Chapter I

INTRODUCTION
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One of India’s most cherished renaissance figures; Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) put India on the literary map of the world when he was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature in 1913 for *Gitanjali*. Tagore is a maker of not only modern Indian literature but also the modern Indian mind. Myriad-minded, he was a poet, short-story writer, novelist, dramatist, essayist, painter and composer of songs. His world wide acclaim as a social, political, religious and aesthetic thinker, innovator in education and a champion of the “One World” idea makes him a living presence.

Drama being an audio-visual medium of expression has been a very effective and powerful genre in world literature. The birth and development of drama in Greece, Rome, England and India emphasizes upon the fact that it has always been an integral part of culture, highlighting and evaluating moral commitments, religious convictions, and political changes in various countries. As Martin Esslin in *The Field of Drama* observes:

“Drama is a mimetic representation of life combining in itself the real and the fictional art and reality and presenting the events and characters within a dimension of space and time. It combines the qualities of narrative poetry with those of visual arts. It is a narrative made visible”

Drama is a literary composition having elements of conflict, action, crisis and atmosphere designed to be staged before an audience. It presents the actions and words of characters on the stage. The conventional arrangement into acts
and scenes is derived from the practice in Greek drama. In the course of time, many of the specific conventions have been changed. The same vision is found in Greek and the dramas in the ages followed. Every play has the direct presentation of actions and words by characters on a stage. It presents the dramatic situation, dramatic conflict, climax, turning point and conclusion of the play. These stages are useful to understand this conventional structure of drama. Indian drama in English is still on the third stage in Common Wealth Literature. It has not still achieved the position that Indian fiction and poetry have got. It still relies on the translation of regional plays into English. Many plays from Kannada, Bengali, Hindi and Marathi have been translated to enrich Indian drama in English.

An attempt has been made to focus on the development of Indian Drama in English in Pre-and Post independence India. A survey of Indian Drama in English reveals that there has been a consistent attempt to produce drama right from the beginning. However, few of them could make a mark. The literary career of Rabindranath Tagore is sublime. He started writing in his early childhood. He had written about 7000 lines of verse even before he was eighteen. Banphul is his first Bengali poem. He wrote this when he was just a child. He was essentially a poet, but he also wrote novels, short stories, essays and plays. He handled all the major forms of literature very successfully. He produces remarkable literary outputs in the fields of poetry, drama and prose-fiction. His writings have a wide range.
Tagore was a unique fire in the history of Indian English drama who was called as Father of Modern Indian stagecraft. He was an expert in the classics of Indian dramas. He has contributed a lot to the Indian English drama. His dramatic forms influenced the Bengali theatre. The variety of his dramatic writing is astonishing. He borrowed his themes from Indian mythology, Buddhist legends, and other classical sources.

Rabindranath Tagore the awardee of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 belongs to Bengali as well as Indo-Anglican literatures. He is a universally known writer for his versatile genius. K.R.S.Iyengar appreciated him as:

He was a poet, dramatist, actor, producer, a musician and a painter; he was an educationalist; a practical idealist who turned his dramas into reality at Shantiniketan; he was a reformer, philosopher, prophet; he was a novelist and short-story writer, and critic of life and literature, he even made occasional excursion into nationalist politics, although he was essentially an international.  

Rabindranath Tagore has a distinct place as a dramatist. He was the first Indian dramatist who was not satisfied with the Western melodrama and was attracted towards the tradition of classical Sanskrit plays. Tagore has successfully molded the elements of the folk drama of Bengal known as Jatra with classical Sanskrit drama. He was familiar with the works of Shakespeare, Ibsen and Maeterlinck and was influenced by the works of Kalidasa. He was familiar with the problems of his age and was very much concerned about the
values which he saw vanishing. He evolved idiom, a dramatic technique. Tagore cannot be considered either classicist or modernist.

Tagore’s concept of the theatre was essentially a poet’s concept: he wanted the theatre to be a place where poetry ruled supreme, revealing ‘the inner reality of things’. Tagore in his own words says: “Drama has the responsibility of drawing apart the curtain of naturalism and reveals the inner reality of things. If there is too much emphasis on imitative naturalism, the inner view becomes clouded.”

It is significant that, right from the beginning of his dramatic activities, Tagore was greatly influenced by the *jatra* of Bengal. What he particularly liked in the *jatra* was ‘the easy bond of mutual trust and dependence’ between the actors and spectators, so that the poetry which, after all, is the main thing, falls like a spreading fountain through the medium of acting on the gladdened heart of the spectators. Tagore went back to the folk tradition of starting a theatre not for the masses, but for those who want to taste the deliberate pleasures of a fine art. He was in full sympathy with the ideals of the Little Theatres in the Western countries, whose aim was to provide a meeting place for the discerning and the cultivated.

