short fiction has often emphasized his humanistic philosophy and nuanced portrayal of social realities. Critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) have highlighted Tagore's ability to capture the complexities of colonial modernity, particularly the tensions between tradition and change. In the context of *Atithi*, this tension manifests in Tarapada's refusal to conform to established social roles.



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Postcolonial theorists provide valuable frameworks for interpreting such resistance. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of liminality suggests that colonial subjects often occupy in-between spaces that disrupt binary oppositions (Bhabha, 1994). Tarapada's wandering existence exemplifies this liminal condition, as he neither fully belongs to any household nor completely detaches from human relationships.

Psychological interpretations have also been applied to Tagore's characters. Sudhir Kakar (1997) explores the role of childhood experiences and unconscious desires in shaping identity, which is particularly relevant in understanding Tarapada's compulsive mobility. His inability to remain in one place may be read as a manifestation of an internal conflict between attachment and autonomy.

Despite these insights, relatively little attention has been paid to the intersection of postcolonial and psychological perspectives in *Atithi*. This paper aims to bridge that gap by offering a holistic analysis of Tarapada's character.

The analysis draws upon two primary theoretical frameworks: postcolonial theory and psychological theory. From a postcolonial perspective, Bhabha's notion of hybridity and Spivak's concept of the subaltern are particularly relevant. Tarapada can be seen as a figure who resists categorization, embodying a form of agency that challenges dominant structures of power. His refusal to be "fixed" within a social role aligns with Bhabha's idea that identity is always in flux.

Psychologically, Freudian concepts of desire and repression provide insight into Tarapada's behavior. His repeated departures suggest an unconscious drive toward freedom, even at the cost of emotional connection. Existentialist ideas further illuminate his condition, positioning him as a figure who asserts freedom in a world that demands conformity.

Tarapada's character is defined by movement. From the very beginning, he is introduced as a wanderer, someone who arrives without explanation and leaves without warning. His presence in the household initially appears harmless, even charming, but gradually reveals a deeper resistance to stability.

Tagore writes that Tarapada "had no attachment to any place, nor did he show any desire to remain bound by affection." This statement encapsulates the essence of his character. Unlike conventional protagonists who seek belonging, Tarapada actively avoids it.

His interactions with the family further highlight this tendency. Despite receiving affection and care, he remains emotionally detached. When offered the possibility of a permanent home, he does not respond with gratitude but with restlessness. His departure is sudden and unexplained, reinforcing the idea that his identity is fundamentally incompatible with rootedness.

Another striking moment occurs when Tarapada engages with the natural world. Tagore describes how "the open sky and the flowing river seemed to call him away." Nature, in this context, becomes



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a symbol of freedom, contrasting sharply with the constraints of domestic life. Tarapada's affinity for nature underscores his rejection of social boundaries.

One of the most significant aspects of *Atithi* is its subtle critique of the colonial education system. In colonial India, education was not merely a means of knowledge acquisition but a tool of discipline and control, designed to produce compliant subjects.

Tarapada's encounter with formal education is marked by resistance. When attempts are made to educate him, he shows little interest, treating learning as an imposed obligation rather than a meaningful pursuit. Tagore notes that "books could not hold him; the lessons slipped away like water through his fingers."

This rejection can be interpreted as a refusal to internalize colonial authority. Education, in this context, represents a system that seeks to regulate thought and behavior. Tarapada's disinterest reflects an instinctive understanding of its restrictive nature.

Moreover, his resistance aligns with broader postcolonial critiques of education as a mechanism of cultural domination. By refusing to engage with it, Tarapada asserts a form of autonomy that challenges the legitimacy of colonial structures.

From a psychological perspective, Tarapada's behaviour can be understood as a manifestation of an internal conflict between attachment and independence. His ability to form connections is evident, yet he consistently chooses to sever them.

Freud's concept of the "pleasure principle" offers one possible explanation. Tarapada seeks immediate gratification in the form of freedom, avoiding the responsibilities that come with attachment. At the same time, his departures suggest an underlying anxiety, a fear of being constrained.

Existentialist philosophy further deepens this interpretation. Thinkers like Sartre argue that freedom is both a gift and a burden. Tarapada embodies this paradox. His freedom allows him to escape confinement, but it also isolates him from meaningful relationships.

Tagore poignantly captures this duality when he writes that Tarapada "walked away without looking back, as though the world itself were his home and yet nowhere belonged to him." This line encapsulates the existential loneliness inherent in absolute freedom. While psychoanalytic and existential frameworks illuminate the unconscious and philosophical dimensions of Tarapada's behaviour, a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) perspective offers a more structured understanding of his patterns in terms of cognition, behaviour, and reinforcement.

CBT, as developed by Aaron T. Beck, emphasizes that human behaviour is shaped by underlying cognitive schemas—deep-seated beliefs about the self, others, and the world. These schemas, often formed early in life, influence how individuals interpret experiences and make decisions.



