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Tagore's Drama Synthesis of Myths, Legends and Folklores: A Medium of Social Reformation

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore symbolizes the true spirit of Indian thought. He being a philosopher, novelist, poet, painter, dramatist as well as an educator exhibited the problems of society through his dramatic plays and acted as a social reformer. India is well known for its legends, myths, folklores and Tagore brilliantly portrays the same through his drama. Myth is "one story in a mythology-a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for rules by which people conduct their lives. If the protagonist is a human being rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is called legend." (Abrams 170) whereas folklore "is a collective name applied to verbal compositions, social rituals and sayings handed down mostly by word of mouth" (Abrams 100).

Keywords- *Myth, Contemporary, Protest, Reformation*

In the contemporary times man is looking for his roots, values and his quest leads them to folklores, myths and legends. It serves as a beacon not only to the present generation but for future generations as well. It also promotes strong sense of national identity and preserves the history of rituals, practices, culture, important places and persons. Jung holds that a civilized man unconsciously preserves concepts, ideas and values of life which was cherished by his distant forefathers, and such ideas are expressed in a society's or race's myths and rituals. Creative writers and critics use myths, folktales and legends in their works to analyze texts and discover mythological patterns. Myths, folktales and legends in a way provide structure and communicative power to literature. Tagore fused images, symbols, levels of reference, illusions, songs together and presented a kaleidoscopic vision of the world of reality in form

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of drama. Rabindranath Tagore's plays are a book of celebrated humanitarian ideals. The Nobel laureate was drawn irresistibly to the myths, legends and cultural symbols in order to propagate these ideals in the modern world through his plays. Most of the mythical tales, legends are drawn from either translated or original sources like *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas* and Buddhist folktales. Tagore's drama includes varieties like musical drama, verse drama, poetic drama, prose drama, symbolic drama etc. In musical drama Tagore fused music and drama together where dialogue is sung and not spoken. His plays like *The genius of Valmiki* (*Valmiki Pratibha*, 1881), *The Fateful Hunt* (*Kal mrigaya*, 1882), and *The Play of Illusion* (*Mayar Khela*) comes under the category of musical drama. In verse drama the singing voice changes to talking voice and this heightens the dramatic quality and expressiveness of drama. Plays like *Nature's Revenge* (*Prakritir Pratisodh*), *King and the Queen* (*Raja O Rani*), *Sacrifice* (*Visarjan*) comes under category of verse plays by Tagore. Poetic drama includes *Gandhari's Prayer* (*Gandharir Abedan*), *The Faithful Wife* (*Sati*), *Karna and Kunti Dialogue* (*Karna- Kunti Samvad*) and many more. Tagore explored various sub-genre of drama and adventurously continued his journey in the field of drama writing as the architect of new India's cultural Renaissance.

Tagore's play reminds the glorious and rich heritage of India accompanied by the myths archetypes and folklores. *The Genius of Valmiki* is a musical drama which is crafted not only to be read but to be heard, sung and seen acted on stage or else it will lose its significance. Musical drama in a way leads forward the practice of Kathakas (reciters of legendary lore). It's a popular tradition in India and one is brought up, hearing a plethora of tales from grand parents and parents. Basically in music drama indigenous music is blended beautifully with western form which was learned by dramatist on his visit to abroad. Tagore himself commented on this musical genre:

It is not what Europeans call an Opera, but a little drama set to music .Very few of the songs are important or attractive by themselves ;they all serve merely as the musical text of the play. (*Critical Study 1: xv*)

In *The genius of Valmiki* (*Valmiki Pratibha*) Tagore relates the tale of legend sage Valmiki and his sudden change of thought and heart. It's one of the popular folklore about the author of epic the *Ramayana*. This is the first play composed and produced by Tagore which gained immense popularity because of its uniqueness. The plot centers round the life of robber Valmiki who later becomes a sage-poet. A band of robbers presents to their chief a girl who is lost in the jungle to be sacrificed at the altar of goddess Kali (symbol of strength, sacrifice, brutality, insanity). However Valmiki's pleading to release the captivated girl antagonizes his companions and they abandon him to lead a desolate life. Once while he was wandering in the forest, he saw the glimpse of goddess Saraswati(goddess of learning and wisdom) which made him yearn to recapture the sight of goddess. While wandering in search of the

