Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education
Vol. 15, Issue No. 11, November-2018, ISSN 2230-7540

A Critical Analysis of R. N. Tagore's Drama

Tumtum Mukherjee*

Assistant Professor, Bankura Zill Saradamoni Mahila Mahavidyapith, Natunchati, Bankura West Bengal, India

Abstract – To say that Rabindranath Tagore was a prolific dramatist would be an understatement. In his sixty-year career as a playwright, he wrote more than fifty works in the dramatic mode. He tried his hand at so many different styles that a classification of his dramatic output is essential. Tagore himself applied the following terms to his plays: ntak or ntya (drama), ntyakvya (dramatic poem), ntik (playlet), prahasan (farce), gitintya (musical drama), and nritya-ntya (dance drama). His conventional ntya can be further subdivided into two categories—the early blank-verse dramas The King and the Queen and Sacrifice and the others, numbering twenty, all written in prose and, with one exception, published after 1907. Although Tagore separately classified seven of his works as "dramatic poems," they are technically similar to the two verse ntya, the only substantial difference being that the latter are in five acts. Because all seven "dramatic poems" were printed by 1900, it would be appropriate to categorize them chronologically, together with the two poetic plays, as his early dramatic work in verse. To them should be added two of Tagore's "playlets," both written in verse, published during this same period.

Keywords: Drama, Play, Poetry

----------X----------

INTRODUCTION

The author also labeled as "playlets" four other dramatic works in prose, published after 1907, of which the most important is *Chandlik*. While *Chandlik* is a short play, two of the other "playlets" are about as long as some of the full-length plays. Once again, therefore, it may be more helpful in an analysis to place these four pieces with Tagore's later plays, which are exclusively in prose.

Tagore wrote four "farces," three of them during the 1890's. Of all of his plays, these lively and relevant social comedies were the only popular successes he had for a long time on the professional stage. Tagore also attempted several artistically successful adventures in fusing music with drama. Songs are incorporated into the scripts of virtually every Tagore play, but in some of his works, the music and songs command precedence over spoken dialogue. He initiated his dramatic career with three such "musical dramas" published in the 1880's. Six more exercises in this genre appeared between 1923 and 1934, but they were more in the vein of collected songs linked by a loose plot on a common theme, for example, the advent of a particular season. Finally, in the last five years of his life, Tagore introduced his "dance dramas," in which Indian dance and musical forms merge with stories borrowed from earlier writings. Two of the three dance dramas published before his death, for example, were based on *Chitrngad* and *Chandlik*, respectively. In addition, he wrote many minor dramatic miscellanea: sketches, dialogues, satiric and comic skits, and short riddles "in imitation of European charades."

Tagore constantly revised, reworked, or abridged his existing work and made dramatizations of his own fiction. Apart from the two pieces that became dance dramas, three plays (including *Sacrifice*) had their origins in novels and five others in various short stories; *Worship of the Dancing Girl* had its genesis in a poem. Tagore's last dance drama began in the form of a poem written in 1899, metamorphosed into a dance drama in 1936, and was transformed a second time in 1939 to its present fully developed shape. Similarly, the play *Paritrn* started off as a novel published in 1883, was dramatized with a different title in 1909, and ultimately rewritten under another title. In the cases of five other plays, including *The King of the Dark Chamber*, Tagore constructed concise acting editions with altogether different titles, the stageworthy versions succeeding the originals sometimes by as many as forty years, sometimes by as few as six. In recasting *The King and the Queen* as *Tapati* forty years later, Tagore indicated his dissatisfaction with the verse original, observing that he had virtually to write a new play in prose in order to make it suitable as theater. Indeed, the very existence of his acting editions indicates his concern for the staging of his plays and should serve as compelling evidence against those critics who dismiss them as mere closet drama.

The literary influences of Tagore offer important insights into his plays. Above all writers, Tagore

perhaps revered the classical Sanskrit master Klidsa the most; his early drama contains much proof of the impact of Klidsa's heroic themes, nature imagery, and lyric language. The mysticism of the fifteenth century poet Kabir attracted Tagore, too, as did the devotional fervor of Vaishnava religious poetry, presenting human love as simultaneously sacred and profane, and the folk songs of his native Bengal, particularly those with a spiritual flavor, as of the wandering minstrel *bul*. Among Western dramatists, he respected William Shakespeare. It is significant that he liked *Antony and Cleopatra* (pr. c. 1606-1607, pb. 1623) "very much" and found *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (pr. 1604, pb. 1622, revised 1623) fascinating, a "harrowing" experience. His early verse drama was to a great extent modeled after Shakespeare. Tagore admired as well the Romantic idealism of Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. In later years, he acknowledged the debt to Maurice Maeterlinck in his mature "symbolic" plays. Although the initial spark may have come from a reading of Maeterlinck, there is considerable difference between the uses of symbolism as practiced by the Belgian poet and by Tagore.

