
Rabindranath Tagore's *Muktadhara* as a colonial allegory

Mr. Shaik MD Thameem Basha¹, Research Scholar, Department of English, Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa

Prof. J. Mercy Vijetha², Head & Research Supervisor, Department of English, Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa

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Abstract:

Tagore could be considered one of the pioneers of Indian English Literature. The present work will analyze Tagore's seminal work *Muktadhara* (1922) from a postcolonial perspective. Tagore represented the nation of his times under the colonizers' rule. He discussed various issues, such as oppression, slavery, exploitation, colonial authority, rebellion against colonial forces, and nationalism, in the work of *Muktadhara*. He vehemently criticizes the overuse of machinery and the process of industrialization, which was, in a way, ruining the lives of the natives. *Muktadhara* also critiques industrialization and its impact on nature. Tagore in *Muktadhara* invokes the spirit of Gandhian nationalism by bringing truth and non-violence to the forefront. The rebellion of the oppressed against the colonial oppressors would be analyzed. The play *Muktadhara* will be studied as a colonial allegory that overtly reflects the socio-political situation under British colonial India.

Keywords: Colonialism, Non-violence, Oppressor, Oppressed, Muktadhara

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is one of the most celebrated poets of early Indian English literature, a novelist, philosopher, composer, and also a renowned playwright. He is mostly credited for having composed the national anthems of India, Bangladesh, and erstwhile East Bengal. The composition of *Gitanjali*, which is considered his masterpiece, won him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, making him the first Asian to receive the honor. Tagore became a formidable writer whose works attributed utmost importance to aesthetics and Indian cultural nuances. Some of the most important plays of Tagore include Post Office (1912), Chitra (1914), The Waterfall or Muktadhara (1922), and Red Oleanders (1923-1924). It was also the

time when Western giants like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and J.M. Synge were writing and had their influence on the Indian writers as well.

Drama, as a genre in literature, has carved a special place for itself. Drama as a medium of expression has truly been instrumental in taking popular socio-cultural and political aspects into people more effectively. Drama has played a crucial role in spreading awareness even amongst illiterate masses through its audio-visual assistance since time immemorial. Martin Esslin extols *Drama as "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."* He asserts that play, apart from containing realism, also has fictional elements that help people understand the circumstances in an effective manner. Tagore used Drama as a medium to convey his socio-cultural ideas consciously to people. He believed that drama as an imitative art can make people easily sense realities and consciously construe them. He says, "*Drama has the responsibility of drawing apart the curtain of naturalism and revealing the inner reality of things. If there is too much emphasis on imitative naturalism, the inner view becomes clouded.*" Tagore focussed on the inner attributes of things but not the external embodiments. Tagore's plays vividly delineate the socio-cultural aspects and also mirror the political situations of his times. Tagore was able to reflect on the happenings in society at a time when it was very crucial for people to understand them and develop an interest in the national consciousness. Nationalism, which was in its nascent stage, was dexterously portrayed in his works. The works of Tagore, especially his plays, played a key role in taking the concept of Nationalism to the masses. Tagore was keen on the colonial exploitations and the intentions behind their actions, which he delineated in his works.

Tagore's plays follow a particular pattern when it comes to portraying the scenic elements in his work. This could be better understood in the works of Edward Thompson. Thompson says, "We don't need any scenery; the only background we need is the background of the mind." Tagore does not create complex plots, and all his plays are set in austere backgrounds. He attempts to create an impact on the minds of his audience, not by the scenery but by the atmosphere he develops. If one looks at the plays of Tagore, one can easily observe the reluctance to use scenic arrangements. Tagore tries to explore the complex internal psyche of his characters, and these revelations play a key role in understanding his philosophies. Tagore was not simply reflecting and imitating the dramatic conventions of his times; on the contrary, he was experimenting with new ideas and forms. Kiranmay Raha observes 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."

