

Resilience, Empathy, and Well-Being in Tagore's *Kabuliwala*: A Positive Psychology Perspective

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Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel laureate renowned for his profound contributions to literature, penned the short story Kabuliwala, a narrative that has resonated with readers across generations and cultures. This article examines Kabuliwala through the lens of positive psychology. Using the PERMA model developed by Seligman, the article analyzes the story from the perspective of positive psychology. All elements of the PERMA model—Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—are present in the story, with Relationships emerging as the predominant theme. In addition, this article explores Kabuliwala in terms of human resilience and empathy. The story offers a rich portrayal of these qualities through its central characters, Rahamat and Mini's father. Kabuliwala exemplifies how classical literary works can serve not only as sites of aesthetic beauty but also as reservoirs of psychological insight, inviting scholars to further integrate positive psychology with literary studies to reexamine narratives of human well-being.

Keywords: *Kabuliwala, Well-being, Resilience, Empathy, Postive- Psychology*

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's celebrated short story *Kabuliwala* (1892/2009) narrates the unexpected friendship between a Kabul-born fruit seller, Rahamat (the "Kabuliwala"), and Mini, a young Bengali girl. The story, set in colonial Calcutta, explores universal themes of fatherhood, separation, and cross-cultural friendship. From the first meeting – when Mini's fear overpowers her curiosity of the towering stranger – to the final reunion on Mini's wedding day, Tagore portrays a rich tapestry of human emotion. In particular, *Kabuliwala* highlights how affection and understanding can flourish despite hardship.

The objective of this research paper is to revisit *Kabuliwala* through the lens of positive psychology, specifically analyzing how the narrative illustrates fundamental principles of human well-being, resilience, and empathy. Using Seligman's PERMA model (2011) - which includes Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment - as the primary analytical framework, we demonstrate how this classic literary work serves as a rich repository of psychological insights that transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. The analysis proceeds through three interconnected sections: first, we establish the theoretical foundation by examining positive psychology and the PERMA model's relevance to literary analysis; second, we systematically apply each component of the PERMA framework to key narrative elements and character interactions in *Kabuliwala*; third, we explore the manifestations of resilience and empathy in Rahamat and the narrator throughout the story.

This interdisciplinary approach reveals how classical literature can illuminate

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contemporary understanding of human flourishing and psychological well-being. This paper analyzes how Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala* (1892) exemplifies core principles of positive psychology through its portrayal of well-being, resilience, and empathy.

Review of Literature on *Kabuliwala*

Kabuliwala has been the subject of various scholarly interpretations, offering diverse critical perspectives. Khan and Shah (2025) employ Marxist theory, specifically the concept of alienated labor, to analyze Rahmat's experiences in *Kabuliwala*. It examines how Rahmat's life as an Afghan merchant in Calcutta reflects his estrangement from his homeland, his work, and his personal relationships due to capitalist systems. It also critiques the commodification of personal bonds and the socio-economic disparities between the rich and the poor in colonial society. From a postcolonial perspective, Hanifi (2018), highlights the tension between the rigid concept of the nation-state (a colonial construct) and the historical realities of human mobility and cultural hybridity. It implicitly critiques colonial policies, which restricted the traditional movement of people like Afghans, reclassifying their historical mobility as "illegal."

Meanwhile, Lal (2010) reflects on Tagore's portrayal of the "Other" in "Kabuliwala" to show how he could overcome barriers of gender and racial identity to empathize with "difference." It suggests that while the story primarily focuses on paternal love, it also offers insights into the portrayal of women and gender roles, even implicitly challenging stereotypes.

Together, these critical approaches demonstrate that *Kabuliwala* operates simultaneously as a simple story of human connection and a complex meditation on the social, economic, and political forces that shape cultural encounter.

Positive Psychology and the PERMA Model

Positive psychology, a relatively recent branch of psychology, shifts the traditional focus from pathology and dysfunction to understanding the factors that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It seeks to identify and cultivate strengths, foster positive experiences, and promote overall well-being. In positive psychology, well-being is generally described as a state of happiness and contentment, characterized by low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health, and a positive outlook or a good quality of life (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). Well-being has both subjective and objective dimensions, encompassing how people feel and how they function on a personal and social level, as well as how they evaluate their lives as a whole (Oades & Mossman, 2017).

