



Research Paper

Storytelling as Pedagogy in Jawaharlal Nehru's *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*

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Abstract

This article explores the storytelling features in Jawaharlal Nehru's *Letters from Father to his Daughter*. The 30 letters compiled in this book tells 30 stories about the beginning of earth, evolution of life, creation of civilization and values like freedom, justice and universalism. The book fulfills the criteria essential for an ideal storytelling: an enthusiastic and resourceful narrator (Nehru) and an inquisitive listener (Indira). Some of the prominent characteristics of storytelling evident in this book are: personal, intimate, instructive and conversational tone, simple and clear language, moral message, vivid imagery, first person narrative voice, presence of story elements, clear purpose and dramatic nature of the narrative. The letters are written in a story format meticulously wrapping facts with fictions. The storytelling educates, entertains and engages the audience.

Keywords: earth, civilization, narrator, tone, language, voice, dramatic, fiction

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I. Introduction:

Letters from Father to his Daughter was first published in 1929. At that time Jawaharlal Nehru was in prison in Allahabad due to his participation in the Indian freedom struggle while his ten year old daughter Indira was studying in Mussoorie, a town in North India. The book is a classic example of epistolary literature wherein Nehru educates India through correspondence creating curiosity about the geology, politics, history and a host of contemporary issue. Apart from these virtues, the book unfolds a unique example of story telling that provides a memorable learning experience in an engaging and entertaining manner. Since the ancient times, storytelling has been an integral part of human life. It is an important cultural practice that has played a complimentary role in intellectual and cultural upliftment of the humanity.

Oxford English Dictionary defines *storytelling* as "the activity of telling or writing stories" (Oxford English Dictionary). According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *storytelling* is "the act or art of telling stories" (Merriam-Webster). *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as "the activity of writing, telling, or reading stories" (Cambridge Dictionary). *Collins English Dictionary* offers a similar definition: "Storytelling is the activity of telling or writing stories" (Collins English Dictionary). These varied definitions show that storytelling is an important aspect of human life and therefore exploring the nature of storytelling in *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* is a fruitful exercise.

II. Theoretical Framework

Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm Theory (1984) holds that the humans like to tell stories which is more impactful practice than making arguments. The letters demonstrate coherence, emotions and engage the audience through the first person narration and transcendental experience. The present study is rooted in Lawrence Kohlberg's Pedagogical Theories of Moral Education (1958). It's basic premise is that the children progress through six stages of moral reasoning and learn to adhere to rules of morality. The study has a close connection with Constructive Learning Theory proposed by Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner (1966). This theory argues that the children gain knowledge through experience and therefore narrative plays a crucial role in

learning. This theory is relevant in the context of this study holds that storytelling enables learners to expand their existing fund of knowledge and make it a memorable and meaningful experience.

III. Storytelling in *Letters from Father to his Daughter*

Jawaharlal Nehru is primarily known to us as the political leader, freedom fighter and statesman. At the same time he is an eminent writer who has produced the seminal works such as "*Letters from a Father to His Daughter*" (1929), "*Glimpses of World History*" (1934), and "*The Discovery of India*" (1946). The aim of *The Letters* is educate Indira through the stories pertaining to nature, history, politics, civilization and other key developments. Nehru acknowledges the story format of the book in his letters.

"We have rocks and mountains and seas and stars and rivers and deserts and fossils of old animals. These and other like things are our books for the earth's early story. And the real way to understand this story is not merely to read about it in other people's books but to go to the great Book of Nature itself." (Nehru 8)

The book contains thirty stories that narrate the birth of the earth, the world, humanity, and their actions. For a narrative to qualify as a story, it must have two essential elements: a storyteller and a listener. In this case, an intelligent and kind father serves as the narrator, while his curious ten-year-old daughter, Indira, is the listener. Nehru directly communicates the story of world history to Indira, making this an example of the oral storytelling tradition. His warm, thoughtful, and poetic tone shines through each story. This interactive exchange of ideas is what truly makes it a story.

3.1 Personal and Intimate Tone

The letters are addressed to Indira. Narrating the history of the earth—from its birth to the formation of nations—could easily become a dry and academic lecture. However, Nehru adopts a simple and engaging storytelling approach, using a warm and reflective tone. He deliberately avoids the impersonal style typical of academic discourse. Instead, by choosing a personal and intimate tone, he creates warmth and closeness, which are essential foundations of effective storytelling. This work blends historical facts with Nehru's personal insights, making it captivating and engaging for readers. It reinforces the idea that the book shares experiences through the rich tradition of storytelling.

