

Tagore's *The Post Office*: Transmuting Spiritual Credence in Symbols

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ABSTRACT

The dramatic oeuvre of Rabindranath Tagore has been broadly categorised as Realistic, Classical and Symbolic plays. In the limits of the present research paper; the researcher studies symbols and their spiritual denotation in his play *The Post Office* (1912). Symbolism in literature is using symbolic images to express mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind therefore, a semiotic study of this celebrated play connote Tagore's introvert expression in a lucid but powerful language that connects the reader or spectator with Tagore's spiritual faith formed through his philosophical concern at large. With an analytical method of research; the present research paper states the foremost findings and limitations in the conclusion of the paper.

Keywords: Freedom, Imagination, Introvert, Spiritual, Symbolic

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a multi-faceted genius, a spiritual preceptor, has left his artistic distinction for the generations. Besides a poet, he is a known figure in the field of novel, short-story, prose and dramatic writings. His contribution to the field of paintings and other art forms has been recognised well in the respective fields. Tagore, as a playwright, receives considerably a moderate attention of the researchers, scholars and general readership though he produced a number of quality plays and gave a completely new style to Indian Theatre. The plays of Tagore may be classified into the groups such as musical, verse, poetic, symbolic, prose, comedies, and dance drama. The unifying element in almost all the plays of Tagore is the rich symbols conveying an in depth meaning

Sudhir Kakar, a noted biographer of Tagore aptly mentions: "Artistic creativity is the translation of this truth into our own symbols" (10). Similarly, the symbols in the plays of Tagore transform the spiritual truth to reveal his artistic destination. Thus, in the overall exploration, the signs or symbols receive a prominence. The contemporaries of Tagore such as Yeats and Maeterlinck were the prominent writers who propagated a skilful use of symbols in poems and plays respectively impress Tagore on the similar line. The common factor in these three is the use of natural surroundings to develop the plot. Spirituality stands as a dynamic element for Tagore encompassing all the aspects of life. It is just like obtaining fullness in partiality.

According to Ernest Cassirer "In a wider sense symbolism is a fundamental activity of the human mind-the power of actualising inarticulate experience in some apprehensible sensible form" (Hough: 129). It can be argued thus that art is nothing but a system of symbols and it "... is for evoking in our mind the deep sense of reality in its richest aspects" (Tagore: 140).

The genius of Tagore as a symbolic playwright can be seen in the skill of bringing the character into action through various symbols with literary as well as spiritual significance. It can be supported with Eliot's statement: "For character is created and made real only in an action, a communication between imaginary people" (Eliot: 95). Tagore in his most productive dramatic phase sought theatrical experiments. In these experiments, his desire centred on creating an activity embodied drama. In this way, it is not unnatural to associate Tagore's experimental endeavours with a type of theatre which was not experimented by any other Indian before him.

Tagore is among a very few theatrical figures who revived the culture of modern India through their plays. His deliberation was associated with a new/different acceptance of the life experiences. The influence might have, as stated earlier,

borrowed from Yeats and Maeterlinck who encouraged him to write his plays in a symbolic language. Though there is a remarkable assimilation of symbolic expression in his poetry, particularly *Geetanjali* it strengthened his literary excellence and provided Indian Drama with a new form of expression. The words and phrases in his plays possessing specified symbols have a relation with his personal spiritual grooming right from the days of childhood.

Spiritual ambit stands as the core of his plays. The symbolic ambience in the plays of Tagore seeks a spiritual destiny. Tagore himself reveals: "For each tackle dramatically a spiritual problem which concerns itself with man's fullness of growth in form of his identification with nature" (Chakraverty, 6). The plays of Tagore focus the process of evolutionary dynamism. Therefore, the characters of Tagore are not mere walking shadows on the stage because his characters are individualised as well universalised at one and the same time. Further, they stand either on the side of spiritually awakened or unawakened.

