



THE CONTEXT

Quarterly e-journal of English Literary Studies

International, Indexed & Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal

Publication details and instructions for authors:

www.thecontext.in

This is an Open Access Journal[#]

Symbolism in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*

Dr Chandrashekhar Ashok Dawane

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Rajarshi Shahu Mahavidyalaya (Autonomous), Latur. MS.

Abstract

Symbolism is a literary device that uses symbols, be they words, people, marks, locations, or abstract ideas to represent something beyond the literal meaning. The concept of symbolism is not confined to works of literature: symbols inhabit every corner of our daily life. One of the most remarkable features of Rabindranath Tagore's play *The Post Office* is the use of symbolism. Tagore uses different phrases, words, characters symbolically. The reader and the audience need to interpret them for their underlying significance. Tagore himself gave an interpretation of *The Post Office*. The *Post Office* itself becomes a symbol of the universe, the king stands for God, and Postmen are the six seasons representing the visible nature. The post office is a sort of bridge between the known and the unknown. The king's letter is a suggestive symbol.

Keywords: *Symbolism, Phrases, Characters, Nature, King*



Symbolism in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*

Dr Chandrashekhar Ashok Dawane

Rabindranath Tagore was a man of versatile genius who achieved image in almost the entire literary genre. He was chiefly a poet, novelist and writer of short stories. He also wrote a large number of plays and achieves a high degree of Excellence. He may be regarded as one of the pioneers of drama in this country. He wrote his dramas like his poems and novels. His dramas were subsequently translated into English. His literary works were rendered into English by diverse hands. He himself translated *Gitanjali* from Bengali to English but the bulk of his literary works were translated into English by other scholars. Tagore was a prolific writer. He tried his hand successfully almost all the major forms of literature as Edward Thompson point out- Tagore's plays are of every kind like tragic, symbolic, comic and radical. Tagore's major players are Nalini, Chitra, Malini, Raja or The King of Dark Chamber, Dakghar or *The Post Office*, *Muktadhara* and *Chandalika*. We can divide the dramas of Tagore into two classes. The earlier non-symbolic drama such as *Sacrifice* and *The King and the Queen* and the latter symbolic drama such as *The Post Office*, *The Cycle of Spring* and *Red Oleanders*. Of the non-symbolic place some of them like *Karan Karan* and *Kunti* and *Devayani* are one scene playlets. *Malini* and the *Sanyasi* are slightly larger and may be regarded judged from the technical point of view as plays of preparation for apprenticeship for Major play like *Sacrifice*.

The Post Office is the most popular of all Tagore's plays and has been successfully presented on the stage in India and abroad. It has in its ingredient of a tense human drama, a moving fairy tale and a deeply suggestive spiritual symbol. *The Post Office* (Bengali version) was composed in 1911. It belongs to the *Gitanjali* period of his literary career this works during this period are coloured by reflection on death and a mysterious call from far off. *The Post Office* is a symbolic representation of these different currents of thoughts. The letter is the most suggestive symbol in the play. It comes from a distance mysterious land bringing message from someone whom we hold dear to us. It is a sort of the bridge between the known and the unknown. To Amal's mind the postman is a specially privileged person for he establishes communication between the distance and the nearby. *The Post Office* itself provides a realistic background to the symbolism of the letter.

M. M. Bhattacharjee says- The symbolism in *The Post Office* is delicate and has been interpreted in more ways than one.



The story of *The Post Office* is simple enough. The play divided into two acts. Amal is the main character described in the Play. He is an orphan who has been adopted by Madhav. He is ill and Madhav is most anxious to save his life. On the advice of the village physician, he has confined Amal within a small room as his contact with the wind and the sun is confirmed considered harmful. Amal looks at the stream of life in the outer world from the window of his room and gets fascinated by it.

There is a post office near Amal's window, and he imagines that the king's postman will one day bring a letter for him. His physical condition deteriorates and one day he sinks into eternal sleep. The Action of the play in the first act is mainly unfolded by means of dialogues. The exposition of the play consists of dialogue between Madhav and the village doctor and a dialogue between Madhav and Gaffer both the dialogue is more or less on a naturalistic level. They both focus on boy of uncertain age, an orphan who has lost his mother in infancy and his father the other day who is besides ailing from some illness from which there is no chance of recovery. Madhav a fairly well to do householder with no children of his own has brought the boy in his house.

The boy being the son of a man clings to Madhav's heart in such a queer sort of way that he is ready to do everything to save the boy. The only way to save Amal according to the physician is to keep him indoors away from autumn wind and Sun. The exposition is realistic with some pointed satire against the learned, scripture quoting physician for whom the dying boy is but a patient to be treated according to the medical scriptures. What is to be particularly noted in the exposition is the fact that we are not told about what exactly is wrong with the boy. What exactly is mother's business and what exactly Gaffer does for his living, which shows that the poet playwright is intent on keeping to the essentials and does on evoking the simplest of responses. This sort of pruning to the bare essentials lends a symbolic flavor to the play and makes critics think of characters as symbolic of certain principles of life. A. E. Spoke says: Symbol as a vehicle of expression, he made scant use of it except in a broad manner through the Irish myth.

