

Deliverance as the Theme of Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*

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Rabindranath Tagore's works are the creations of his age and the harbingers of a new era. Tagore may undeniably be regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of modern age. His approach to the problems of the modern age usually is under the following heads: woman's place in life, the relation between of God and the Individual and the relation between the Individual and society. Drama in India cannot attain to heights which it has reached in Europe, because the oriental mind, unlike them, feels shy in directly exhibiting the emotions. Kalidas is an exception in India and from his example it is evident that great drama can be written in India. Some of the dramas of Tagore are also refreshingly original and *The Post Office* is perfect in its own way. *The Post Office* is flawless in construction and its message springs spontaneously out of the plot of the human story. The theme of the play can rightly be addressed as deliverance which the child discovers in death.

The dramatic art of Rabindranath Tagore is both simple and complex. It is simple in style and expression and it is complex in the variety of its forms and in the depth of its meaning. Tagore is primarily and essentially a lyric poet and his dramatic art too is so poetic and personal that it would be more appropriate to address his plays as lyric dramas or dramatic lyrics. His works, including his dramas, are saturated with his personality and each one of his plays bears the impress of the experiences of his own inner and outer life. He writes of the mental states and moods of men and of the progress of human thought and aspiration. None of his plays is to be viewed merely objectively, as a representation of a series of events. It is really intended to produce an aesthetic and emotional experience and impression. In the words of K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar in *Indian Writing in English*;

Tagore is the most outstanding name in modern Bengali literature, And he was the one writer who first gained for modern India a place on the world literary scene. The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to him was but the beginning of a drama of recognition on a global scale to which there cannot be many parallels in literary history. He was a great poet and a great man, and he has left behind him a great institution the Visvabharati at Shantiniketan. (99)

The Post Office is the most popular of all Tagore's plays and it is possibly the best of them all. It contains elements of tense human drama, a moving fairy tale and a deeply suggestive spiritual symbol. It stirs the readers and its audience to its inmost depths and leaves a lasting impression upon their minds. It is so simple and delicate and yet so profound. The human interest is sustained and the climax is reached by means of the simplest dramatic touches. There are only two acts in *The Post Office* and there are no scenes. The theme is simple and the treatment is equally simple. It is a play of feeling, a play of carnival delight and eternal simplicity.

The *Post Office* 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 his room, and not allowed to go outside. He is a sick and lonely child under the care and protection of Madhab, who has adopted him and who does on him and desires that he should live. But there is a touch of elusiveness about his relationship with Madhab who is not his real father. In the most tense moments of his life, Amal does not think of Madhab but hear voices from far away and feels that his real father and mother are sitting by his side and speaking to him.

Madhab, Amal's step father is most anxious to preserve his life. On the advice of the village physician Madhab has confined Amal within a small room as his contact with the wind and the sun is regarded as harmful.

Madhab, who is simple and ignorant reposes full confidence in the doctor and confines Amal in a small room from the window of which Amal looks at the outer world and is fascinated by the stream of life he sees in the street. Labourers going out in search of jobs, the dairy man with his curd, the watchman with the ringing of bells and children at play, all these scenes, sights and sounds are a source of fascination to him and he is in his own turn fascinated them all. Amal is a romantically conceived child, a child-angel endowed with the characteristic Tagorean qualities. He is possessed of an intense imagination coupled with an intense love of the concrete reality. He longs to be free, to wander about, and to go beyond the hills, but essentially he is a quiet, docile child willing to submit to the dictates of his elders. He has a mind of his own, but he is unknown to protest or rebellion.

One of the most original and beautiful things in this drama is the manner in which the poet discovers through Amal the inward romance in the humdrum activities of life. It is in the fitness of things that Amal who is shut in a small room and not yet aware of the fever and fret and the monotony in the daily round of the ordinary man's work, should find something wonderful in what goes around and abroad. The Dairyman sees a new vision of his own faraway village under big trees on the Shamli River at the Punch-mura hills, of cattle grazing and women drawing water and carrying it on their heads. And it is the prosy watchman who invents the possibility of a letter coming to Amal from the king and of the King's postoffice being set near Amal's window for the purpose. Amal's sensitive imagination is set ablaze and he sees the visions of the king's postman coming down the hill side alone, a lantern in his hand and on his back a bag of letters, climbing down forever so long, for days and nights, and of his taking to the footpath on the bank where at the foot of the mountain the water-fall becomes a stream.

