

Rabindranath Tagore and Modernity: Revisiting the Three Dance- Dramas of Tagore.

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Rabindranath Tagore needs no explanation. He is an innovator, a creator and artist in every sense. He wrote poems, short stories, novels, plays, songs, essays, travelogues and what not and succeeded in every genre. Though his poetry excels his dramatic achievements but he made some great contributions in Indian drama. He experimented with the traditional Indian stage. He loved the idea of freedom and exercised it in his writings as well as in his own life. This idea of creative freedom let him diverge from the persisting norms in creative traditions. He invented a few forms of drama which is exclusively tagorean. Tagore gave the world some new forms as *geeti natya* (song dramas) and *nritya natya* (dance dramas). My paper is an attempt to discuss the three dance dramas known as *Rabindra Nritya Natya: Chitrangada* (1936), *Chandalika* (1935, revised in 1938) and *Shyama* (1939). He combined songs, dance and music to form the drama where words have very little role to play. The entire drama is presented through dance and songs where emotion, expression, gesture and body language play the key role. About which Jha writes ‘he created his own genre of dance drama, a unique mixture of dance, drama and song. He was progressive emphasizing in creative self-expression in the development of young minds.’(qtd. in Ray, 132). An entirely new dance form was created by Tagore which was an adaptation of Bharatnatyam, Manipuri and Kathakali to perform these dramas; the songs are originally written by Tagore and known as *Rabindra sangeet*. The key point of *Rabindra Nritya Natya* is Expressive dancing. The dancer becomes one with the character through the language of his/her body and emotive eyes. The dancers are not confined to females only rather the males equally participate in dance as dance has no gender.

The dance drams of Tagore have many modern elements in them not only in terms of their theme but techniques as well. The first of these is *Chitrangada*, the story of which is borrowed from Indian mythology. It has the epic characters of Arjuna, the best of the pandavas and the royal princess Chitrangada from the Mahabharata but Tagore gave Chitrangada a distinguished identity of her own; she is a manifestation of the

mythological fervour. She is strong, feminine and aware of her true self. She is Tagore's 'attempt to justify the role of women, not only as a beautiful agent of Nature but also as an interpreter of truth.' (Ray,137). The play opens with a formal introduction of princess Chitrangada who was brought up by her father, Chitravahana, the king of manipur to be a man. She dresses like a man and fought with equal temper. She was an expert in archery and was a saviour of her kinsmen. The action of the play begins when Chitrangada meets Arjuna and a desire to become a woman enliven within her. She seeks the help of the love-god, Madana who blesses her with ethereal beauty for one year. She is able to break the celibacy of Arjuna with her enchanting beauty but is affected by the conflict between her real self which was more like a man in every inch and her present fake self which is borrowed. She dwindles between the two and even criticises the 'Kurupa' (ugly) Chitrangada before Arjuna when he hears of the princess who fights like a man. Eventually she realizes her true self and asks Madana to take the blessings of beauty back. In her words:

'Take back, do take back

This your boon,

O cupid Lord!

Make me free, do remove

This web of falsehood

O cupid Lord!'(Banerjee, 110)

The awakened Chitrangada calls her present beauty a 'web of falsehood'. Though she wants to shed off her male attire and rely on to her woman self but with no modification. Her realisation towards the path of self awakening is beautifully crafted when she demands equality of power and position with her male counterpart. Tagore's Chitrangada claims her feminine position in her bold announcements:

'I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the

object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with

indifference. If you design to keep me by your side in the path

of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great

duties of your life, then you will know my true self.'(Tagore, 23)

The dance drama on stage has several full length songs in fact the dialogues are converted in songs and the conflicts are expressed in gestures and body language. The background music denotes the mood of the play. The loud music makes the tension and conflict clear along with the facial expressions. What lacks in Tagore is the lapse of time in which all the incidents occur. Though the story is well narrated by the background singers and the on stage dance performers. The stage design has no special effects and the scenes change with the coming and going of performers on stage. Chorus plays an important part on stage. Here in *Chitrangada* the *sakhigan* are almost always surrounding her and help the audience get a clear image of Chitrangada's psychological torpor through their reactionary gestures. Chitrangada is a portrayal of modern Indian women who is not weakened by worldly illusions of beauty. She is brave, dutiful, courageous and challenging. She captures Arjuna's heart with her scintillating transformed beauty but gains his reverential love through her real self. She makes Arjuna love her more for who she is not for who she pretends to be. Tagore's attempt to portray a modern woman through his dance- drama is a success and this is the reason *Chitrangada* is still so popular and one of Tagore's most performed dramas on stage. To quote Krishna Kripalani, the biographer of Tagore:

‘Indeed the theme is the enchantment of spring and the power of its spell on the senses, and Spring is itself one of the characters in the play which is one of Rabindranath Tagore's best and perhaps the only one that is flawless, if anything made by man can be called flawless.’ (Kripalani, 143)

