

Rabindranath Tagore's Portrayal of Conflict Between Tyrannical Forces and Sense of Freedom

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to project Rabindranath Tagore as an adept in making use of his dramatic skill for exploring the conflict between tyrannical forces and sense of freedom in his dramatic realm. Making special reference on Tagore's masterpieces *Mukta Dhara*, *Natirpuja* and *Chandalika*. This paper projects the conflict between the tyrannical forces and sense of freedom through his characters. Thus, this paper presents how powerfully Tagore used his dramatic skill in exploring the conflicts.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, tyrannical forces, conflict, freedom, awareness, equality, casteism, discrimination, power, protest.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is an outstanding modern Indian playwright whose phenomenal dramatic career numbering over-sixty plays occupies a prime position not only in Bengal but also in modern Indian theatre. He has rightly been called "the father of modern Indian stage-craft" (Ghosh 57). He wrote plays of every kind-tragic, comic, farcical and symbolical plays, writing them in blank verse, in rhymed couplets, in prose and in mingled prose and verse. "He admired Shakespeare, probably he admired Ibsen, probably also Maeterlinck; and he knew his Kalidas very well. He would try his hand at drama like them – yet it could not be like quite like them" (Iyengar 122). His plays, a production of his own style mixing the elements of *Jatra* with classical *Sanskrit* dramas, are not on Aristotelian or the Shakespearean models, but Tagorean dramas in quantity and quality achieve a high degree of excellence. Basically, his plays are – "the vehicle of ideas, rather than the expression of action" (Thompson 51). In the words of Amiya Chakraborty, "Tagore's play is the play of feeling, not of action" (P 123).

Generally speaking, Sanskrit dramas, the great epic Mahabharata and the folk tradition of Bengal culture wielded tremendous influence on Tagore, and he was eager to produce a new dimension to the Bengali stage. Tagore's plays are said to be a kind of Santiniketan plays. Niharranjan Ray is of

the opinion that “Rabindranath is matchless in his symbolic plays” (P 56) and Satyendranath Ghoshal holds:

“every symbolical or allegorical play of
Rabindranath of Rabindranath is a
Magnificent dramatic work.” (P 45)

Myriad-minded Rabindranath Tagore, as a prolific writer, tried his hand successfully in almost all the major forms of literature and as such, we have inherited immortal poetry, ethical and delightful plays, moral and rhythmic prose. Every branch of literature that he has touched has turned out golden. As a man of versatile genius and achievements, Tagorean writings – dramas, novels, essays, short-stories, numerous letters, reminiscences, speeches, poetry of various kinds, songs, travelogues, sermons, criticism and articles on politics, on education and even on psychology and economics – shower down in India and abroad with a rich fund of creative imagination. As a writer of astonishing scope and versatility, he is said to have been endowed with manifold excellences. He was a poet, actor, producer, director, translator, painter, educator and dramatist. He was not only a gifted playwright but also an enthusiastic and successful actor:

“It was not that the public clamoured for
his appearance, he also loved to act” (Kripalani 455).

Universally acknowledged as a poet par excellence for his *Gitanjali* (song offerings), Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Laureate is regarded as the most eminent modern Indian writer gaining a permanent place in the map of world Literature and his world-wide acclaim as a social, political, religious and aesthetic thinker proves his penetrating intellectuality and far-sighted capability. To attest to the fact that he was a good actor who loved to act, his first appearance as an actor in *Alikbabu* by Jatindranath Tagore brings a lot of reputations and admirations from all literary circles. The reputed critic Thompson comments, “Among his many gifts, he is a great actor; All Bengali knows that he can act” (P 51). Indeed, he acted in the role of different characters in his plays. For examples, he played the role of Valmiki in *Valmiki Prativa* (The Genius of Valmiki, 1881), the blind monk in *Kal Mrigaya* (The Fate of Hunter, 1882), the role of Bikramdeb in *Raja O Rani* (the King and the Queen 1889), Raghupati in *Visarjan* (Sacrifice 1890), Kedar in *Vaikuntha's Khata* (1897), the month in *Saradotsav* (the Autumn Festival, 1908), Upali in *Natirpuja* (1926). In this way, he established a new trend in his own written plays even though dramatization on stage. As director and producer, Tagore's every twist and turn were very educative to the whole community and to the participants. He need to write plays to fit the actors and actresses available to him.