Seligman's PERMA model (2011) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding well-being and human flourishing, identifying five key building blocks: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. This model suggests that well-being is not solely about feeling good but also about functioning well in various aspects of life. An explanation of the five elements of the PERMA model is provided below:

Positive Emotion: This element refers to experiencing feelings like joy, contentment, inspiration, and hope (Fredrickson, 2001; Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009). It's about cultivating an optimistic outlook and savoring positive moments.

Engagement: Engagement involves being fully absorbed and present in activities, often leading to a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Relationships: A significant factor contributing to overall well-being is the presence and quality of social relationships, which can amplify positive experiences and provide support during challenging times. Nurturing meaningful connections with others is crucial for human flourishing. Some researchers have considered it to be one of the most important predictors of well-being (Argyle, 2001; Myers, 2000).

Meaning: This component relates to having a sense of purpose and belonging to something larger than oneself (Steger, 2012). It involves identifying one's values and aligning actions with those values.

Accomplishment: Accomplishment involves achieving goals, mastering skills, and experiencing a sense of competence and success (Seligman, 2011). It's about striving for and attaining meaningful outcomes.

Cultivating positive emotions, engaging in activities that provide a sense of flow, nurturing meaningful relationships, finding purpose in life, and achieving a sense of accomplishment are all considered essential pathways to enhanced well-being. The application of such psychological frameworks to literary analysis allows for a deeper exploration of character motivations, narrative themes, and the human condition as depicted in stories.

PERMA Model in Kabuliwala

In *Kabuliwala*, these elements are subtly interwoven into the narrative fabric. By applying the PERMA framework, we can see how the story promotes well-being through its portrayal of laughter and play (Positive Emotion, Engagement), cross-cultural friendship (Relationships), paternal love and purpose (Meaning), and the fulfillment of emotional resolution (Accomplishment). Throughout the story there are many sentences that are in accordance with the theme of these concepts.

Positive Emotion

While overt joy isn't the dominant tone, *Kabuliwala* features significant moments of positive emotion, particularly in the burgeoning friendship between Mini and Rahamat. Mini's innocent fascination with the *Kabuliwala* is a recurring motif, evident in her playful banter – her eager inquiries like “*O Kabuliwala, what is in your sack?*” – and the simple delight of her laughter during their encounters. In the busy rhythm of family life, Rahamat's visits initially served as a welcome diversion for Mini, a seemingly harmless and even educational interaction that broadened her limited world. The friendship itself becomes a wellspring of joy for both. Tagore highlights how their daily meetings are a highlight in her young life as Rahamat was an exceptionally patient listener, second only to her father. Their conversations, characterized by Mini's endless chatter and Rahamat's grand yet affectionate replies, fostered a shared sense of wonder, as seen when they both enjoyed the simple witticism about the elephant in his bag as can be seen in the narration below. The narrator's explanation that “*The essence of the*

joke was that the man had an elephant in his sack. Not that the joke was very witty, but it caused the two friends to double up in laughter, and the sight of that innocent joy between a little girl and a grown man on autumn mornings used to move me deeply." itself showcase the positive emotion in the story.

Furthermore, Rahamat's affection for Mini is evident in his willingness to engage in her games such as in answering to her question about in-laws, he would make "... a huge fist with his hand, Rahamat would pretend to punch at his imaginary in-law and say, I'll wallop my in-law." The joy it brings to Mini can be seen in the narration which says "*thinking of the plight of the unknown creature called father-in-law, Mini would explode into laughter.*" In addition, he remembered her across time which suggests a deep warmth and perhaps even a vicarious joy derived from their connection. The narrator witnesses the genuine affection Rahamat holds for Mini, evidenced by his small gifts, his patient participation in her play, and the longing in his eyes when he speaks of his own daughter. The narrator, Mini's father, experiences a bittersweet positive emotion as he observes this unusual friendship, initially with amusement and later with a deeper understanding and empathy. This sentimentality extends to moments of tenderness and compassion, particularly when he empathizes with Rahamat on Mini's wedding day, recognizing the shared fatherly love that binds them despite their different circumstances.

