

Treatment of Myth in Rabindranath Tagore's Drama

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Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore has introduced mythical themes in his dramas with spiritual, materialistic, political and historical perspectives. A close study of Tagore's major plays reveals that he probed deep into the mythological tales, legends and folklore and presented a wide range of fundamental human emotions. The plays Chitra, Karna and Kunti, Gandhari's Prayer, etc. are based on mythical stories from Mahabharata, the great Indian epic. On the other hand, the themes of plays like Chandalya, Natir Puja are drawn from old Buddhist legends. The simple and sometimes bald episodes from the mythology are transformed by Rabindranath Tagore into vibrant and rich dramatic expressions full of deep psychological insight and vivid imagery. Tagore's allegorical, philosophical and symbolic plays observe the theme of the realization of truth through the suffering and sorrow in the light of the ideology of Vaishnavism, Upanishads, Jada Bharata, Sankhya philosophy, finite and infinite.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Buddhist legends, Vaishnavism, Upanishads, Jada Bharata, Sankhya philosophy, finite and infinite.

A myth is a symbolic narrative usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional and is especially associated with religious belief. Indian drama, written in English by Indian playwrights makes extensive use of tradition, myths, legends and folklore. Rabindranath Tagore's plays vividly exemplify this trend. Rabindranath Tagore is a major dramatist who has significantly gone back to the roots of Indian myth, tradition and culture and has re-created for us the rich and vibrant picture of Indian society, culture and its people. In all his plays he genuinely portrays the Indian way of life with all its positive and negative aspects, its tradition and their relative contemporary importance and relation.

A culture's mythology is a powerful tool for psychology, casting light on the culture's *shared consciousness*. In Tagore's drama, a myth is a formula or a set of formulas which is vividly used as a constant background to represent eternal truths.

Tagore made rich contribution in the matter of redefining the Indian spirit in modern context with the help of the unique Indian mythological symbols and imagery through his powerful dramas.

Much of Tagore's ideology comes from the teachings of Upanishads and from his own beliefs that God can be found through personal purity and service to others. The symbol of the soul longing for eternity and relationship between Finite and Infinite and the various other mythological symbols of his plays can be ascribed to the influence of the Upanishads and certain aspects of Vaishnavism. The ideas that the Infinite can only be understood in close relationship with the Finite, that man is a "Finite-Infinite" being, conscious of his finitude only through the presence of an infinite nature within him are some of the aspects. Soul yearns for eternity. God, too, sets out to meet the Soul. A close study of Tagore's plays reveals that he probed deep into the mythological tales and presented a wide range of fundamental human emotions.

Sanyasi or *The Ascetic* which ordinarily appears to be a play highlighting the conflict that goes on in the mind of a Sanyasi regarding the Finite and the Infinite, beautifully refers to the myth of Jada Bharata in the Vishnupurana and also to Lord Shiva. The myth has been dramatized through Sanyasi who like Jada Bharata, under some wrong notions renounces the world but the worldly attractions like innocent Vasanti bring him back to the world of ordinary people. Through this mythical comparison, Tagore establishes the fact that Infinite can not be achieved through the negation of the Finite. Sanyasi's joy of loneliness can only be compared to the satisfaction of Lord Shiva, who "after aeons of dream wakes up to find himself alone in the heart of the infinite annihilation." But K.E.S. Iyengar opines, "Sanyasi is a study of a failure of what Shri Aurobindo would call the Refusal of the Ascetic."

The theme of *Visarjan* or *Sacrifice* is quasi-historical. This placing of the theme into the remote past is an artistic necessity, for the theme of Sacrifice, if placed in present time, would have become intolerable. The religious myth of goddess Kali has here been presented with a view to providing the dogmatism and obscurantism as well as to establishing norms of humanism. The story of the play closely imitates a legend if not a myth. But the very concept of Sacrifice can be called mythical and heroic.

Tagore has commendably depicted the myth of goddess Kali as the power of destruction of evil. King Govinda's liberality, humanity, kind-heartedness and firmness of

decision are the qualities found in the great kings in Indian mythology. Queen Gunvati stands for womanly love and eternal motherhood; Raghupati for orthodox religion; Jaysing for duty and Aparna for love and truth.

The King of the Dark Chamber may be regarded as part of a detailed allegory with pronounced traces of the Vaishnav ideology. The unseen King is God who like a husband loves 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. The human soul always impatient to get united with the Supreme, also languishes to have a glimpse of Him. Nirmal Mukherji says, “The knowledge of the true nature of God comes through self-realization—this is the theme of the play.”