Once the exposition is over, we meet Amal, the protagonist, and find in him a nice little boy who has the characteristic Tagorian impulses and attitudes. He is imaginative, adventurous, innocent, Observant, full of curiosity, inquisitiveness, sympathetic, affectionate, docile, obedient with a mind of his own though Amal, Tagore said, was his own youth. Amal was conceived most obviously in a true romantic fashion. But what makes this highly idealized angel of a child acceptable is the correctness. Are concreteness this highly idealized angle of a child acceptable is the correctness of the terms in which his character has been worked out. He sounds credible most of the time except in places where there is intentional poeticality as in. Amal says- Uncle, do you think it (the Hill) is meant to prevent us crossing over? It



seems to me because the earth can't speak; it raises its hands into the Sky and beckons. And those who leave far off and sit alone by and those who leave far off and sit alone by their windows can. And see the signal.

The naturalistic level simplifies and rarefied to some extent, is maintained in Act I. There are only two occasions where the naturalistic level is slightly keyed up to a fairly symbolic level-one where Amal and Watchman talk about time, the Watchman tells of the land of which no one knows anything, the land to which all of us have to go one day and of a greater doctor Who will come and let us free, and Amal says-When will this great doctor come for me? I can't stick it here anymore?

There are obviously some suggestions about death and God. But the talk of the child is so natural and realistic in context that it is absolutely not necessary to read a deeper meaning than is suggested by the surface level, like the soul's longing for the beyond, for death, for eternity and so on. The irony lies in the implied suggestions of death, contrasted with the child's innocent desire to go to the land to which all of us have to go one day and all this is in the context of child's impending death.

The second occasion is where Amal and the boys speak of the King's postman. It is here that Tagore hints that some symbolic meaning, the seasons are might be God. The post office might be the whole universe and nature with her seasons like Badal and Sarath might be the agents through whom God sends his message.

Amal: Who are they? Tell me their names.

A Boy: One's Badal

Another Boy: Another's Sarat

Such examples are no more than symbolic overtones that Springs forth spontaneously without disturbing. The central naturalistic level structurally, it may be noticed the Post office is amazingly simple. The first act is being a little longer than the second. Amal is off course the central character of the play. He is present in the play all the time, except in the exposition in which thought he is physically absent, he is the focal point of the conversation.

There are number of little contrast and parallel current and cross currents which shows that beneath the apparent simplicity of structure there is clarity of vision and maturity of art. In exposition models concern for Amal is contrasted with the physicians learned unconcerned on one hand and on the other, with a more sympathetic an understanding concern of Gaffer's. Amal's encountered with the outside world, two, is worked out with great artistic subtlety. Amal's meeting with the dairyman who is unwilling to stop in the beginning, but who eventually establishes a significant relationship with him, Amal's subsequent in contact with the Watchman, later on, with the girl Sudha, and with the boy, with significant variations, are



important examples from the point of view of establishing the permanent trades in Amal's character.

We have then, in contrast with this encounter, Amal's encounters with the headman in the middle, which is anything but pleasant. The Headman is abusive, ironic, and malicious and cross all the time; he comes in anger and goes away in anger, threatening destructions. An attempt is made in this Act to place positive situations, the death of a child at the centre of the play and remove as many sources of sentimentality as possible. Amal is made a foster child of Madhav and not then natural son; Amal's foster mother the aunty is never brought on the stage and the relationship between Amal and Gaffer postponed to act II. Amal is the central, the most dominating character in the play. Our attention, therefore, is focused on him. He is a romantically conceived child with Tagorian qualities. His desires, longing fancies, Intuitions, etc. Springs naturally and spontaneously out of the situation he encounters. In accordance with the promoting of the situation he would like to be a number of things, a workman going about finding things to do, Curd seller, a bird, a Champa flower, the King's postman and so on. He would love to go about and see everything that there is, or go beyond the Hills. The central theme of the Post office is love.

The very first speech of Madhav in act I strike the keynote. What a state I am in! Before he came, nothing mattered. I felt so free. But now that he has come, Goodness knows from where, my heart is filled with his dear self, and home will be no home to me when he leaves. Like Madhav almost everyone else except the Headman, establishes a relationship of affection with Amal. Love is essentially creative and it transforms people into better human beings. Amal is in love with life and the living Universe and hence every moment of his life is significant to him. His contact with the Outside World is first with sense and when the sense exhausts their capacity, with his imagination. The most important theme that intersects. The central theme of love is that of death. The play starts with Amal being on the brink of death and it ends with his actual death. What is most significant to the play is that though Madhav, the Physician, and Gaffer each in his own ways, are full of solicit concern for Amal's impending death. Amal is totally unaware of his predicament. He's all the time interested in living and death comes to him as a matter of course.

