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The Post Office: Protest in the Guise of an Allegory

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Abstract:

It cannot be denied that Tagore, besides being a great poet, was also an educationist. Throughout his life he was very much up and doing in implementing his ideas about education in which he tried to make a unification of the Oriental and the Occidental sensibilities. Not only do his scholarly essays and full-length plays but even the small plays he had often composed within a very short time or even overnight for the young ones bear evidence to this. Tagore was also a reformer, a man with an open mind. This liberalism sometimes led him to go into clashes with the established traditions that obstructed the growth of humanity. He always wanted to break free from its tentacles whenever it was necessary. 'The Post Office', a very short symbolic play about an ailing boy embodies his protest against the so-called orthodoxy of the society. The play also incarnates the Renaissance man's eternal longing to see the unseen, know the unknown and attain what appears to be unattainable. By linking knowledge with the base of society Tagore, through the life of the protagonist Amal, also advocates for the upliftment and deliverance of the soul which, in its turn, would obviously nourish our understanding of the world and the humanity as well.

Keywords: Oriental, Occidental, reformer, symbolic, liberalism, tradition, orthodoxy, Renaissance man, knowledge, humanity.

Introduction:

Drama is a kind of literature which mainly expresses its meanings through acting. The appeal in a symbolic drama is chiefly dialogue dependent which delivers the ultimate effect. Hence, it is bound within the confines of sensory perception. But, at the same time there are some incidents or occasions which cannot be comprehended solely through sense experiences; they demand some supra-sensory feelings and understandings. Tagore's 'The Post Office' is such a kind of play that breaks through the confines of normal intelligibility and takes us to a realm that exists beyond the limits of sensory perceptions.

The term allegory has been derived from Greek 'allegoria' meaning 'speaking otherwise'. According to J.A.Cuddon, "an allegory is a story in verse or prose with a double meaning – a primary or surface meaning and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning. It is a story, therefore, that can be read, understood and interpreted at two levels."¹ There is not any doubt that Tagore's 'The Post Office' may be read at more than one level and often the interpretations vary.

Prime concern of the play:

The play 'The Post Office' is very short in length (containing 399 dialogues in all) and was composed within the short span of a single night. The central figure of this play is a little boy Amal who has been sick for some days. The main concern of the play is obviously death, the decay caused by it and its paralysing effect which gives rise to a deep sense of

melancholy. But, in spite of the prevalence of death, it is more important to see how Tagore has portrayed death in this play.

Most of the critics are of the opinion that the play is about ultimate freedom – the release of the soul from the confinement of the body. It was W.B. Yeats, the famous Irish poet of the 20th century, who commented after the play was staged in London:

The deliverance sought and won by the dying child is the same deliverance which rose before his imagination. Mr. Tagore had said, when once in the early dawn he heard amid the noise of a crowd returning from some festival this line out of an old village song, “Ferryman, take me to the other shore of the river.” It may come at any moment, though the child discovers it in death, for it always comes at the moment when the ‘I’ seeking no longer for gains that cannot be ‘assimilated with its spirit’, is able to say, “All my work is thine.”²

It is to be noticed that the poet Yeats has put much emphasis on the deliverance of the soul – it is what is sought by the ‘dying child’ and is ultimately ‘won’. Mr. R.N. Roy in his book ‘Rabindranath Tagore: the Dramatist’ has also spoken of the issue in this way:

Amal is the soul of man and the king stands for God... ‘The Post Office’ dramatizes the struggle of the soul to free itself from the ties of the earth and become one with the Universal soul of God.³

In both the instances cited above we can see that it is the soul and its release which is the prime factor of the play. But, another important factor to consider is Amal’s earnest desire and longing for the far, the external world which lies beyond, to which he does not have any access. The point that I’d like to make is that Tagore has expressed a kind of protest against the clasp that society tries to forge onto an individual in his/her way of life. The limited world that Amal inhabits exerts a claustrophobic effect upon him and he tries to break free from such a confinement. But there is a clash – the clash between his mind and body – one is imaginative and fertile while the other is feeble and diseased that fails to provide adequate support to fulfil his desires. But Amal’s longing to see the unseen, to surmount the seemingly unsurmountable is irrepressible. This is evident from the beginning of the play, in his conversation with Madhav:

Amal: Wish I were a squirrel! – It would be lovely. Uncle, why won’t you let me go about?

Madhav: Doctor says it’s bad for you to be out.

Amal: How can the doctor know?

Madhav: What a thing to say! The doctor can’t know and he reads such huge books!

Amal: Does his book-learning tell him everything?

Madhav: Of course, don’t you know!

Amal: (with a sigh) Ah, I am so stupid! I don’t read books.

Madhav: Now, think of it; very, very learned people are all like you; they are never out of doors.

Amal: Aren’t they really?

Madhav: No, how can they? Early and late they toil and moil at their books, and they've eyes for nothing else. Now, my little man, you are going to be learned when you grow up; and then you will stay at home and read such big books, and people will notice you and say, "He's a wonder."

Amal: No, no, uncle; I beg of you, by your dear feet – I don't want to be learned; I won't.

