Tagore's Philosophy of Deliverance in *The Post-Office* vis-à-vis Islamic Perspective of Salvation

Dr. Haseeb Ahmed, Associate Professor, Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Abha, KSA

This paper is an attempt to examine Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of deliverance of man as presented in his one of the most celebrated plays *The Post-Office* (1914) in relation with the Islamic perspective of salvation of man. Tagore's thoughts are based on his profound knowledge of Hindu religious books especially the Upanishads and his keen observation of nature and human life on the earth. Under the tutelage of his father, Maharishi Devendranath Tagore, young Tagore learnt to chant mantras from Upanishads during childhood. Unlike an ascetic Tagore believes in man's meaningful and judicious entanglement with the world He says: "For me there is no deliverance in renunciation"

Tagore's philosophy of deliverance of man is made clear in *The Post-Office* through the chief character of the play, Amal. He is an ailing child adopted by a childless business man named Madhav. The sick boy Amal is confined to a dark room with only one small window which enables him to just watch the outside world. He has a strong passion to come into contact with the world outside. This desire can be explained as a spiritually matured man's desire to have an eternal union with God. Dr. Radhakrishnan further clarifies this point. He says, "The character which distinguishes man from other species of creation is the presence of the conscious endeavor to free himself from the limits self and nature and seek for a seat in the kingdom of god." *The Post-Office* subtly states that death is a point of time where the part of life in this earthly world ends and where the other unending part of life begins. It is the door through which man's
soul passes to enter the eternal world. It is an agency that frees man from the bondage of temporal life and propels him through the way of unification with the Lord. In his attempt to come into contact with the outside world, Amal interacts with a curd seller, a flower girl, some playful children, the village-headman, a watch-man and the king's post-man. Amal finds solace in his encounters with them. He wishes to be free like them. He longs for a journey to the next world which must be free from all pains and pangs. This explains the idea that man's deliverance lies in his liberating himself from the shackles of the materialistic world. The character of Amal is presented juxtaposed to that of his foster-father Madhav who is unimaginative and materialistic in attitude. His speech lacks the tenderness and lyrical quality that is conspicuous in Amal's rhetoric. For him "Earning was a sort of passion… and a joy" (TPO: 8). Spirituality, human spirit's obsession to get liberated from the shackles of this world and its yearning for an unobstructed travel to the higher world – all are a "rigmarole"(TPO: 61) for him. In contrast to this, Amal's yearning for the entry into the other world is boundless. His conversation with the watchman reveals this:

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 anymore. (TPO:31)

The king's post-office in the play stands as a metaphor to the God's kingdom. The king in the play is God in the real sense. Amal's desire to get a letter from the king's post-office is human soul's natural wish to receive the call of deliverance in the form of death. For the soul death is not a sad ending. It is a
peaceful and blissful transformation. Therefore Amal bursts out: "I shall say (to the king) 'Make me your post-man, so that I may go about, lantern in hand, delivering your letters from door to door. Don't let me stay at home all day!'"  (TPO: 70)

The Islamic perspective of man's salvation is based on the teachings of *The Qur'an* and the sayings and practices of Prophet Muhammed (Peace be upon him). According to Islam man is God's vicegerent on the earth. (*The Qur'an*: 2:30) He is not free to live as per his whims and fancies. The creator has provided guidance through divine books and prophets as to how he must live in this world. This world is a temporary abode for man. This is an examination hall for him to test whether he lives as per the diktat of his creator or follows his own will. Every human is bound to die. (*The Qur'an*: 3:185) On the Day of Judgment all human beings who have lived on earth, since the beginning of this world, will be resurrected. Then every individual will be informed about his deeds, good or bad. Accordingly he will be punished or rewarded with hell or heaven on the Day of Judgment.