The King and the Queen as God and human Soul remind us of the myth of Purush and Prakriti in the Sankhya philosophy. Their union is not easy but is a must to run the world and continue the generation. Like God himself the King remains a mystery to all from the beginning to the end of the play. But the Queen at the end realizes the spiritual beauty of the King. She confirms that God is within the human Soul and the human Soul lies within God. Thus the temporal and the celestial are united together.

Chitra is a dramatization of the story of love between Arjuna, the Pandava and Chitrangada, the princess of Manipur. Tagore has beautifully recast this story in this play with certain changes, but maintaining its full mythical significance. By using various symbols, he has made the play all the more effective and interesting. As S. K. Desai observes, “In *Chitra*, we have the well-known Mahabharata story of Arjuna and Chitrangada, which Tagore transforms into a symbol of human love and in sense, of human life itself.” Through the Chitra-Arjuna episode taken from the Mahabharata, Tagore seems to be recasting the Lord Shiva-Parvati myth as described by Kalidasa in Kumar Sambhavam, an excellent epic in Sanskrit literature. Both Arjuna and Chitra belong to the world of myths and the play presents the confrontation of the human desires with the spiritual world. In *Chitra*, Tagore has beautifully blended the Finite and the Infinite worlds. Summarizing these views K.R.S. Iyengar says, “Tagore rejected both ‘negations’-the ascetic’s denial of life as well as the sensualist’s denial of the spirit. The blinding maddening ecstasy of the physical union is not denied in *Chitra*, but its transience is also recognized.”

Gandhari’s Prayer is one of the short plays of Tagore. Its story is based on the great epic Mahabharata. Tagore has beautifully handled the Mahabharata myth of Gandhari who by virtue of her morality, motherhood and magnitude has become an ideal

woman. Unlike ordinary mothers of present day society, she pleads for punishment and disowning of her son. On the contrary, Dhritarashtra, the father who is supposed to punish his son, turns a blind eye towards his evil activities. The playwright seems to be criticizing the age in which man's selfishness has overpowered all his good qualities and changed the norms of behaviour and conduct through this mythical story.

Karna and Kunti, is a wonderful dramatization of a dialogue between the castaway son Karna and socially conscious mother Kunti, who according to the story of Mahabharata, had left the innocent Karna floating on the current of Ganga, to save herself from infamy due to premarital birth of the child. Through the Mahabharata myth of Karna's birth and his dialogue with Kunti, the playwright presents a conflict between social customs and the inner voice of the mind. Kunti represents the predicament of a woman who is torn between prescribed norms of morality and affection for her son. Karna symbolizes the innocents who are born to face infamy and humiliation throughout their lives without any fault of theirs.

In his *Dakghar* or *Post Office*, Tagore achieved a complete integration of his dramatic art along with the remarkable use of symbols. The Post Office becomes a symbol of the universe, the king stands for God, postmen are the six seasons representing the visible nature. The letter is the message of eternity, the message calling us to reach God. The Blank Slip of paper symbolizes the message of God which one is free to interpret according to one's own light.

Chandalika is a dance –drama by Tagore based on a Buddhist legend of Sardulakarnavadana. Tagore built up this dance-drama retaining the supernatural elements in the legend, holding high the revolutionary idealism of Lord Buddha and its impact on common man. This is the story of the untouchable girl Prakriti, who falls in love with a handsome Buddhist monk Ananda, when the latter asks her to give him water to drink. As Ananda drinks water from her hands, she feels spiritually reborn, newly aware of herself as a woman and emancipated from the bondage of her birth and caste.

Natir Puja is a straightforward play, also based on an old Buddhist legend. The main action centers on a simple religious emotion which rises to a high pitch of ecstasy as the story ends in a tragedy of martyred devotion of the palace dancing girl Srimati.

Malini is a verse drama which well-constructed and highly dramatic in spirit, as well as, in the development of the situation. It comes closer to Sacrifice and Natir Puja. In this drama, Tagore has exposed religious fanaticism in a subtle and minute manner.

Malini, the king's daughter in the play, is denounced by orthodoxy. But her sincerity saves her and Kemanker, her chief accuser, meets a right contribution.

Thus, the meticulous analysis of Tagore's major dramas reveals how dramas dealing with myths and legends have been instrumental in propagating India's cultural heritage, philosophical systems, religious thinking, political understanding and social values. Tagore's plays are deeply rooted in the Indian ethos in their themes, atmosphere and characters. Tagore is the master of the language. He builds powerful imagery and clothes even the pettiest happenings with the glamorous fancy of his poetry. His dramas must be understood in the light of the period in which they are set. They are the epitome of Indian English drama, with a precisely Indian atmosphere expressing the soul's quest for beauty and truth.

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