Madhav: Dear, dear; it would have been my saving if I could have learned.

Amal: No, I would rather go about and see everything that there is. ⁴

It is clear from the above conversation that Amal's imaginative mind unfurls its wings as he longs to be a squirrel. He wants to run up to the other side of the yard where he sees 'auntie' grinding lentils in the quern and the squirrel 'sitting with his tail up' and with his wee hands 'picking the broken grains of lentils and crunching them.' When Madhav informs him that the doctor has prohibited him to go outside for it would affect his already ailing health, with child-like natural curiosity he asks his uncle how the doctor could know everything. When he is told that it is because the doctor reads 'huge books' that he knows everything, Amal very simply puts forward an apparently innocent question: "Does his book-learning tell him everything?" This is surely a dig to the traditional concept prevalent in the society that knowledge gathered from books is everything one needs to achieve for it is highly esteemed. Tagore, who himself was not bred with institutionalized knowledge is voicing his protest here and upholding the necessity of learning in a way that will plug oneself with the natural phenomena one grows up in. He wants to say that any learning divorced from its natural surrounding is not learning in the true sense of the word.

Tagore's concept of education:

Tagore always thought that education is actually a part and parcel of social growth, that education must be achieved grounding itself upon the available social structure. Since the colonial time it has become customary with us to equate education with literal knowledge. The measure of one's knowledge, even in the villages and mufassils is determined by how many examination one has passed, by the number of degrees one has accumulated so far. We know that the colonial system of education was modelled on Europe. Tagore was aware of its good effects in that continent. As he makes it clear in his discussion about this in one of his articles:

যুরোপে মানুষ সমাজের ভিতরে থাকিয়া মানুষ হইতেছে ... লোকে যে বিদ্যা লাভ করে সে বিদ্যাটা সেখানকার মানুষ হইতে বিচ্ছিন্ন নহে ... সেখানকার বিদ্যালয় সমাজের সঙ্গে মিশিয়া আছে, তাহা সমাজের মাটি হইতেই রস টানিতেছে এবং সমাজকেই ফলদান করিতেছে। ⁵

[In Europe people are getting reared as they inhabit the society . . . The knowledge one derives there is not divorced from the people. . . The institutions there are interlinked with the society, they are deriving their sap from the societal ground and giving fruit to the society. (Translation mine.)]

As for Tagore, the aim of education is the total fructification of the humanistic possibilities. When Amal is told "very, very learned people are all like you; they are never out of doors", he gets horrified and expresses his unwillingness to become learned. Tagore is also satirical here about the process of learning that keeps oneself confined indoors. The protagonist Amal, in his little child-like intelligence realises that it will never satisfy his soul and voices his protest – "No, I would rather go about and see everything that there is." When

Madhav wants to know from him what there is so much to see about, Amal's imagination unfurls again and he says that he wants to go beyond the hills that he can see from the little window of his room. To Madhav it is a silly thing to do, it makes no sense to him. For him the hill is there to act as a barrier, 'it means you can't go beyond it.' The contrast is evident when little Amal speaks in a different vein, "It seems to me because the earth can't speak it raises its hands into the sky and beckons. And those who live far off and sit alone by their windows can see the signal. But I suppose the learned people – " ⁶ The speech is stopped midway by Madhav, his present guardian who considers it nothing but 'nonsense' and takes this as Amal's craziness. Actually Tagore wants to criticize too much matter-of-factness of people like Madhav and exposes the ingrained hollowness of the so-called process of learning.

Once again, through the portrayal of the characters like the Dairyman, the Watchman and the flower-girl Sudha the poet dramatist has tried to uphold the dignity of labour showing that no work is demeaning which the traditional system of education fails to breed in us. Although the Dairyman expresses his grudge because of the delay caused by Amal's chatting with him in the beginning, he gradually gets involved in the conversation. Finally he offers him some curds because he thinks Amal has done some good to him. As he says, "it has been no loss to me at all; you have taught me how to be happy selling curds." ⁷ This speech, however unimportant and insignificant it might seem, carries a message to the society that this happiness is precious, this is something which is to be sought after for it fills one's life with pleasure and peace.

When the Watchman speaks about the nature of work that the postman has to perform he glorifies it in a revering vein:

Ha! Ha! Postman, indeed! Rain or shine, rich or poor, from house to house delivering letters – that's very great work! ⁸

Amal also shows his respect for the work the Watchman performs, "Oh! Yes, your work is great too." As he goes talking he is swept by imagination and feels romantic:

When it is silent everywhere in the heat of the noonday, your gong sounds, Dong, dong, dong – and sometimes when I wake up at night all of a sudden and find our lamp blown out, I can hear through the darkness your gong slowly sounding, Dong, dong, dong! ⁹

Very deftly Tagore catches the psychology of a little boy like Amal who is always desirous to explore the far and the wide and familiarize himself with the unfamiliar.