The Post Office follows the hour glass structure. In first act, the sick child quoting nears the window muses and talks to the stranger that move along; then in the second act, the child is in bed and people talk to him or watch him sleep. In the second act the hour glass reverse its position and direction of the flow changes. Tagore's play, as is evident from first Act, is not a playoff action, but a play of feeling. A play of Carnival delights an internal identity. It synthesizes the rhythmic intensity of Western tragedy with the platitude of Indian folk and classical drama.



In the second act, the hour glass shows reversal and the direction of the flow changes. Amal's condition has become worse on account of exposure to the wind near the window. So, he is advised by Madhav to keep his bed. Gaffer soon comes as a faqir and narrates to Amol about the parrots Isle as a land of wonders and a haunt of birds that simply sings and fly. He informed Amal that he would build a small cabin for himself among their crowd of nest and passed his days counting the sea waves. Amal longs to be a bird. Amal then expresses a wish to marry the niece of the curd seller, with a pair of Pearl drops in her ears and dressed in a lovely red saree. A touch of pathos and symbolic references is lent when Amal expresses- I have been feeling a sort of darkness coming over my eyes since the morning. Everything seems like a dream. All his pain is gone; he is in deep sleep. The Headmen and Gaffer are beside him. Sudha, according to her promise, comes with flowers and place them in Amal's own hands. He gets worse and die. "The place pathos" Observes Edward Thompson, "And easy simplicity will survive even that incongruous King at the end". "The poet's skills have avoided catastrophe" says Edward Thompson, if the language had been a shade less perfect in simplicity and Naturalness, the play would have sagged downward into a hopeless mush and welter of sentimentalism.

Act II except the last scene, moves on a naturalistic level garnished with some symbolic overtones like the blank slip of papers, the shutting and opening of Windows and the knocking outside. The knocking definitely takes us to the level of fantasy. But whatever happens, even on this level, is more or less in a sense realistic. The scene with the Kings Harold and the state physician is not to be taken as a symbolic at all, but as realistic. The scene can be interpreted as realistic if we take these two mysterious characters similar to the faqir who is Gaffer in disguise.

The last scene may be interrupted in three possible ways. It can be realistic in the sense expressed above. It can be realistic if we take the two mysterious characters are real, as real persons sent by the King. It can be fantasy, something that occurs with the consciousness of the child, a kind of dream. Induced by his obsession with the King no specific hint is thrown by the poet to choose either of the above interpretations. It is a teasing sort of sad scene because we cannot interpret it successfully. However hard we may try to do so. In order to best appreciate the scene, we should surrender ourselves to it and allow it to work upon our feelings rather than a pound of intellect. The level of the play is basically naturalistic, except in the last scene where there is shift to another level that is of fantasy and symbolism compelling surrender.

The central positive relationship in Act II is that of Amal and Gaffer and other relationships are contrasted with it. Gaffer is the one person who has the right wave length to establish throughout relationship with Amal on the level of imagination and intuition. This may be contrasted with Madhav's, blind and helpless affection, with



the physician's indifference with the Curd sellers suggested sympathy and with the headman's aggressive destructiveness. The actual pathos of death related with permanent loss is withdrawn. There is no sign, no whipping, no beating of the breast, but just a peaceful, mysterious, even joyous crossing from life to death. The actual moment of death is transferred into something that is mysterious, joyous even humorous and tender.

Amal's desire to get a letter from the King's grows into an obsession in Act II. He has been reconciled to his illness and confinement by the Post office. Gaffer is late to tell him that the letter is on the way and Amal almost sees him coming with a 'lantern in his hand'. But it is the headman who comes with a blank slip of paper and sneeringly tells that it is a letter from the King. The contemptuous headman interrupts and says that the King would be calling on Amal shortly and that he would like to have puffed rice from Amal. Gaffer reads into the letter gentle, and encouraging meaning and saves that the King's state physician would himself come to see Amal. It is followed by a knocking, which in its turn is followed by the arrival of King's State physician. One thing is followed by another naturally inevitably and beautifully. Amal's character has a consistency which makes it rounded and thoroughly individualized, romanticized and idealized.

The Post office is the best known of the symbolic plays by Tagore. He was a more thoroughgoing symbolist. He called it a prose lyric in dramatic form. It symbolizes the spiritual quest of the individual soul. It deals with the longing for freedom of Amal, a little boy who has been ill, confined to the room and not allowed to go outside. Tagore makes habitual use of symbolism.

Works cited

- Bhattacharjee, M. M. Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Thinker. Macmillan, 2004
- Thompson, Edward J. Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work. Calcutta: Y. M. C. A. publishing House, 1921
- Tagore, Rabindranath. The Post Office. Wisdom Tree, New Delhi. 2002.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. Reminiscences. Madras: Macmillan, 1974.

#Copyright permissions and liabilities are the sole responsibility of the author(s). Association, Journal and all Editorial members are NOT responsible for any copyright infringement.