"All these, including our earth, are called planets of the sun. The moon is called a satellite of the earth because it hangs on to it. The other planets have also got theirsatellites. The sun and the planets with their satellites form a happy family. This is called the solar system."(Nehru 11)

3.2 Conversational Tone

Tone refers to the attitude of the speaker toward their audience. It is why a book as a whole can convey emotions such as hope, despair, joy, sorrow, anger, or seriousness. Readers are able to sense the emotional resonance of the narrative, which reflects the tone of the narrator. From this, we can infer how the speaker feels about the audience. In *Letters from Father to His Daughter*, Nehru adopts a tone that is warm and affectionate, yet instructive and sometimes critical. The speaker's vision becomes clear through the language he chooses.

In oral storytelling, tone is often conveyed through the pitch and modulation of the speaker's voice. In written narratives, tone must be inferred from the choice of words (diction) and sentence structure (syntax). Short sentences often create a tense tone, while longer sentences tend to be more reflective. Nehru skillfully uses punctuation to influence the tone as well. Through the tone, readers also understand how the speaker feels about the situations described, as well as the emotions he wishes to communicate. The narrator's tone is generally light-hearted and dramatic, which helps bring readers closer to the story and effectively communicates the book's themes.

Storytelling is essentially a personal conversation between the narrator and the audience, where the storyteller strives to create a strong connection. This emotional engagement compels readers to listen attentively until the story ends. The conversational tone transforms the narrative into a dialogue rather than a dry academic lecture, making the content more memorable and relatable. Nehru frequently asks questions to involve Indira, making the story interactive and keeping the listener attentive. This technique also breaks the monotony, as audiences may sometimes feel bored or disinterested during long narratives. Some questions serve to remind Indira of past experiences, while many rhetorical questions are posed without expecting an answer, encouraging reflection and active participation. Nehru's letters make ample use of these rhetorical devices to maintain engagement and deepen understanding.

"You will probably say that men are living beings and so are all animals. What about trees and shrubs and flowers and vegetables? Surely they are living also. They grow and drink up the water and breathe the air and die." (Nehru 14)

3.3 Simple and Clear Language

Simple and clear language in a story help readers understand the message easily and without struggling. Clarity of message improves understanding. Another advantage of simplicity in word use is that the strategy provides the readers with an immersive experience. Simple words are more powerful than verbose and high sounding fancy words which retard the pace of the narrative. In *Letters from Father to his Daughter* Nehru has used very simple words because he knows that he is communicating with a ten year old listener. Indira follows the central message with ease and shows a sustained interest and curiosity. The sentences are shorter and every paragraph has remarkable clarity of thought and coherence. There is a flow maintained in each story so that the reader keeps on turning the pages. His method of explaining complex ideas and events in the simplest language make them easily accessible to the readers. The following excerpt from the book demonstrates the use of simple and clear language used in the book.

"You know that only a few years ago there was a great war. Most of the countries of the world were in it, and every one of them was trying to kill as many people on the other side as possible. The Englishman was trying his best to kill Germans. And the Germans were killing Englishmen. Millions of people were killed in this war and many thousands were maimed for life— some have no eyes left and are blind, others have no arms or legs." (Nehru 37)

3.4 Convey morals and messages

Through the stories of the earth, nature, civilization, and national consciousness, Nehru imparts moral education to young Indira, inculcating values such as universalism, secularism, and scientific temper. These stories not only educate but also empower her. Rather than teaching these values directly, Nehru chooses to reinforce them through storytelling, allowing Indira to grasp the messages within an appropriate and meaningful context. The theme is effectively communicated through the plot, giving the message a deep and lasting impact. As a result, the lessons are not easily forgotten but become deeply imprinted on her mind, making them more meaningful and enduring.

"These were the books written in India thousands of years ago. Who but the greatest of men could have written them? And although they were written so long ago, they live today in India and every child knows of them and every grown-up is influenced by them." (Nehru 79)

3.5 Vivid imagery

Imagery is a literary device that creates vivid "word pictures" through the use of descriptive and figurative language. Writers use imagery to appeal to the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—in order to build mental pictures that immerse readers in the narrative world. By engaging the senses, the writer attempts to transport the audience into the imagined or described setting, making the experience more vivid and memorable.

In *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*, Nehru skillfully employs vivid imagery to help Indira, his daughter and listener, visualize the distant past. His descriptions are so evocative that they enable the reader to feel as though they are experiencing the historical events themselves. The narrative becomes emotionally resonant, allowing the audience to sense the same wonder and awe that Nehru himself conveys.

"In this way our earth also shot out from the sun. It must have been very hot, with terribly hot gases and air all round it, but as it was very much smaller than the sun it started to cool. The sun also is getting less hot but it will take millions of years to cool down. The earth took much less time to cool. When it was hot of course, nothing could live on it—no man or animal or plant or tree. Everything would have been burnt up then." (Nehru 13)

3.6 First Person Narrative Voice

Nehru chooses the first-person narrative because it aligns well with the structure and purpose of the book. In oral storytelling, the storyteller often uses their own voice to establish a direct connection with the audience. Similarly, in this non-fictional prose work, the story is conveyed through written words, but it retains the essence of spoken storytelling—engaging and personal.

