

Rediscovering Symbolism in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*

Shalini Yadav

Assistant Professor
Jaipur National University
Jaipur, India.

Rabindranath Tagore is an exceptional stature in the history of Indian drama in English. He was a man of the classics of Indian drama and was, at the same time, alive to the European dramatic tradition. His career as a dramatist may be divided into three periods, namely—pre-Gitanjali period, Gitanjali period and post-Gitanjali period. During the pre-Gitanjali period he wrote *Sacrifice*, *King and Queen*, *Malini*, and *Balmiki-Pratibha*. During the Gitanjali period appeared *Autumn Festival*, *The Castle of Conservatism*, *The King of the Dark Chamber* and *The Post Office*. During the post-Gitanjali period he wrote *The Cycle of Spring*, *The Free Current Tent* and *The Red Oleanders*. The range and variety of his drama is astounding. Many of his themes are borrowed from Indian mythology, Buddhist legends and other classical resources without any creative reticence or scruple. Edward Thompson remarks, “All these dramas are vehicles of thought rather than expression of action.”¹ Tagore achieved a complete dramatic integration in his *The Post Office*.

The Tagorean drama is more a play of symbols than of characters and incident. Most of the characters are shadowy and featureless. They are important only in so far as they stand for an idea or a feeling. According to K. R. S. Iyengar they symbolically express a philosophy “Not the logic of careful plotting, but the music of ideas and symbols is the soul of this drama.”² Even the titles of plays and names of characters are symbolic. It is a thrill and a revelation watching the play behind the play suggested by these symbols. Tagore’s symbols and images are charged with profound intimations.

A symbol expresses two levels of meaning. That is, symbolic words refer to something which suggests a range of reference beyond itself. A symbol works through association or suggestion. A symbol is an integral part of a context, whereas an image can exist without a context. An image has only one meaning, whereas a symbol can have layer after layer of meanings. It is rich in suggestion. Thus, a symbol is an inimitable literary tool to make a drama highly symbolic.

The King of the Dark Chamber and *The Post Office* are considered the most symbolic of Tagore’s plays. But these plays are mystic in nature and deal with personal quest and desire. These highly symbolic dramas effectively convey Tagore’s vision of the universals behind the particulars. This following well-considered view of Prof. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar clearly defines the nature of Tagore’s drama:

“When Tagore applied his mind to a current problem—social, political, economic – the heart ruled the head; and the heart in its turn, beat in response to abiding intuitions, not the restrictive formulas of creed, caste or custom. The light of the soul’s illumination led him, not the will-o-the-wisp or agonizing dialectics. Whatever the problem, Tagore leapt from the circumference to the centre and seized it in terms of universality. The poet sees clear than others, further than others.”³

The Post Office was originally written in Bengali in 1912 and the play narrates the story of a young boy Amal who is confined to his house because of illness. The play is designed as a simple play by Tagore. The character list is short, and Tagore has used common language style. It is a story of a young boy, Amal, who has an intense curiosity of the outside world, and yearns for the type of knowledge that can't be learned from a book. He is forbidden by the village doctor

to move out of doors because he is sick and that doctor is diagnosing him. He lies confined to his room and talks to a lot of friends who pass through the path nearby the window of his room and who are set to pastor to his curious, innocent mind in the most delightful way possible. He not only feels happy but also makes those who come in contact with him very happy. He is keen to journey from this world to the next, is happy in the fertile world of his imagination.

In this play *The Post Office*, the sick boy Amal is symbolically shown by Rabindranath Tagore to have a desire, to have a communion with the outside world. Rabindranath Tagore has written about this personal interest in *Reminiscences*:

*“Going out of the house was forbidden to us; in fact we had not even the freedom of all its parts. We perforce took our peeps at nature from behind the barriers. Beyond my reach there was this limitless thing called the Outside, of which flashes and sound and secrets used momentarily to come and touch me. It seemed to want to play with me through the bars with so many gestures. But it was free and I was bound—there was no way of meeting.”*⁴

The *Post Office* is a story of an ill boy Amal who looks out of his room window at the colorful life outside; a curd-seller coming from a village near the hills, a little girl with a basket of flowers, groups of cheerful children, the alert watchman, and the postman who brings letters from the king.