He was deeply acquainted with Sanskrit Classics, Bengali Literature, English Literature and Continental European Literature. Out of his father’s spiritual legacy and moral earnestness and his grandfather’s spirit of enterprise, he created his own artistic sensibility. He enriched every genre of literature as a restless experimenter and innovator in the field of poetry, novels, plays, short stories, essays, literature criticism, polemical writing, travelogues, memoirs etc.
he created his own genre of dance drama. His plays are basically expressions of
the soul’s quest for beauty and truth. There are certain traditional national
attitudes; some unshakable obscure racial memories and quite a few recurrent
archetypal human patterns and these are the stuff out of which he creates his
dramatic world.

Tagore has projected his idea through his dramatic works. Edward
Thomson aptly says: “His dramatic work is the vehicle of ideas rather than the
expression of action.” 4 He produced outstanding plays. His works are the
creations of his age and the harbingers of a new era. During the period of sixty
years that he wrote, there witnessed a rapid widespread advancement of
Western type of education both amongst the middle classes, man and woman
and growth of new professional classes and the virtual decay of the feudal
structure of society. The barriers between castes, classes and regions came to
be destroyed due to rapid industrialization and the development of transport and
quick and ready means of communication. Advancement was seen stage-by-
stage, though it was from a colonial dependency to the threshold freedom.
Amongst this social, cultural, economic and political influences, which were
ushering in changing of a far-reaching significance, was the influence exercised
by Rabindranath himself. It was Tagore who in reality moulded the thoughts
and aspirations of three generations of educated middle class who derived their
intellectual sustenance and spiritual inspiration mostly from his works and his
influence penetrated every corner of India. We can see in him the fulfillment of
Raja Ram Mohan Roy in many aspects. What Roy advocated as an abstract
proposition with regard to women, came to be fully illustrated in great many
ways by Rabindranath in his poems, short-stories, novels and dramas. None in
India championed the cause of women so stoutly and persistently as Tagore.

Tagore composed his works in his own style. He cannot be tagged to
Aristotelian model or Shakespearean model. He was a model for himself. Sisir
Kumar Ghose rightly points out:

To see Tagorean drama calls for more empathy than many critics
have displayed. From eros to cosmos, from the pastoral to the
modern age, from a study of religious bigotry to social comedy,
from entertainment, romantic love to martyrdom, what was the
common thread or pursuit? The changing scenario, but each with
a thesis, open or hidden, reveals a complex, evolving mind, a
repertoire of versatility and development in theme, treatment as
well as choreography far beyond the professional playhouse. The
performance of plays like Visarjan, Phalguni and Natir Puja set
a new style of action and theatre art. 5

The dramatic art of Tagore is both simple and complex. It is simple in
style and expression. It is complex in the variety of its forms and in the depth of
its meaning. Tagore is a lyrical poet. His dramas can be called lyrical dramas or
dramatic lyrics. His works reflect his personality. His works deal with the
experiences of his own inner and outer life. He writes on the mental status and
mood of men; the progress of human thoughts and aspiration. His plays cannot
be viewed objectively as representation of a series of events. They are intended
to produce an aesthetic and emotional experience and impression. Prof. D. V. K. Raghavacharyulu observes:

The plays of Tagore reveal an organic continuity and a steady advancement in spiritual perception and psychological insight. As Tagore progressed in these qualities, he also achieved a symbolic form of drama which was organically evolved by the inner causation of his art.  

The themes of Tagore’s plays can be summed up as ‘Tagore’s affirmative to life, broad humanism, conviction about the inviolable relationship between man and his maker, deep faith in women and the beneficent role of nature, all contribute to the pervasive sense of harmony and invincible spirit of hope in his plays’. Tagore’s plays are theme-oriented and symbolical. His themes are different and the treatment is also unique and well-suited to the theme. K.R.S. Iyengar remarks:

Tagore could take many things for granted: for example, an intimate knowledge of our epics and our main cultural tradition generally. Certain attitudes, too, he could take for granted. Idolatry in India is as old as the hills, and condemnation of idolatry also is as old as the Buddha, if not even more ancient. Asceticism and the failure of asceticism, Casteism and the exceeding of casteism, the spectacle of husband being redeemed by wife or wife by husband or both by children, fanaticism striving with tolerance, pettiness striving with magnanimity - all
are old, old themes. Tagore could start the play, strike the opening chords, name the characters- and memory and imagination would do the rest. Not the logic of careful plotting but the music of ideas and symbols is the soul of this drama. Not the apparent meaning but its echoing cadence of suggestion dhwani as the Sanskrit rhetoricians called it; in other words, the richness of the undertones - is what matters, for this alone kindles the sluggish soul to a new awareness of life’s ‘deep magics’.  

