

# Character to Symbol – Journey of Transformation

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Rabindranath Tagore's fame as a literary luminary flashed across the world with the publication of his Nobel Prize winning book *Gitanjali* in November 1913. Since the publication of *Gitanjali*, the appreciation of Tagore's poetic genius in the West has been based upon the assumption that it is the *Summum Bonum* of his life. But it is not the whole truth. Tagore's earlier poems established him as a poet of Nature, who sang of human love and life, but in *Gitanjali* he is singing the songs of divine love and here lies the difference.

There are two important literary influences apparent in Tagore's life - the early lyricists of Bengal and the European symbolists and romanticists. As we are concerned here with Tagore's dramas, it seems pertinent to deal with the nature and function of these influences in his dramatic works. With a view to erecting on naturalistic and romantic foundations a philosophy of life, it enjoins upon the writer to surrender the critical and positive spirit and to adopt a more or less speculative attitude, in which the measuring standard for everything is his own personal and private self, which is constantly changing and moving and seeking after novelties. Life, in such a case, would either be an endless whirl of vain appearances or become a perpetual gushing forth of novelties. Art in this context does not portray life literally, but aims at discovering the deeper or ideal truth from the changing circumstances and seeks the reality of the one in many or unity in variety. It means, in short, romanticism of feeling rather than of action. This is what Tagore means by a return to Nature and striving after the unknown Infinite by rejecting the materialism of modern civilization. Tagore, like any other romanticist, has set up primitivism or the natural goodness of man as a philosophy or even as a religion. He redeems the cruelty of civilization and decorum by the touch of wildness, the flavour of the open air and the free man. He invents a type of literary vagabond with a gipsy strain and blood and with an ingrained distaste for the routine of everyday life and conventionality. He shows a romantic nostalgia, a never-ending quest after the ever-fleeting objects of desire. He sees in Nature what he himself has put there and his art becomes a projection of his own self. Tagore does not deal with ordinary people; his individuals are extraordinary men and women. He sacrifices always the probable for the picturesque. He breaks up the smooth and tiresome surface of the ordinary normal life by the Pursuit of strangeness and surprise.

Some of Tagore's dramas are good enough, but he is considered greater as a lyric poet who had produced some attractive plays also. But he has not received adequate recognition at the hands of critics. Prof. S. C. Sen Gupta says:

Some of the dramas are refreshingly original and *The Post Office* is perfect in its own way; but he is not a great dramatist.<sup>1</sup>

Some of his dramas are refreshingly original, but he is not a great dramatist. He seems to lack that penetrating sense of humour which makes a dramatist to understand characters of different temperaments and to identify himself equally with all of them. His symbolic dramas are, however, better than his experiments in the field of direct dramatic representation. But in both these kinds of dramas, except in occasional scenes or episodes, there is a lack of dramatic terseness and they "often fail to grip"<sup>2</sup> and they seldom reach dramatic excitement. His psychological plays too, do not bring natural or environmental symbols and his characters have not the strange insight and strength and mysterious unconsciousness. But the loss in terseness of grip is partly made good by naturalness and simplicity. His symbolical dramas are not cut off from the beauties of the open air and whenever a hidden truth is revealed or expressed, it is not done through abnormal instincts and emotions, but through the normal yearnings of a woman for union with her lord or of a child for the world stretching beyond his window. The dramatic art of Rabindranath Tagore is both simple and complex. It is simple in style and expression; 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 call 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. The theme of his plays are merely objective, representing a series of events. They are intended to produce an aesthetic and emotional experience and impression. The secret of his power does not lie in the action of the plays or even in the psychological analysis of the characters. His aim is not to build a story consisting of merely objective action, nor does he engage himself exclusively in the painting of the minds of his characters. His power seems to lie in his amazing vitality of imagination and his remarkable ability to create an atmosphere which grows upon the mind. He achieves this not by the repetition of any central idea, but by his magic. He weaves his words into a most delicate pattern of poetic prose. He can hold up the action with talk that makes action redundant and that makes objective relation between the character and another rather unnecessary. His plots are little suggestive sketches meant to induce and express an attitude of mind. Thus we find that though Tagore's literary genius found its best expression in his poetry and not in drama, but to question the greatness of the dramatist is to do less than justice to the dramatic talent of Rabindranath Tagore.

In spite of all these, many of Tagore's characters rise to the level of symbols assuming two different levels of meaning - the surface meaning which is direct and the over-arching meaning which is indirectly suggested. This is apparent in *Sacrifice*. In the play Tagore himself seems to have played the role of Raghupati, who in some respect recalls Polydaon in Sir Aurobindo's *Perseus the Deliverer*. The extirpation of an old ethic in favour of a new ethic is the theme of both plays, and blood thirsty Kali and Poseidon are exceeded by divinities. Sometimes it appears that most of these characters are shadowy, being vessels of ideas more than individualized human beings. However, the humanity is not denied, neither it is altogether ignored or suppressed. It is transcended by new forces that blaze for a while with destructive fury till a new calm descends again.

