
Rabindranath Tagore's Treatment of Love and Religion in his Thesis

Mrs. Smita Devi

Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese Fakiragram College, Kokrajhar, Assam

INTRODUCTION

A versatile genius Rabindranath Tagore surpasses all concrete introductions to his works. As in poetry, Tagore is an important name in the history of Indian Drama.. He has both abundance and variety in drama as in his poetry. The large number of plays from his pen includes nearly all known typical categories – full five-act play on the Elizabethan model and one-act plays, poignant tragedies and joyful comedies, farces and satires, dramatic dialogues in verse and lyrical dramas, symbolical plays with a predominantly metaphysical content and plays dealing with contemporary social and political issues.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives in this article is to critically analyse the treatment of the themes of love and religion in four thesis plays of Tagore trans-created in English by the playwright himself from his Bengali originals. The plays selected are “Chitra (1913), Sanyasi (1917), Malini (1917) and Sacrifice (1917)”.

DISCUSSION

The plays are varied in thematic concerns, but viewed as various facets of Tagore's thesis on love and religion; they present a sort of unity. The treatment of the themes is discussed and assessed in the backdrop of Tagore's humanism.

Treatment of the themes : Love of Religion & Religion of Life. Tagore's plays are firmly rooted in the Indian ethos and ethics in their themes, character and treatment. Dr. Sayug Yadav says, “Not the careful knotting knitting of the plot but the music of ideas and symbols is the soul of his plays.”² To say, ideas in his dramas are more important than their construction.

Tagore is a sage-writer. He works with a thesis in each of his writings. His dramatic work is the vehicle of ideas rather than the expression of action. The plays under discussion have been called thesis plays – plays that deal with controversial social issues in a realistic manner, expose social ills and stimulate thought and discussion on the part of the audience.

Each of these dramas presents an intricate play of love and religion. The ascetic's religion is his renunciation of the world for which he declares “I am free of fear and desires.....my reason shines pure and bright”, “nothing can touch me truly”. He considers the early things unreal, the beautiful mere fantasy. When Vasanti wants to shelter in his love, he flees from her to stick to his religion of seclusion. But later he realizes the power of love of this physical world. He becomes nostalgic of Vasanti when another ragged girl addresses him as father. He feels in his imagination the caressing

hand of Vasanti on his forehead. Moved by the memory of Vasanti's love, he lets his vows of sanyasi go. His religion of desolation now transforms to his love of the world, the bondage of human affections. The untouchable girl gives him the touch of human love and human religion, though at the cost of her life. The sanyasi realizes – "True love, far from binding, can emancipate and enlarge. Love is the Everlasting Yea that liberates, purifies and intensifies human understanding...."³

In "Chitra" Tagore shows that mere physical love cannot satisfy the lovers; illusion can dazzle a lover at first, but cannot thrive. Reality is to be revealed for fulfilment of love. Here also Tagore delves deep into the human heart. Arjuna's celibacy is shaken when Chitra blessed by Madana and Vasanti expresses her cherished love for Arjuna. But pure love cannot base upon unreality. Both Arjuna and Chitra are unhappy till they are under an illusion. Once Chitra unveils her disguise and appears in her real self, Arjuna cannot help saying "my life is full" Religion of love overpowers all other established religion.

While in the plays "Sanyasi" and "Chitra", the central floor is occupied by the theme of love, in "Sacrifice" and "Malini", it is religion or controversy regarding orthodox belief. Threat to establish orthodox Hindu belief initiates the action in both the plays.

In "Sacrifice", Hindu orthodox is represented by Raghupati, the priest in the temple of Kali. He comes in bitter conflict with another adamant character – the King who forbids shedding of blood in the temple. Tagore here offers a thesis, in his own medium of Poetry and drama, against idol worship, the whole basis of which seems to be shattered by the agonized questioning of Raghupati's disciple, the innocent victim of his fanaticism and by his own terrible disillusionment. (Hirankumar Sanyal)⁴. Jaising sacrificed himself not for his love of religion, but for religion of love. His agonized questions to his master indicate his growing scepticism on idol worship. Caught in the trap of fanaticism, he could not disobey his master, but he could neither shed the King's blood that he adored nor go with Aparna whom he loved. Jaising did the last thing he could do. The drama shows the play of love and religion: People like Raghupati and Nakshatra, also Gunavati, sacrifice love for the sake of religion. The final scene shows that love is more powerful than established religion itself. Realization dawns upon Raghupati, who, noticing the fatal act of Jaising, cries out, "Jaising, forgive me, my darling; come back to my heart, my heart's one treasure! Let me die in your place!" (P-107). His discarding of the idol calling it deaf, dumb & blind signifies the shattering of his orthodox religious belief.

In "Malini", Raghupati's place is taken by the Brahmins who assemble to secure their religion by banishing the king's daughter Malini who is going against the established belief and has embraced Buddhism. Even here, fanatic Brahmins take up ignoble method, one going to the extent of seeking foreign aid. But universal love preached by Malini overpowers them. The agitated Brahmins, except Supriya and Kemankar, at once accept her as a goddess and mother; proposes to restore her to her home. Latter, Supriya is also drawn on Malini in religious faith and also love. The final speech of Malini is very significant. She asks her father to forgive Kemankar though the latter has killed Supriya. Forgiving is an absolute action. Malini forwards her compassion and mercy to Kemankar even though a killer. She could have won the battle of love openly and affected a change of heart of Kemankar formerly and she thinks, she can even now. This universal love preached by Buddha, by Christ and, here, by Malini which is the core of every religion – so dearly merges the themes of love and religion! Forgiveness is divine; religion of love is the most catholic one. In "Sacrifice" and

