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A play of statements, Tagore's the post office

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Abstract

The post office is the largely admired of all the plays of Tagore, composed in Bengali in 1912. The post office is a relationship between Amal with the open streets, the constituency that are away from Amal's stare, the hill, the river, and the mountain the slight path where crickets squeak, where only the streak shake their tails and stab at the mire with their bills. The play includes essentials of an anxious human drama, a moving goblin fiction and a deeply indicative religious sign.

Keywords: Tagore's the post office.

1. Introduction

The Post Office (Bengali: Dak Ghar) is a 1912 play by Rabindranath Tagore. It concerns Amal, a child confined to his adopted uncle's home by an incurable disease. W. Andrew Robinson and Krishna Dutta note that the play "continues to occupy a special place in [Tagore's] reputation, both within Bengal and in the wider world." It was written in four days.

Amal stands in Madhav's courtyard and talks to passers-by, and asks in particular about the places they go. The construction of a new post office nearby prompts the imaginative Amal to fantasize about receiving a letter from the King or being his postman. The village headman mocks Amal, and pretends the illiterate child has received a letter from the king promising that his royal physician will come to attend him. The physician really does come, with a herald to announce the imminent arrival of the king; Amal, however, falls asleep (or dies) as Sudha comes to bring him flowers.

W.B. Yeats was the first person to produce an English-language version of the play; he also wrote a preface to it. It was performed in English for the first time in 1913 by the Irish Theatre in London with Tagore himself in the attendance. The Bengali original was staged in Calcutta in 1917. It had a successful run in Germany with 105 performances and its themes of liberation from captivity and zest for life resonated in its performances in concentration camps where it was staged during World War II. Juan Ramón Jiménez translated it into Spanish; it was translated into French by André Gide and read on the radio the night before Paris fell to the Nazis. A Polish version was performed under the supervision of Janusz Korczak in the Warsaw ghetto.

The Post Office is about a young boy, Amal, who is forbidden by the village doctor to move out of doors. He lies confined to his room and collects a host of friends who are ready to minister to his inquisitive, 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 happy in the fertile world of his imagination, and is willing, when the time comes, to journey from this world to the next.

The opening of the play is very revealing. Madhav is very much concerned with Amal a sick child who is "so quiet with all his pain and sickness." His anxiety for the child, his love of it and his interest in earning money are just contrasted with the learned unconcern and impertinence of the doctor who says: "In medicine as in good advice, the least palatable is the truest." Madhav tells Gaffer how earning has become very significant for him after the arrival of the boy. 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." The ephemeral concerns of the materialistic world and the keen longings of the child eager to be lost in a world of sensation are juxtaposed most vividly.

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The boy tells his uncle about his meeting with a crazy man who has a bamboo staff on his shoulder with a small bundle at the top and a brass pot in his left hand and an old pair of shoes on. He wants to go out to seek work. Realization slowly comes to him. He is rather queer in his behaviour because he intends to walk on so many streams. When people are asleep with their doors shut in the heat of the day, he will tramp on and on far, very far, seeking work. He, also, loves to talk to strangers.

With the arrival of the Dairyman the play shifts to a different level. The boy is thrilled 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 awe 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." The boy definitely teaches the Dairyman how to be happy selling curds.

In Act I of the play, there is the theme of love. Whoever comes into contact with Amal, is filled with love for him. The Dairyman who is rather irritant in the beginning gets closer to the boy and tells him that he has learnt the art of remaining himself happy by selling curds. Even the watchman expresses his warmth to the boy by telling him something about the gong and the town. The other peoples in the play love the boy, There is the theme of death also, the deliverance which the child discovers in death, as Yeats points out. Death is not something to be hated or feared, on the other hand, it is a welcome release from the earthly bonds.

They call to my home

The night is dark and my heart is fearful

Yet i will take up the lamp; open my gates

And bow to him my welcome.

What is more remarkable about *The Post Office* is the use of symbols in the play. The Post Office becomes a symbol of the universe, the king stands for God, Postmen are the six seasons representing the visible nature. The letter is the message of eternity, the message calling us to reach God. The Blank Slip of paper symbolises the message of God which one is free to interpret according to one's own lights. The Post Office is the place where messages are received and delivered and where there is ample scope for communication.

Amal's confinement to the small room symbolises the human soul imprisoned in the mortal body. His soul has received the call of the open road where there is light and beauty of the world beyond but it is denied to his soul, the imprisoning confines of the body. The only way to secure freedom of the soul is through death, as death is said to be the emancipation of spirit. Therefore the doors and windows of the room are opened on the arrival of the king's physician. The opening of the gate by the king's physician is the opening of the human mind to the nature of experience. Amal finds some comfort in his soul as death brings him spiritual freedom. Tagore himself gave an interpretation of *The Post Office*.

