Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) has been called the father of modern Indian stagecraft. His Post Office is originally written in Bengali as Dak Ghar and is translated into English by himself. The awardee of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Rabindranath Tagore belongs to Bengali as well as Indian literatures. His symbolic plays are drama of ideas. His symbolism often becomes excessive. The main characters of his symbolic plays are not so much persons of flesh and blood as personifications of the poet’s subjective experience. He uses symbolism in order to express deeper meaning. He is master of the technique of language; he knows how to build imagery upon imagery, how to show most common and trivial happenings with the glamour and gleam of poetic fantasy, Edward Thompson remarks about Tagore’s plays, “All these dramas are vehicles of thought rather than expression of action.”

Renaissance in Indian Literature has brought and culminated towards several significant changes in the overall writing styles and patterns. With the Renaissance in Indian Literature, readership has enlarged with a literary and education exposition. Rabindranath Tagore is one of the eminent writers of Indian Renaissance. Humanistic philosophy of Tagore can be seen in almost all his works. He preached human brotherhood, having faith in fundamental unity of mankind. He remarked that, “Even God depends upon man for perfecting his universe.” His humanism is mainly expressed through his concept of inter-personal relationship. He has reflected comprehensively and intensely on the ontological status of man in idiosyncratic dimensions and the revelation of the meaning in relation to nature and modes of inter-personal relationships. Tagore’s concept of human personality is finding its fruition through the realization of the feeling of intimacy with Nature. In Post Office he has shown the relationship between man and Nature, and has also presented the holistic view. In the vastness of Nature, we are not unknown strangers; we are her kith and kin. He also compares the beautiful Nature with our mother. He believed that Nature forms background for the development of human personality. Tagore calls his humanism the “Religion of Man”. The function of religion, according to him, then is to bring the individual into harmony in reason, in love, indeed with the Supreme Man, the Universal being. Tagore believes in the concept of freedom; true freedom is not the freedom from action, but freedom in action.

Symbolism is a device in which an object, person or situation is given another meaning beyond its literal one, usually something more abstract or non-rational than a symbol itself. Symbolism was originated in late 19th century in France and Belgium, which was an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind. The term ‘Symbolism’ is derived from the word ‘Symbol’, which derives from the Latin ‘Symbolum’, a symbol of faith, and ‘symbolus’, a sign of recognition. In literature, the style had its beginnings with the publication of ‘The Flowers of Evil’ (1857) by Charles Baudelaire. Symbolism was largely a reaction against naturalism and realism. It was in favour of imagination, spirituality, and dreams. Symbolists believed that art should represent absolute truths that could only be described indirectly. Thus, they wrote in a very metaphorical and suggestive manner, endowing particular images or objects with particular images or objects with symbolic meaning. Some of the famous precursors of symbolism are William Blake, Alexander Pushkin, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, D.G. Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and George Macdonald.

There are two main categories of symbols: (i) Universal symbols and, (ii) Contextual symbols. Universal symbols have meanings across many different works. Contextual symbols on the other hand, only have meaning within the work in which they are featured. Symbolism adds depth to a dramatic work. It causes audiences to reflect more thoroughly upon what they have seen. It is also a powerful force for communicating meaning; certain themes or ideas affect the mind of the audience more profoundly when presented indirectly through a symbol than when presented overtly. As a movement, Symbolism is very close to Romanticism. A desire to contact a reality beneath or beyond that accessible to reason and everyday observation leads to an art of indirection, suggestion, and ambiguity. The symbolists had an enormous influence on theatre. It was symbolism that provided the first clear alternative to the triumphant realist drama, and its theatres, its dramatists, and its search for alternative styles of acting and production. The late plays of Ibsen and Strindberg, strongly influenced by symbolism, continue to provide a challenging alternative to the earlier realistic works.

Post Office, internationally the most popular play of Tagore, is a play in two acts. It is a gentle and moving play that tells the story of a young boy, Amal. Confined to the house by an illness, Amal collects a host of friends who to his inquisitive, innocent mind in the most delightful way possible. With the world at his doorstep, Amal is happy in the fertile world of his imagination, and is willing, when the time comes, to journey from this world to the next. Act One presents what Amal sees through window and what happens outside the house; and the Act Two depicts all that happens inside the room, different people calling on the boy lying in his sickbed. What Amal, the delicate and sensitive child watches and imagines from his sickbed and the procession of life in which he longs to participate, constitutes the action of the play. This play offers a glimpse into Tagore’s enormous understanding of the human spirit:

1) Life is given to us, we warn it by giving it.
2) The highest education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes our life in harmony with all existence.
3) We live in a world when we live it.
Tagore wrote ‘Post Office’ after having lost his son. One night, lying in his roof garden and looking at a starlit sky, he was inspired to write this magnificent play about the ‘death’ of a child, Amal, which is in fact the boy’s liberation, and the beginning of a great voyage toward the Outside. Through the demise of the child, Tagore expresses his conviction that the full meaning of life can be grasped in death. Tagore says,

“I remember at the time when I wrote the play, my own feeling which inspired me to write it. Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road... But there is a post office in front of his window and Amal waits for the letter of king to come to him direct from the king, bringing him the message of emancipation. 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 creeds brings him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom. The only thing that accompanies him is the flower of love given to him by Sudha.”