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goddess he came across fowlers who did not hesitate in killing mating crane. Valmiki lamented on this cruel deed and to his utter surprise he chanted something in Sanskrit, this indicated that poetic inspiration has dawned upon him. Valmiki's change of heart and practice of new values were put to the test by the temptations put forward by goddess Laxmi-goddess of wealth. However he did not yield to her offers and finally became worthy for the blessings of goddess Saraswati. It also proves that to an awakened soul worldly possessions didn't have any worth. The playwright derives the source material from the *Saradamangal* (The divine song of poetic inspiration) of Viharilal Chakravarti. The play shows that love and compassion are the innate qualities of human beings however sometimes it's buried under the sternness of habit. Combination of serious and comic notes can be traced throughout the play which provides to the action the high dramatic interest. The play used Irish, Scots and Old English tunes (English tunes include the drinking songs of robbers and Irish tunes represent the laments of wood nymphs in play) which made the play technically admirable. The play throws light on the religious rite of sacrifice particularly human sacrifice to goddess Kali on a new moon night. Our attention is drawn to the custom of sacrifice for wish fulfillment. It was the popular myth of the time. But will this brutal assassination of a living being either animal or human brings happiness? A big question is posed by the playwright to the society. Valmiki's loyalty shifts from goddess Kali to Saraswati, symbolizes his elevation from the plane of violence to that of enlightenment. *The genius of Valmiki* emerges as Tagore's drama of movement within the soul. Tagore's drama is a medium of social-religious reformation through which he tried to uproot the deep seated vices, superstitions, and blind customs of the society.

The Faithful Wife (Sati) is a poetic play by Tagore. Sati in Sanskrit means virtuous wife. In Hindu mythology basically in *Shiva Purana* there is a reference of Sati, the daughter of King Daksha and the wife of Lord Shiva. King Daksha has arranged a yajna in which he disgraced Lord Shiva, Sati couldn't bear the disgracing words about her husband resultant she self immolated herself in fire. In Hindu custom sati practice was once prevalent where widows self immolate on the funeral pyre of their dead husband either voluntarily or forcefully. For the material of the play, Tagore turned to Ackworth's essay on 'the ballads of maratha' published in the *Journal of National Indian Association*. Tagore has drawn the story from the pages of history which shows how religion affects the life of a human being. The daughter of Brahmin maratha chief Vinayaka Rao, Amabai was abducted by Muslim noble of Vijapur court on the night of her marriage. She was affianced to Jivaji, however she married the Muslim noble against the will of her parents. Father of Amabai and Jivaji swore to kill Muslim noble to defend their honour however later in a battlefield the husband of Amabai and Jivaji both were killed. In this play Tagore shows the blind adherence to customs irrespective of any logical thinking. A sense of communalism can also be witnessed here.

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Ramabai, mother of Amabai forced her to sati herself on the funeral pyre of Jivaji, despite the protests by Vinayaka Rao. The first word of father and daughter after the death of Amabai's husband exposes the dramatic situation that widowhood is thrust on Amabai.

Ama: Father!

Vinayaka: Shameless wanton, you call me "Father"! you who did not shrink from a Mussulman husband !