What is generally understood from an analysis of Tagore's plays is that he has shown his dramatic skill in exploring the conflict between tyrannical forces and freedom especially in the three masterpieces of his, namely, *Mukta Dhara* (1922), *Natirpuja* (1926) and *Chandalika* (1933). In fact, a conflict in which tyranny is decentred and defeated and freedom achieves a victory at the ultimate can be discerned in most of his major plays, which show a common pattern in exploring how his plays have death with the themes of tyranny and freedom. This common pattern is well-worked out in *Mukta-Dhara*, a play of three acts by Tagore, with a dramatic focus on the subject of political tyranny. Here is *Mukta Dhara*, the King of Uttarakut Ranajit desires to control the source of Shiv-tarai's

economic well-being and to that end, he has had a great dam erected to prevent the waters of Mukta Dhara from reaching the plains below. The king is quite confident that the poor and defenseless people of Shiv-tarai must be at his mercy forever. The focusing point is that the king Ranajit, scientist Bibhuti, the mob of Uttarakut belong to the class of tyrannical forces representing tyranny of exploitation, narrow nationalism, injustice, inhumanity and insensitiveness while Maharaja Visvajit, an ascetic Dhananjaya, the people of Shiv-tarai, the crown prince Abhijit are all for freedom, freedom from the clutch of king's political oppression, freedom from Bighuti's inhumanity and heartlessness, narrow nationalism, free flow of Mukta Dhara, free trading.

Mukta Dhara means 'a free stream' referring to a mountain spring the waters of which flowed from their source in the mountain kingdom of Uttarakut down the mountain slopes in the plains and into a country called Shiv-tarai. These waters were essential to the people of Shiv-tarai for their very fields which yielded food and other products as well as to sustain the people. The people of Shiv-tarai have long been subject to the authority of Ranajit, the king of Uttarakut and these people have been paying him the taxes which he, as the king, had been imposing upon them. In certain years of food-shortage, the people had been unable to pay these taxes, and on such occasions, the king felt deeply annoyed with them for their default. The people of Shiv-tarai had, of course, been resenting the dictatorial rule of the king Ranajit but had been feeling helpless till the Yuvaraja of Uttarakut, namely Abhijit, came as their governor and began to treat them with a rare compassion and leniency. But now the situation has become even more complicated, for the people of Shiv-tarai because the royal engineer Bibhuti has after years and years endeavour, succeeded in building a dam across the waters of Mukta Dhara. Bhibut is a scientist who, with the help of his scientific equipment and at the sacrifice of numerous human lives, has constructed a dam which would enable the king Ranajit to stop the flow of the water of Mukta Dhara into Shiv-tarai at his own will. The construction of his dam means that from now onwards, the people of Shiv-tarai would become wholly dependent on king Ranajit's mercy. If the king decides at any time to prevent the flow of the waters of Mukta Dhara into Shiv-tarai, he has only to shut the sluice gates of Bhibuti's dam and the people of Shiv-tarai would then be able to sow no crops and reap no harvest. Bhibuti's dam is thus intended to fetter and imprison the waters of Mukta Dhara. Eventually, the dam is breached by the Yuvaraja who resents the blocking of the waters of Mukta Dhara and by breaching the dam, restores to Mukta Dhara the freedom which it originally had.

In *Mukta-Dhara*, the tyrannical forces- the political tyranny of the king, the inhumanity of the scientist, the wrong demands of the people of Uttarakut, the racial discrimination and domination are in conflict with the forces for freedom are – the natural rights of the people of Shiv-tarai, the natural flow of the Mukta-Dhara and the supporters of free-trade by opening of the Nandipass. At last, the tyrannical forces are defeated and freedom wins victory, thereby bringing out the meaning of the play so clearly: "Although it is not heavily underlined, the meaning of the play is clear: Human values are paramount and to ignore this truth is to canter towards self-destruction" (Iyengar 135).

In *Natipuja*, there is a conflict between spiritual freedom represented by Srimati and the tyrannical forces of inequality, caste hierarchy, inequality represented by Ratnavali (the main opponent of Srimati), Ajata Satru, Devadatta and to some extent by Lokesvari. However, their tyrannical power

is suggested to be no less ominous. In the play, Tagore shows the true victory of the freedom of spirit over the tyranny of inequality, inhumanity, casteism, vain beliefs, superiority in Ratnavali. In brief, Ratnavali becomes a prisoner of outdated mindset and is chained in old concepts and she gives a tough resistance against the emerging social beliefs. Devadatta and Ajatasatru are not present physically, yet their tyrannical activities are suggested through dialogues of others.

Ratnavali is depicted as trying to perpetuate a tyrannical system of religious beliefs. There is a vast gap of ideas between old and new, between tyrannical tendencies and new approach to truth, non-violence and love in humanity prevailing in Buddhism. The manifestation of different dialogues and statements of Lokeswari proves that she is tormented in between ideas of wrong and right, false and truth; no doubt, she represents tyranny to others Srimati is the incarnation of toleration. She has been tortured mentally and physically. But spiritually she exists in a world of freedom that no tyranny can destroy.