The play, *The Post Office* is momentous for its combination of elements. The play in two acts assimilates the facets of Amal's (the orphan boy and protagonist of the play) nature, his longing to get involved in Nature and her surroundings, symbolise his transparent character. The play also stands for a continuous conflict between values. Edward Thompson argues: "...a moving piece of work. It is full of feeling, and the handling is delicate. The language is of an unsurpassable naturalness, the speech of the streets purged of all its grossness yet robbed of not one drop of raciness" (Thompson: 214). The conflict in the play, on the other hand, leads ultimately to a realisation. Tagore tracks a spiritual path through the tragedy of Amal and also strives to relate it with his childhood confinement. Amal's very peaceful transition from sleep to death is the most striking aspect of the play. Sudha's entry in the end with a cup of flowers in her hand symbolises her tribute to Amal's generous and kind spirit.

Though, they met for a very short period of time but there is an unshaken bond of affection between them. Amal always desired to mix with boys and girls of his age but the illness and forced confinement followed, trapped him in a caged room. Yet a longing to cultivate the inner crop of joy stimulates to form a friendly relationship with whosoever comes across him irrespective of his/her social or any other kind of background. In his letter to Andrews, Tagore mentions: "Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road-he seeks freedom from the comfortable enclosure of habits sanctioned by prudent and from the walls of rigid opinion built for him by the respective" (Chakraverty, 233). Amal is confined within doors. He glances through half-opened window and strives to maintain a contact with the world in which he is unable to take any part.

He talks the dairy man, the watchman, Sudha and a troop of children who stand at the other side of the world in which he cannot get involved. His interaction with these ordinary individuals, a frank and unintentional interrogations, encouraging the nature of their jobs symbolise a humanly innocence of the playwright towards laymen. Tagore's spiritual concern lies particularly in his belief that humanity comes first than any religious or other constrained identities. Amal's conversation with the dairyman runs thus:

AMAL: Your village? Is it very far?

DAIRYMAN: Our village lies on the river Shamli at the foot of the Panch-mura hills.

AMAL: Panch-mura hills! Shamli river! I wonder. I may have seen your village (22).

His fearless attitude while talking with watchman connotes the freedom of mind he enjoys at the moment and also Tagore's childhood desire of freeing himself from family confinement and forming an association with eternity. He conveys his desire of becoming a postman to the watchman because according to him it is the most sacred job.

AMAL: I'll be the King's postman when I grow up.

WATCHMAN: Ha! ha! Postman, indeed! Rain or shine, rich or poor, from house to house delivering letters – that's very great work! (35).

His yearning to message happiness to the people through a postman's sacred profession signifies his humanistic approach. On the other hand, it illustrates Tagore's liberal humanism at large. The headman who shows a little sympathy with the boy and his illness yet he is not in Amal's list of disliked people. Though he warns him of complaining the King; Amal's respond remains generous as he does not bother headman's arrogance, dislike for his father Madhav and his rude behaviour. Amal does not speak with the outsiders out of winning their compassion but it is his inborn nature. His passionate dialogue with the girl of his age pronounces the same calm and composite nature. The compassion in Amal is adorned with a profound respect towards all living creatures and a whole hearted passion to participate in the festival of life.

Amal is very much concerned of enjoying Nature than bothering his illness. Madhav warned him not to stand by the window and should not talk the passer-by. But the innocent mind of Amal strives to escape the worldly restrictions and celebrate the freedom of mind. As he realises very well that he will not be allowed to leave the room and participate in the celebration of life. Hence, he procures to celebrate the freedom through his imagination. He visits the hills and mountains and the other beautiful sites of Nature to fill the vacuum of bliss in his life. Though he is an orphan, adopted child; Amal does not want to lag behind in securing the paramount pleasure of life. Being a strong advocator of Naturalism, Tagore champions a need of pragmatic association with Nature and her beauty. Thus Amal speaks the words of Tagore: "Oh, I will walk on, crossing so many streams, wading through water. Everybody will be asleep with their doors shut in the heat of the day and I will tramp on and on seeking work far, very far" (18). It is also an attempt of relating life with spirituality. Amal counters the