Engagement

The element of Engagement in *Kabuliwala* vividly manifests in the deep absorption both Mini and Rahamat experience during their unique connection. Rahamat's engagement is profoundly emotional and psychological; he is fully mentally present during their visits, setting aside his burdens to become completely absorbed in those short but meaningful interactions with the little girl. This isn't mere politeness; it's a focused attention driven by a deeper, perhaps subconscious, need for connection. Mini, in turn, exhibits childlike enthusiasm and curiosity, becoming fully engaged in her storytelling and conversations with him. Her intense curiosity and playful interactions demonstrate her complete absorption in the moment, drawing her into a world of simple yet captivating imaginative exchanges with the *Kabuliwala* that transcend typical adult-child interactions.

On the narrator's part, though not related to the main story, he also seems to be fully engulfed in the story writing which is time and again disturbed by his daughter's activities.

Relationship

"*The sight of that innocent joy between a little girl and a grown man on autumn mornings used to move me deeply.*" This sentence represents not only the relation that transcends age and culture but also the empathy that narrator has for them. Friendship between Mini and Rahamat, that is free of prejudice, aligns with positive psychology's emphasis on social bonds as a source of happiness.

Kabuliwala fundamentally explores relationships through simple interactions that reveal deep bonds of love, empathy, and connection.

Despite being strangers from different cultures, Mini and Rahamat form a beautiful bond built on affection and fun. The *Kabuliwala* finds comfort in Mini's chatter, which reminds him of his own daughter in Kabul whereas Mini trusts

him and eagerly talks to him, without fear or prejudice. Rahamat's determined return to seek out Mini after his release, despite the passage of time and the uncertainty of her reaction, showcases the deep connection he felt with the child.

Another relationship that is present in this story is between Mini and Her Father. As the narrator of the story, his love for his daughter is evident. He is initially wary of the Kabuliwala, as any protective father might be, but later shows understanding and compassion.

Third and very important relation is between Rahamat and his daughter, which is very much present in the story though his daughter never appears in the story. The memory of the Kabuliwala's daughter drives his actions. His visits to Mini are not just casual; they reflect his yearning for his child, whom he has not seen in years. The worn paper with his daughter's handprint symbolizes the emotional weight he carries.

Meaning

Meaning and purpose also emerge strongly. For Rahamat, the meaning of life is his daughter. He articulates this explicitly when he says to the narrator: "*Just as you have a daughter, I too have one back home. It is remembering her face that I bring these gifts for your child. I don't come here for business.*" Here Rahamat confesses that his role in Mini's life is sustained not by commerce but by an aching paternal love. His journey to Calcutta each year is meaningful because it keeps him connected to his daughter's memory. Even the simple paper handprint is suffused with purpose. Tagore notes that "*as if the soft touch of that little hand kept his huge, lonely heart fed with love and happiness*", implying that Rahamat's identity and will to continue are inseparable from that connection. This sense of meaning – a life guided by love and duty – is a key aspect of his well-being.

The narrator, too, finds deeper meaning by the end of the story. Preparing for Mini's marriage, he is confronted with Rahamat's plight. Rather than resenting the intrusion, he reexamines his values: seeing Rahamat's love reminds him of his own paternal love. In giving Rahamat money for passage home, he enacts an altruistic purpose. He even muses to himself that foregoing some extravagance (the marriage band, extra lights) makes "*auspicious ceremony became more luminous.*" The narrator derives meaning from this cross-cultural compassion. Thus, by the story's end, both characters' actions fulfill Meaning (purpose driven by family bonds).

Accomplishment

Although accomplishment is less overt in the plot, we can interpret the narrator's benevolence as a self-transcendent achievement. The narrator forgoes using money intended for his daughter's wedding—a deeply significant family celebration—to instead help the Kabuliwala return to Afghanistan to see his own daughter. This is a genuine sacrifice of personal and family interests for the benefit of another person who has no claim of family or close friendship. The decision demonstrates impartial moral consideration—treating the Kabuliwala's relationship with his daughter as equally valuable to his own family celebrations. This moral accomplishment ultimately enriches the narrator's life with meaning that professional or material success could never provide.