Allegory and symbolism – the idea of final deliverance:

The plays of Tagore are symbolic in nature. They mostly carry on an undertone of allegory but their main concern is to look for the infinite in the finite and the eternal in what is temporal. 'The Post Office' is not an exception in this regard. Being a symbolic play it has less incidents; the progress is kept up through the coming and going of characters – the Dairyman, the Watchman, the flower-girl Sudha and the group of boys. Their movability is contrasted with the sick, feeble Amal sitting in a closed room by the side of an open window. In the second Act he is not even able to sit in a place – he is shown lying in a bed, waiting for the arrival of the letter from the post office, waiting for the final hour to come. Now the representatives from the outer world have come and encircled his bed. His imaginative romantic mind casts its contagious spell upon the gaffer who says, "My eyes are not young;

but you make me see all the same.”¹⁰ What the gaffer could see remains a mystery – whether it was the world of wonder the boy was so eager to interact with or the world of the dark, the gloom and the mysterious associated with death. While all others are apprehensive of the approaching doom, it is Amal who remains completely unaware of this. He is not shown to bear the intolerable pain and suffering generally associated with death. Death has been shown in a new light that goes in accordance with Tagore’s philosophy of life. As Amal captures fresh bouts of sickness the doctor detects ‘a peculiar quality in the air’ and instructs Madhav to shut that one piece of window which facilitated Amal’s imaginative excursions into the outer world in the first Act. This ‘closing’ of the window blocking the sunrays to come inside allegorically signifies the blocking of the mind against the light of knowledge that facilitates all sorts of reformation. Tagore was a person who was instrumental in bringing about reformation in various sectors of the society. He was against any type of practice that would lead society in the backward direction from progress and civilization. He disliked the idea of stagnation taking ‘চরবৈতে’ [‘charoibeti’ – to move ahead] as his motto of life. That is why, when the King’s physician comes, he asks them to open up all the windows and doors that are shut. And Amal, the protagonist of the play exclaims with jubilation, “How fresh and open! I can see all the stars now twinkling from the other side of the dark.”¹¹ This opening of the doors and windows is the opening up of the new avenues to the world of eternity. The King was a very favourite analogy of Tagore for death or the Almighty and here he makes full use of that. There is the instruction for making adequate arrangement for His arrival. As the State Physician asks Madhav, “Arrange flowers through the room for the king’s visit.”¹² In his poem Gitanjali No. 50 Tagore uses the term ‘King of all kings’ to denote God. In the poem ‘Arrival’ he asks the non-believers to make preparations for welcoming the king at the dead of night. But, just as the beggar in Gitanjali No.50, materialistic men like Madhav or the Headman fail to comprehend the inner meaning of the situation; Madhav gets disappointed at Amal’s fascination for asking the King to do him a favour by making him a postman and the Headman proposes to send words to his house for making ‘really nice’ puffed rice. One does not fail to notice an implicit protest of Tagore against too much concern of the materialistic men for the world of sixpence.

All of us know that the creator of ‘The Post Office’ had some specific ideas about death. According to him death was the ‘last completeness of life’. To him life and death were the two inseparable components of a greater existence. There is no wonder then that Tagore would like to create a glorified and beautified figure of death in this play. But, we should also keep in mind that Tagore did not delineate death in such a royal fashion out of some particular creed or fixed religious belief. That is the very reason that Tagore’s portrayal of death as emancipation is very much different from that of the saints or the hermits. As Pabitra Sarkar opines:

রবীন্দ্রনাথ কখনোই বশিষ্ঠ বা ধর্ম্মবজ্র দরে তথ কথতি মুক্তির ছাঁচে ফলে অমলের মৃত্যুকো ভবনেনি। দখেনয়ে চেষ্টোও করনেনি। মৃত্যুর একটা শক্তি প্ৰথম গড়ে তলেই তাঁর ঝাম্বছলি বলে মনে হয়।¹³

[Rabindranath did never think of the death of Amal in the way the believers or the religious fundamentalists show it as so-called emancipation or mukti. Neither did he try to do it ever. It seems that he wanted to construct an artistic image of death. (Translation mine.)]

If Tagore’s concept of death were similar to that of the religious teachers he would have tried to depict this incident as an occasion of joyous celebration. But no one fails to notice an undertone of pathos and melancholy when Amal drops into the final sleep. Unlike the traditional concept of death as only deliverance from this earthly existence Tagore, like a sensitive human being, creates an ambivalence as the incident touches our heart, turns it

heavy with a spell of sadness even as showing this as a regal journey. Perhaps we can share with the poet-dramatist his depiction of death as a journey towards completeness, towards the ultimate finality where it becomes at one with the universe and we get a new concept of emancipation, of the fulfilment of desire:

আমার মুক্তি আলোয় আলোয় এই আকাশে,
 আমার মুক্তি ধুলায় ধুলায় ঘাসে ঘাসে
 দেহ মনের সুদূর পারে, হারিয়ে ফেলি আপনারে
 গানের সুরে আমার মুক্তি উর্ধ্বে ভাসে।¹⁴

[My emancipation lies in the light of this sky./ In the grass and the dust of this earth./ I lose myself in the farthest bank across the limit of my body and mind/ My emancipation floats above in the tune of my songs. (Translation mine.)]

Through his death Amal registers the chord of mukti expressed artistically in the lines of the song.

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