“Malini”, we find a conflict between orthodox religion and conventions on the one hand and the claims of humanity on the other”.⁵

Symbolic Elements

The plays under discussion belong to the earliest group of Tagore’s plays which are generally considered non-symbolic. But symbolism is not totally lacking in these plays. M. K. Naik also observes, “Tagore’s Principal characters tend to be symbolic and allegorical in the thesis plays.”⁷

The different events and actions only contribute to the formation of the symbolic character. Again, certain common symbols are noticed in the plays. Road or street symbolizes the public, the ordinary life, the general state of affairs. In “Sanyasi”, Vasanti asks the Sanyasi, “Do you hear the noise in the road?” It is symbolic of her invitation to him to return to the finite world. All scenes of this play except the first one is set in some path, symbolizing the different stages of the ascetic’s realization of the truth underlying the finite world. In “Malini” again, the most important conversion – the silent acceptance of and surrender to Malini by the Brahmins takes place in the street, symbolizing the state of affairs in which now onward Malini gets involved. The altar and the temple symbolize orthodox religion. The casting of the idol in “Sacrifice” symbolizes the reformation advocated by the king in the drama, the Poet and the reformist leaders of Indian Renaissance. One of the merits of “Chitra” is Tagore’s deep and profound use of symbolism. When in the first scene, granting Chitra’s blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs, (P-3)”, the blossoms and nestle symbolize the feminine grace and beauty and the promise of motherhood Chitra is going to achieve. Tagore’s observation on “Sanyasi” is worth mentioning here. The thought of this play is one of the key thoughts of all his life: “the great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form and the eternal freedom of the soul in love.....Nature took the Sanyasi to the presence of the Infinite, enthroned on the finite, by the pathway of the heart(It) may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work, or rather, this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt – the joy of attaining the Infinite within the finite”.⁸

To say, significant symbols relating to love and religion have been used in these plays. “talks and walks”:

In the strictest sense of the world, drama is a literature that deals with ‘walks and talks’. In the thesis plays of Ibsen, Shaw etc, there were more talk than walk – the walks being far different from that of the Elizabethans. The stage was basically used as a platform for deliberation on the social issues taken. The plays under discussion deal with some issues – spiritual, ethical or social. As such, presumably talks are more important here than the walks. There is little action in the sense of action in Elizabethan dramas, which Tagore claims, are his models. Chitra is brought up as a warrior, Arjuna is a Kshatriya but archery expertise or human tricks are not displayed. In “Sanyasi”, groups of people pass the stage, but there is no real action except theatricality. Same is the case with “Malini”; even death of Supriya is not for action, but accident of course, the incidents in “Sacrifice” are highly dramatic. Yet the talks – the thesis Tagore worked on are unquestionably the most important aspects in these plays.

The Poetic Vehicle

“Tagore’s dramas are very short, but epigrammatic suffused with the unfathomable depths of imagination and emotion.”⁹ Almost all his plays ring the note of music and rhythm, love and spirituality, metaphors and symbols i.e. elements essentially poetic. Thus the English plays also,

though in prose, do not lack in poetic elements. Some poetic lines dealing with the themes of love and religion are –

“Not for the short span of a day, but for one whole year, the charm of spring blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs.” It is significant for its poetic tune and poetic imagery and symbol. Again, the whole speech of Chitra in scene IX is delivered as a piece of poetry. Likewise, “the finite is the true infinite, and love knows its truth”

(Sanyasi P – 67); “I seem to have come down, like a sudden shower from a cloud of dreams, into this world of men,” (Malini,” p- 77); “The hearts laws are not the laws of scripture,” (Sacrifice, P- 99). But what is more important perhaps is the poetic idea that is worked on in each of these plays. The celebration of life in “Sanyasi” and “Chitra” that present spiritual development of the title characters is far more poetic than the poetic lines therein. Again, killing Supriya the betrayer of love and bringing Raghupati near to his antithesis Aparna, Tagore has provided poetic justice in the plays concerned.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the plays combined with the discussion on Tagore’s treatment of love and religion clearly brings out the play wright’s universal humanism. Futility of religions fanaticism is exposed while catholicity of human love is adored. Methods and means for reformation are suggested in symbolic and poetic language. Religion of love is presented to be the most promising one. To say, the plays nicely present the core feature of the theme of love.

REFERENCES

- i. Das, Sisir Kumar (ed) – The English writings of Rabindranath Tagore. Volume Two, Sahitya Akademi (Reprint) 2004, P-57. All textual references are to this volume; page no are given within brackets.
- ii. Prasad, Amar Nath & Yadav, Sar yug (ed) – Studies in Indian Drama in English. Prakash book Depot, 2003. P-5.
- iii. Iyengar, K.R.S. – Indian Writing in English. Sterling. (Reprint) 2003. P-124
- iv. Sahitya Akademi – Rabindranath Tagore: A Centenary volume 1861-1961, 1961. P-235.
- v. Joshi, KN & Rao, B.S. – Studies in Indo-Anglian Literature, Prakash Book Depot. (Reprint) 2006. P-53
- vi. Thompson, Edward J-Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist, OUP, New Delhi 1994. P- 286. 1097, Naik, M.K. – A History of Indian English Literature. Sahitya Akademi. (Reprint). 2006. P-103.
- vii. Tagore’s “Reminiscences” (P-237, 238) quoted in Thompson, Edward J, op cit. P-51,55.
- viii. Prasad, A.N. op. cit. P-24-25.