Ama: Though you have treacherously killed my husband, yet you are my father; and I hold back a widow's tears, lest they bring God's curse on you. Since we have met on this battlefield after years of separation, let me bow to your feet and take my last leave! (*The Fugitive* 37)

The mode of penance suggested by father to wash away the stains of marrying a Muslim shows the limitations and narrowness of society. It was suggested "to seek some solitary shrine of holy Shiva far from shamed kindred and all neighbours; bathe three times a day in sacred Ganges and, while reciting god's name, listen to the last bell of evening worship....Let him (death) carry you into his own great silence as the Ganges carries a fallen flower in its stream, washing every stain away to render it, a fitting offering, to the sea." (*The Fugitive* 37-38) Amabai's defense was that she acted against the narrow man-made laws and not against the eternal divine's ordinance. She told that she yielded to Muslim conqueror only when she found him honourable, worthy and one who loved her. Here Tagore also shows the battle of two women on the ideals of womanly honour. According to Amabai's mother she was a fallen woman whereas Amabai consider herself as a morally pure woman, a true sati, a wife who was true to her husband. Towards the end of the play Amabai was forced to sati herself on the funeral pyre of Jivaji which according to her mother will remove stain on Amabai's honour. In originality the stain was not removed but a blot was added. Tagore here exposed the archetypal theme of religious bigotry, social hypocrisy, hatred and violence in the society. Communalism is the root cause of all the problems in the play accompanied by 'Sati pratha'. By showcasing problems through his plays the playwright presents a picture that is to be avoided and how it ill affects the society. This religious bigotry and blind custom following ruins the life of many. Here Tagore makes an attempt to widen the horizon of thinking through his plays. Tagore raises questions that can self immolation be considered moral? If it's not why females are forced to sati themselves on the funeral pyre of husband? Does she not have a right to live after her husband's death? All these questions dawned as an eye-opener. Myths, legends, tales are deep rooted in the life of people so their usage in plays helps the audience to connect with the play easily, to understand the problem and also to find a solution. Therefore Tagore with his liberal humanistic approach sets the stage for eternal human values. Tagore here is also talking about the equal rights of women from which they were either deprived or suppressed from the very beginning. Tagore exposes the patriarchal

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society i.e. a male dominated society where a woman is suppressed and subordinated in all cultural domains: religious, political, familial, cultural, economic, social, artistic and legal. As Simone de Beauvoir says:

Woman owns nothing, woman does not enjoy the dignity of being a person; she herself forms a part of the patrimony of a man: first to her father then to her husband. (114)

Tagore tries to find the solutions for the removal of evils from the society with the help of myths, legends and culture of the country. *Chandalika* is a short prose play of Rabindranath Tagore expressing class difference. It is based on a Buddhist legend of Ananda who was a disciple of Lord Buddha. The play involves deep spiritual conflict. 'Chandalika' means a girl of the lower caste. Prakriti once gave water to Ananda to quench his thirst and it was something like a new birth for her at that very moment she fell in love with Ananda however was deeply hurt by his attitude of indifference towards her. She decides to bring him down from the heights of his renunciation to love her. She pleads her mother to use her black magic so that Ananda in a magical spell begs for her love. Her mother casts a spell on Ananda but towards the end Prakriti feels pity for Ananda, and her mother revokes magical spell at the cost of her own life. This play depicts the conflict in the mind of each of the three characters Prakriti, her mother and Ananda. Ananda was a Buddhist Bhikshu, disciple of Lord Buddha. It shows how the psychic power of Buddha saves his devotee Ananda from the lust of a lower caste girl. Rabindranth Tagore has changed the plot into a psychological drama of intense spiritual conflict. The consciousness of a girl of lower caste was awakened by the words of monk that she is like any other human being for whom self- humiliation is a sin. Restlessness can be noticed between the conversation of Prakriti and her mother. Prakriti's mother was shocked that she's going to cast magic spell on Ananda, the disciple of Lord Buddha and feels guilty in exercising the magic but still performs it for her daughter's sake. She remarks: "They draw men by the strength of their virtue. We drag them with spells, as beasts are dragged in a noose." (*Three Plays* 154)

Prakriti realizes her mistake and is guilty of the offence. She surrenders him and begs pardon. The mother is on the deathbed. She greets him with last words and dies: "Victory to thee, O Lord. My sins and my life lie together at thy feet, and my days end here, in the heaven of thy forgiveness." (*Three Plays* 166)

In original legend, Ananda, becomes victim of black magic who turns astray from the path of the spirituality. He's allured to the sensual world, forgets his aim of life and ultimately Lord Buddha saves him from the sin. One is also reminded of Mahatam Gandhi's campaigns against untouchability. It attacks on the system of casteism and evil practice of black magic that was prevailing in the society. Rabindranth Tagore tries to make the audience rational. He has introduced the black magic to enhance the richness of the text. The use of

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legendary figures is always superior to ordinary characters as they inspire people to connect with them easily and association with Buddhism provides magnificence. The play is widely appreciated for the message of equality against conventionality.