Resilience

Resilience—the capacity to adapt effectively when facing adversity (American Psychological Association, 2012)—emerges as a central theme through Rahamat's character. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (n.d.). This adaptation is not merely about returning to a previous state, but can also involve profound personal growth, allowing individuals to emerge stronger and more capable from challenging situations. Resilience is both a process and an outcome, characterized by mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility in response to both external and internal demands (American Psychological Association, n.d.). It is crucial to recognize that being resilient does not imply an absence of difficulty or distress; rather, it is the ability to navigate and work through these painful experiences. Furthermore, resilience is not considered an extraordinary trait possessed by only a few, but rather a set of learnable behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be developed by anyone.

Resilience was defined by Zautra et al. (2010) as the ability to adapt effectively when facing adverse circumstances. Similarly, Luthar et al. (2000) characterized resilience as a dynamic process that involves positive adaptation when confronted with significant adversity. Several factors contribute to an individual's resilience, including their coping strategies, the availability and quality of social resources, and their individual perspectives on the world. The ability to view challenges as opportunities for growth, maintain a sense of control, engage the support of others, and possess effective problem-solving skills are all associated with greater resilience.

Resilience in Kabuliwala

Resilience is a salient but understated theme in *Kabuliwala*. Rahamat endures the heartache of being a foreign labourer in India, far from his child. Despite this deep loss, he maintains his livelihood selling dry fruit on the streets of Calcutta. He faces significant adversity through his separation from his native Afghanistan and his daughter, coupled with his eventual imprisonment in a foreign land. Despite these considerable challenges, Rahamat demonstrates notable resilience in several aspects of his life. His consistent annual return to his homeland to visit his family underscores a powerful desire to maintain these crucial familial ties. This yearly journey, undertaken despite the inherent difficulties of traversing the long distance between Kabul and Calcutta and the demands of his profession as a traveling merchant and moneylender. The narrative never explicitly labels him “resilient,” but his actions convey a stoic endurance. For example, when a financial dispute lands him in jail, he calmly accepts his fate even as eight years slip by. Upon release, he returns to find that Mini – the little girl with whom he had played – has grown up and married. In this poignant reunion, Tagore reveals Rahamat's inner strength and sadness. He “*slouched on the floor with a long, deep sigh*” when he saw Mini in bridal dress, acutely realizing that his own daughter “*had grown up as well*” and that he would face an unfamiliar child upon return. Though his heart breaks at this prospect, he does not despair. His dignity remains intact; he gently conceals his turmoil even when he is bewildered by the change in his young friend's demeanor. Rahamat's resilience is embodied physically by a single cherished possession:

“the trace of a tiny hand created with burnt charcoal daubed on the palm”. He has carried this crude memento year after year in his robe, keeping *“the trace of a tiny hand”* close to his heart. This handprint symbolizes his enduring hope and resilience, serving as a tangible link to his past and a constant reminder of his love for his daughter and his ultimate goal of returning to her. This signifies a powerful display of resilience, maintaining a connection to loved ones and a sense of purpose even within the harsh and isolating environment of prison, aligning with the resilience factor of holding onto hope.

Empathy

The definition of empathy is “understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions, and thoughts” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). Empathy is the intricate ability to both understand and share the feelings of another person, often leading to compassionate actions. According to Hodges and Myers (2007), empathy involves three emotional components. First, it's about experiencing the same emotion as someone else. Second, personal distress arises from one's own feelings of unease when witnessing another's suffering. Finally, the third component, feeling compassion for another person, is the aspect most often studied in psychology when examining empathy.