The opening of the play is very illuminating. Madhav, Amal's guardian, is a man that believes in learning from Books, and feels more comfortable in home than outside. He is very much worried about Amal, his sick child whom he loves very much and who is so quiet with all his pain and sickness. His concern and fretfulness for the child, his love of him and his interest in earning money are just contrasted with the learned unconcern and impudence of the doctor who says: *“In medicine as in good advice, the least palatable is the truest.”*⁵ Madhav tells Gaffer that after the arrival of the boy earning has become very significant for him. He says:

*“Formerly earning was a sort of passion with me: I simply could not help working for money. Now I make money and as I know it is all for this dear boy, earning becomes a joy for me.”*⁶

The transient concerns of the money-oriented materialistic world and the intense desires of the child keen to be lost in a world of sensation are juxtaposed most brilliantly.

The Dairyman is another character; he is an ordinary curd supplier. He is not a well-read person but experienced. The play moves to a different stage with the arrival of the Dairyman. The boy is overjoyed with delight to see the Panchmura hub and the Shamli river near the Dairyman's village. He, then, goes on giving all the details about the village. There is a moment of realization and another moment of ignorance; He expresses his fear at the tune of the Dairyman. *“I can't tell you how queer I feel when I hear you cry out from the end of that road, through the line of those trees.”*⁷ The Dairyman who feels irritated in the beginning gets closer to the boy and tells him that he has learnt the art of remaining himself happy by selling curds when the boy teaches him how to be happy selling curds.

The Watchman is a loyal servant to the king; he is conversant of the government and King's systems. Amal tells the Watchman, *“Oh yes, your work is great too.”*⁸ The watchman, who was not keen to talk to Amal in the beginning, says in the end, *“I will drop in again tomorrow morning.”*⁹ Even he expresses his warmth to the boy by telling him something about the gong and the town. The other people in the play, too, love the boy. Amal is innocent, pure and simple. He is a nice little boy, imaginative, observant, and full of curiosity and wonder. He would like to be a squirrel, a workman going about finding things to do, a curd-seller, the king's postman, a bird and so on. He would love to fly away with the time to that land where no one knows anything.

The Headman is an Indian who is given power by the king but he is not popular with the local population. He gets annoyed at Amal and calls him “a wretched monkey”¹⁰ and says toward the end

*“This little child does have an instinct of reverence. Though a little silly, he has a great heart.”*¹¹

Sudha is a girl who gathers flowers. She feels happy to do the work of her parents. Finally there is a group of boys, they give confidence to Amal to resist the doctor and leave the house.

To understand Tagore’s ideology one should understand usage of symbolism in this play which is central to understanding his ideology. Tagore was also an Indian under British colonial rule like other Indians. While Brittan had gone astray from many of its colonies it still held onto India which wanted to be freed from its rule. Many Indians wanted to liberate themselves from British rule and get back their independence. But at the same time many Indians benefited themselves from British rule and were content with the status given by colonizers. Throughout the play the current state of India is explained by using Tagore's symbols and these symbols have helped to create strong imagery of the past, present and future of the country.

In Act I, Scene I Tagore sets up the conversation between Doctor and the young boy, Amal. The doctor symbolizes the British Empire or British rule when India was under it. All the characters which are introduced throughout the play pay respect to him; they encourage Amal to listen to his decisions and say to him that whatever doctor suggests him that is for his benefits. These would be the Indians content with British rule. Some of them want Amal to rebel from the situation, the Indians who want to get rid of British rule. Amal can be seen as an Indian of transition period of the country. He wants to leave his house and wants to go out to play but at the same time he is obedient enough of the doctor to stay inside. He knows that he is too young at the moment, but he knows his future lies in leaving. He can be seen as the youth of India. His attitude is characterized by this quote, *“See that far-away hill from our window-I often long to go beyond those hills and right away.”*¹² Merely children that are not ready to rise up against the British but know that someday they will have to. They wanted to be freed from the confined environment as the country also wanted to be freed from the colonizers so they feel that after sometime when they will be more mature, they will revolt against the situation and bring some great changes. Tagore himself gave an interpretation of *The Post Office* to G. F. Andrews thus:

*“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 respectable.”*¹³

The next scene is an interesting conversation between Amal and his foster father, Madhav:

“Amal- See that far away hills from our window- I often long to go beyond those hills and right away.

*Madhav- Oh, you silly! As if there is nothing more to be done but just get up on the top of that hill and away! Eh! You don’t talk sense my boy. Now listen, since that hill stands there upright as a barrier, it means you can’t get beyond it. Else, what was the use in heaping up so many large stones to make such a big affair of it, eh!”*¹⁴

Madhav represents the older generation of Indians while Amal is representing youth of the country. He is content to stay at home and listen to the orders of the doctor. He regrets not being a more learned man, and he wants to fulfill his desire by educating his son and wants Amal to stay at home and study so that he can be a learned person. He symbolizes a generation that is too set in their ways and unwilling to stop the British rule. Madhav is content with his life now. Firstly he does not want to spend his money but now after arrival of Amal, he is so happy and

understood that money is not more important than relations. He puts his attention toward the boy's life and shares his views with Gaffer:

"Madhav- You know, brother, how hard all this getting money in has been. That somebody else's child would sail in and waste all this money earned with so much trouble—Oh, I hated the idea. But this boy clings to my heart in such a queer sort of way—

Gaffer- So that's the trouble! And your money goes all for him and feels jolly lucky it does go at all.

*Madhav- Formerly, earning was a sort of passion with me; I simply couldn't help working for money. Now, I make money, and as I know it is all for this dear boy, earning becomes a joy to me."*¹⁵

This characterizes Madhav's willingness to let the younger generation deal with the British rule. He talks about materialized world and young generation.

After that Amal meets with all the other characters- the Dairyman, followed by the Watchman, followed by the Headman. All three of these characters symbolize different working class levels of the Indian population. The Dairyman is the laborer and he is discontented with his work but would not dare go against British rule, he encourages Amal to accept his book learning and not venture out of the house. When Amal asks him to teach him to cry curds, he encourages him to study:

"Amal- And you'll teach me to cry curds and shoulder the yoke like you and walk the long, long road?

*Dairyman- Dear, dear, did you ever? Why should you sell curds? No, you will read big books and be learned."*¹⁶

The Watchman represents an Indian that follows British rule but does not know why, and more importantly doesn't care why. He is content with his job and does not question his orders. In one important exchange of dialogues between Amal and the watchman, Amal talks symbolically about time when Indians should start freeing themselves from the British because time waits for none. Time is also one of the important and recurrent symbols in the play which is shown in this conversation:

"Amal- Won't you sound the gong, Watchman?

Watchman- The time has not yet come.

Amal- How curious! Some say the time has not yet come, and some say the time has gone by! But surely your time will come the moment you strike the gong!

Watchman- That's not possible; I strike up the gong only when it is time.

Amal- Yes, I love to hear your gong.... Tell me, why does your gong sound?

*Watchman- My gong sounds to tell the people. Time waits for none, but goes on forever."*¹⁷

This exchange is Amal telling the Watchman that his generation has the power and timing to awake the Indians to revolt against British rule, the just need to strike the metaphorical gong and start the revolution. The Watchman responds with, *"That is not possible; I strike the gong only when it is time."*¹⁸ This shows that while India may be ready to rid themselves of the British not all the people are willing. The Headman is the last working class person presented by Tagore. He is the British controlled Indian. He gains from British control and would be unwilling to be involved in change. The three "men" symbolize Tagore's views on the current Indian generation who has become habitual of the way of they are living but the young generation of the country will take a step ahead to make them free from the confined environment of the British rule and is waiting for the right time to arrive.