Tagore's plays like *Chitra*, *Chandalika* and *Natir Puja* are epitome of women empowerment. Tagore wrote in an era where women were treated as mere commodities without having any identity. Tagore tried to change this thinking by presenting female as central characters of his plays. They were not presented as artifice but women of strength, dignity and character. They were capable of taking decisions and were confident. Tagore challenged the image of women as a weaker sex on the contrary he presented them with a strong identity revolting against social conventions. In olden days women were considered subordinate, inferior and did not have any right to lead an independent life. Rabindranath Tagore breaks that myth that women are meant for kitchen and placed them in the active stream of life. Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra* is a one act play which was first published in English in 1913 by the India Society of London. The play adapts part of the story from the *Mahabharata* and centers upon the character of Chitrangada a female warrior who tries to attract the attention of Arjuna, she in way was less than Arjuna. In *Mahabharata* the legend was such that Arjuna while the course of his wanderings to fulfil a vow of penance, visited Manipur and there he saw Chitrangada, the beautiful daughter of Chitravahana, the king of Manipur. He was attracted to her and in order to marry her he seeks King's permission. The King interrogated who he was and on learning that he was Arjuna-the Pandava prince, told him the story of his clan, that one of his ancestors called Prabhanjana, was childless and in order to obtain a successor he performed severe penances to please Lord Shiva who in turn granted him a boon that he and his successors would be blessed with a single child. All his ancestors were blessed with a male child but Chitravahana is an exception who is bestowed with Chitrangada - a daughter. He has treated her as a son and made her, his successor so that Chitrangada's son could continue the race of King's clan. When Arjuna decided to marry Chitrangada pledged that the son born of this union would continue Chitravahana's race. Arjuna stayed there for three years in the meanwhile a son was born to them and soon bid them farewell to continue his travels. This play was written by Tagore for the upliftment of women.

However Tagore's *Chitra* slightly differs from the original story it begins with the conversation of Madana (god of love) and Vasanta the god of springtime and eternal youth with Chitra. They question about the identity of Chitra that who she is and what is bothering her? She replies that she is the daughter of the king of Manipur and has been brought up like male as her father considers her the heir to the throne. She is strong as a man, a great warrior and hero. She is an expert in riding, hunting, duel and war and her ultimate goal is to challenge Arjuna in a single combat. Her personality is so majestic that her name is a type of

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terror for the evil doers. Chitra however never got a chance to truly live as a woman or learn how to use feminine wiles. Chitra explains that she instantly fell in love with Arjuna-the warrior hero after she saw him in the forest while hunting for game. Chitra despite knowing the fact that Arjuna had pledged of twelve years of celibacy, can't resist her emotions for him and approached him to plead her case, however Arjuna turned her away due to his vows. Now Chitra not having any other option left requests the two gods to provide her the boon of perfect beauty so that she can win over Arjuna's heart. Moved by her pleas, the two gods gave her not just one day but an entire year to spend with Arjuna. Chitra turned into a beautiful damsel instantly attracts Arjuna. He requests to tell him what she is searching for, to which Chitra coyly replies that she is seeking the man of her desires and later admits that she was looking for him, which prompts Arjuna to say that he will no longer hold to his vows of chastity. This makes Chitra rather unhappy that Arjuna is not falling for her true self and tells him not to offer his heart to an illusion. She then complains to the two gods that Arjuna has fallen for her false image on which two gods scold her saying they had only given her what she wanted. Chitra replies that despite their gift of beauty she consider this beauty as a different and separate part of herself and even if Arjuna had loved or slept with her it would not be with her true self but with her beauty. Vasanta advises Chitra to go to Arjuna and spend the year with him so that by the year ends he will be able to embrace the true self of Chitra but she was filled with insecurities that Arjuna will not love her true self once the year ends. After much time has passed, Arjuna asks Chitra questions about her past, family and parents. Chitra replies that she has no past and that she's as transient as a drop of dew, which upsets Arjuna.