Tagore’s plays bear little relation to reality. The reality in Tagore’s plays is the realism of the mind, not so much of exterior physical action as of emotional or spiritual. It depicts the fluctuations in mood and feeling. It does not emphasise the development of a plot but develops a pattern of symbols which reflects these fluctuations in great deal.

Tagore’s power as a dramatist lies in his amazing vitality of imagination and his remarkable ability to create an atmosphere which grows upon the mind, not by the repetition of any central idea but by magic. He weaves his words into a delicate pattern of poetic prose. He does not follow any of the rules and conventions of the modern stage. His plays bear a continuous action on the stage and are set against a background which is extremely simple and unostentatious. He concentrates the attention of his audience on the atmosphere that he is creating. Edward Thompson says “We don’t need any scenery, the only background we need is the background of the mind”.  


Tagore spiritualizes all dramatic action. His characters do not exist in a convincing manner because of their extremely rhetorical and sometimes paradoxical way of speaking. He uses much wit but little humour, much mockery but little irony, much keenness of intellect, but little precision and straightforwardness. His plays are merely plays of ideas, the reality of which remains hidden behind a persistent and determined illusion. Even a most startlingly realistic plot becomes a cover for symbolism and everyone in his plays is a puppet. His characters are as poetic as himself. They seem to be actors staging an idea, symbols not human beings. His dramas are capable of poetic heights, because their author is intensely subjective and sensitive, but it is prone to love its simple and straight beauty in the endless labyrinth of a useless repetition of words and phrases. The truth which the playwright seeks to describe is not an objective or material thing but an abstract truth, a spiritual idea. The drama or the theatre is just a device and excuse for him for self-expression.

Tagore can be called a Romantic poet. He revolts against the materialist tradition and insists on the freedom of the soul, his transcendental love of beauty and nature, his conception of the super-sensuous and super-conscious being pervading the entire created universe and his thirst for the infinite, and in order to express all this he discovered an expression which is at once mystical and symbolical. He shows a romantic nostalgia, a never ending quest after the ever-fleeting objects of desire. His art becomes a projection of his own self. Tagore does not deal with ordinary people; his individuals are extra ordinary
men and women. He always sacrifices the probable for the picturesque. He breaks up the smooth and tiresome surface of ordinary life by the pursuit of strangeness and surprise. His dialogues are witty and they contain in them a shrewd knowledge of men and women and a joy in all life and a warm spirit of youth bubbling forth out of the heart of all his characters young or old into songs and always songs.

Tagore’s unfailing faith in man and divinity, his concern for women and solicitation for children, his sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden, his philosophical speculations and practical wisdom, his perception for the zeitgeist and the evolution of taste—all find expression in the all-encompassing sweep of his writings in a magnificent synthesis of philosophical profundity and aesthetic luxuriance.

Rabindranath Tagore has been the source of supreme inspiration to millions of India. His works stir our spirit, refine our life and give profound satisfaction to our mind. Hindu tradition influenced Tagore very much mainly through Upanishads. From his childhood, he was taught to chant in correct accents the selected mantras from the Upanishads arranged by his father under the title “Brahma Dharma”. He was brought up in a family where texts of the Upanishads were used in daily worship. His father Maharishi Devendranath was an example before him who lived his long life in the closest communion with God, while not neglecting his duties to the world.

The forest homes of ancient India (Tapovana) always had a special appeal to the mind of Rabindranath Tagore. He was a philosopher, a religious
teacher and practitioner. All his activities are part of an undivided and ceaseless quest for self-realization through manifold contact with world and life. The ascetics seek deliverance from bondage of birth and death through renunciation. But Tagore writes, “Deliverance is not for me in renunciation; I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.”

He condemns isolation in ivory tower and makes a forceful plea for participation in the daily activity of humble humanity. He is against Avidya, the narrow-mindedness of the people, and superstition. He felt for the starving poor who were driven away from the gates of heartless aristocracy. He thinks that though the earth is full of rich harvest, still the people starve. He founded ‘Vishva-Bharati’ where the whole world finds its shelter. In *The King of the Dark Chamber* and *The Post Office*, Tagore deals with the theme of relationship between God and man and says that ‘Aham’ or ‘Avidaya’ stands between Atma and Paramatama.

As a playwright, Tagore was a universal writer. He was also conscious about the literary mysticism in his literature. Tagore’s mysticism is the result of spiritual, cultural and has perennial effects on literature. He derived his mysticism from Vedas and Upanishads as like Greek philosophers in literature. Among all playwrights, Tagore used and referred very significantly the Indian myths and legends in his plays. He successfully handled his contemporary philosophical, religious, political and social problems and issues through mythological themes and characters. He used these myths unhesitatingly from the original epics according to his purpose. His aim, approach and technique of
the treatment of myth are different from other playwrights. Sometimes, he followed myths, sometimes molded and changed the story to serve his purpose.

