



**SYMBOLIC AND MYTHICAL IMAGERY IN TAGORE'S
SELECT SHORT STORIES**

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ABSTRACT

The present pare attempts to show how Rabindranath Tagore has employed variety of symbolic and mythical imagery, to present his ideas, through his short stories. Tagore uses symbolic language to present his adopted myths from the Indian culture, traditions and scriptures. The selected stories Sampatti Samarpan, Anadhikar Prabeshand Putrajajna present how

symbolic language heightens the employability of myth in the literary narratives to convey writers ideas. The beliefs and traditions of Indian culture have also been explored in the stories while portraying the characters and actions.

KEYWORDS

symbol, myth, Indian culture, short stories, etc.

RESEARCH PAPER

Symbolic and Mythical images have been part of literary narrative since the evolution, oral or written. Every writer has used different symbols to convey his/ her ideas and they employ different meanings to the symbols according to their context. Like the symbol of 'rose' is generally used to denote true love and beauty, however, W. B. Yeats has use the symbols of 'rose' to indicate Ireland and Maud Gonne in his early poems. In this case W. H. Auden remarks:

A symbol is felt to be such before any possible meaning is consciously recognised, i.e. an object or event which is felt to be more important than the reason can consciously explain is symbolic; secondly, a symbolic correspondence is never one to one but always multiple and different persons perceive different meanings. (164)

Indian literati have employed symbolism in their literary narratives to explore their ideas and they have extracted most of those symbols from Indian culture and its heritage to make their works meaningful to the readers. Indian scriptures, mythology, folklore, fairy tales and landscapes provide variety of material to draw on. For example, the Laxman and Sita episode from *Ramayana* and story of Indian Yaksha, the treasure guiding spirit, find expression in Tagore's short stories namely *Svarna Mriga* 9*The Fool's Gold*) and *Sampatti Samarpan* (*Wealth Surrendered*).

Rabindranath Tagore's story *Sampatti Samarpan* (*Wealth Surrendered*) is based on the myth of Indian *Yaksha*. The name of the main character Yajnanath Kunda is symbolic one as 'Yajaanath' means 'Lord of Sacrifices' and 'Kunda' is the name *Yaksha's* son. This simply shows Tagore's conscious efforts to employ the myth in the story. The character of Yananath is portrayed to be miser, ruthless and suspicious. His son Brindaban has a son named Gokulchandra. The interaction between them moves the story ahead and it is revealed that Yajnanath has let Brindaban's wife die without providing medicines and that is why Brindaban is leaving the house with his son Gokulchandra. On the other hand Yajnanath permits him to do so as he is afraid that his son may poison him and secondly he would save some money, however, he feels sad that even Gokulchandra would go with him. Later on Yajnanath finds no peace in his life without his grandson and wanders in village with *hookah* in his

hands. After some days he meets his grandson Gokulchandra, now known as Nitai, who has run away from home as is being sent to school. Yajnanath wants to employ Nitai as the *Yaksha* to guard his wealth hidden in temple, in jungle. He gets the opportunity soon as Nitai again want to run away as his father is coming in search of him and here Yajnanath assures him that “I’ll hide you where no one will be able to find you. Not even the people I this village” (80). Then he takes the boy to the temple surrounded by jungle and this main incident of the story happens in the dark night. Tagore narrates the scene:

The night wore on. Though he was doing his utmost to stay awake, Nitai began to nod as he sat. At one in the morning, Yajnanath took Nitai by the hand and led him along the dark paths of the sleeping village. There was no sound anywhere, except for a dog barking from time to time, answered loudly by other dogs near and far. Sometimes nocturnal birds, startled by the sound of footsteps, flapped away through the forest. Nitai nervously clasped Yajnanath’s hand. (80)

The imagery of soundlessness of the jungle creates atmosphere of guilt and shamefulness as even the dogs are not barking continuously and on the other hand even birds are fleeing away at the sound of footsteps, which symbolically indicates that even nocturnal birds don’t want to witness the shameful episode. This melancholic atmosphere symbolizes the approaching disaster in Nitai’s life. The dark night seems to be only witness and its colour symbolizes the disaster, mystery, death, melancholy and unfamiliarity. Tagore’s conscious efforts in infusing image of dark night to symbolize mystery as Nitai is unconscious or unknown about what is going to happen to him, is evident here.

Yajnanath enters the temple with Nitai and lifts up a slab where the boy saw a cellar and a flickering lamp. Yajnanath enters and Nitai, though afraid of mysterious cell, follows him down there. Nitai is very happy to see the brass pots full of gold and silver coins, but becomes curious to see things used in rituals, things like mat, vermilion, sandal paste, garlands, etc. Yajnanath asks the boy to sit on mat and smears sandal paste on his fore-head; puts a *tika* of vermilion and then a garland around his neck. Yajnanath then starts saying mantras continuously neglecting the plight of the

terrified little boy. At the end of the ritual he drags all the pots one by one in front of the terrified boy and asks him to chant after him the mantra:

... I count and bequeath this money to Gokulchnadra Kunda son of Brindaban Kunda son of Yajnanath Kunda son of Paramananda Kunda son of Prankrishna Kunda son of Gasadhar Kunda son of Yudhisthira Kunda; or to Gokulchandra's son or grandson or great-grandson or any of his true descendants. (81)

Here Tagore uses the imagery of number seven which symbolizes completion of a cycle, as Yajnanath mentions his seven generations here. After repeating the mantras many times the boy feels drowsy and adding to that because of the smoke they are not able to breathe properly and Nitai feels having dried mouth and limbs being feverishly hot. The lamp goes off and Yajnanath starts moving out from there leaving the little terrified boy behind and tell him that "You stay here: no one will find you but remember Gokulchandra son of Brindban son of Yajnanath" (82). This is how Yajnanath transforms Nitai into *Yaksha* to protect his wealth and the story ends with this disastrous note.

The short story *Anadhikar Prabesh (Tresspass)* is based on the religious myths related to sacred peaceful atmosphere of temple and then Tagore presents how religion of humanity and kindness takes over the religion of rituals. Tagore portrays Jaykali Debi, the protagonist of the story, who is the widow of Madhabchandra Tarkavachaspati and mistress of the Radhanath temple. She represents Tagore's idea of new woman as he has portrayed her as strong woman who is capable of controlling the temple management like performing daily rituals of the idol like dressing, bathing and feeding; she keeps the temple and its courtyard clean; and she would not allow people involved in unscriptural practices to enter and not even children to play and the goats to enter and eat *Modhabi* creeper leaves. She is presented as strict disciplined woman when it comes to following the religious rituals and maintaining sacred and peaceful atmosphere at the temple. All her activities and beliefs project her image as a strong believer of religion. The image of staunch religious person is evident in her harsh treatment to the visitors of the temple to maintain the sacred and peaceful atmosphere of the temple. In her personal life as well is shown the same, she does not have female friends as they are afraid of her. However, she is tireless worker who can nurse the

sick people and she has taken the responsibility of upbringing her orphan nephews Pulin and Nalin.

Tagore changes her image from protector of religious ritual and convention to the promoter of humanity and kindness towards animals, even when they seem to be dirty. It happens so when she hears the noise of frightened animal as well as chaos of people following it, close to the temple. When she hears footsteps she feels that it is her nephew Nalin near the *madhabi* creeper but she finds that it is a dirty pig hidden there at the creeper out of fear. Suddenly, instead of getting angry she feels sympathetic towards the frightened creature. She orders the mob to not to pollute the temple and sends them back; she also stops the *pujari* who has come with stick to drive it away. This sudden changes in the atmosphere due to Jaykali's love for creature is unbelievable for others. Tagore has used the image of creeper of *madhabi* which symbolically stands for Vrindavan. The temple of Radhanath is of Indian god Krishna who is presented by Tagore in the form of Jayakali who has come forward as a saviour of the little creature, pig, as Krishna would save the poor and downtrodden people. The myth of reincarnation of Krishna with intention of quelling the evils spirit and save the lives of innocent people is consciously employed by Tagore here. Her strong and bold act to save the little creature serves the paradigm of the hero myth.

Another story *Putrayajna (Son Sacrifice)* ironically presents the fertility myth prevailing in Indian culture. Tagore has portrayed the characters like Baidyanath, Binoda, Kusum, Nagendra and the maid servant who moves the story ahead through their conversation. Tagore portrays Baidyanath as a rich man without a heir and how he goes on marrying many times just to have a son who would inherit his wealth. He marries Binoda with the same motive but for long time she proves to be barren and she is torched for the same. Baidyanath did not love her and this makes her upset as she doesn't get husband attention. Biadyanath blames his fate for not having son and out of this he visualizes the open gates of the hell where men without sons are condemned. On the part of Binodato the relation was not good:

....But instead of the delicate showers of new love, Fate decreed a sting, roaring hailstorm, poured down by her husband and his lofty family hierarchy. They all accused her for being barren. Her wasted youth wilted, like a flowering plant kept indoors away from light and air. (229)

Here the image of flowering plant kept away from light and sir symbolically stands for the pitiful conditions of Binoda. The family strongly believes in the fertility myth and begetting a son as heir accuses her for being barren. Binoda feels dejected and goes to play cards at Kusum's house, where Nagendra gets attracted towards her and one day "he seized Binoda's arms wrenched her towards him, and kissed her. Shocked, angered, wounded, flustered by this affront, Binoda struggled to free..." (229). Unfortunately, the maid witnesses it and spreads the news among family members and then Binoda is driven out of home. However, no one is aware of the fact that Binoda is carrying Baidyanath's baby in her womb, not even Binoda. After this Baidyanath marries again but fails to have heir. One astrologer tells him that soon his family members would increase. One pundit advised him to perform fertility rite to have a son and it went for four months. One day a lean lady with a son came to the door asking for food but they were driven by Baidyanath's servants, the lady and child were nothing else but Binoda and his son, but here Biadyanath fails to identify them and shuts the doors of his fate forever. This ironic end of the story is symbolic in nature. The story presents Tagore's conscious efforts to employ the fertility myth and by doing so he is also giving message to traditional Indian society.

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