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Politics of Faith in the Regions of Ideologies and the Spiritual Principle of Emancipation as the Greatness of Life: A Critical Reading of Rabindranath Tagore's *Bisarjan*

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is an exponential figure of modern literature, culture, and philosophy in colonial Bengal. He is still remaining appealing for his politically significant and imaginatively creative contribution in dramatic literature. *Bisarjan* (lit. Sacrifice) is considered as a drama of "maturity." He deals with a treacherous zone of life in his play *Bisarjan* that progresses a dramatic action within the conflicting regions of ideological apparatuses as systems of belief and state. The play revolves around the Indian religious thought which critiques the dogmatic prejudice and intolerance within the socio-political dynamics of the state. The action resolves the dramatic question by seeking the spiritual notion of greatness of life through the act of sacrifice. This essay examines how the play *Bisarjan*, as a 'social drama' defined by Victor Turner's anthropological theory of theatre, exposes the ideological conflict in the terrain of the politics of faith as well as embraces the emancipatory principle of sacrifice as the spiritual meaning of life. In response to the question, this article employs the critical theory of ideology originated from the Marxist school of thinking the idea of power as well as Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy about the relationship between human and religion.

INTRODUCTION

Written in 1890 Rabindranath Tagore's *Bisarjan* (lit. Sacrifice) is ostensibly about the illogic of faith and the sacrifices it forces on believers. The play centers on a ban: the king of Tripura, Govinda Manik, has banned ritual sacrifice and slaughter at the altar of the goddess. His power threatened by the ban, Raghupati, the high priest, orchestrates opposition. Caught between is Jaysingha, a disciple and mentee of Raghupati, who serves with unmitigated faith at the altar of the goddess. In most readings, *Bisarjan* is a conflict between love and power and the Visva Bharati Granthanbibhag introduces it as such: 'Raghupati's desire for authority pitted against Govinda Manik's capacity to love. The king wants to see his love victorious. Raghupati wants to maintain and expand his authority. In the end, all barriers are overcome, the priest awakens, and love prevails' (Tagore, 1411, p. 122). A close reading of this play demonstrates differently, however, *Bisarjan* is a contest between a king and a priest, each vying to enforce their authoritative will over the other. To introduce the play as the Visva Bharati edition does, reduces *Bisarjan* to a simpler conflict and steers us from something deeper, more poetic: rather than solely sacrifice, Jaysingha's death becomes complex as it can also be seen as a deliberate act to renew the living. Read as a play of a multifaceted signification of death, Jaysingha's death - Jaysingha's rebellion - is against the worldly enactment of power, be it priestly or secular. But for this reading we have to move away from Govinda Manik and Raghupati and inquire into Jaysingha: his characterization, the underlying conceptual framework of his character, and his progression through the play. This essay progresses through the discussion of three conceptual frameworks. Hence, discussion of this essay, firstly, contains the ideas of death, pain, and beauty. Secondly, it discusses the ideological conflict of royal pride versus Lordship of the priest. Finally, this essay explores the concept of simple truth and spiritual principles that Tagore employs through the characterisation of Jaysingha in the process of denouement of the play *Bisarjan*. Through the discussion of the play, this study polemically concludes how Rabindranath Tagore rejects the dogmatic idea of religious ideology and accepts the spiritual principle of emancipation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a seminal work, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet & Dramatist*, Edward Thompson vividly explores Tagore's life and creative works within a conceptual structure consisting of five phases: (i) Early Life and Poetry (ii) The Sheleida and Sadhana Period (iii) Unrest and Change (iv) The Gitanjali Period (v) Internationalism. Thompson aims to generate a holistic approach to explore Tagore's life and work periodically. The chronological approach he employs in his book sporadically discusses Tagore's *Bisarjan* as a drama of "maturity" (pp. 91-4). He argues that the theme of the play "had been implicit in many an obscure page of Indian religious thought. But Rabindranath's play first gave its protest a reasoned and deliberate place in art. He attacks bigotry with the weapon most dangerous to it, the sarcasm of parody" (pp. 91-2). He finds "Nature's Revenge" and "human love" through the "highest dramatic point" in this play (p. 93). Such concepts, suggested by Thompson, produce an apolitical reading of the play. Therefore, a

close reading of Thompson's book demonstrates a dramaturgical understanding of the plays, particularly, *Bisarjan*, instead of critical analysis of the play in the context of contesting religious discourses. This absence indicates an epistemic gap and provokes a new study of *Bisarjan* in the critical context of an intertwined dynamics of religious dogma and power politics.

