



RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S DRAMATIC SKILL IN PROJECTING TYRANNICAL FORCES AS 'BEING DEFEATED' AND FREEDOM AS 'BEING TRIUMPHANT' IN HIS \ DRAMATIC WORLD: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This paper evaluates Rabindranath Tagore's dramatic skill in projecting the defeat of tyrannical forces and the triumphant of freedom in his dramatic world and analyses a few salient features underlying some of his plays like Mukta 'Dhara, Natir Puja and Chandalika thereby presenting how powerful terrific tyrannical forces and defeated after a long struggle and tells how tyrannical sensual love gets transformed into the freedom of spiritual love.

Keywords: *Social Responsibilities, Religious beliefs, Tyrannical Forces, Freedom, Sensuality, Inequality, Humanity.*

Rabindranath Tagore is regarded as 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. A distinguished critic Sisir Kumar Ghosh rightly called him "the father of modern Indian stage-craft" (P 57). He is said to have written plays of every kind - tragic, comic, farcical and symbolical plays writing them in black verse, in rhymed couplets, in prose and in mingled prose and verse. His plays, a production of his own style mixing the elements of *Jatra* with classical *Sanskrit* dramas, are not on Aristotelian or the Shakeapearean models. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar puts it, "He admired Shakespeare, probably he admired Ibsen, probably also Maeterlink; and he knew his Kalidas very well. He would try his hand at drama like them – yet it could not be quite like them" (P 122). 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). Amiya Chakraborty observes that Tagore's play is "the play of feeling, not of action (P 123).

Myriad – minded Rabindranath Tagore, as a prolific writer, tried his hand successfully in almost all the major forms of literature like immortal poetry, ethical and delightful plays, more and rhythmic prose. Every branch of literature that has touched has turned out golden in all respects. Such a man of versatile genius was born on 7th May 1861 in the family of Tagores at a place called Jorashanko in the heart of Calcutta. He was the youngest of the seven sons and the fourteenth child of Maharshi Devendranath. His grandfather Prince Dwarakanath was an intimate friend of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. It was a singular coincidence that on the same day Jawaharlal Nehru's father, Motilal Nehru also was born. Rabindranath was surrounded by affluence and aristocratic culture. As a boy, he grew up keenly alive and awake to the world of man and Nature around him. He had no regular schooling. Though Tagore had no formal schooling, he was sent to various schools. In spite of the fact that he did not any useful work in these schools, he formed an indelible impression on one of the masters of St.Xaviers college about whom he wrote in his Reminiscences:

"I felt in him the presence of a great soul,
and even today the recollection of it seems
to give me a passport into the silent seclusion
of the temple of God."



He actually breathed the air of literary atmosphere. Even at the age of fifteen, Tagore started making excursions to writing. By 1875, his first efforts in prose and verse had begun to appear in black and white. When he was eighteen, he passed through the moment of Great Illumination and it gave him intense insight into the literary universe. He wrote the poem “The Awakening of the Water fall”. It made him get into a sudden expansion of his consciousness. In 1883, Tagore wrote a play which he translated afterwards as “Sanyasi” or “The Ascetic” and in 1887, he wrote “The Sea Waves”. He started translating into English some of his own Bengali lyrics of the ‘Gitanjali’ period. He has to his credit publication of such remarkable and memorable poems as The Crescent Moon, The Gardener, Fruit-Gatherings, Lover’s Gift, Crossing; plays like Chitra, The Post-Office, The Cycle of Spring, Sacrifice and other plays like Red Oleanders; novels like The Home and the World, The Wreck, Gora; short-story collections like Hungry Stanes, Mashi, Broken Ties; philosophical works like Sadhana, Personality, Creative Unity, The Religion of Man and autobiographical works like Reminiscences.

Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Laureate (1913), universally acknowledged as a poet par excellence for his Gitanjali (song offerings), is the most eminent modern Indian writer who gained a permanent place in the map of world literature. His world-wide acclaim as a social, political, religious and aesthetic thinker proves his penetrating intellectuality and far-sighted capability. As a writer of astonishing scope and versatility, he was endowed with manifold excellences. He was a poet, actor, producer, 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).