Tagore represents the symbolism in *Chitra* - namely the symbolism of the human psyche of youth and growth. He refers to the symbols - 'the organic world' of flower and fruit and plant and creature. There are also the symbols of metaphysical passions of 'Illusion and Reality'. Again he has also stated the symbols of mythological consciousness of Madana and Vasanta and the beloved elves. All these

Symbols are sustained throughout by the controlling allegory of the two ashrams of Kalidas' Shakuntala. Tagore has created for himself a wonderfully rounded form, for a play racing the passage of the human soul through the eternal cycle of innocence and experience and consummation.

The King in *The King of the Dark Chamber* is another of Tagore's plays which presents a more complex figure. The unseen King is God, who, like a husband, woos the human soul represented by Queen Sudarshana. Their place of meeting is a dark chamber which may stand for the inner consciousness where man may become one with God. Salvation, according to Tagore, is not to be achieved in 'the lonely corners of the soul only but that it will be won in the wide universe, for God lives at the place where the tiller is toiling at the hard soil and the path-maker is breaking stones.'<sup>3</sup> The Queen is united to her King at the end of the drama. It in other words, signifies that the human soul at last has realized God within itself. When this occurs the King throws open the doors of the dark room and Sudarshana is asked to come with him outside, into the light. The King is dark; His appearance ugly and so, forbidding as God is without a form and the presence of the formless is intolerable to the human eye.

There is also a strain of mysticism in his symbolical plays. It will be worthwhile to know exactly what this mysticism is. It is not enough to consider the boy, Amal, in *The Post Office* as the human soul aspiring, after God, or the King of the Dark Chamber as God trying to fulfill himself in creation. These characters stand as symbols for certain ideas as well as they personify certain vital and fundamental conceptions of the dramatist. They are a part of the fundamental philosophy on which the edifice of his plays has been founded: which, truly speaking, is his whole poetic creed, viz., the immanence of the infinite in the finite and the struggle of the human spirit for freedom. In his plays Tagore has only given an embodied form to his spiritual conception which is very real to the author, however mysterious and meaningless it may appear to others.

*Red Oleanders* is an essentially poetic play with its own pattern of symbolism and with its own characteristically Indian structure primarily derived from Indian folk drama. The curtain rises 'on a window covered by a network of intricate pattern in front of the Palace'. The network, which remains throughout the play only to be demolished at the end, is the central symbol of the play. The symbol goes on acquiring semantic dimensions and it is clear from the many references to it in the play. Nandini asks the Professor:

Then again, you hide your King behind a wall of netting. Is it for fear of people finding out that he is a man?<sup>4</sup>

The Professor replies that their 'ghostly royalty, made hazy by this net' is fearfully potent with 'its inhuman power to frighten people'. He also says that he, too, leaves behind 'a network of scholarship'. Quite early in the play Nandini claims with confidence, 'I shall find my way through the networks.' In their first meeting which takes place through the network the King accuses Nandini:

Do you know, Nandini, you too are half-hidden behind an evasion, ... you mystery of beauty!<sup>5</sup>

Later, when Nandini wants to go away from Yaksha Town and asks the Professor to show her the way, she later says:

...there's a wire network stretched from post to post, from country to country.<sup>6</sup>

Towards the end of the play Nandini knocks and pushes at the network, shakes it violently, and at the very end the network lies torn to shreds. The important point to be noted is that the network is not a wall barring all communication; it allows partial communication and partial contact. At one stage, for example, the King stretches out his hand through the network and asks Nandini to place her hand on it for a moment. Thus the network symbolizes many things — isolation, self-protection, imprisonment, partial communication, haziness, and mistiness, half-knowledge and half-understanding, and so on. It is with this multidimensional symbol as the backdrop that the action of the play takes place.

In Nandini, Tagore succeeds in creating a mythical figure in consonance with the spirit of the modern world— a woman symbolizing secular faith coupled with new individual freedom, a mystical kind of humanism coupled with an uncompromising spirit of revolution. Nandini has definite features of an individual person'; 'She is the bearer of the message of reality; the saviour through death; she is symbolic of Woman, who, 'will restore the human to the desolated world of man'.<sup>7</sup>

The King is as complex a character as Nandini is simple, as human as she is super human. He represents the modern human predicament, the eternal human anguish, the inevitable perversity of creativity, the awful human knowledge which includes the knowledge of its limitations, the greatness of human power which disintegrates under its own weight.

In the play Nandini sings two songs - one ... autumn song and the other of universal love:

I love, I love, - 'Tis the cry that breaks out from the bosom of earth and water.<sup>8</sup>

Tagore, thus, connects up the course of human life and human history with the cycle of seasons and asserts that behind all this lila of destruction and creation operates the spirit of Love, the prime mover of the universe.

The dark chamber represents the inner consciousness of man. It is in this inner consciousness that God must be realised as the formless divine presence. When this realization takes place, God should be realised in various shapes and forms in the outside world.

