

Tagore as a Dramatist: Transcending Boundaries

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Abstract

The Nobel Laureate, who denounced the title, was the first oriental dramatist to have initiated the postcolonial waves of reawakening through his literary writings based on the concept of “Indianness.” Thematically based on India and the storyline developing in truly Indian settings, the stories act as mirror to Indian society sometimes criticising the drawbacks and at other times flaunting the inherent goodness emanating through our rich cultural heritage.

Yes, his writings transcend borders. With its universal tone, readers all over do empathise with his themes and sympathise with his characters. The minute delicacy with which the story is narrated in his dramas make the readers dwell in his world of creation with complete surrender to the work. His oriental approach does not deter the western readers but lure them into a world of ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ where they are completely enchanted through his creative art.

At twenty, he wrote his first drama-opera *Valmiki Pratibha (The Genius of Valmiki)*. In it the Pandit Valmiki overcomes his sins, is blessed by Saraswati, and compiles the *Rāmāyana*.¹ Another play, written in 1912, *Dak Ghar (The Post Office)*, describes the child Amal defying his stuffy and puerile confines by ultimately “falling asleep,” hinting his

physical death. A story with borderless appeal—gleaning rave reviews in Europe—*Dak Ghar* dealt with death as, in Tagore's words, "spiritual freedom" from "the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds. In 1890, he released what is regarded as his finest drama: *Visarjan (Sacrifice)*. "A forthright denunciation of meaningless and cruel superstitious rites," (Ayyub 48) the Bengali originals feature intricate subplots and prolonged monologues that give play to historical events in seventeenth-century Udaipur. In *Raktakarabi* ("Red" or "Blood Oleanders"), akleptocrat King rules over the residents of Yakshapuri. He and his retainers exploit his subjects—who are benumbed by alcohol and numbered like inventory—by forcing them to mine gold for him. The naive maiden-heroine Nandini rallies her subject-compatriots to defeat the greed of the Sardar class—with the morally roused King's belated help. *Chitrangada*, *Chandalika*, and *Shyama* are other key plays that have dance-drama adaptations.

Based on myth mingles with social customs and political intrigues, the plays cover a broad area of human behaviour and mannerism, though Indian but engulfing humanity in general. The paper aims at taking a dive into Tagore's world and selecting the pearls of wisdom which are universally acceptable, applicable and appreciable.

Keywords: Oriental, Post-Colonial, Transcend, Myth, Universal, Intrigues, Acceptable, Applicable, Appreciable.

Introduction:

When India was fidgeting with the clash of value system pertaining to a battle between traditions and modernity; orientalism and occidentalism became the most debated school of thought. Colonial India was ready to break free from its shackles and enter into a new dawn of hope. But colonisation didn't just end with perpetual battles; people from all

genres put their best foot forward to devise philosophies on the condition of their sullied nation. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was one such prominent figure who surfaced.

Tagore grasped the essence of postcoloniality and infused them into his writings. Albeit they were accurate and rigorous renditions that brought out the evils a colonised nation housed. The post-colonial implication provided for grounds to analyse the nation and question its rhetoric. Tagore felt the need to dig them up and give them a center stage. Being awarded as a novelist, poet, philosopher, musician, artist, reformer, actor, critic and playwright, the balance in his works readily mingled and appealed to the emotions of the people. The pressing issues which were brought to light through the eyes of an orientalist like him investigated the impact of imperial language, European studies and the plight of a colonial education system.

Tagore developed his philosophies around these grounds. But being a worldly man, gave him exposure to the pace at which the Western nations were progressing. On a mission to expound and rationalize the beliefs of the people of his nation; a careful restructuring of the "white man's burden" was his attempt.

He started to write as young as 15. Having being born into a wealthy family, the values of atheism and aristocracy were imbibed in him. His family comprised of men of letters and his household embodied literature, spirituality and music throughout. As a poet his fame branched out to the West for which he was conferred the Nobel Prize in 1913 for *Geetanjali*. He was a representative of the coeval India. But not only as a poet, Tagore as a playwright, novelist and an actor also cherished.

A significant part of the Indian national movement, Tagore shaped the thought process of the masses by writing about the popular belief systems. His poems and novels successfully infused the feeling of patriotism, which was fuel for the freedom movement. A

social reformer, visionary and a patriot, Tagore also had high regards for the Indian education system. His Vishwa Bharti at Shantiniketan stands tall to his universal ideas.

In particular, if the theatrical aesthetics of Tagore are to be brought to light, an appropriate mix of theatre and drama reveals itself. His dramatic vision is highly individual. As a playwright his dramas had evolved over a period of six decades.