However, it is interesting to juxtapose Tagore's views with the Islamic philosophy. Tagore does not subscribe to the idea of living like a hermit or an isolated self in devotions. Nor does he approve of a lustful life. He stands for the combination of "the 'bhoga' with the 'yoga' an acceptable mixture of the mystical with the worldly happiness." The same is true in Islam. Prophet Muhammed out rightly rejected three of his followers' plans who came out with the intentions of never marrying women, observing fasting everyday throughout life and spending every night in devotions. He unambiguously declared these whims to be un-Islamic. He advised them that they must live like him. He married women, only occasionally observes fasting and during nights while praying he finds time to sleep also.
A close examination of *The post-Office* vis-à-vis the Islamic literature draws our attention to some more important points. Amal considers the dark a room a prison and wants to get liberated from it. Islam also proclaims that 'For a believer this world is a prison.' In Islam, one who gets engrossed in the worldly-pleasures and ignores the divine teachings (a materialistic person) is an unbeliever. "If any do fail to judge by what god hath revealed they are unbelievers" (*The Qur'an*: 5:44). Tagore also uses the same phrase for the materialistic Madhav, "Silence-Unbeliever." (TPO: 87) A humble soul always considers the life in this world a burden with so many responsibilities to be discharged honestly. At times it wishes it were not born at all. Amal wishes "If I were a squirrel." (TPO: 11) and "I wish I were a bird"( TPO:64) which sounds like the wish of Caliph Umar who said 'Had I been made a sparrow, it would have been better for me.' The water fall (that) becomes a stream at the foot of the mountain (TPO: 68) in *The Post-Office* is akin to the "Gardens beneath which rivers flow" (*The Qur'an*: 61:12). The watchman in *The Post-Office* who would sound the gong (TPO: 36 & TPO: 83) at appropriate time resembles the angel by the name Israfeel in Islamic faith who would sound the trumpet on the appointed day. "The trumpet will be blown (*The Qur'an* 18:99); "The Day when the trumpet will be sounded" (*The Qur'an* 78:18 & 20:102) and "Then when the trumpet is blown (*The Qur'an* 23:101).

Conceptions about God's capabilities look alike in *The Post-Office* and in *The Qur'an*. The King (god) is capable of listening to and knowing everything. "Everything reaches the King's ears." (TPO:72) In Islam god is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. *The Qur'an* says: "To Allah belong the East and the West; whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah's face. For Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing" (*The Qur'an* 2:115). Dissemination of God's message to the mankind is a noble mission for a virtuous soul. Amal's idea of becoming one of the King's (god's) post-man is fantastic. He says: " I shall ask him ( the
king) to make me one of his postmen, that I may wander far and wide, delivering his message from door to door" (TPO:85). Interestingly Prophet Ibrahim also prays to God to send some-one who would let the people know about the covenants of the creator. He says: "Our Lord! Send among them a messenger of their own, who shall rehearse Thy signs to them and instruct them in scriptures and wisdom, and purify them." *(The Qur'an 2:129)*

Tagore attaches importance to reading books in *The Post-Office*. Madhav explains the importance of being educated and knowledgeable to Amal.

Madhav: … he reads such huge books!
Amal: does his book-learning tell him everything?
Madhav: Of course, don't you know!
Amal: (with a sigh) Ah, I am a stupid! I don't read books.
Madhav: Now, think of it, very, very learned people are all like you, …Early and late they toil and moil at their books, and they have eyes for nothing else. Now, my little man, you are going to be learned when you grow up; and then you will stay at home and read such big books, and people will notice you and say, 'he's a wonder!' (TPO:11-13)

Surprisingly, according to the chronology of the revelation of *The Qur'an*, the very first verse is "Read in the name of thy Lord and cherisher" *(The Qur'an 96:1)* Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) said, "the greatest gift a father gives to his children is – good education and training."[^9] He further made it an obligation on the part of every Muslim man and woman to acquire knowledge.

However Islamic views about the rebirth of man on this earth are different. In *Kathopanishad* it is said that some souls "do not attain salvation. Falls again and again in the wheels of births and deaths"[^10] Islam has no conception of rebirths or *punarjanma*. There is only single chance for man to live on this earth. He has to utilize this opportunity for his salvation, attainment of the heaven and liberation from the hell.
References:

1. W.B. Yeats endorses the view that deliverance is the theme of this play. See W.B. Yeats, Preface, *The Post-Office* by Rabindranath Tagore (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1914) p. v-vi
2. Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* Verse: 73