As in Browning's *Pippa Passes* the girl, by the mere fact of humming to herself simple songs, solves unawares other people's ticklish problems, so also Amal by merely talking to people makes them experience a sudden accession of the sheer joy of life. The characters and the situations may be representative and suggestive, conveying meanings other than the surface ones, but one can't be definite about them. The following conversation between Amal and the Watchman about Time is significant. It apparently manifests not only the Watchman's consoling and encouraging words but also Amal's indirect quest for deliverance.

Amal : Yes I love to bear your gong.....Tell me, who does your
Gong sound ?

Watchman : My gong sounds to tell the people. Time waits for none,
but goes on forever.

Amal : Where, to what land ?

Watchman : That none knows.

Amal : Then I suppose no one has ever been there, Oh, I do wish to fly with
the time to that I and of which no one knows anything.

Watchman : All of us have to get there one day, my child.

Amal : Have I too ?

Watchman : Yes you too !

Amal : But 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.

Amal : When will this great doctor come for me ? I can't stick in here any more.

Watchman : Should n't talk like that my child. (B- 69-70)

The conversation contains some suggestions about death undoubtedly, but they are expressed of course in a natural way, so that its surface level is not violated. The child's talk is so natural and realistic that it is not necessary to read a deeper meaning than is suggested by the surface level, like the longing of the soul for the beyond, for death, for eternity etc., The ironical suggestion of death in the context of the actual situation of the child's impending death is of dramatic significance.

Next there appears the girl, Sudha, the flower-seller. Amal has wished already that he were a squirrel, a curd-seller and one of the King's Postmen, and now he wishes he could help Sudha to gather flowers. She too is known for her love for Amal. She promises to come back later, and when she disappears, a troop of boys pass in the street. Amal gives them his own toys to play with and is content to observe their play. This squatting long has tired Amal, and he has to rest. If Madhav's solicitude for Amal is that of a Man of property, the Physician's that of a jailor, if the curd-seller suggests native bounty, if the Watchman signifies natural order and the Headman obtrusive authority, the girl symbolizes sweetness and beauty while the boys enact the exuberance of play and adventure. Amal himself is an angelic creature that can create the world of values in the mere act of imaginatively perceiving it. He is apparently passive person but richly creative in his own right. Only a series of casual conversations, but even so creepers of understanding and sympathy grow quickly and bind these strangers to little Amal, making him rich in imaginative experience and wise beyond his years.

In Act II, the hour-glass reverses its position, and the direction of the flow changes. In the next day, exposure near the window has worsened Amal's condition, and he is now advised by Madhav to keep to his bed. Gaffer enters as the Fakir and tells Amal that he has just come from the Parrot's Isle – a land of wonders, of hills and waterfalls, of birds flying and singing, and a land with no men at all. Amal too wants to visit the Parrot's Isle. Madhav says that the dairyman has left a jar of curds for Amal. This makes the boy dream of marrying the curd-seller's niece. The prosaic Madhav now leaving the room, Amal has Gaffer all to himself. While answering to the question of Amal, Gaffer says, the letter has "already started. In his reverie Amal sees clearly the progress of the letter as in *Rabindranath Tagore* by K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar ,

I can see it all: there, the King's postman coming down the hillside
alone, a lantern in his left hand and on his back a bag of letters; climbing
down for ever so long, for days and nights, and where at the foot of the
mountain the waterfall becomes a stream he takes to the foot path on the bank
and walks on through the rye...I can feel him coming nearer and my
heart becomes glad.(63)

Every word Amal speaks is simple, perfectly within the range of a child's natural vocabulary – yet also, in the context, charged with profound intimations. Amal thinks that how nice it would be, if he became the King's postman, delivering his letters from door to door. Madhav comes again, troubled because of the loose talk of the King sending a letter to Amal. And Amal himself feels a sort of darkness coming over his eyes since the morning, and doesn't feel like talking. Although apparently asleep, Amal's percipience is uncanny as he says that he can hear everything faraway and he can see his mother and father are sitting by his pillow and speaking to him.