He categorized his plays into subcategories like *natya* or *natak* (drama), *natika* (playlet), *naritya-natya* (dance drama), *natkiyanatak* (dramatic drama), *prahasan* (farce) and *gitintya* (musical drama). The popular ones like *The King and the Queen* and *Sacrifice* were his renditions of blank verse. Tagore commenced his dramatic career by producing musical dramas. Songs were a major part of his dramatic scripts. But his social comedies did exceedingly well on stage. The themes of his plays stem out from his multifaceted personality, and his exposure to the rich Indian scriptures; the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Smritis is evident. The intellectuals of post-colonial India sheltered a belief system which gained sustenance from its roots. With the idyllic mixture of upanishadic philosophy, and the Western ideas, his school of thought reflects in his dramas.

In this sense, I find his reflections on 'dharma' to be quite striking. He defines it - "the ultimate purpose that is working in our self." He says that the purpose of man is finding truths about what transcends him. It is in understanding what is beyond one's existence that man can truly be capable of comprehending humanity. He writes:

When we know the highest ideal of freedom [perhaps *mukti*] which a man has, we know his dharma, the essence of his nature, the real meaning of his self. At first sight it seems that man counts that as freedom by which he gets unbounded opportunities of self-gratification and self-aggrandisement. But surely this is not borne out by history. Our revelatory men have always been those who have lived the life of self-sacrifice. The higher nature in man

always seeks for something which transcends itself and yet is its deepest truth; which claims all its sacrifice, yet makes this sacrifice its own recompense.

This is man's dharma, man's religion, and man's self is the vessel which is to carry this sacrifice to the altar (*Sadhana* 43).

Being a multidimensional writer, he had a sound knowledge of both English and Bengali. But his inclination was more towards the latter. A strong believer of humanity and in the divinity of the human soul; Tagore wound up his characters with such delicate details. All his protagonists and antagonists show their simplicity of character and each time put across his intended ideology. He was very vocal about this ideology and he opined that –“Our soul when detached and imprisoned within the narrow limits of a self loses its significance, for its very essence is unity. It can only find out its truth by unifying itself with others and only then has its joy. To know our soul apart from the self is the first step towards the realization of the supreme deliverance” (30). The metaphysical concepts are boldly woven as the play makes progress. In a very direct yet cold manner, Tagore introduces his moments of enlightening which he called as *Reminiscences*, a universal ideology with an inclined axis towards vibrant Indian culture.

If Tagore's plays are to be closely studied, it is the predominant theme of humanity running intertwined with various other social evils that erected the colonial and post-colonial India. But the human goodness and spirituality with which these sensitive topics are presented makes all the difference. His take on values asserts that, “Our life gains what is called 'value' in those of its aspects which represent eternal humanity in knowledge in – sympathy, in deeds, in character and creative works” (145). This refers to a context of humanity that goes beyond existentialism. Some material particulars of life add little to no value to what we can call ‘quality’ of life. Similarly, Hall expresses: “The Universality and immutability of properties is taken either to be valuable or simply to constitute value itself.

That a property is not restricted in space and time and does not share the vicissitude~ of fortune that fall to the lot of particulars exemplifying it seemed to Plato to establish the superlative value of properties. Properties reside in a higher realm than particulars" (14-15)

The symbolism in his plays is heavy. A harmonious mix of peace, brotherhood and progressive mindset are woven with little intricate detailing, as one gets knee-deep into his plays. An even more interesting facet of Tagore was the mysticism running through all his dramas. At all various dimensions and nooks, this arcane component is handled pretty well.

Definitely calling Tagore a prolific writer is an understatement. There are layers and layers under which Tagore speaks through his characters. His dramas albeit imbued with mysticism, are filled with the potential to foresee the future and give a commentary of the current scenario. There are legit issues addressed in his plays but they also tag along his universal trust in humanism. Socio-cultural and economic issues; matters of significant sensitivity are dealt with caution and enough dramatic emphasis. Tagore's language is superficially simple for the masses to read.

Tagore spun his mystical agenda with many elements. The key elements are the attitudes, virtues, social and moral values and beliefs. Even the very first drama-opera that he wrote, *Valmiki Paratibha* (1888) a union of love, wisdom and a belief in actions lies at the essence. The story revolves around Pandit Valmiki (*The Genesis of Valmiki*) who conquers his sins, gets blessed by the divine intervention of Goddess Saraswati and produces the epic Ramayana. The heavily laden storyline is reflective of all the elements that Tagore believed in. In 1881, this play was taken to the stage and Tagore himself played the role of the protagonist.

The play *Raja O Rani*, called *The King and the Queen* (1889), show a woman leading a kingdom to glory. But towards the end, the inclusion of a male protagonist steals the light. Here Tagore attempted to give a little hint to the progressive women of today. In such simple

yet elegant work, Tagore transcends his boundaries and dates to put them in public. He weaves the story in such a way that it became audible enough for his audience.