Tagore's plays vividly and overtly portray the social conditions of the times, the political turmoil, and the struggle for an independent nation. The plays of Tagore are laden with nationalistic ideas and the struggle for independence. His forte at writing plays and techniques also needs special emphasis. The rich symbolism used to describe things could be considered as a key striking feature of his plays. In a way, it could be said that he was influenced by several contemporary artistic and literary movements that spread across Europe. He was highly influenced by the artistic *Art for Art's sake* movement fostered by Oscar Wilde. Tagore's work, "Wrong Man in Workers' Paradise," could be considered the best example of this influence. This same influence could not remain in all his work since he started to write for the nation's cause. This cause is well displayed in his works. Tagore's *Muktadhara* (1922) ostentatiously portrays the colonial policies of suppression and exploitation. It mirrors the way in which the colonizers deliberately paid the way for destroying and distorting the culture and economy of the country at the cost of the life of the colonized. The brutal and sly means the colonizers used to subdue the colonized and make them subservient and obedient to the whims of the colonizers are expressed overtly. The play is also a critique of the overemphasis laid on the process of mechanization. The key theme underlying the play includes that of Nature versus Machine. The play dwells completely on a dam constructed across the river *Muktadhara* by the royal engineer *Bibhuti* on the orders of the king of *Uttarakut*, King *Ranajit*. The king attempts to make the people of *Shiv-tarai*, a place lying at the foot of *Uttarakut*, accept his suzerainty and submit themselves to the king. The people defy the royal decree, and the king feels the defiance is an insult. As a result, to stop them from growing financially strong and subdue themselves to the kingdom of *Uttarakut*, the king urges the royal engineer to go against Nature and construct a dam across the flowing river, costing the death of many civilians in the process. The king is least bothered about the lives of these people and has no concern for anything else that inhibits his ambition.

"Messenger: After all these years, you have finished the dam on the *Muktadhara* waterfall. Again and again, it has burst, many men have been crushed under earth and sand, many others have been swept away in floods. Today at last...

Bibhuti: Their lives were not given in vain. My dam is completed" (*Muktadhara*, p.11-12).

The idea does not appeal to his foster son, Prince Abhijit, who expects its demolition. He sacrifices his own life in the end to free the river by shattering the dam. The play also focuses on humans' fallacies and attempts to remain superior to God. The construction of a machine that surpasses the trident of the Bhairava temple exemplifies these efforts. Tagore allegorically portrays all his convictions and ideas through this play. Edward Thompson observes that "It is a reasoned though highly allegorical presentation of his convictions, as expressed during many previous years,

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on modern politics." Tagore critically condemns mechanization and goes against its redundant use. The artificiality and misuse of machines against nature have been attacked critically. Tagore exposes the harsh hypocrisy of the people of Uttarakut. They, on the one hand, praise hymns in praise of lord Bhairava and extol him as "Cleaver of the heart of darkness, fire inexorable flaming, barren death-pyres' denizen, Trident-wielder, breast of Death's Ocean, Sankara! Sankara" (Muktadhara 18), and on the other hand, they equate the machine with the Lord as, "All hail Machine, we worship thee, we bow to thee, we honor thee, machine O Lord Machine" (Muktadhara 15). Tagore focuses on all these nuances, too. The play can also be read as a colonial allegory that depicts colonial aspects like subservience, oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. Tagore ignited the spirit of national consciousness through the play by bringing out the striking features of colonialism and reflecting the political situations in the society. Tagore wanted to create awareness amongst the masses and persuade them to fight for their own cause. He had in the work all the ideological dictates that he wanted the masses to know. The actual purpose of writing the play, as Edward Thompson believes, is "His deep distrust of all government by machinery and of all prostitution of science to serve violence and oppression, his hatred of a slavish system of education, his scorn of race-hatred and of all politics which seek to make one tribe dependent on another instead of risking the gift of the fullest freedom, his certitude that it is in freedom that God is found-all these are so prominent that each may with justice be claimed as the play's message" (Edward Thompson 271).