The most notable thing about Tagore’s plays is their variety. He has written social comedies in prose such as *The Society of Confirmed Bachelors* (*Cirakumar-sabha*, 1962), *A Wrong Start* (*Goday Galad*, 1892), and *Balkuntha’s Manuscript Copy* (*Baikunther Katha*, 1897). These are delightful comedies, full of sparkling wit, ingenious situations and charming characters. It is unfortunate that these plays have not been translated into English so far. One would like to agree with Ghosh’s opinion that “Tagore’s best dramatic work is to be found in his comedies”, 10 a view not shared by the majority of Tagore’s critics.

Tagore’s characters are used as his mouthpieces and they represent conflicting ideologies. There is an expression of remarkable conflict of mind and soul. Setting in his plays is remote and romantic. It is puritanical or legendary, feudal or symbolical. His dialogues are conspicuous for poetic flavour. His plays express typical Indian ethos and the language has been remarkably used to express Indian cultural and spiritual background. Tagore paid more attention to the stagecraft also. He himself was an actor, producer and playwright. He realized the limitations and the needs of all the aspects of the dramatic art. He took great interest in costume, stage and other accessories.

Tagore wrote a large number of plays. He achieved a high degree of excellence in drama-writing. He can be regarded as one of the pioneers of drama in India. He wrote his dramas originally in Bengali. He translated some
of them into English and other scholars translated rest of them. Among them were distinguished literary figures such as: C. F. Andrews, Krishna Kripalani, Amiya Chakravarti, Nagendranath Gupta, Babhani Bhattacharya, Aurobindo Bose, D. Mukhopadhyaya, Marjorie Skyes and Edward Thompson. In translation, Tagore’s plays lose original beauty of Bengali plays. The plays lose something of their delicacies in characterization and the sheer beauty of language and of visual and audible images which evoke the appropriate dramatic mood. The following are the translated plays of Tagore himself: *Sanyasi or The Ascetic, Malini, Sacrifice, The King and The Queen, Kacha and Devyani, The Mother’s Prayer, Karna and Kunti, Ama and Vinayaka, Somaka and Ritvika, Chitra, Autumn Festival, The Waterfall or Muktadhara, Natir Puja* and *Chandalika.*

The plays of Tagore can be divided into three groups. In the first group of the plays, Tagore tried to apply the elements of Western tragedy to Indian materials. Some of the plays are *Malini* (1884), *Sanyasi* (1884), *Raja O Rani / King and Queen* (1889), *Sacrifice or Visarjan* (1890). *Malini* and *Sacrifice* are the most well-known non-symbolic plays of Tagore. In both these plays, we find a conflict between orthodox religion and conventions on the one hand, and the claims of human truth and moral foundations of human action on the other hand. The dramatist has attempted to solve the actual conflicts of human activity. For Tagore, problems in dramas are reflective of life. In the plays of the first group Tagore tries to apply the elements of Western tragedy to Indian materials: *Malini, Sacrifice, King and Queen* belonging to this group are
primarily dramas of conflict. The most well known among them is the play called *Sacrifice*. In this drama we find the characteristic touch of Rabindranath. The incidents are powerfully drawn, especially the priest Raghupati and the devoted temple servant Jaisingh. The drama deals with the moral foundations of human action.

Among his favourite plays *King and Queen, Malini* and *Sanyasi* are also expressions of the problems of human life which are attempted to be solved in the actual conflicts of human activity. Rabindranath Tagore raises some problems or other in his plays and often his solution does not appeal to the reader. But to him the problem being something reflective of life, a clear-cut solution is never offered by life itself.

The second group includes *The Post Office, Chitra, The King of the Dark Chamber* and *Red Oleanders*. Tagore attempted in them to open up the frontiers of drama so as to allow the passage of symbols to the soul, where they remain no longer fixed but become plastic and free. *Mukta Dhara, Natir Puja* and *Chandalika* bring the whole career of experimentation to a point of culmination by integrating the two levels of dramatic vision- those of the intellect and of the experience.

Tagore’s plays deal with the mystery of human existence. All major aspects of human existence including love, religion and faith find a conspicuous place in Tagore’s plays. He is primarily a humanist who highlights how love, religion and death can be life giving forces. His plays are expressions of the problem of human life which are attempted to be solved in the actual conflicts
of human activity. He raises some problem or other in his plays and often his solution does not appeal to the reader. But to him the problem being something reflective of life, a clear-cut solution is never offered by life itself. A thematic study of Tagore’s English plays is essential for a proper understanding of his achievement as a dramatist.