opponent forces such as Madhav, physician, the headman who prohibits him from getting involved in the outside world and thus suppress his metaphysical dreams with sweet, delicate responses. A connectivity he strives to establish with the landscape which is beyond his reach still lingers in his imagination. It stands to rescue him from all kinds of worries, pains, and despairs. Therefore, he strives to keep it alive through the window of imagination that opens to the other side of the world. On the other hand, Thakurda, (The role played by Tagore himself), concerns Amal's dream. He encourages him to receive a letter from the king which may be received from newly established post office before his house because the letter he wishes to receive from the king is letter of his emancipation. It is a high road to get rid of physical pains and also mental turmoil's he has been facing for a long period of time. Madhav's mundane passiveness and Amal's constant desire of freeing himself from the bondage of finite is the actual conflict in the play.

AMAL: Mayn't I be out of the courtyard at all?

MADHAV: No, my dear, no.

...

AMAL: Wish I were a squirrel it would be lovely (10-11).

Mystical yearning in form of Amal's innate desire to visit the land he never visited before, aspiration for spiritual realisation, a kind of awakening to shackle the bonds of confinement where a childlike Amal is not permitted to take the inner calls, a conflict of values where choice becomes a real difficulty and poetic sensibility are some of the prominent symbolic aspects in *The Post Office*. Amal is a symbol of a polar star-i.e. an absolute or relative truth. It would be worth to cite here that "He (Tagore) maintains, like Bridges and Wordsworth that spiritual elevation consists in man's loving response to the beauties of nature." (Sathiraju, K.: 51). To put in nutshell, *The Post Office* is a thirst for an undefined destination. The researcher concludes his research observations on the basis of following foremost findings:

- Tagore strives to revive the traditional Indian theatre but in the guise of modernity.
- *The Post Office* is a small play with rich spiritual symbols.
- The roots of New Indian Theatre are there in Tagore's theatrical experiments.
- The plays of Tagore lack technicality due to their closet nature.
- There are just one or two occasions in Tagore's literary career when he was completely associated with dramatic writings.

CONCLUSION

Modern Indian identity broadly speaking Indianness has a very meaningful, logical acceptance in Tagore because there is faith in our traditions but at the same time, it is linked with contemporary concerns.

Tagore's spirituality as one observes in his plays is not mere mysticism but a revival of connection with all forms of life. Therefore, one cannot associate his spiritual concerns with conventional spiritual faiths but profound meaning needs to be added. His spirituality is not a day dreaming but a thoughtful acceptance of underneath changes in human personality. The revival of Indian spiritual values has a different connotation in Tagore. He is not rigid in the process of accepting the life values because he admits a combination of values irrespective of their origin place. Therefore, there is no severe east-west conflict in Tagore but a very thoughtful acceptance or denial. The message of freedom in the present play speaks a different freedom altogether. Amal's freedom in *The Post Office* is his escape from physical pains and also from a forced confinement that stops him from the involvement in Nature and her beautiful landscape. He represents the pains of thousands of children like him who are not allowed by their parents to meet Nature with all openness of mind and body.

Indian identity broadly speaking Indianness has a very different acceptance in Tagore because there is faith in our traditions but at the same time, it is linked with contemporary concerns also a straight way denial of conventional practices, beliefs that lack a scientific, logical foregrounding. Tagore's spirituality as one observes in his plays is not mere mysticism but a revival of connection with all forms of life. Therefore, one cannot associate his spiritual concerns with conventional spiritual faiths but anticipate a profound interpretation on the part of reader. The plays of Tagore, in short, are the plays of ideas. There may be least political or any serious conflict in his plays but the metaphysical, symbolic nature of his play rejuvenated Bengali theatre in particular and Indian theatre in general. Tagore, the spiritual sentinel, stands at the isthmus where divert currents meet but provoke a philosophical, symbolic meaning that transformed the very nature of drama of his time. His aspiration of reaching the universal through particulars is being certainly achieved through this play.

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