

## **Tagore's Concept of Childhood / Character of Amal in Tagore's The Post Office**

The Post Office, which arose before Tagore's imagination once in the early dawn when he heard amid the noise of a crowd returning from some festival, the line out of an old village song, 'Ferryman, take me to the other shore of the river,' written in prose throughout, without even a song, has a 'flimsy texture' and 'of the very stuff of dreams.' Amal, a dying boy, looks out his sick-room window at the colourful spectacle of life: a Curd seller coming from a distant village near the hills; Sudha, a little girl with a basket of flowers; troops of playing children; the Watchman going on their beats; the Postman who brings letters from the King; and above all Gaffer, the only person who takes part in everyday drama and is also the outsider, who all together, adds a different hue in Amal's life. Day by day, as his life ebbs out and he pines for the far-away, the boy awaits a letter from the King which comes at last, at least so the boy believes, carried by the King's own messenger, the Royal Physician, who comes to put the boy beyond the touch of all earthly pains. The moment of death for the child is the moment of his union with the King.

The Post Office is a wonderful expression of the totality of experiences of Tagore's own childhood and the childhoods of Amal, Phatik, Subha and Tarapada. When the call of the Mother Universe comes, the child-hero who is confined within the rigid walls of sanction becomes restless to answer that call. Amal, like Tarapada, the hero of Atithi, is born under a star that makes him restless to go out in quest of the unseen and unknown. Tarapada slips away silently into the dark night spread out against the cloudy sky never to return ever to the human fold. In that sense, The Post Office registers Tagore's complaint against the regimentation of the natural life; it also makes a plea for greater interaction with nature. In his own childhood, Tagore did not like to be confined to the four walls of the house, with caring servants doing his errands; he did not want to become learned; instead, he craved to 'go out and see everything that there is.' Likewise, the yearning to go out, to be a part of the vast festival of life, whose sounds are conveyed on the soft breeze that caresses every leaf and flower in the early hours of dawn or when the sun sets, makes Amal 'restless', 'athirst for far-away things.'

Amal, the central character of The Post Office has, like Phatik and Tarapada, a limitless zest for life. The sight of boats arriving from faraway places makes Tarapada restless; a wandering mendicant excites his curiosity; a band of gypsies infuses into him a desire to travel far away from familiar surroundings towards the great unknown. Amal differs from Tarapada in that he cannot run away physically from the familiar; sickness has

confined him indoors, and he feels dissociated from everything beautiful and romantic in life. It seems to lacerate his ligature with the unseen and the faraway. He feels that because the earth cannot speak, it raises its hill-like hands to beckon human beings to go to the hills, to go beyond the hills towards 'the Great Unknown'. The child-hero who sits by the window sees the signal and feels a strong urge to go out. Again, when Amal says, 'Wish I were a squirrel,' he expresses in general terms the very dream that almost every child-hero in Tagore has dearly nursed in the depth of his heart. However, endowed as Amal is with the ability to abnegate the self, he easily becomes part of the existence of all that appears before him. At one moment, he is the prospective bridegroom of the Curd seller's niece; the next moment, he is either a little fakir begging for alms or a beggar-boy pushing Chidam's pushcart, or even one of the Champa brothers blooming on the end of the thinnest branch of a champa tree and calling out to his sister Parul.

In the character of Amal we note the normal curiosity of a sick boy about the world around him, and the stretch of imagination that psychologists associate with prolonged illness; but he also shows an awareness of a nimbus that irradiates all that he hears and sees. Amal is in love with green earth, and the hum of the work-a-day world is for him the language of light; the confinement to a narrow room whets his appetite. In addition, although he is too young to know the reality of death, he has a strange apprehension of the approaching end; but this has absolutely no terror for him; he really looks forward to it. It is for him the starting point of an exciting adventure. His boyish imagination affects a kind of transposition; he views his present stage as a waiting station, and the repressed spirit of adventure of a physically incapacitated boy becomes an adventure with the divine. Thus, Amal's death at the end of the play is a construction of the skeptic's – he does not really die. The village doctor was about to finish him off; but none can die when the Royal Physician takes charge.

Tagore's handling of the character of Amal has been delicate and full of feeling. The language that he uses is of unsurpassable naturalness; the dialogue flows in even unhurried streams. We understand and sympathize, as everyone falls in love with Amal. Tagore does successfully 'what both Shakespeare and Kalidasa failed to do, brings on to the stage a child who neither 'shows off' nor is silly.' To conclude, 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 the prudent and from the walls of rigid opinion built for him by the respectable. But Madhav, the worldly wise, considers his restlessness to be the sign of a fatal malady; and his adviser, the village doctor, the custodian of conventional platitudes – with

his quotations from prescribed text-books full of maxims – gravely nods his head and says that freedom is unsafe and every care should be taken to keep the sick man within the walls.

However, there is the Post Office in front of his window, and Amal waits for the King's letter to come to him direct from the King, bringing to him the message of emancipation. At last the closed gate is opened by the King's Royal Physician, and that which is death to the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds brings him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom. Amal's aspiration and the Divine response meet, and the result is new birth, not physical death. The Divine has come to the parched human heart, and there will now ensue the burst of a new spring of life and joy. At the call of the Great Beyond, Amal unlatches the window of his soul to let it merge with the Soul of the Universe. He will now, perhaps, somewhat like the hero of T.F. Powy's Mr. Weston's Good Wine peddle the 'wine' of divine Grace among his customers. Nevertheless, whatever its deeper symbolism, the figure of Amal embodies the author's own reminiscent longing as a child for freedom from the confines of his regimented home.