In *Valmiki Prathibha (The Genius of Valmiki)*-1881 what was striking, so early was the fusion of classical, folk and European strains. The Ramayana story of conversion is retold, how the robber chief, Ratnakar, turns into a poet. The cry of the bird for its mate killed by Ratnakar is replaced by the wail of the young captive girl. The repentant Ratnakar, instead of offering her to Goddess Kali, prays to Saraswathi. When she appears before him, he prays for a boon. It is granted: “Just as your heart of stone has melted with pity, so your poetry will melt millions of hearts and reach many lands and shores and be echoed by future poets”.
Kal Mrigaya (The Fateful Hunt, 1882) takes up another event from the Ramayana, the killing of the son of a hermit by the unwitting king Dasharatha, Rama’s father. The plot is thin and not dramatic. It is the music and the singing that matter. Some of it was later incorporated in Valmiki Pratibha.

Mayer Khela (The Play of Illusion, 1888) written at the request of the Culcutta Women’s Club for an all-women’s cast, the play, as Tagore himself knew was but “a garland of songs with just a thread of dramatic plot running through it”. Its charm and popularity are still undimmed. Krishna Kripalini summarizes as “We chase happiness in love and miss both love and happiness”. Mayer Khela indeed is a divertissement rather than a regular play, with almost no action worth speaking of but much feeling and insight into feminine psychology, of lovelorn youth and maidens; it provokes both smile and tenderness. There is a certain detachment in the dalliance, the dialects of paganism and Puritanism that runs through much of Tagore’s play, can be seen in embryo.

Tagore would shift, for a time, from the singing to the speaking voice, towards verse plays that would also be dramatic. Rudrachanda (1881) was no more than a string of melodramatic scenes on the revenge theme. He found his line in his first important work; Prakritir Pratishodh (Nature’s Revenge, 1884). It is a blend of prose, verse and songs, in a sequence of scenes. But it has a supporting idea basic to his world view. Tagore in his words says: “It was an introduction to the whole of my literary works”. Not the whole, but surely
much, his basic life affirming thesis. Though not a stage success, it deals with a conflict between rejection and acceptance.

Tagore dramatizes the myth of Bharata in his English dramatic creation entitled *Sanyasi or The Ascetic*. Here it becomes torch light for the dramatist to present the infinite power of the Lord, in the form of the nature that is in fact, the finite world of the humans. The penancing ascetic, the untouchable girl, Vasanti, the villagers; the troubled woman; their children; the bantering students and the invisible nature are the dramatic personages of the play. The Ascetic is under the row of shunning the contacts of the materialistic world in search of his inner self, in search of the peace of mind and the spirituality, thus drawing closer to the finite world of God. In doing that, he finds satisfaction in the thought that he is forcing his revenge against the Nature. He also asserts his own egoistic superiority over the worldly feelings controlled by nature.

*Chitra* is based on the episode from the Mahabharata. Arjuna and Chitrangada story enabled the dramatist to produce *Chitra*. Tagore has made use of his dramatic craftsmanship to create the world of Arjuna-Chitra relationship. As it is a mythical story and people being spiritual like to read and watch the performance of the play. The myth of Arjuna-Chitra is at the core of the play. Tagore was seized by the ideas of presenting the evolution of human love from the physical to the spiritual. In the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna during his travels weds princess Chitrangada of Manipur, and their son becomes longed for male heir of the King. When Tagore fused the soul of the idea with the body of the story, it became the play *Chitrangada*, and in the English form it is a
somewhat shortened dramatic sequence in nine scenes. Tagore has wonderfully conveyed in this short drama with consummate skill ‘an endless meaning in the narrow span of a song.’ He has the original gift of spreading the atmosphere of the ideal world over familiar forms and incidents.

Tagore has composed *The Mother’s Prayer* (Grandhari’s Prayer) on an episode from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. When Pandava brothers lost their Kingdom to Kauravas in gambling which was the game of treachery, the Kauravas won by fraud. The blind king Dhritarashtra was happy with the victory of his son Duryodhana, but the queen Gandhari was not. She pleaded her husband to punish her son for his offence. The episode itself is a myth from *Mahabharata*. It is the base of the play. *The Mother’s Prayer* is a short play dealing with the grievance of a mother for justice. She wants justice for those who are at the right path. This incident is the core content of the play. She requests her husband to punish Duryodhana for his folly but in vain.

Tagore has used the myth of divine birth of Karna to compose the play *Karna and Kunti*. Karna’s father was Surya, the solar deity, and his mother’s name was Kunti. He was born before his mother’s marriage to prince Pandu. The story of Karna’s miraculous birth is as follows. When Kunti was a young woman, the sage Durvasa visited her father’s palace, where Kunti served him sincerely for one year. Pleased by her service and hospitality, the sage foresaw that Kunti would have difficulty having a child after her marriage to Pandu, and granted her a boon to overcome this difficulty. By this boon, she could call upon any God of her choice and receive a child through him. Out of curiosity,
while still being unmarried, Kunti decided to test the power of the mantra and called upon the God Surya. Compelled by the power of this mantra, Surya appeared before her and handed over a son to her, who was as radiant and powerful as Lord Surya himself. Tagore used this myth to compose the play *Karna and Kunti*.