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 symbol of the soul longing for eternity and the relationship between the Finite and the Infinite and other symbols of the play can be ascribed to the influence of the Upanishads and certain aspects of Vaishnavism. The ideas that the infinite can only be understood in close relationship to the Finite, that man is a "finite-infinite" being conscious of his finitude only through the presence of an infinite nature within him are some of them. Soul yearns for eternity. God, too, sets out to meet the Soul. Amal's prayer for the king's letter is answered by the king who sends his royal physician. "I can feel his coming nearer and my heart becomes glad" says Amal.

Symbolism denotes something that stands for something else. It has two meanings; apparent and hidden. In post office, Tagore uses different phrases, words, characters symbolically.

On the surface level, the play is the story of pain and agony of human condition. It is the story of an orphan boy amal who has been adopted by madhav. Amal is suffering from some fatal disease and is restricted by the physician. Amal expects a letter from the king .So it is the story of agony of a child. But beneath the natural level, the play symbolizes man's yearning for the union with God. Human being, the finite, seeks fulfilment with the God, the infinite. And he is elated whenever the union takes place. This is illustrated through exquisite symbols.

AMAL: See that far away hill from the window. I long to go beyond those hills and right away. MADHAV: Oh! yoy silly! As if there is nothing more to be done but just get up to the top of the hill and away. The conversation shows the difference between the materialist and a spiritualist. Unlike a materialist, a spiritualist believes that there is another world beyond this world. The post office is therefore a symbolic representation of two currents of thought. The post office itself provides a symbolic background. It is a sort of bridge between the known and the unknown. The king's letter is a suggestive symbol .It comes from a distant, mysterious world bringing a message from someone whom we hold very dear. It is an invitation to leave the world of pain and enter into the world of eternal bliss. Time is an essential symbol, played by the watchman. We are bound by time, but we can conquer it. It calls for great suffering and pain. Amal's deliverance suggests the note.

Pleiades Theatre states that its mandate is to "introduce writers and styles not widely known to Toronto audiences" and *The Post Office* does exactly that. It is written in a style closely related to the symbolist drama that flourished in Europe at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. This form of drama that uses limited action to suggest the larger inexpressible forces to which its characters are subject. The most familiar example is Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), now best known in its setting as an opera by Claude Debussy, where an unnamed, oppressive fate seems to prevent the characters from fully expressing themselves. A play as early as Gerhart Hauptmann's *Hanneles Himmelfahrt* (1893), begins in a naturalist fashion but leaves that mode behind to explore the experiences of a dying child. It's no wonder Tagore's play should have been so popular at this time since the Hinduism and Buddhism as interpreted by Schopenhauer underlie the symbolist movement in the first place.

In *The Post Office*, characters come and go, but conflict

that drives traditional western drama is unimportant. Instead, what holds our attention is the transformation of Amal. As he grows physically weaker he grows spiritually stronger, and, in the exquisite passage at the end, as he falls into an eternal sleep, we experience the world as his dream.

Central to the success of Pleiades' production is the moving performance of Mina James (a woman) as Amal. She captures all the enthusiasm natural to a young boy along with the naïveté that makes so many of his statements charmingly humorous. Amal is quite willing to believe that the fantastic tales of the Fakir about an isle of parrot or a land without gravity are real. Unfamiliar with the ways of the outside world, Amal always believes the best of everyone and this belief transforms everyone he encounters. The Curdseller and Watchman no longer looks down on their jobs but see them in a new light because of Amal's enthusiasm. Mina James carefully depicts Amal's physical decline and Amal's ungrudging accommodation to it.

Sugith Varughese tends to bluster as Amal's uncle but sets that aside for more authentic feeling in the final third of the play. The other five member of the cast all play two or three roles and excel at keeping these roles distinct. Patricia Marceau's best role is as the Curdseller. It is lovely to watch how Amal's view of her job as exciting gradually erases the care from her face. Dylan Scott Smith effects his great physical transformation perfectly between the lame Watchman and the elegant Royal Healer whose poise bespeaks his authority. The concern Smith shows as the Watchman when Amal says he would like to travel to where time comes from provides our first clear suggestion of the larger issue that Tagore is presenting. In other roles, Errol Sitahal is comically pedantic as the Healer, Sam Moses combines whimsy and earnestness as the Fakir and Jennifer Villaverde is a treat as the sprightly flower-seller Suda. Marceau, Sitahal, Smith and Villaverde also have a lot of fun a quartet of boys playing outside Amal's window, a sign, both joyous and sad, of the life he will never have.

Teresa Przybylski has created a beautiful set for the piece with a large wooden door and textured drapery for the wall that, depending on Robert Thomson's skillful lighting, can change from solid to transparent. To Debashis Sinha's fine score combining traditional Indian instruments with electronic sounds, Hari Krishnan had created a series of expressive dances that alternate with the drama and enhance the performance as a kind of ritual.

To appreciate *The Post Office* put yourself in a relaxed, meditative state of mind and realize that like Amal we are all innocents when it comes to facing life's greatest mystery.

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