The post-Marxist critical thinker Louis Althusser theorises the idea of "ideology" that critiques classical Marxist framework and concentrates Lacanian linguistic philosophy in his ground-breaking book titled *On Ideology*. To reframe his view on ideology, Althusser postulates a series of proposition, for instances, (i) the reproduction of the conditions of production, (ii) the reproduction of the relations of production, (iii) Ideological State Apparatus. In the Marxist tradition of theorising the "ideology," state has been defined as only a linear dynamic of power which is called "state power" (p. 21). On the contrary, Althusser theorises the state which is securely operated by a complex dynamic of "the legal-political and ideological superstructure" (p. 22). According to Althusser, state only functions as a state when "the state power" is exercised "in the state apparatuses" (p. 22). He proposes three steps of this political exercise that demonstrates, at first, State as State Apparatuses; second, State as the repressive State Apparatus; third, State as the Ideological State Apparatuses (p. 22). To explain the idea of ideology based on the structure and function, Althusser determines two kinds of ideology. One is "imaginary form of ideology," and the other is "the materiality of ideology" (p. 36). For him, discovery of the "reality of the world" is the rediscovery of the material condition of the world in the form of "imaginary representation of ideology" as the reality of the world (p. 36). He posits that "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individual to their real conditions of existence" (p. 36). Therefore, he rationalises the idea of ideologies defining as "world outlooks" (p. 36). According to Althusser, there are so many "world outlooks," for examples, "religious ideology, ethical ideology, political ideology, etc. [...]" (p. 36).

As the play of *Bisarjan* thematically explores religious thought, there is a critical scope to initiate new research on the play to rediscover "world outlooks" of the play through the lens of Althusser's political theory of the ideologies which is completely remained untouched in this field.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative method to offer a semiotic reading of Tagore's drama *Bisarjan*. This method has been critically employed using the technique of judgmental, alternatively, purposive sampling. This study uses theatre semiotics partly to focus on this drama as a linguistic component of theatre arts. This essay polemically provides a critical understanding of how the play as a 'social drama' reveals the Marxist ideological conflict in the domain of politics of faith as well as proposes the emancipatory notion of sacrifice as the fundamental principle of metaphysical meaning of material life. This research, therefore, engages the play *Bisarjan* as the primary source while other relevant literary works, sociological

sources and Marxist school of critical writings are considered as the secondary sources. In response to the research questions, this essay aims at exploring Tagore's liberal philosophy of the intertwined relationship between human and religion following hermeneutics as the science of multi-faceted interpretation of text.

DISCUSSION

Brought up by Raghupati and anointed his successor, Jaysingha is descended from the royals. With sacrifice banned by royal decree, when Raghupati decrees only royal blood can appease the goddess, Jaysingha volunteers himself as sacrifice. His death is a gift to the living. But what does he hope to gain for the living? Can the dead really do anything for the living? Death, here, serves only as an occasion and the poet Shankha Ghosh gives us the real purpose of such occasions:

Reasoning or theory cannot explain our life and our most common relationships. A poet does not seek to know life through any reasoning, but seeks to know life through all his senses and through all his being, he seeks to see the world in all its manifestations. We run into quite a few characters of such poetic disposition in Tagore's plays. They are not labeled as poets, but they stand out through the torment they endure and the truth they uphold. (1985, p. 166)

Jai Singh, as cited by Shankha Ghosh, is one such poet: Jai Singh's death is the straight and simple path to life. Jaysingha loves Raghupati but cannot accept his machinations against Govinda Manik. His spirit drawn by the prospect of love, he hearkens to a call from Aparna to leave the confines created by struggles for power. From the midst of worldly bonds, Jaysingha ascends to another plane. From the ascension he gains inner sight. Jaysingha senses the end. He realizes how everyday life chains us to our sorrows. Such realizations bring detachment from life and its bonds (Ghosh, 1985, p. 168). Shankha Ghosh points to this detachment as the purpose behind Tagore's poetic characters who distance themselves from relationships as Jaysingha does in standing aside from everyday life. They see a new aspect, they see life in its entirety, they see the pain and the beauty (Ghosh, 1985, p. 168). Jaysingha goes to his death reaching out for an incandescent beauty unchained from the sensory and the sensual, the staples and constraints of life. In his sacrificial death, an awakening is attained (Ghosh, 1985, p. 171).