In his plays, Tagore explores the conflict between tyrannical forces and freedom in his masterpieces like Mukta Dhara (1922), Natirpuja (1926) and Chandralika (1933). Indeed. A conflict in which tyranny is decentred and defeated and freedom achieves a victory in the ultimate analysis can be discerned in most of his major plays. Mukta Dhara (1922), a play of three Acts by Tagore, means ‘a free stream’ and refers to a mountain spring the waters of which flowed from their source in the mountain kingdom of Uttarkut 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 Uttarakutt, 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 Uttakut, namely Abhijit, came as their governor and began to treat them with a rare compassion and licency. 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 of endeavour, succeeded in building a dam across the waters of Mukta Dhara. Bibhuti 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. Bibhuti’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 who by breaching the dam, restores to Mukta Dhara the freedom which it originally had. The whole action of the play centres round the imprisonment and freeing of the waters of Mukta Dhara.

Of the two conflicting groups one consists of Ranajit, the king of Uttarakut, Bibhuti, the royal engineer and the people of Uttarakut, representing tyranny, injustice and oppression while the other of Abhijit, the Yuvaraja, the Maharaja Visvajit of Mahangarh, the king Ranaji's uncle, the citizens of Shiv-tarai, Dhananjaya, a vairagi from Shiv-tarai standing for freedom, sympathy, truth and justice. Ranajit is the king of Uttarakut, having traditional ideas of royal authority and wanting to govern the subject race of Shiv-tarai in an arbitrary manner. He is very despotic and is very callous towards the people of Shiv-tarai who are subject to him and to his authority. He wields absolute power over the people of Shiv-tarai which is a country situated in the plains, below the mountainous land of Uttarakut. The king feels very proud of the achievement of the royal engineer Bibhuti in building a dam which would greatly add to the king's authority over the people of Shiv-tarai. The dam made by Bibhuti had increased the king's political power. He would be able to release or to withhold the waters of Mukta Dhara at his own will and the people of Shiva-tarai will depend totally on his will. In brief, the king Ranaji's behavior and actions are not kind to them and he regards them as 'foreigners'. The king's real tyrannical intention is exposed in this utterance:

"Now that Bibhuti has Mukta Dhara under control at last, we have a way of making them submit. One's own folk may be won by affection; outsiders must be held by fear" (Mukata Dhara, Act – I, P.17)

These statements reveal his real intention in narrow nationalism. He is trapped in the out dated tyrannical ideas.

The king Ranaji would like the people of Shiv-tarai to pay their taxes to him without fail whether or not they are in a position to do so. The king has no sympathy for the Shiv-tarayans. His only target is to extract taxes from them by hook and crook. Ranajit is well – acquainted with the fact:

"There have been plenty of famines in Shiva-tarai before this, but they always used to pay their taxes" (Act-I, 17).

He does not have any sympathy for the poor Shiv-tarayans. The King's fierceness is nakedly revealed when he orders his minister to take Dhananraja into custody and keep him as prisoner. The king feels strongly dissatisfied with the Vairagi Dhananraja who conveys to the people of Shiv-tarai being not in a position to pay taxes. He dislikes Dhananraja. He suspects Dhananraja to stir up disaffection and rebellion in Shiv-tarai and feels something must be done to curb Dhananraja's subversive activities in Shiv-tarai. The King Ranajit thinks this Vairagi is proving to be a cause of his anxiety because that man keeps going about and instigating the people of Shiv-tarai to rebel against him. That is why, to his mind, the vairagi must be taken into custody to prevent him from continuing his mischief. In this way, the king, bit by bit, becomes an institution of tyranny and proves him a selfish oppressor. The King's arrogant statement "Uddhav take this vairagi to the camp and keep him prisoner there" (Act-II, P.50.) evidently exposes his ferocity.



The king had nominated Abhijit as his heir and successor to the throne of Uttarkut because his guru had told him that this founding had on his body unmistakable marks of imperial destiny. He had also subsequently appointed Abhijit the governor of Shiv-tarai. But now he feels keenly dissatisfied with Abhijit's actions firstly because he has been too lenient with the people of Shiv-tarai and has opened the Nandi pass Road to benefit those people at the cost of Uttarakut people. He regards Abhijit as 'a traitor'. In King's own words:

"He is a traitor to his country and
I will not see him until he admits
his guilty" (Act – II, P.51.)