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Tarapada's persistent refusal to remain in one place may be understood through the lens of **maladaptive core beliefs**, particularly those related to autonomy and entrapment. His behavioural pattern suggests an implicit schema: "Staying leads to loss of freedom," or "Attachment results in confinement." Such beliefs, even if not consciously articulated, guide his repeated decisions to leave.

Tagore subtly hints at this cognitive structure through Tarapada's actions rather than explicit introspection. Even in moments of comfort and affection, Tarapada becomes restless. The narrative observes that he "could not stay long in any one place, however kind the household," indicating that external conditions do not alter his internal response pattern. This aligns with CBT's assertion that behaviour is less influenced by circumstances than by interpretation.

From a CBT standpoint, Tarapada's wandering may also be seen as **avoidance behaviour**. In cognitive-behavioural terms, avoidance temporarily reduces psychological discomfort but reinforces the underlying belief system. By leaving each environment before emotional bonds deepen, Tarapada avoids the anxiety associated with commitment and dependency. However, this avoidance simultaneously strengthens his belief that staying is intolerable.

Furthermore, Tarapada's behaviour reflects what CBT identifies as a **negative reinforcement cycle**. Each departure reduces immediate internal tension—perhaps the anxiety of being tied down—thereby reinforcing the act of leaving. Over time, this creates a self-perpetuating behavioural loop. This cycle explains why Tarapada's pattern persists despite exposure to nurturing environments.

Another important CBT concept relevant here is **cognitive rigidity**. Tarapada does not appear to entertain alternative beliefs such as "belonging and freedom can coexist." His thinking operates in binaries—freedom versus bondage—reflecting a cognitive distortion similar to **dichotomous thinking** (black-and-white thinking). This rigidity prevents adaptive integration of relationships into his identity.

Interestingly, Tagore does not pathologize Tarapada in a clinical sense. Instead, the narrative presents his cognitive and behavioural pattern as both admirable and tragic. From a CBT perspective, Tarapada embodies an unresolved schema conflict. His solution—constant movement—resolves the first while suppressing the second.

In this way, a CBT reading complicates the romanticization of freedom. Tarapada's mobility is not purely liberatory; it is also structured by internal belief systems that limit his capacity for relational fulfilment. Thus, freedom, in *Atithi*, emerges not as an absolute state but as a negotiated psychological condition shaped by cognition, habit, and emotional avoidance.

A comparative reading with Tagore's *The Postmaster* reveals striking thematic parallels. Both stories explore the idea of displacement and the difficulty of forming lasting connections.



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In *The Postmaster*, the protagonist is physically displaced, struggling to adapt to a rural environment. His relationship with Ratan, though emotionally significant, ultimately fails due to his inability to transcend his own detachment. Similarly, Tarapada's relationships are transient, marked by a refusal to commit.

However, there is a crucial difference. While the postmaster longs for connection but fails to sustain it, Tarapada actively avoids it. This distinction highlights different responses to the same existential condition. Both characters, however, reflect the broader impact of colonial modernity, where traditional structures of belonging are disrupted, leading to a sense of alienation.

Tarapada's departures resist easy moral classification. They are neither acts of immaturity nor purely heroic assertions of independence. Instead, they occupy a more ambiguous psychological terrain where freedom and avoidance intersect. His refusal to remain within structures of care complicates the conventional association between affection and fulfilment. Tagore does not suggest that Tarapada is incapable of attachment; rather, he implies that attachment, for Tarapada, is inseparable from the threat of loss of self.

This tension becomes especially visible when Tarapada is offered stability through education and domestic belonging. At precisely these moments—when his future appears most secure—his restlessness intensifies. Such a pattern suggests that his resistance is not directed at specific institutions alone but at the very idea of fixity. In this sense, Tarapada embodies a form of subjectivity that remains perpetually in motion, refusing closure.

From a psychological standpoint, this mobility may be read not simply as desire but as compulsion. His departures do not appear fully voluntary; they are triggered, almost reflexively, by situations that imply permanence. The narrative, therefore, invites us to reconsider freedom not as an uncomplicated ideal but as a condition that may carry its own constraints.

*Atithi* is a profoundly layered text that transcends its seemingly simple narrative to engage with complex questions of identity, freedom, and belonging. Through the character of Tarapada, Tagore presents a vision of freedom that is both liberating and isolating.

The paper has demonstrated that Tarapada's rootlessness can be understood as a form of resistance to colonial and social structures, as well as a psychological response to the constraints of attachment. His character challenges conventional notions of stability and invites readers to reconsider the meaning of home and identity.

Ultimately, *Atithi* remains a timeless exploration of the human condition, capturing the tension between the desire to belong and the equally powerful urge to be free.



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