USES OF ALIGORY IN R. N. TAGORE'S DRAMA

The Western concepts of illusionism and naturalism in the theater, much in fashion among Tagore's contemporaries in late nineteenth century India, did not find a place in Tagore's theory of drama. Many critics, ignorant of the principal consideration that realistic drama and the representational stage (a "childish intrusion") did not in the least appeal to Tagore, are quick to point out flaws in Tagore's dramaturgy. This well-entrenched vogue of Tagore criticism has rarely been opposed, fostering the article of faith among scholarly and theatrical circles that his plays are weak on stage. That this attitude is patently false has been proved on several occasions in the theater, especially in the capable hands of the Bengali director Sombhu Mitra. Tagore is no Henrik Ibsen, and his plays consequently should not be judged by realist standards. If a comparison must be made to a Western author, the proper analogy might be William Butler Yeats, perhaps the Yeats who composed *Four Plays for Dancers* (pb. 1921) and other such later works. Tagore derived his mature drama mainly from Indian traditions, from sources as apparently divergent as Bharata's ancient theoretical discourse, the *Ntyashstra*, and the indigenous folk theater of Bengal, the *jtr*. From Bharata, Tagore enlisted support to vindicate his practice of discouraging painted sets in productions of his plays; as for the *jtr*, he pointed out that "there is no forbidding separation of the actors from the spectators." Referring to the *jtr*, he noted that "The poetry, which after all is the main thing, flows like a spreading fountain through the medium of acting." Tagore insisted, "The art of acting has to be subservient to the poetry of the written word. But that should not mean that acting must be a slave to all the other arts." He thought that actors had a special responsibility to "draw apart the curtain of naturalism and reveal the inner reality of things. If there is too much emphasis on imitative naturalism the inner view becomes clouded." For this reason, he said, "I never humour the adolescent habit of frequently changing scenes and moving the curtain up and down."

One can glean from these comments the four major characteristics of Tagore's drama. First, it is meant ideally for a completely flexible, totally open (perhaps even open-air) stage. Second, it is fluid and imaginative in the widest sense, requiring an appropriately nonillusionistic production style. Third, whether written in verse or prose, its essence is poetry, demanding heightened participatory and auditory awareness. Fourth, it purports to "reveal the inner reality of things." As in his other writings, Tagore explores in his plays the nature of humankind and its relation to divinity or the spiritual world. Some themes are immediately indicative of Tagore's spiritual preoccupations—renunciation of the world (*Sanyasi*), the realization of religious duty (*Sacrifice*), the true attributes of divinity (*The King of the Dark Chamber*), the death of a bed-ridden child (*The Post Office*), the death of winter followed by the rebirth of spring (*The Cycle of Spring*), the worship performed by a dancing girl (*Worship of the Dancing Girl*). In many plays, Tagore's choice of key characters reveals his predilection for the spiritual side of life. Besides the ascetic in *Sanyasi*, the priest in *Sacrifice*, and the Buddhist dancing girl in *Worship of the Dancing Girl*, there is Dhananjaya, the ascetic who appears in *Muktadhr* and *Paritrn*, the Buddhist monk Ananda in *Chandlik*, and the spiritual preceptor Purandar in *Bnsari*. In other plays, Tagore deals with people's relations with other people. Human conceptions of love and feminine beauty are the themes of *Chitra* and *Chandlik*. The attachment between adults and children figures strongly in *Sanyasi* and *The Post Office*. *Muktadhr* treats the invention of the machine and its adverse effects on common people. In *Red Oleanders*, the subject is the dehumanizing impact of organization and of greed for wealth. Political repression is examined in *Paritrn*, and the duties of a ruler in *The King and the Queen*. He also examines the caste structure of Hinduism in *Chandlik*, and the conflict between love and duty in *Bnsari*. Despite the ostensibly spiritual import of many of Tagore's plays, he was actually involved with the ramifications of these issues in everyday life. Thus the undesirable aspects of organized religion are specifically attacked in several works: namely, ritual sacrifice in *Sacrifice*, religious intolerance in *Worship of the Dancing Girl*, and untouchability in *Chandlik*.

The adjectives commonly applied to Tagore's mature prose drama are "symbolic" and "allegorical," but the playwright frequently disclaimed these notions, stating instead that his plays were indeed "just like other plays... very concrete." *The Post Office*, perhaps Tagore's most

famous play outside Bengal, presents a fine example of how commentators trip over themselves attempting to lace his plays with significant meaning. A generally accepted theory suggests that this short play symbolizes and fulfills in its action the human desire for union with God. Such an interpretation, if correct, would cruelly contradict the actual situation depicted. A terminally ill boy, the center of attention, dies in the course of this play. Amal (the name signifies "pure") is too young even to understand the concept of God, much less wish to be united with Him. On the contrary, he is full of genuine *joie de vivre*, constantly imagining what he would do once able to walk again. The ordinary person would feel only sadness, not joy, for Amal's passing. The meaning of the play, as Yeats observed, is "less intellectual, more emotional and simple."