*The Post Office* is a highly popular and moving play of Rabindranath Tagore. He wrote it in March 1912. It was written in Bengali as *Dakghar*. Three years later Devabrata Mukhopadhyaya translated it into English as *The Post Office*. This symbolical play is full of symbols and philosophical tones. There are nine characters in the play. Among these, Madhav and Amal are the most dominating ones. Amal, the sick boy, is the protagonist. Through this character, the dramatist presents a fascinating study of child psychology and his love for life free from all bondages. The play is the product of Tagore’s personal feelings and desires that he experienced in his childhood. Rabindranath’s painful experience of a circumscribed and regimented childhood while he longed to escape from it and wander through the big and mysterious world of men and nature beyond the confines of home has found expression in the post office.

The tradition of sacrifice is deeply rooted in Indian society. Right from the primitive age, people have been offering animal sacrifice to the God and Goddesses according to their religions. They believe that their desires will be granted through these means. Tagore has utilized the myth of sacrifice to
compose the play *Sacrifice*. Even today, several goddesses are worshipped by offering animals in different parts of the country. It is believed that Kali is strong and powerful and can be pleased by offering blood. The playwright has tried to criticize the tradition of sacrifice. He has used royal personage to convey the message. The king Govinda stops animal offerings in the temple of goddess Kali. The priest, Raghupati tries to retain the tradition. He does not hesitate to conspire to get the king killed. It indicates that it is difficult to eradicate tradition deeply rooted in the society for ages. Raghupati represents those who exploit religion for their personal benefit. Gunavati the queen of the land is childless. She stands for these women suffering for child. A woman who wants a child can do anything for the sake of a child. Rest of the characters in the play represent those people who blindly believe in their spiritual leaders. The playwright has skillfully composed the play dealing with these aspects.

*Mukta Dhara* is regarded as Tagore’s greatest play. Bibhuti, the royal engineer in the mountain-Kingdom of Uttarkut builds a dam across the water of Mukta Dhara with the help of his steel machine. The Yuvaraja of Uttarakut opposes the dam because he has sympathy for the people living in the land of Shiv-Tarai. Yuvaraja Abhijit is on their side in this matter. Thus, an antagonism begins between Bibhuti and Abhijit. The dam stands for the triumph of science of technology and opposition of Abhijit denotes the rebel against this inhuman dam which might even lead to starvation of the people of Shiv-tarai. In the end, the Yuvaraja breaks Bibhuti’s dam at a weak point, thus releasing the water of
Mukta-Dhara and restoring to the mountain-spring the freedom which it originally possessed. Yuvaraja loses his life in the act of breaking the dam. It shows the triumph of the human spirit over the achievement of science and technology. The chorus chant at the very beginning refers to the origin of Ganges spring in the lock of Lord Shankara and its myth.

The Ganges’ most sustained association is with the God Shiva himself. Like Shiva and the moon on His head, the Ganges, whose life sustaining water flow from the realm of the moon, is connected with both life and death. The Shiv-tarayans patiently suffer from the atrocities of Uttarakut. They believe that their people were created in the process of Lord Shiva’s swallowing poison after the mythical churning of the ocean. This creation myth is narrated by a Shiv-tarayan in the play. Dhananjoy Vairagi an ascetic, who has complete faith in Lord Shiva points out “. . . In the beginning of the world, after churning of the ocean, some drops, of nectar trickled down from the god’s cups and fell on the earth. From that earth, our Shiv-tarayan ancestor was created.”

Tagore presented Indian myth and legends. He was without any shade of doubt, a born literary artist. A renowned scholar Nirmal Mukherji summarizes Tagore’s plays as:

Some of the charges usually leveled against him as a dramatist are that his plays are mostly unactable that they have inadequate dramatic action, that most of his characters are not full-blooded, that they are one dimensional, conceived as they around one single idea, that his plots are woefully weak in construction and
are dramatically flowed in the abundance of music and dance is
more often an intrusion of the dramatic conflict.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Natir Puja} or \textit{Worship of the Dancing Girl} is a simple but moving play. It does not have any complex symbols. The central theme of the play is martyred devotion. The story is based on a Buddhist legend as found in Rajendralal Mitra’s \textit{The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal}, which was published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1882. Tagore has made some essential changes in the story for dramatic purposes. King Bimbisara learns the wisdom of renunciation from Buddha. Finding his son Ajatashatru, to be very ambitious, he abdicates his crown in his favour. The younger son, Chitra, also inspired by Buddhistic teachings, becomes a bhikshu. The queen mother, Lokeshwari, is very bitter about Buddhism, because she has lost both her son and husband to it.