In the same sequence, when Amal expresses his doubts whether his doctor will let him out, the Watchman boosts up his morale and tells him that one greater than he comes and lets us free:

“Amal- But the doctor won't let me out.

Watchman- One day the doctor himself may take you there by the hand.

Amal- He won't. You don't know him. He only keeps me in.

Watchman- One greater than he comes and lets us free.”¹⁹

But before coming to the climax we see the images of doors and windows sustaining and developing the central image of freedom. To break open the doors or to see out through the windows is itself a longing for liberation from a cage.

At another side there is a set of characters- Sudha and a group of Boys who are symbols of India's youth generation. Sudha symbolizes the young and naive group. She thinks that Amal should listen to the doctor, by saying that he will be naughty if he doesn't listen. However in the end she still has a sense of being willing to listen to Amal's ideas in the future. The group of boys is the future of India, they are willing to defy the doctor and encourage Amal to join them. While Amal does not join them we get the sense that this group will someday rise up and control India.

They talk:

“A boy- Come out and play with us, yes do.

Amal- Doctor won't let me out.

A boy- Doctor! Do you mean to say you mind what the doctor says? Let's be off; it is getting late.”²⁰

This exchange of dialogues of Amal and one boy of the group of boys shows that how Tagore has used symbolic language to explain the meaning. This conversation clearly indicates that these boys represent youth of India and wants to get freedom as soon as possible and do not mind whatever British rulers have said or decided. They say to Amal that it is already getting late so we should rise and do needful for our country very soon.

Amal sees the vision of the Parrot Isle. From the moment he is aware of the presence of the Post Office, he starts feeling happy. The feeling of freshness and happiness Amal gets is in correspondence with the coming of the king's messenger. When Royal Physician asks him about his health, he tells him:

“Royal Physician- What is this? How close it is here! Open wide all the doors and windows. (Feeling Amal's body) How do you feel my child?

Amal- I feel very well, doctor, very well. All pain is gone. How fresh and open! I can see all the stars now twinkling from the other side of the dark.”²¹

In this paper an effort has been done to rediscover the handling of symbols in Tagore's play *The Post Office* and Tagore has used this tool effectively to express controversial political views and the state of colonial India. Tagore's use of symbolism is brilliant. It makes his play seem subtle and inspired. Tagore does not criticize British Colonialism by blunt contemptuous writing and writes about the effects of Colonialism on India. He explains India's past, present and future by using symbols in his play. His characters are very simple yet they are carefully planned. He set out with the intention of writing a play about Indian people under British rule, and through his use of symbolism, he succeeds in his intentions of making clear the situation of Indian people in colonial period.

Works Cited:

1. Thompson, Edward J. *Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work*. Calcutta: Y. M. C. A. Publishing House. 1921. pp. 19.

2. Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Asia Publishing House, Bombay. pp. 143.
3. Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Asia Publishing House, Bombay. pp. 144.
4. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Reminiscences*. Madras : Macmillan, 1974. pp. 6.
5. Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Post Office*. Wisdom Tree, New Delhi. 2002. pp. 7.
6. Ibid. pp. 8.
7. Ibid. pp. 20.
8. Ibid. pp. 27.
9. Ibid. pp. 27-28.
10. Ibid. pp. 28.
11. Ibid. pp. 54.
12. Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Post Office*. Wisdom Tree, New Delhi. 2002. pp. 12.
13. Chakravorthy, B. C. *Rabindranath Tagore, His Mind and Art*. Young India Publications, New Delhi. pp. 133.
14. Ibid. pp. 12.
15. Ibid. pp. 8.
16. Ibid. pp. 19.
17. Ibid. pp. 22.
18. Ibid. pp. 22.
19. Ibid. pp. 24.
20. Ibid. pp. 35.
21. Ibid. pp. 56.