The narrator is not an external observer describing events from a distance, which could have rendered the narrative dull and monotonous. Instead, Nehru places himself at the center of the narrative, acting as one of its key participants. This choice allows him to speak directly to his daughter and, by extension, to the reader. To reinforce this personal connection, Nehru frequently uses first-person pronouns such as "I" and "we," which enhance the immediacy and intimacy of the storytelling.

"I have written to you many letters. This is the 24th of the series. But so far we have only discussed very old times about which we do not know much. We can hardly call this history. We may if we like call it the beginning of history, or the dawn of history. Soon we shall consider the later periods about which we know more and which may be called the historical times." (Nehru 67)

3.7 Presence of Story Elements

Though the book may not incorporate all the conventional elements of storytelling in a strict literary sense, a deeper analysis reveals that these elements do, in fact, govern the narrative. To begin with, the book follows a clear narrative structure. There is a main plot supported by multiple subplots. It features the essential components of storytelling: a beginning, development, climax, conflict, and resolution. Through this structure, it conveys a coherent and meaningful message.

The book includes key narrative elements such as characters, plot, theme, point of view, and tone. Each of the thirty letters contributes to the progression of a larger story—the story of evolution and the emergence and development of conscious humanity. A single cohesive theme runs throughout the text, with each letter reinforcing and building upon it.

The narrative unfolds in a linear and chronological manner, maintaining focus without deviation. The narrator, Nehru, is not external to the story but a character within it, directly engaging with the listener. The tone remains personal and intimate, further enhancing the storytelling experience.

3.8 Purpose of storytelling

Storytelling is a primordial instinct of human beings. It is a cultural practice used to share important experiences, facts, and fictional narratives with others. Nehru wrote these letters from prison in Allahabad to his daughter Indira, who was in Mussoorie. Thus, the book represents a form of written storytelling. In this context, the father instructs his daughter through a series of letters that explore subjects such as the universe, humanity, ideology, and more.

The study of history and politics is often delivered in the form of academic lectures, which can be impersonal and unengaging. However, Nehru chooses to explain complex concepts—such as the origin of the earth, the evolution of life, the "book of nature," unity in diversity, and universalism—through the accessible and engaging method of storytelling. By weaving historical facts into narrative form, he successfully places events within a meaningful context.

At the beginning of the book, Indira Nehru, in her introduction, succinctly explains the purpose of her father's storytelling:

"My father was interested in everything and delighted in sharing his enthusiasm. I was full of questions and this enabled him to tell me about the world, and the men and women who inhabited it and who have moved others by their ideas and actions, and through literature and art." (No Page Number)

3.9 Dramatic nature of the narrative

The book is a historical narrative written in the form of letters, which also shows an affinity with the essay genre. Nehru is both the speaker and narrator, while his ten-year-old daughter Indira is the listener. The presence of both a speaker and a listener is indispensable in storytelling. The narrative style is highly dramatic, a strategy that makes the text more impactful, meaningful, entertaining, and emotionally engaging. The dramatic quality of the narrative refers to its ability to create tension and evoke emotions. The stakes are presented in such a way that each letter deepens Indira's curiosity and encourages reflection.

"And if for hundreds of years people live in very hot countries, fathers and their children and their children's children and so on, they will become darker and darker, till they become almost black. You have seen the Indian peasant working in the fields in the midday sun. He is too poor to have many clothes and has little on. His whole body is exposed to the sun and all his life is spent in this way. He is bound to get dark." (Nehru 29)

IV. Conclusion

Storytelling is the defining characteristic of Nehru's *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*. He employs storytelling as a pedagogical tool to instruct Indira, who is geographically distant from him. Through this narrative technique, Nehru transforms the learning of history and politics into a memorable and comprehensive experience. With a warm and intimate tone, he successfully fuses fact with fiction and adds value to the narrative by mixing his personal analysis. Having a fair understanding of the listener's Intelligent Quotient, the narrator maintains clarity of purpose in this storytelling exercise. As a result, a single cohesive theme runs through all the letters, and the optimistic, affectionate and lighthearted tone fosters a strong emotional connection between the narrator and the audience. True to the storytelling protocol, each story concludes with a moral or intellectual message that has the potential to influence the reader's behavior and worldview. The narrative is inherently dramatic and purposeful, designed not only to inform but also to inspire. Furthermore, Nehru engages his young listener by posing rhetorical questions, creating an interactive and immersive storytelling experience. In essence, storytelling is not just a feature of the book—it is its hallmark, shaping both its form and its lasting impact.

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