Another play similar to sacrifice was *Mukta Dhara*. In this work, Tagore wanted to depict the social values and principles that could be easily incorporated in the social life. How the forces of science and religion influence man and curtails or expands his freedom is expounded upon.

Not entirely uprooting from his belief system, and eulogizing about the West, Tagore knew how to maintain a healthy balance of both. A worldly man with a taste for Western philosophers, dramatists and novelists, he grew fond of Shakespeare. There is an inkling, quite visible in the way he wrote and structured. His early drama were structured and modeled in accordance to Shakespearean line. In *Bisarjan* or *Sacrifice* (1890) yet again, he challenges social evil of animal sacrifice and brings up it in contrast to the barbarism of human sacrifice. Through his fictional characters, Tagore is able to braid a powerful play, with numerous lessons to take back.

Through a plethora of social settings, Tagore successfully portrays man in the changing times. The characters speak their mind and present society with a mirror. There is an indication towards his theory of Nature and Man, where none exist independently. It is only through nature that the divine nectar could be savoured. In his play nature is also depicted in a very non-animated manner.

Most label Tagore's plays as greatly symbolic and allegorical but to him they were just honest rendition of the situations around him. Tagore eulogized the presence of the divine and God. This is pretty evident from the thematic foundation of most of his dramas. *Dak Ghar* or *The Post Office* (1912) allows for a window through which people can get to experience the divine semblance in mundane life. Even with such melancholic and dry theme

like death, in this play the death of a bedridden child and the invention of a machine in *Muktadhara*, along with its pros and cons put across his ideologies successfully.

While in *Sanyasi* (1883) the renunciation of the world is beautifully set, there is a challenge to the Hindu caste system in *Chandalika*. Not only this, being an advocate for feminism later in his life, plays like *Chitra* and *Chandalika* celebrate the feminine beauty and love as their themes too. The want for wealth and the downside of housing greed for material aspects is picked as the theme for *Red Oleanders*. Even though the storyline treads around a fictitious town of Yakshapuri, the value in the play points out to the stratification of class in the Indian society. This amalgamated with the greed to hoard enormous wealth; served together in a platter to point out to human rights.

With all such themes that challenge myths, flawed belief systems, and the institutions that make it easy to relate; the reader or the viewer always has a take back. Moreover, all these elements are tossed and garnished with spiritual integrity. Apart from Shakespeare, there is also a very visible influence of Kabir the classical Indian Sanskrit poet.

The presence of Rabindranath Tagore in India's literary scene surely made it even more sacrosanct. To house a top notch poet, writer, philosopher, educationist, musician, playwright and a patriot nonetheless, adds on to the extraordinaire culture. He can rightly be called a cultural colossus, who with his words had the power to influence by inculcating a feeling of belongingness in his readers.

In reference to Tagore and his contributions, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru said “Rabindranath Tagore has given to our nationalism the outlook of internationalism and has enriched it with art and music and the magic of his words, so that it has become the full-blooded emblem of India’s awakened spirit” (36). Such contributive was his presence that his plays showed a dramatic element which was highly cherished in the West too. Tagore specifically pinpointed to the underlying meanings that were to be originally deciphered. Many might consider his

discourse on God and spirituality as a figment of fiction. But for Tagore being an Indian playwright, it were the social values and these ideologies of divinity and religious affairs that made him more relatable, consequently bringing him closer to people.

Mostly, it is the natural aspects combined with the supernatural that make up Tagore's dramas. They readily transcend into the wide-open stage for which they are fabricated. Not only this, his dramas emerge from the wildest of imaginations which hold the potential to intrigue the audience. Another appreciable aspect is the manner in which Tagore unravels the plays. There are both tragic and beautiful elements in close relationship with the broad themes that his dramas span across.

A certain acquaintance with reality is what the readers and viewers get to experience while going through Tagore's plays. This is most appreciated and respected aspect. Simple yet valuable gems of life lessons are embellished in a colossal and comprehensive manner. Even the most sensitive of topics are dealt with maturely. Divinity is given an overview from different dimensions and the flaws of the current system are highlighted. The treatment of the characters and subject matter in his plays show a certain maturity as the play proceeds.

Tagore in the first half of the twentieth century was experiencing a spiritual journey with the elements of God, life and death. Thus his writings during this era have shown a glimpse of an overt analyzing of the pressing political and social matters. The evils gaining ground, in the twentieth century was a matter of concern for Tagore and he, on his mission to eliminate them, took to literature. Through literature and his various mediums, he transcended boundaries on issues which were considered a taboo and suppressed the popular opinion.

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