The new king, Ajatashatru, forbids the practice of Buddhism in his kingdom and punishes the offenders very severely. On Purnima, Buddha’s birthday, Srimati, the dancer is chosen by the Sangha to offer and light the lamp at the stupa. As she is dancing in ecstasy, casting away one by one the superfluities of jewel and raiment till she is pure and naked in her yellow nun’s wrap alone— the Guard strikes her head at the king’s command. There is transcendent victory for her in death, for now even Queen Lokeshvari— and even the adamantine elder princess, Ratnavali— are overcome at last, and mutter, touching martyred Srimati’s feet:

I take refuge in the Buddha!
I take refuge in the Dhamma!

I take refuge in the Sangha.

At the end of the play, Ajatashatru is moved by the enormity of his crime and decides to give up his policy of religious persecution.

The other theme of the play is that the right to worship God is not the exclusive of one caste alone. Dramatizing the principle of equality of men, it concludes that true worship is the dedication of the best we have to the call of truth. Of all the characters in the play, the queen’s mother is drawn with insight and subtlety. In the bitterness against religion, she is entirely human. Music and dance are integrated with the theme. It is one of the popular plays of Tagore.

The Untouchable Girl or Chandalika represents Tagore’s later drama. The short play is based on a Buddhist legend of Sardulakarnavadana. It has some affinity with Chitra. In the latter, the heroine attempts to win the heart of her beloved by borrowed charms, but is successful only when she has discarded her borrowed plumes and has nothing to offer but her love.

In Chandalika, the ‘untouchable’ girl, Prakriti, falls in sudden love with Ananda, the Buddha’s ‘youngest’ and best-loved disciple, when he chances to meet her near a well. A few kind understanding words set aflame her self-respect, and she becomes his slave, though he has gone far away. But Prakriti’s love is a devouring fever of desire, and she persuades her mother to work the primordial earth spell on Ananda so that he may return and quench the raging fever. The spell drags Ananda with irresistible force to Chandalika’s hut, but it works at the same time a hideous change on his countenance, which is no more
than the index of the destructive fury of the storm within his own heart and soul.
Prakriti’s final victory is also her supreme defeat, for although she has won and
brought Ananda to her cottage door, she cannot bear the sight of his agonized
face—not the face she has longed for, that face of beauty and holiness! Tagore
transforms the crude plot of the popular legend into a psychological drama of
intense spiritual conflict in which a sensitive girl who has been condemned by
birth, as an untouchable, suddenly wakes to a realization of her fate as a woman.
Ananda’s asking her for water reveals to her a new identity, a new birth, and
washes her clean of self-degradation and humiliation. Ananda has taught her to
judge herself, not by the artificial standards of society, but by her capacity for
love. Kripalani calls *Chandalika* “a tragedy of self-consciousness overreaching
its limit”.16

*Red Oleanders* is a moving parable of contemporary civilization. It is the
story of a community where every member is enslaved to dig the gold mines
under the too watchful eyes of ruthless bosses. The people of the play have lost
their human identity; they have no names, only numbers. Yaksha Town is an
appropriate symbol of modern civilization. The professor describes very
elocuently the lineaments of this town: “Yaksha Town is a city under eclipse.
The shadow Demon, who lives in the gold caves, has eaten into it. It is not
whole itself, nor does it allow anyone else to remain whole.” 17

The *Red Oleanders* is one of the most difficult of Tagore’s symbolic
plays. It excited a great deal of interest as to its real meaning. The playwright
found that many of his western readers failed to understand its real meaning. Hence, he gave an elaborate explication of its allegorical meaning in the *Manchester Guardian*. It may be pointed out here that in his enthusiasm for decoding the allegory and its various ramifications, not much attention was paid to the play as a work of art. It was much later, when it was staged by the Bohurupee Theatrical Group that it was realized how tremendously powerful this play can be on the stage.

Rabindranath Tagore, the epitome of Indian spiritual heritage, served his fellowmen fruitfully and characteristically by assuming the roles of an interpreter and mediator between the civilizations of the East and the West. Tagore’s English plays can be compared with those of W. B. Yeats. The plays of both Tagore and Yeats do not present action in the traditional sense, but a moment of intense life. The main principle in his plays is the play of feeling and not of action. Tagore’s contribution to Indian English drama is not in keeping a tradition alive, but in forging a new form’ and the smithies of Tagore’s dramatic imagination responded as splendidly to the challenge.’ While Shakespeare was unconsciously mythical, Yeats turned to the Celtic myths, Joyce to Homer and Eliot to Frazer in their attempt to give meaning to the modern predicament. Tagore combined the Indian and the Western literary traditions to bring a synthesis between the East and the West.