The next dance- drama is *Chandalika* where Tagore took up the theme of untouchability. The story is borrowed from Buddhist legends. It is not a drama against untouchability but again about awakening of the spiritual blindness. It raises the status of women who are trapped in the slumber of social dogmas. The heroine of the play, a chandal girl named Prakriti who lives in banishment with her mother and is deprived of the simple joys of love, laugh and human connections. She is made to believe that she is born out of curse. She lives in the delusion of a lower caste birth and hence is an untouchable. It is mention worthy here that in both *Chitrangada* and *Chandalika* Tagore experimented with the original story and twisted the characters. In Tagore both the women are strong, aware of their true self, transformed for better and modern in their approach. Chandalika in the Buddhist story is more of a wanton female fervent to seduce a Buddhist devotee who is saved by the psychic power of Lord Buddha. Tagore made it a psychological drama of high conflict: between mother and daughter, man and society and belief and conscience. Prakriti here, is awakened to her

rights as a human being who does not pollute the high borne. Surprisingly the awakening of Prakriti is caused by the Buddhist devotee Ananada who asks water from her. He made her believe that:

‘You’re the same human that I’m, maiden!

That water is pilgrim’s water which satiates the thirsty,

Whatever refreshes the hot and the weary is sacred

Water indeed!

Give water to men, give water.’(Banerjee, 141)

No wonder that Tagore’s Chandalika has a feminine sway which distinguishes her from her Buddhist origin. Though she persuades her mother to bring Ananda back to her through her special magic but eventually she learns to sacrifice her love in order to save Ananda who lives in celibacy. She is capable to love and to give love away for the utmost good. Prasad writes: ‘Chandalika is redeemed for the second time, purged of the pride and egoism and she realises that love does not bind but frees.’(qtd. in Ray, 127). When Tagore staged this dance drama Gandhi who watched the performance was moved and was full of praise due to the theme of untouchability.

The last of the dance dramas is *Shyama*. It was Tagore’s last major work for the stage. It reflects his dramatic and philosophical reaction to the ongoing turbulence in pre independence India and the chaos in Germany. The story of *Shyama* is based again on a Buddhist legend, about which Tagore wrote a poem in 1899. In 1938, he had started to develop this into a dance work for the stage by the name *Porishodh* (Repayment) with the help of students at Santiniketan. This was what he expanded and developed into the full dance musical *Shyama*. Tagore addresses a number of issues which are as topical today as they were in 1939, when he wrote *Shyama*. *Shyama* is essentially a romantic tragedy, though there are two love stories intertwined: that of Shyama and Bojroshen, who are initially both in search of their ideal partners, and that of the unexpressed, unilateral and unrequited love Uttiyo has for Shyama which leads him to sacrifice himself for her happiness. Both romantic situations are likely to be painfully familiar to many. A year before he wrote *Shyama*, Tagore had written *Prayashchiththo* (Penance), which reflected his deep concern with both the increasingly turbulent atmosphere in pre-Independence India and the rise of Hitler in Europe. In *Shyama*, in casting the character of Bojroshen as a foreign merchant, Tagore may have been referring to the

persecution of Jews by Hitler at that time. When Shyama asks why Bojroshen has been imprisoned, the King's Guard replies:

'Royal treasury has a thief's onslaught---

We need a thief, any which way, we need a thief;

Catch anyone, however we may, we need a thief.

Or else we lose respect!' (Banerjee, 122)

The Companions (*sakhi*) in *Shyama* are literally Shyama's companions but they are sometimes used by Tagore in metaphorical roles as narrators or as the sub-conscious of one of the main characters. For example, after Shyama hears why Bojroshen has been imprisoned, the Companions sing about the oppression of the innocent:

Bondage of the beautiful in hands of the cruel

Who can stop? Who?

Tear-flow of eyes of the hapless and the ailing:

Who can mop? Who?

Wailing of the distressed hurts universe,

Assault of injustice with poison-arrows pierce---

From assault of the mighty, who'd save weakling?

To give succour to the defamed, whose bosom'll drop? (ibid, 121-122)

Shyama has many beautiful Rabindrasangeet which are still so popular and 'mayabono biharini' is one such. Tagore selected and adapted those elements from different dance styles which could be understood without additional explanation or prior knowledge of the gestures, he created the Tagore dance style. He was clearly influenced by the classical Indian dance styles of Manipuri, Kathakali, Bharatanatyam but he also incorporated elements from Indian folk dances as well as dances from outside India, such as Kandy dance from Sri Lanka and Balinese dance from Indonesia. The influence of Western ballet is also evident in *Shyama*: the central character is a woman and the choreography calls for duets, particularly between Shyama and Bojroshen, which are reminiscent of the *pas de deux* in classical ballet.

Even though Tagore's dance- dramas were meant to be enacted in the form of dance, the main *rasa* of each play was to be kept uppermost in mind. The dancers are only medium of conveying that spirit to the audience, dwarfing their individual skills and dexterity all the while. The male and female dancers often come from the background of different styles and techniques. But the aim defined for them by Tagore was to convey correctly the nuances of songs they are meant to dance with. (Banerjee, 9)

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