Empathy in Kabuliwala

Kabuliwala is deeply imbued with the theme of empathy, intricately woven into the interactions between its characters and the narrator's evolving perspective. The initial encounters between Rahamat and Mini serve as a compelling study in the development of empathy. Despite Mini's initial fear rooted in Rahamat's foreign appearance, Rahamat patiently bridges this apprehension through consistent kindness and the offering of gifts. His gentle demeanor and unwavering patience in the face of her childish fear demonstrate an early form of empathy, as he intuitively recognizes her vulnerability as a young child and acts in a way that gradually cultivates trust. Their deepening bond, fostered through shared jokes, lighthearted conversations, and the mutual enjoyment of each other's company, further underscores this growing emotional connection. Their shared laughter at simple humor and the narrator's observation of their “innocent joy” reflect both emotional empathy, where they share feelings of joy, and cognitive empathy, where Rahamat understands Mini's innocent perspective, and Mini, in her own way, appreciates his responses.

Rahamat's ability to comprehend Mini's innocent inquiries and respond in a manner accessible to her highlights his cognitive empathy. The “father-in-law's house” joke is a prime example, where Rahamat employs a culturally relevant euphemism playfully, and Mini, despite not grasping its literal meaning, finds it amusing. This showcases Rahamat's capacity to perceive the world from Mini's viewpoint and tailor his communication accordingly. Conversely, Mini's ability to connect with Rahamat on an emotional level, unburdened by the biases of the adult world, emphasizes the potent nature of genuine human connection in transcending societal barriers. The poignant moment of Rahamat's return after years of imprisonment, recognizing the grown-up Mini and triggering the realization

that his own daughter must have similarly matured, powerfully illustrates his deep empathy. This allows him to connect his experience of Mini's transformation to the likely transformation of his own child over their years of separation. His subsequent sigh and the understanding that he will need to "make friends with her anew" underscore the universal nature of parental love and the shared human experience of time's passage and its impact on familial bonds.

The narrator, initially observing the relationship with a degree of amusement tinged with societal awareness, gradually develops a profound sense of empathy. While he initially finds their interactions strangely fascinating, his perspective reflects the prevailing social norms, creating a subtle distance. The narrator's reaction to Rahamat's imprisonment marks a shift in his perspective, acknowledging the gravity of Rahamat's situation. Yet, the subsequent years lead to a gradual fading of Rahamat from his daily thoughts, highlighting the influence of personal circumstances and time on empathy. The narrator's most significant display of empathy occurs upon Rahamat's unexpected return on Mini's wedding day. "*In a moment I realised that we were both just the same – he was a father and so was I.*" This realization compels him to a significant act of compassion, choosing to reduce the wedding festivities to provide Rahamat with the financial means to reunite with his own daughter. This prioritization of Rahamat's deep emotional need over societal expectations and personal desires exemplifies a profound act of empathy, moving beyond mere understanding to active compassion and a desire to foster Rahamat's well-being. The narrator's feeling that the "*ceremony became more luminous*" underscores the intrinsic reward of acting on empathy and contributing to the well-being of another, solidifying empathy as a central and resonant theme of *Kabuliwala*.

Conclusion

This analysis of *Kabuliwala* through the lens of positive psychology reveals the story's profound exploration of resilience, empathy, and well-being. Rahamat's resilience in facing separation and hardship demonstrates the human capacity to adapt and find meaning even in challenging circumstances. The bond between Rahamat and Mini serves as a powerful testament to the strength of human connection and the significance of empathy in fostering joy and understanding across societal divides. Furthermore, the narrator's journey toward greater empathy and his compassionate act at the story's conclusion underscore the potential for positive change and the prioritization of human flourishing.

By examining *Kabuliwala* through the framework of positive psychology, we gain deeper insights into the enduring power of human connection, the importance of resilience in navigating adversity, and the profound impact of empathy on individual and collective well-being, ultimately highlighting the factors that contribute to a life well-lived as portrayed in this timeless literary work.

This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates the value of applying psychological frameworks to literary analysis, suggesting that positive psychology can serve as a valuable lens for understanding how literature portrays human flourishing. Such analysis not only enriches our understanding of literary works but also provides concrete examples of psychological principles in action, making abstract concepts more accessible and meaningful. Future research might explore how other literary

works reflect positive psychology principles, potentially developing a more comprehensive understanding of how literature both reflects and shapes our understanding of human well-being.

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