The philosopher, writer and teacher Rabindranath Tagore set out to unify Indian and European traditions creating plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and Western medieval mystery plays. Tagore is
equally capable of laughing and making others laugh. His approach is down to search. His comedies have proved as equal to the ‘Elizabethan Interludes’ and they have proved to be crowd pullers. The plays are free from the vulgarity of both the native and the imported tradition. Tagore’s nature plays are another story, blending myth and reality and helped by Shantiniketan and its environment. He was able to create a wholly individual style of drama. He had always believed in harmony of Man and Nature, their bond of common life, which he has expressed in his poetry so often. In Gitanjali, we hear him to say: “The same stream of life that runs through my veins runs through the world.”

In a myth-forsaken modern age, Tagore’s plays hark back to something primeval and perennial. They are in their own way ‘a criticism of our eroded life’.

Tagore’s plays deal with the mystery of human existence and throw light on the indelible relationship between Nature and Man. Primarily, Tagore wrote plays in Bengali and later on, he translated them into English. Tagore is a mystic and most of his symbolical plays embody strains of mysticism. Tagore’s concept of beauty, religion, his concept of God, realism, symbolism, self-negation, civilization are the important themes of his plays. He has blended the Bengali folk-tales with the classical Sanskrit legendary tales and thus has reached the peak of dramatic excellence. It is worth noting that Tagore criticizes the secondary and inferior position of women in the society in his plays. He suggests purification of not the external world but the inner nature. He believes in the rectification and purification of the human heart. He accepts
that life is with full of struggles and hardships. He agrees with the traditional views that attitude of man towards evil is one of anger and scorn and this is not only natural but necessary. His plays are theme oriented and symbolical. His themes are varied and the treatment is also varied and well-suited to the theme.

The dramatic art of Tagore is both simple and complex. It is simple in style and expression. It is complex in the variety of its forms and in the depth of its meaning. Tagore is primarily and essentially a lyric poet and his dramatic art too is so poetic and personal that it would be more appropriate to call his plays as lyric dramas or dramatic lyrics. His works, including his dramas, are saturated with his personality and each one of his plays bears the impression of the experiences of his own inner and outer life. He writes of the mental states and moods of men and the progress of human thought and aspiration. None of his plays is to be viewed merely objectively, as a representation of a series of events. It is intended to produce an aesthetic and emotional experience and impression. The secret of his power does not lie in the action of the plays or even in the psychological analysis of the characters. His aim is not to build a story consisting of merely objective action, nor does he engage himself exclusively with the painting of the minds of his characters. His plays bear a continuous action on the stage and are set against a background, which is extremely simple. He concentrates on the attention of his audience on the atmosphere that he is creating. His plays deal with the mystery of human existence. All major aspects of human existence including love, religion and
faith find a conspicuous place in his plays. He is primarily a humanist who highlights how love, religion and death can be life-giving forces.

Towards the close of the 20th century, a kind of symbolic drama enshrining a deep-seated philosophy came into vogue in Europe. In the beginning, it was not appreciated by the people. But gradually, the symbolic drama became very popular in the intellectual community of Europe. W. B. Yeats, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Strindberg and many surrealist and existentialist writers have made extensive use of symbols in their plays. The allegorical drama differs from a symbolic drama in the sense that a symbolic drama is full of abstractions. On the other hand, the purpose of the allegory is to clarify issues by concretizing the abstract. Symbolic drama offers sudden, illuminating flashes into the unfathomable darkness that surrounds our life. It is sometimes said that Rabindranath was inspired to write symbolic plays under the influence of Maeterlinck or some other symbolic dramatists of Europe, because the important symbolic plays of Maeterlinck (1862-1949), Hauptmann (1862-1946) and Strindberg (1849-1912) had been composed and translated into English before Rabindranath Tagore started writing the symbolic plays.

Leaving aside the question of influences, it is possible to consider Tagore’s use of symbolism as a direct corollary of the poet’s concept of drama. His scattered remarks on dramaturgy, collected by Shri Kironmony Raha in *Natya* indicate that:

Tagore never sympathized with the realistic trend that dominated the Bengali stage of his days. To him, the adornment of the stage
….. by realistic sets and painted scenes was childish an intrusion.

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It is unfortunate that Tagore hasn’t made any explicit statements about what he meant by symbolism or about the use of symbolism as a literary technique.

He has, of course, made some remarks, by way of explanation, on some of his plays and the symbols therein, but they do not amount to any definite attitude towards symbolism and its use. That means either he thought that the symbolic technique didn’t require a special kind of justification, or that he himself was not quite certain or definite about his technique. The second possibility, which is more likely, suggests that he was probably experimenting with symbolism, trying to work out its various possibilities and potentialities. In this work there is an attempt to examine Tagore’s use of symbolism in his plays and to demarcate the areas of his failure and success.
REFERENCES