Although Srimati is, by profession, a dancing girl, whose function is to provide entertainment and pleasure, she is at heart a potentially religious person. When she is alone, or even where there are others around her, she suddenly begins to sing a religious song like the one that begins thus:

“At dead of night, what whisper came?

I know not, I.

was it is waking, was it in dream?

I know not, I” (Act I: 94).

Upali’s willingness to accept alms from the dancing girl arouses much resentment among the royal princess and more especially in Ratnavali. Even the Queen mother Lokeswari feels deeply annoyed with the Buddhist Bhikshu who had expressed his willingness to accept alms from mere a dancing girl and she feels deeply disturbed with the Buddhist religion, which permits a Buddhist monk to take alms from a person who occupies a low position and belongs to a degraded profession. Lokeswari fears that the Buddhist religion would degrade persons of royal birth and would raise beggars to the position of a king. The fact is that the princesses and even the mother Queen Lokeswari herself have not understood the Buddhist teachings even though they have become followers of the Buddhist religion. They have not understood the Buddhist message that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the Lord. Thus, they are still in bondage to the old concepts of caste hierarchy and unaware of the true sense of the spiritual freedom. However, as Srimati sings these words:

“Salutation to the Buddha who teaches!

Salutation to the Dhamma That saved!

Salvation to the Sanga which is Supreme! (Act – I, 102).

Lokeswari herself joins in the singing. In other words, Srimati’s singing stirs Lokeswari’s own hidden reverence for the Buddha and her deep-seated desire to get free from the shackle of unfreedom. Srimati not only becomes a devoted follower of the Buddha but also a determined and fearless

follower. Then comes even bigger and more pleasant surprise for her. The Bhikshu Utpalaparna comes with the news that she had been selected by the Buddhist monks to lead the ceremony of worship at the altar in the royal garden where the birth of the Buddha is to be celebrated on the occasion of vasanta purnima. This is, indeed, a great honour for Srimati. The Bhikshuni Utpalaparna confirms saying:

“To-day is vasanta purnima – the full moon of
spring. We celebrate the birth of the Lord Buddha.
It will be Srimati’s task to lead the rites of
worship at the altar beneath the Asoka” (Act – I – 105).

This leads to the conflict between Srimati, representing the force of freedom and Ratnavali, representing the force of tyranny.

In *Natir Puja*, the tyrannical forces are casteism, inequity, inequality, intolerances and false religious beliefs. The forces of freedom are equality, sympathy, dignity as human being and realization of ultimate spiritual values. At last, the tyrannical characters are transformed and freedom wins.

In *Chandalika*, Prakriti’s carnal desire devouring fever of possessive passions are defeated. She is overcome by conscience and by the spirit of renunciation. The triumph of spiritual instincts over her sensuality finds expression in a strange sadness, in wistful melancholy. She releases Ananda from her selfish desire and devotes herself to the noble mission of Ananda who is a symbol of higher and larger good. The gratification of tyrannical sensual love transforms itself into the freedom of spiritual love. “*Chandalika* (the outcaste), not exactly a play on the caste system, shows us a conversion, following the outcaste girl’s love for Buddha’s disciple, Ananda. She persuades her mother, a sorceress, to bring Ananda to her. But overcome by conscience, she begs forgiveness and lets her go” (Ghosh 66). However, at the last moment, Ananda was able to save himself from his moral and spiritual downfall by praying to Lord Buddha to give him the strength to resist the temptation to which he had been to the point of yielding. Tagore has made a very skillful use of this legend to write a play having a spiritual and practical significance even today. Prakriti echoes Tagore’s radical ideology that caste system is the humiliation of the Divine spirit, when she condemns her mother”,

“Fie, Fie, mother, I tell you again,
Don’t delude yourself with this
self-humiliation – it is false and
a sin” (Act-I; P-152).

The theme of this play is a conflict, which takes place in the mind of Prakriti; the Chandal girl’s awareness of herself as a human being has been aroused by Ananda’s assurance to her that she is a human being like all others and she should not hesitate to give him water to quench his thirst. At the time of giving water to Ananda and as a result of new awakening in her mind that she is a human being like all others, she also falls in love with Ananda and then she forces her mother to employ her magic powers to bring Ananda to her embrace. In the words of Beena Agarwal, “The very act of providing

water brings her to the realization of her equally significant existence. She becomes crazy to possess the monk under all circumstances” (P 89).

Thus, the conflict between tyrannical forces and forces of freedom has been beautifully explored in the three masterpieces of Tagore – *Mukta Dhara*, *Nitirpuja* and *Chandalika*. It has to be understood that Tagore has made a skillful use of his dramatic power to deal with the themes of tyranny and freedom in many forms and guises.

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