Both the plot and the characters of the play are the symbolic representations of the struggle between illusion and truth. The play can also be interpreted in terms of allegorical symbols. The real King is Truth or God or Life-Spirit: Queen Sudarshana is the Individual Soul: Suvarna is Illusion: Kanchi is the symbol of Mind, the maid Suranagama symbolises self-surrender. The invisible King of the dark chamber is the divinity of man. When one comes to a realization of one's own soul, one is no longer dwelling in the 'dark Chamber' but in the light of divinity.

*The Post Office* is a symbolic representation of two currents of thought — reflections on death and a mysterious call from the far-off. The 'letter' is the most important suggestive symbol in the play. It comes from a distant mysterious land bringing a message from someone we hold dear to us. It is a sort of bridge between the known and the unknown. To Amal's mind the postman is a specially privileged person, for he establishes communion between the distant and near. The Post Office itself provides a realistic back-ground to the symbolism

of the letter. The Post Office which is physical and is of the mind and world may be considered to have been invested with such meaning by Tagore that it stands as symbol for a Temple of God which transmits the prayer of men to God and God's grace to men.

Amal personifies man's longing for free and natural development. This longing is fettered by external trivialities. He represents the pure heart and angelic innocence. Madhav represents the fussy, possessive father while the physician symbolises the pedantic, narrow-minded, dogmatic fellow. Gaffer is as autumn wind and sun. The Post Office is flawless in construction and its message springs spontaneously out of the plot of the human story and characters symbolizing some abstract ideas related to the mystical philosophy of higher human values.

In all the three plays Malini, Natir Pooja and Chandalika, the stress is on the spiritual action in symbolic terms behind the physical action in human terms. Kemankar, Lokeshwari and Ratnavali, and Prakriti and her mother, all feel the transforming power of the pure in heart and angelic in compassion.

In Mukta Dhara Uttarkut and Shivtarai symbolize the exploiter and the exploited, the arrogant in power and the brave in spirit. Dhananjay the ascetic and Abhijit the Prince who becomes the vessel of man's immortal spirit give Mukta Dhara its spiritual and symbolic overtones and undertones.

The symbolic art of Tagore can also be seen in his early plays like Autumn Festival and Atonement. Autumn Festival is the first of a group of plays all in prose, with songs interspersed. The wild gusty bands of travellers are in a festive mood. Here we have a rebellious King, a miser, an emperor disguised as a sanyasi, the emperor's wise companion is Thakurdada who represents the pastoral wisdom, a youth whose character is unformed but generous, and a chorus of boys. The characters are symbolical as the king and the emperor both rebel. The former rebels against wisdom and righteousness, grasping at power for power's sake, where as his overlord rebels against the bondage of the material and conventional, the chains with which his earthly greatness has bounded him.

Atonement was adapted from his early novel The Young Queen's Market. In it the only substantial addition is that of the character of Dhananjay, an ascetic. In him, there is a touch of mysticism. Rabindranath himself played the part of the Ascetic, who has strong family likeness to Thakurdada. The symbolism of the play is subordinated to its action which, however, is unsatisfactory.

Tagore's characters do not exist in a convincing manner because of their extremely rhetorical and sometimes paradoxical way of speaking. His plays are merely plays of ideas, the reality of which remains hidden behind a persistent illusion. Even a most startling realistic plot becomes a cover for symbolism and everyone in play appears to be a puppet. His characters are as poetic as himself. They seem to be actors staging an idea, symbols, and not human beings. The truth, which Tagore speaks to describe, is not an objective or material thing, but an abstract truth, a spiritual idea. The drama, thus, is just a device and excuse for him for self-expression.

This leads us to believe further that Tagore only chose to analyze exceptional characters in exceptional circumstance and his aim is always to express the ultimate sense of subjective life and consciousness. His characters rise above the plane of mere triviality and live in a world which can only be understood.

In Rabindranath's dramas, the pressure of thought often strangles the action. There is little differentiation of character. All the actors are pitiful at heart, lineal children of the poet who created them. Even the characters of Tagore's later plays have all moved away from the full-blooded life of drama, into folk-lore and the conventional life of allegory and miracle play. It is equally true of Red Oleanders which deals with metamorphosis and redemption of the king, his moral growth, and his emancipation from self-imposed incarceration within the four walls of his own self, his liberation from his hell-bound state. He starts as a self-made prisoner of his own ego, but wholesome contact with Nandini gradually makes him feel like transcending the narrow confines. Contact with Nandini makes him conscious of his predicament and he realizes: "All I possess is so much dead weight".<sup>9</sup>

Though Tagore's plays are considered more as symbolic than dramatic, they express the essential Tagore. His plays had to be symbolic for the basic reason of his vision of seeing Nature itself involved in staging a drama of birth, growth, death as rebirth in which men participated as symbols of a cosmic process to their own joy. Drama for him was an appropriate vehicle for producing 'sant-rasa'. Though, less of action, there was much of realism in Tagore's characterization.

To sum up, we can say that Tagore's plays are not only plays of action, but also plays of feelings, plays of perennial delight and eternal identity. His characters are not mere characters that represent human dramas, but rise to the level of symbols.

## REFERENCES

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