Description:

Tagore's play Muktadhara can be read as a colonial allegory as it explicitly represents and reflects the circumstances of his times. The colonial aspects like slavery, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, and tyranny can be found in the text. Tagore, in the text, not only brings about colonial aspects but also critically attacks the colonial style of learning. Tagore was against rotten learning and was not interested in such a process. He wanted the mind to think about issues freely and in a lucid way, which alone can make people creative. Tagore is sternly opposed to the process of rotten learning and recounts in his autobiography an aversion towards it. "Several pages in Tagore's autobiography recount the robust dislike Tagore felt, as a boy, for private tutorials, classrooms, and rote-learning." This then paved the way for founding an institution like Santiniketan, which fostered creative learning and encouraged innovations. Tagore also hated the English language and the education system. McCulloch's *Course of Reading Tagore*, he recalls the following reaction of Tagore. He recalls, "Providence, out of pity of mankind, has instilled a soporific charm into all tedious things. No sooner did our English lessons begin than our heads began to nod."

Tagore, however, was able to dexterously bring out his convictions through

the play. Tagore, by this time, had brought in the spirit of Nationalism in many of his works. Muktaghara centers around the construction of a dam across the river, which will, in turn, make the people of Sivatarai suffer from famine. The words of the king are defied by the king's foster child and the crown prince, Abhijit. The overuse of machinery in order to control the forces of nature has been brought under serious criticism. The people of Sivatarai, who were colonized by the King of Uttarakut, reproach the machine for the harm it had done to them. The pilgrim who visits the village taunts it by saying, 'It looks like a demon's head, a grinning skeleton head, lying in wait to devour your city in its sleep' (Muktaghara 10). As in every colonial text, the constant tussle between the oppressor and the oppressed is inevitable. The people of Uttarakut, ruled by a colonial tyrant, King Ranajit, developed hostile relationships with the people of Sivatarai. The king wants the people of Sivatarai either to subdue themselves to the king of Uttarakut or die of starvation. The people of Sivatarai wanted to remain independent and chose the fate of dying from starvation. The king, as a colonizer does, plans to subdue them with his colonial might. He decides to cut their lifeline, which has helped them in growing prosperous and wealthy. The king orders Bibhuti, the royal engineer, to construct a dam across the river so as to make the people of Sivatarai starve to death. The people of Sivatarai opposed this idea and demanded independence, but the king was reluctant. Therefore, a persistent conflict between the colonizers and the colonized develops. Tagore epitomizes the spirit of Indian nationalism, which strictly adhered to and endorsed the principles of Gandhi. Tagore was inspired by the Gandhian concepts of truth and non-violence, which he was able to portray in the play. Tagore creates a character named Dhananjaya Boiragi and teaches him all the Gandhian principles. Dhananjaya Boiragi is shown as a Gandhian character who fights against colonial oppression and tyranny, not by force, but by truth and non-violence. Tagore attempts to incite and infuse feelings of strength, courage, and belief in the self through nonviolent means. This could be understood by the answer that Dhananjaya gives to Ganesh when he thinks of using brutal and violent means to fight against the Kingdom of Uttarakut. *"Dhananjaya: Can't you show him what not-beating is? That needs too much strength, I suppose? Beating the waves won't stop the storm. But hold your rudder steady, and you win.*

Fourth Shiv: What do you tell us to do, then?

Dhananjaya: Strike at the root of violence itself. (Muktaghara, p.34)"

The king and the royal engineer are praised for their unsurpassable achievement of locking the water with the help of a dam. The royal engineer and the king are not bothered about the curses of the people of Sivatarai. The engineer asserts, "When a man fights against the power of the gods, does he care for the curses of men." (Muktagharap.13). When the royal prince approaches him and expects Bibhuti to demolish the construction, he does not agree to it. But Abhijit is sternly fixed on

seeing that the dam is turned to dust liberating the water. He goes against his own father for the good of the people of Sivatarai. He is disgusted with the construction as he believes it to be a colonial construction that tries to starve people and obstruct the free flow of the current. Abhijit resents, 'I cannot endure that monster that mutes the music of the earth and guffaws with its iron fangs at the sky. I love this paradise, and that is why I shall fight its demons.'(Muktadharap.28). Abhijit also opens up the way the Nandi pass road whose closure the king himself had ordered. Abhijit fights against the colonial tendencies of his father and backs the cause of the people of Sivatarai. He reproaches Uddhav, a captain of the royal guard when he praises King Ranajit's order to close the Nandi pass road, putting the people of Sivatarai at stake. He says, "When the right hand is niggardly enough to close the road against them, men cannot be saved by the bounty of the left." (Muktadharap.30). The king foresees the danger that Abhijit may possibly pose and is detained. The colonial attitude of silencing the voices and quelling them behind bars is something that needs to be noted. Vijayapal, a messenger from the king, puts Abhijit in the tent and tells Sanjaya that Abhijit "is a prisoner". Dissent is an atypical tendency that the Colonizers never expect from the Colonized. They simply want the colonized to obey the decrees of their masters.