Finally there is a knock on the door, and the King's Herald enters to make his announcements. Amal is just himself even in the presence of the King's Physician.

State Physician : 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.

Physician : Will you feel enough to leave your bed when the King comes in the middle watches of the night ?

Amal : Of course, I am dying to be about forever so long. I'll ask the King to find me the polar star- I must have seen it often, but I don't know exactly which it is. (B -59)

Sleep soon descends on the eyebrows of Amal and the state physician, who had flung all the windows of Amal's room open on his arrival announces that everybody is to remain quiet then, as sleep is coming over Amal, and he will sit by his pillow. He asks the oil lamp to be blown out, he wants only the star-light to stream in. He tells Sudha when she comes that he is asleep and permits her to deliver the flowers which she has brought for him into his hands. Sudha tells the physician to tell Amal that she has not forgotten him. Amal's condition deteriorates and he sinks into eternal sleep. In spite of all his enjoyments in his own world, he suffers physically and meets his death at the end of the play. Amal's aspiration and the divine response meet, and the result is new birth- not physical death. The Divine has penetrated the parched human heart, and there he will ensue the burst of a new spring of life and joy.

Thus the deliverance which the child discovers in death is the principal theme of *The Post Office*. It comes always at the moment when the self of man seeking no longer for gains that cannot be assimilated with its spirit, is able to say "All my work is thine". The play deals with the aspirations of this little boy, some of which and it is the saddest part of it, are not fulfilled at all. He is a tragedy of unfulfilled aspiration. He dies day dreaming and in longing for things not within his reach.. Thus the *The Post Office* ends in death, hence it is a tragedy. The message of deliverance is brought by the State Physician in the end, but what is to be particularly noted is that a good deal of drama, despite this, concerns with the joys which Amal wants to find by freeing himself from the limitations imposed by his uncle. Amal desires to go about and see everything that there is not only in the open street before him but also in what lies in regions beyond his immediate gaze.

It has been rightly suggested by W.B.Yeats in the preface to *The Post Office* that deliverance is the theme of the play. Tagore has explained the significance of the play in his letter to C.F.Andrews as it is quoted by A.N.Gupta and Satish Gupta in *The Post Office- A Critical Study* in the following way:

Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road. At last the closed gate is opened by the King's own Physician, and that which is 'death' to the world of hoarded wealth and certified breeds brings him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom. (A- 27)

There is a resemblance between the two plays of Tagore i.e. *The Post Office* and *The King of the Dark Chamber*. *The Post Office* is about a child with a sick body. *The King of the Dark Chamber* is about a woman with a sick soul. The King visits the sick chamber of the little, and all is well; the King visits the Dark Chamber of the Queen's heart, and all is well again as in: "I open the doors of this dark room today- the game is finished here! Come, come with me now, come outside- into the light" (647). It is more natural to assume that, as in *The Post Office*, in *The King of the Dark Chamber* too the adventure with the Divine leaves man cured in soul as well as body.

The Post Office is a moving piece of work. It abounds in feeling and its handling is delicate. The language is of an unsurpassable naturalness. The dialogue flows in even unhurried stream. The title of the play is significantly appropriate. It emphasizes to a considerable degree Amal's longing for the far-off, the unknown, the distant and mysterious and it bears upon fully the theme of the play which is in deliverance i.e. there is bondage in seclusion and there is union in freedom with the All Amal falls asleep but we are sure that when he awakes he will find himself in a world of freedom. Amal wants to be the postman of the King. This means that he will carry the message of God from place to place. And this message comes to everyone every moment through the variegated lights and colours, music and fragrance in Nature, and through the love and affection of Humanity.

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