However around the same time Arjuna hears tales of Chitra-the brave warrior princess and begins to wonder what she might be like. Arjuna didn't even knew the name of damsel with whom he's spending his days and nights however Chitra assures Arjuna that he would never have noticed Chitra if he had passed by her. Arjuna informs her that Manipur is under attack but Chitra assures him that the city is well protected. Arjuna's mind is occupied with thoughts of the warrior princess, to which Chitra bitterly asks if he would love her more if she were like the Princess Chitra, he admires. Arjuna replies that her true self is a sort of mystery for him, since she has always kept her true self a secret, he has never truly grown to love her from the deepest corner of heart it's something rather "incomplete". This upsets Chitra but Arjuna consoles her. The play ends with the final confession of Chitra to Arjuna admitting that she herself is the warrior princess Chitra of which he spoke and even tells him how she begged for beauty to gods in order to win over him. She even admits that she is not the apostle of perfect beauty but she loves him and if he would accept her then she would remain with him forever.

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This legend describes the confident and bold stature of female. Tagore has presented Chitra as the central nucleus around which other characters surrounds. Somewhere or the other they bears a striking similarity to the heroines of Shakespearean comedies who were self willed, assertive, adventurous, bold, admirable and lovable. The feminine power has been exposed by Tagore with the help of his plays which can be considered as a remarkable contribution or reformation for the social status of women who were merely considered as subaltern or subordinate in position. Bringing the female power to the forefront with all the rights in their hands is a remarkable representation by Tagore.

Another play of Tagore, *The Dancing Girl's Worship (Natir Puja)* exhibits the message of equality as well. It is also based on a Buddhist legend. Tagore derived this Buddhist legend as related in Rajendralal Mitra's *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal*, published by the Atlantic society of Bengal in 1882. "Raja Bimbisara, receiving the knowledge of truth from the Lord, had built a big Stupa over the Lord's nails and hair in his Zanana and his maids cleansed the place every day. When Ajatasatru obtained the throne by Parricide, he prohibited the females to sweep the Stupa on pain of death. Srimati, a female slave, caring not at all for her life washed it neatly and lighted it with a row of lamps. The king, in great rage, ordered her to the place of execution." (*Three Plays* 81). Srimati, a dancing girl in the court of Magadha sacrificed herself of her sincerity and devotion for Buddhism. The play deals with the conflict between the transient and eternal, between temporal and spiritual. It is the spirituality which remains victorious in the end. "The death rebirth theme is often said to be the archetype of archetypes and is held to be grounded in the cycle of seasons and organic cycle of human life...like widespread myths of god who die to be reborn"(Glossary 13) Under the influence of Devadutta, cousin and a rival of the Buddha (devadatta left the Buddha sangha to form his own sect and became arch enemy of Buddha), Ajatasatru –the new king forbids the practice of Buddhism and persecutes its followers. In the mean while, Srimati (a palace dancer) who was chosen by the Buddhist order to offer worship at the shrine on the Vasant Purnima day(birthday of the Buddha). Princess Ratnabali and queen Lokeswari did not like the idea of offering prayer by Srimati-a woman of low caste. Ratnabali can't just stand this idea that such a great honour is bestowed on Srimati. The exchanges between princess Ratnabali and Bhikshuni Utapalaparna adds light to the caste dominated anti Buddhist ethos of the times:

Bhikshuni: ...it will be Srimati's task to lead the rites of worship at the altar beneath the asoka.