Thus, the king holds Abhijit's action of opening Nandi Pass Road as "Treachery against his people" (Act-I, P.18). A king with such mind-set can never be a well-wisher to the people of any nation, more particularly to the people of Shiv-tarai and will prove so later. As he says,

"Ever since my grandfather's time, the road
over the Nandi pass has been blocked, to prevent
the wool trade of Shiv-tarai going to foreign
markets. Now Abhijit has thrown open that
road and here in Uttarakut the price of
food and clothing will go up" (Act-I P.18).

In such a way, the King's family has been exploiting the people of Shiv-tarai. The king Ranajit, even in his own time, has not allowed Shiv-tarayans to export their surplus product of wool and other commodities to foreign markets to be sold at the highest prices available to them. By forcing the Shiv-tarayans to sell all their surplus produce in Uttarkut, the king has forced the people to get the lowest possible prices for their commodities so that the people of Uttarkut may obtain those commodities of the minimum possible rates. In this way, the political exploitation gradually looms large. It is abundantly clear that the king himself and the people of Uttarkut are exploiters and the people of Shiv-tarai are the exploited ones. It is also clear from their statements and actions that Ranajit, Bibhuti and the citizens of Uttarkut are arrogant and even inhuman, the economic exploitation of the weaker nation is the rule of the king Ranajit. This is nothing but a kind of robbery which the dramatist detested. The king's uncle the Maharaja Visuvajit's arrival does not produce any pleasure to the king Ranajit. Instead, the king holds him as the 'ring-leader of that set that is spoiling Abhijit' (Act-I, P.19). A conversation that takes place between the king and the Maharaja shows that the king Ranajit's real intention is to subdue the Shiv-tarayans which is very unpatriotic and inhuman act. Ranajit, the king even does not fear Bhairava because 'Bhairava is Uttarakut's own God' (P 20).

The King Ranajit whose sole concern is to tighten his grip over the people of Shiv-tarai, exults over Bibhuti's triumph not so much because it is triumph of scientific technology, because it would enhance his political authority over the Shiv-tarayans. The king strongly resents the Yuvaraja's leniency towards the Shiv-tarayans as their governor. He resents the Yuvarajan's action in opening the Nandipass Road too. As the royal engineer, Bibhuti is also represented as an exploiter, tyrannical, selfish and inhuman through his actions and speeches. Bibhuti symbolizes science divorced from humanity. Bibhuti is the successful royal engineer who after prolonged endeavour of twenty five years has accomplished the feat of building a dam with the help of his machine which would enable the king to release or withhold the waters of Mukta Dhara in accordance with his wish either to benefit or to punish the people of Shiv-tarai. Bibhuti feels very proud of his accomplishment. "To them the gods gave only water; to me, they gave



power to imprison the water” (Act-I, P.12). The construction of the dam has enhanced greatly the king’s authority over the people of Shiv-tarai, apart from bringing glory to Bibhuti himself and to the people of Utarakut. In this way, the blessing of science is used for an evil purpose. Marjorie Sykes rightly comments:

“The engineer who built it cares
nothing for God or for the happiness
of the Shiv-tarayans” (P 112)

Bibhuti proves himself as brutal and inhuman. The waiting of the hungry, the curse of the bereaved mother and the common people of Shiv-tarai do not generate any sympathy in his ruthless heart. The construction of the dam with the help of the machine is an evil omen because the machine has assisted in the construction of a dam which is intended to serve as an additional economic exploitation of the people. The machine symbolizes an evil that science can cause if divorced from human feeling. Bibhuti is undoubtedly meant by the dramatist to be a symbol of scientific power and also of the harmful use of that power. The machine helps Bibhuti in building a dam which would serve his king as a means of tyrannizing over a subject nation. In the end, however, the human love of freedom triumphs over a scientist’s threat to the very existence of a nation. Bibhuti’s mind is the mind of a pure scientist, a mind which is divorced from human values and a human sympathy. “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). The dam is a cause of conflict in the play. No doubt, Bibhuti is a symbol of the tyranny of scientific advance divorced from human welfare and he stands for scientific research, scientific skill, scientific achievement and scientific progress, all divorced from human welfare and from human feeling. “Tagore’s bitter contempt for political oppression finds its fullest expression in the play *Mukta-Dhara*. It bears deep stamp of his ideas of political and economic exploitation” (Agarwal, 67).