Tagore keeps his character list short, and uses a common language style. The characters aside from Amal are each represented and defined by their function. The names of the characters are also symbolic. Amal has an intense curiosity of the outside world and yearns for the type of knowledge that can’t be learned from a book. Amal is represented as youth of India. He is also shown as being Tagore’s own son. The name Amal means pure in heart. Madhav is Amal’s guardian who believes in learning from books and feels comfortable in his home than outside. Madhav represents the older generation. Sudha, gathers flowers, is happy to do work for her parents. She symbolizes the young and naïve, and those who wish to obey the older generation. The group of boys encourages Amal to defy the doctor, leave the house and join them. They represent the future of India. The Royal Healer and the King are not literal characters; they are the metaphor for Eternity and God, illuminating that the Eastern philosophy on death is much different than that of the West. As Amal’s physical state deteriorates, his spiritual self transcends his physical state, bringing him closer to the King and his Royal Messenger. They symbolize the British Empire. The curd seller is not learned, but experienced in life. She represents someone who would not dare to go against British rule. The watchman is a loyal servant to the king; he is knowledgeable of the government and the king’s system. He represents someone who follows British rule, but does not know why, and does not appear to care why. The Headman is placed in power by king, but is not popular with locals. He represents the controlled mass, which appears to have degree of power, and is unwilling to change in order to hang on to his power.

The character of Amal makes a power impression on all. Many critics have regarded Amal’s character as Tagore’s dramatic projection of his own ‘painful experience of a circumscribed and regimented childhood’. It is easy to find in Amal as idealized picture of the poet’s own childhood, too carefully looked after by the servants. Tagore himself defended his method by recalling his own feelings that ‘Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the road.’ Amal’s innocent, curious conversation makes people recognize the sheer joy of their own lives. The dairyman says to Amal,

“It has been no loss to me at all; you have taught me how to be happy selling curds.” (Page no. 43)

The Tagorean drama is more a play of symbols than of characters and incidents. 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, “Tagore’s dramas simplisticly express a philosophy not on the logic of careful plotting, but the music of ideas and symbols are the soul of this drama.” In Post Office, the sick boy Amal is symbolically shown by Rabindranath Tagore to have a desire, to have a communication 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 berries. 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.”

Amal looks out of his room window at the colourful 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 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. Madhav tells Gaffer that after the arrival of the boy earning has become very significant for him. (Page no. 25). 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.” (Page no. 27). 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.” (Page no. 42). 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.” (Page no. 50).The watchman, who was not keen to talk to Amal in the beginning, says in the end, “I will drop in again tomorrow morning.” (Page no. 51). 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” (Page no. 52), and says toward the end “This little child does have an instinct of reverence. Though a little silly, he has a great heart.” (Page no. 86). 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.

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. Amal wants to leave his house and go out and play, but at the same time, he is obedient enough for the doctor to stay inside. The world here is symbolized by the doctor, who is always there to keep in the ‘worldly chains’. 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."

(Page no. 32). Merely children that are not ready to rise up against the British but know that someday they will have to. 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.”

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? (Page. 32).

Amal longed for freedom and also with the union with Nature. In his words, “Wish I were a squirrel! It would be lovely.” (Page no. 30). He was always willing to go outside and see the outside world. He says, “I would rather go about and see everything that there is.” (Page no. 32). He is essentially a lover of life, existentialist who is interested in here and now. He represents the universal longing for freedom. He is only a little boy, but has little interest in the worldly things. He loves Nature, imaginative world like the land of parrots and loves tiny creatures like squirrel. His obsession with the post office is the result of his facing a situation.

Amal- Post office? Whose?
Watchman- Whose? Why, the King’s surely!
Amal- Do letters come from the King to his office here?
Watchman- Of course. One fine day there may be a letter for you in there.
Amal- A letter for me? But I am only a little boy. (Page no. 48, 49).

Amal longs receive a letter from the King. He is able to bear his illness because of his desire to get a letter. Amal wanted to be a postman of the King. This means that Amal would like to be a transporter of God’s belief and spread his message door to door. Amal’s paining for king’s letter is nothing but his desire for deliverance of the soul.

Madhav represents the older generation of Indians while Amal is representing youth of the country. He stands for worldly prosperity. His main interest lies in making and saving money. He wants to be richer and richer, but for Amal only. He says to doctor, “Now I make money, and as I know it is all for this dear boy, earning becomes a joy to me.” (Page no. 27). 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 says to Amal, “Now my child, when you grow up, you will also be a learned man. People will notice you and say about you, ‘He’s a wonder”’. (Page no. 31). He symbolizes a generation that is too set in their ways and unwilling to stop the British rule. Amal does not want to be a learned man. He says to Madhav, “No, no, Uncle; I beg of you by your dear feet- I don’t want to be learned, I won’t.” (Page no. 31). Amal meets 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 labourer 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. (Page no. 41).

The Watchman represents an Indian that follows British rule but does now know why, and more importantly doesn't care. 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.”
(Page no. 44, 45)

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.” (Page no. 45). 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. (Page no. 46, 47).

But before coming to the climax we see the images of doors and windows sustaining and developing the central image of the situation of Indian people in colonial period. 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. 
(Page no. 61, 62).

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. The Royal Physician is symbolically identified with death. The Royal Physician asks Amal 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.
(Page no. 88).

Post Office is one of the deeply significant plays, which a child could read and understand, though it might intrigue the grown-ups. 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.

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