Ratnabali: I cannot have heard right .What Srimati are you speaking of?

Bhikshuni: Yes, this dancing girl.

Ratnabali: Did you get this from the elders?

Bhikshuni: Yes, it's they who gave the order. (*Three Plays* 109)

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Bhikshuni Utapalaparna exposing Ratnabali's caste-ridden psychology says that "Princess, their caste is one and the same. Theirs is an aristocracy of which you know nothing." (109) The play is based upon the sacrifice of a dancing girl for the noble cause of religion and has uplifted the character of Srimati, a court dancer to the status of martyr. Rabindranath Tagore has borrowed plot from the Buddhist legend and combined with historical characters like classical playwrights. His representation of the concept of humanity possess great similarity to Buddha's enlightened concept of man i.e. one should not be valued by distinctions of birth but by their inner worth. Barua in "Rabindranath Tagore and Buddhist Culture" said:

One does not become a Brahmin by birth.
One does not become an outcaste by birth.
One becomes a Brahmin by act,
One becomes an outcaste by act. (6)

Srimati appears before the shrine and begins to dance which turns out to be one of religious ecstasy. Her head is cut off by the order of the king as she kneels down and recites the final verses of formal worship. She utters: "My refuge is in the Buddha, my refuge is in the Dhamma." (*Three Plays* 138) On the other hand Bimbisara, who was coming to the same shrine, was murdered on the way by the king's men. Ajatasatru fearing the upheavals was frightened and remorsefully revokes his policy of persecution. Tagore brilliantly showed the evil face of casteism that is spreading its roots in the society as well as the temporary lavishness which is being preferred by people. However he emphasized that transient and temporary are alluring but the power of spirituality out wins all. Tagore in a way requests Buddha to wipe all the darkness from the human heart. Tagore like Buddha believed in Universal love and through his plays gave a message of compassion, non-violence and tried to liberate man from different rituals, superstitions and racial differences between man and man.

Plays like *Karna Kunti Dialogue*, *Gandhari's Prayer* (*Gandhari Abedan*), are poetic drama which aesthetically through myths, legends, folktales bring out the reformative spirit in Tagore's plays. *Gandhari's Prayer* is inspired from *Sabhaparva of the Mahabharata*, an ethnological storehouse of countless moral stories. It presents the archetype of dharma's triumph over adharma. *Gandhari's Prayer* deals with Gandhari's earnest prayer to her husband to renounce Duryodhana their unrighteous son. The clash between Dhritarashtra's blind love for his son and Gandhari's plea for moral justice is the highlight of this play. If like Gandhari, Dhritarashtra would have subordinated his paternal affection and have given ear to Gandhari's plea the scenario would have been entirely different.

Whenever, there is turmoil or social unrest in the society, awareness is given through mythical tales, stories for solving the problems. A better understanding of the human values is presented with the mythical stories and legends which affects the subconscious mind of the

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reader or audience. Myths, archetypes, legends show a new angle of culture and tradition. Taking the essence of story Tagore wrote the plays which are highly symbolic in their approach and style. Hindu myths, folktales and Buddhist legends advocates secularism and social peace of the country and hence became an instrument of social criticism. Tagore used it as a medium of socio-religious reformation. Such reformation is need of the time when the world is full of vices, superstitions and violence especially on the name of religion. Values and humanity are far superior to ritualistic beliefs and socio religious bindings of any religion which are turning men into feeling less machines or creatures who doesn't hesitate to trouble or kill others out of jealousy, greed, hatred, superstition, casteism etc. Tagore expects the world to follow democratic ideals such as universal brotherhood, equality, secularism, religious tolerance and non-violent beliefs. He lays a foundation upon which a trouble-free society can be build. Thus to conclude lines of *Gitanjali* at its best expresses Tagore's desire of a integrated nation free from all social, political, cultural and religious evils.

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of Truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of
dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action--
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Into that heaven of freedom, my father let my country awake.(162)

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