In the play *Natir Puja*, we find a struggle between spiritual freedom represented by Srimati and the tyrannical forces of inequity, caste hierarchy, inhumanity, inequality represented by Ratnavali (the main opponent of Srimati), Ajatasatru, Devadatta and to some extent by Lokesvari. Ajatasatru and Devadatta are kept in the background. However, their tyrannical power is suggested to be no less ominous. In this 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 touch resistance against the emerging social beliefs.

Srimati is a Nati, a dancing girl in the royal palace in the capital city of kingdom of Magadha. Though she is, by profession, a dancing girl whose function is to provide entertainment and pleasure, she is at heart, a potently religious person. When she is alone or even when 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 in waking was it in dream?
I know, not I (Natir Puja, Act-I, P.94).

Upali’s willingness to accept alms from the dancing girl arouses much resentment among the royal princesses 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 princess and even the mother Queen Lokeswari herself have not understood the Buddhist teachings even though they have become followers of the Buddhist religion and they have not understood the Buddhist message that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the Lord.

One of the leading themes of the play *Natir Puja* is the conflict which takes place in the mind of Lokeswari between her admiration for the Buddha and her opposition to the Buddhist religion. She used to feed a hundred Bhikshus daily before taking her breakfast on the day when Devadatta, the sworn enemy of the Buddha, had preached his message to a congregation. Everyone in the royal palace had begun to waver and she was the only one to stand firm against the opponent in her Buddhist beliefs. All her services to the cause of the Buddha, in her opinion, had led only to disappointment for her. In this way, Lokeswari is chained in the old values and becomes the prisoner of an outdated mindset or prevailing concepts. She is haunted by false illusions of life and she cannot come out from the allurements of luxuries of life. Her mental situation gradually deteriorates when she thinks of her husband Bimbisara and Son Chitra. Her husband Bimbisara has given up the throne and passed it on his eldest son Ajatasatru, himself retiring to a hermitage away from the royal palace to lead life of prayer and penance under the influence of the Buddhist religion. Krishna Kripalani observes:

“She is torn between her genuine devotion to the Buddha – having seen and worshipped him in person, how could she feel otherwise? – and her bitter wrath against a religion whose gospel of compassion and non-violence is a deadly, disintegrating violence wrecking the basic order of Hindu society, turning the ruler into a monk, a warrior into a beggar” (P.376).

Her husband should have stood firm because he was a Kshatriya and because the Kshatriyas are supposed to wield the sword and not to spend their time in meditation and prayer. The behavior of her husband and her son under the influence of the Buddhist teachings has deprived her of all the joys of wifehood and motherhood. She describes her plight to the Bhikshuni in the following words:

‘Look at me, see what I am today – widowed,
Though my husband lives; barren, having
Borne a son, homeless in the midst of a
Palace” (Act-I, P.91).

She dreams of possessing wealth, wifehood, motherhood and honour. In this way, the lack of family ties and bonds of affection makes Lokeswari hostile against the religion. Lokeswari thinks the world will find its peace through strife, through fire and bloodshed and not through the kind of non-violence which the Buddha preaches. The Buddhist religion teaches a son to leave his mother and a king to leave his throne and this teaching is neither acceptable nor desirable for her. *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 him 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.

To conclude, tyranny in different aspects in the three plays is represented from different angles. Religious tyranny in *Natir Puja*, political tyranny in Mukta-Dhara and tyranny of love in *Chandalika* are explicitly shown. However powerful terrific tyrannical forces may, be they are defeated in the long run. After that, there is a breeze of change, peace prevails. In *Chandalika*, Prakrati's Carnal desire devouring fevers 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.

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