DISCUSSION

Tagore's sensitive portrayal, however, evokes a double response at the conclusion. Yeats also recognized that *The Post Office* "conveys to the right audience an emotion of gentleness and peace." Although the audience grieves for Amal, perhaps distressed that so young a boy could not have the chance to enjoy life fully, it simultaneously rejoices that he has been liberated—according to Hindu beliefs—from the shackles of the material world. The pathos in the play is like that of an epiphany, but thoroughly real and only remotely symbolic. There remains a final consciousness that life is tragic yet beautiful, in equal, counterbalanced proportions, and must be lived fully.

The idea of duality in life expresses itself with relation to divinity in *The King of the Dark Chamber*. This play is undoubtedly allegorical in intent, tracing the spiritual enlightenment of humankind from a one-dimensional vision of God to an all-inclusive vision. The figure of the nameless King whom no one has seen, which recurs in so many of Tagore's plays, represents the Supreme Godhead. His queen, Sudarshan ("the beautiful one"), stands for humanity, and they meet each other always in complete darkness. She is puzzled by the King's assertion that she will not be able to bear the sight of his face. Eventually she does get to see him and is horrified by the vision. Her spontaneous rejection of him leads her deeper into an already existing infatuation with a king manqué named Suvarna (which means "golden"). In the end, having learned through suffering, she returns to her King and accepts his appearance in total submission. Sudarshan's development in the play is analogous to the spiritual maturation of people during their lifetime. People's originally innocent conception of life and divinity as happy and benign is usually shattered at some point by a confrontation with the harsh, pitiless cruelty of reality, which leads people immediately to question God and to negate life, sometimes as a result embracing false ideals—as signified here by the impostor Suvarna. Experience makes people mature, bringing them to a full understanding of the fact that life and divinity are simultaneously terrible and beautiful, ultimately reconciling them with God. The spiritual allegory of growth from the state of innocence through experience to the state of acceptance is by no means original, but Tagore's treatment of it shows a simple and unfettered purity. There is also, as the characters' names imply, the secondary motif that people should look not at externals but at inner truths for spiritual inspiration and purification.

Tagore's preoccupation with life, death, and God in the first decade of the twentieth century gave way to a more overt analysis of political and social subjects during the 1920's. *Red Oleanders* epitomizes the best work of this phase. Set in an imaginary town called Yakshapuri (in Hindu mythology, the god of wealth rules over the city of this name), the play presents a society in which the hoarding of gold demands strict discipline and a stratified class structure based on the suppression of human rights. Tagore himself explained its several layers of meaning later to his English readers: He had condemned the principle of organization for utilitarian purposes, which subjugates the individuality of people and turns "a multitude of men... into a gigantic system"; the passion of greed among colonial powers, "stalking abroad in the name of European civilization," and humiliating subject races; and the impersonal attitude in modern humanity that transforms the spirit of science into the tyranny of the machine, preferring mechanization over humanitarianism.

CONCLUSION

The playwright had become increasingly troubled by the evils of twentieth century civilization and seemed to offer an alternative solution in the person of Nandini, the heroine of this play. Nandini symbolizes spontaneity, love, altruism, and the spirit of humanity in communion with nature. The rebellion she instigates against the dehumanizing and exploitative order succeeds; the invisible King of Yakshapuri comes out and joins forces with her to destroy his own Frankenstein after he sees the havoc it has wrought. *Red Oleanders* has been variously interpreted as a call to Indians to take up arms against the British government and as a socialistic revolt against the agencies of capitalism. Such flag-waving restrictions of its theme only constrict its essential beauty, which exists in its universal qualities, applicable to all societies.

REFERENCES

1. Alex Aronson (2010). Rabindranath through Western Eyes, Calcutta, RDDHI.

2. A. N. Gupta & Satish Gupta (2014). Rabindranath Tagore's Chitra 4th edition Delhi.

3. Ananda Lal (2015). Rabindranath Tagore Three Plays, Calcutta: M. P. Birla Foundation.

4. Apurba Kumar Ray (2012). "Tagore Translation: Problems and Prospects", West Bengal, Vol, xxxiv, No. 10, Calcutta, May16, 2012.

5. Asit Bandyopadhyay, History of Modern Bengali Literature, Calcutta: Modern Book Agency, 2014.

6. Chakravorthy, B. C.: Rabindranath Tagore, His Mind and Art. Young India Publications, New Delhi.

7. Commonwealth and American Novel Laureates in Literature, ed. A.L. McLeod "The Royal Metaphor in the Plays of Rabindranath Tagore", Radhiga Priyadharshim, Mysore: 2013.

8. Edward J. Thompson (2011). Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Work. Calcutta: Y. M. C. A. Publishing House.

9. Ghose, S. K. Rabindranath Tagore (2014). New Delhi, Sahitya Academi, 2014.

10. Hiren Mukerjee (2011). Rabindra Nath Tagore Himself A True Poem, Calcutta: People's Publishing House.

Corresponding Author

Tumtum Mukherjee*

Assistant Professor, Bankura Zill Saradamoni Mahila Mahavidyapith, Natunchati, Bankura West Bengal, India