Dhananjaya, on the other hand, is not afraid of the king and motivates his men to raise their voices against the tyranny of the king in a nonviolent manner. He wants a peaceful protest against the colonizer's behavior. Dhananjaya refuses the king's words to pay taxes and asserts, "*He who gives all, keeps all; greed brings you only stolen goods, and they won't last. That is your mistake. What you seize by violence can never be yours. What you set free is yours forever. Clutch at it, and it is gone.*" (Muktadharap.44). Dhananjaya protests against the actions of the king and refuses to move aside, which aggravates the king, and asks Uddhav to 'to take this Vairagi to the cam and keep him prisoner there.' (Muktadhara p.47) Resistance towards the colonial power has never come without detentions. Tagore was well aware of all these rebellions and the detentions that were the direct consequences of such rebellions. Protests increased after these detentions, and the people of Uttarakut wished to meet the prince. They consider Abhijit to be 'so affectionate' and 'would give us the moon from the sky,' but they also believe that he was responsible for such an act. The people of Sivatarai are under the impression that the people of Uttarakut are more important and dear to him than the people of Sivatarai. The acts of the king have tarnished the popular image of the prince. Abhijit is not dismayed by their jibes but is committed to freeing the current. "I must pay my debt, the debt of my birth. Muktadhara was my nurse. I must see her free." (Muktadhara, 53) Abhijit sets out to free the current and destroys the dam. "My God, it is –it is Muktadhara! The water is rushing out. The dam, the dam, who has broken the dam? No chance for him now!" The current is set free, and Abhijit sacrifices his life to unshackle it. Sanjaya laments

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the death of Abhijit, saying that, 'The Monster machine struck him back. Then Muktheadhara, like a mother, took up his wounded body in her arms and carried him away.' (Muktheadhara,p.71). The sacrifice elevated his position and wiped away the hatred that the people of Sivatarai had. People rushed to see Abhijit, but he was washed by the fast-flowing current. He was eternalized by the sacrifice that he made for the people of Sivatarai by fighting against the colonial despots.

"Ganesh: We come to see our Yuvaraja. We shall never find him now.

Dhananjaya: Nay, you have found him. He is yours forever now. (Muktheadhara, p. 71)"

Conclusion:

Tagore's Muktheadhara is an exemplary text that reflects the conditions of colonial India. The oppressive decisions and policies that were devised to subdue the local colonized men and subsequent exploitation are dexterously portrayed. Tagore critiqued slavery in India under the British raj in the play. He invokes sentiments and feelings of the people through his works and imbibes in them the spirit of nationalism. Tagore prioritizes liberation above all. He focuses on the liberation of the human body and soul. He, also being inspired by Gandhian ideologies, incorporated the ideals of Non-violence and truth in his works. He wanted the oppressed classes to fight against the colonial masters, who deliberately, to meet their personal gains, infringed upon the rights of the native colonized men. To Tagore, what matters is just freedom in one's soul and living with dignity and pride. No amount of oppression and subjugation should hold those oppressed from fighting back only if they have the will and self-determination. Thus, Muktheadhara is a play that brings about a scenario of the oppressor and the oppressed that could be likened to a similar position of people living in that age and time under the clutches of the colonizers, where force, slavery, and exploitation were the orders of the day. The play could be read as a fight against the colonial oppressor who infringes on the natural rights of the natives and the resistance expressed overtly by the colonized subjects in a nonviolent way. Invoking the spirit of Gandhian philosophy adds additional flavor to the play by making it a very contemporary and precise reflection of its times. Tagore celebrates the victory of the colonized men over the colonizers and laments with pride the sacrifices of the people who renounced their lives and believes that "when no life springs from the life laid down? When death is the only fruit of death? It is utter loss (Muktheadhara, p.26)."

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