Therefore, a more encompassing reading reveals the conflict of love and power as described by Visva Bharati to be a poorer interpretation. More poetically, *Bisarjan* is a conflict over the use of power in the world that brings us to an ending of painful beauty. Because the exercise of power never confirms liberty for human beings rather it constructs a procedural mechanization as Michel Foucault analyses that "Man have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definitions" (1999, p. 136). Moreover, the institutional imposition as a form power exercise never validates the liberty. Foucault argues that "The liberty of man is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them" (1999, p. 135). As a result, the critical thought within

the philosophy of relationship between the power and the institution therefore allows us to agree with Shankha Ghosh in order to propose that it is only at the surface that the play unfolds as a conflict between crown and clergy over protecting the faith. Visva Bharati's interpretation leaves out a more essential nature of the conflict. A few lines drawn from the play show the need for a closer, textual reading:

Priest: I come to the royal stockade, I seek livestock for sacrifice.
King: From this year hence, the beheading of animals in the temple is forbidden.
Priest: Do I hear this in my dream?
King: No dream my lord!
It was a dream until now, but today I awaken.
The Mother herself, in her maiden form
bid me that animal blood she can bear no more.
Priest: How then! She bore it for so long?
Drink blood She did for a hundred years.
How then this distaste now?
King: Drink she did not.
Turned away her divine face
From the blood you spilled.
Priest: Your highness! Think well on what you do.
The scriptures do not repose in you.
King: Above all scriptures, the Goddess herself bids me so.
Priest: You err. You boast, ignorant mortal.
Only you hear the goddess?
But I do not?
King: Divine ordain does ring throughout the ages
He is most dumb,
who hears the goddess but remains numb (Tagore, 1411, pp. 20-21).

A careful examination of the dramatic text notices what is missing: substantive discussion of what the goddess has said. Rather, king and priest each merely claim the goddess for their side. But let us not mistake the arguments for the goddess to be ones of impassioned belief. To sustain his livelihood Raghupati, the priest, must preserve religious and social customs; he needs the ritualistic animal sacrifice and other ritual practices from which he draws power and for that he depends on Govinda Manik, the king. And Govinda Manik needs to preserve the religious cultural practices that legitimize his rule: through ritual and custom the priest lends the king divine legitimacy. Priest and king are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. This political symbiosis between priest and king uncovers the "congruence between the "relatively autonomous" institutions by looking not to their roots in a common, determining economic base but to an overdetermining network of ideological interrelationships among all of them" (Fiske, 2008, p. 312). According to the post-Marxist theory of superstructure, "ideology is not a static set of ideas imposed upon the subordinate by the dominant classes but rather a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice--that is, in the ways that people think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to society" (Fiske, 2008, p 311). Louis Althusser, the most important proponent of the post-Marxist theory

of superstructure, defines ideology as “a certain representation of the world” which determines human’s “condition of existence” (2008, p. 305). Considering the omnipresent characteristic of ideological representation, Althusser adopts human beings as ‘ideological animals’ against other dominant ideas of ‘political animals’ and ‘economic animals’ (2008, p. 305). Following the intrinsic logic of Althusser’s theory, if ideology represents the reality and determines all worldly acts then it is “diffused throughout the body of society” (2008, p. 306). Althusser says, “Thus, in our societies, the domain of ideology in general can be divided into relatively autonomous regions: religious ideology, moral ideology, juridical ideology, political ideology, aesthetic ideology, philosophical ideology” (2008, p. 306). The play of *Bisarjan* situates its action in the “autonomous regions” between religious and political ideology. As ‘ideological animals’ both the king and the priest discover a crack in their interdependent ideological bond through a sense of subjectivity. To understand how the ideological apparatuses work on the micro-level of individual, John Fiske stresses that “We need to replace the idea of the individual with that of the subject. The individual is produced by nature, the subject by culture. Theories of the individual concentrate on differences between people and explain these differences as natural” (2008, p. 312). On the other hand, he argues that theories of the subject focus “on people’s common experiences in a society as being the most productive way of explaining who (we think) we are” (2008, p. 312).

The sense of subjective agency turns into a politics of identity that creates an ideological conflict between two regions: politics and religion. However, the ideological conflict is embodied into the form of the sudden ban on animal sacrifice that ends Govinda Manik’s dependence on the priest and cleaves the relationship. Raghupati stands to lose his livelihood and in response labels the ban an affront to established custom, royal hubris, and an attack on faith, while Govinda Manik positions himself as a reformer of religious custom. Both king and priest profess to protect faith from the other’s intrusions, both are confident in their knowledge, and they stand in opposition. Ostensibly, the opposition roots in who has the benefit of greater knowledge, but belief in pure knowledge is a dangerous myth: knowledge is also about particular understandings and interpretations and when interpretive differences surface, power becomes paramount. Specifically, who has the power to interpret and who has the rhetorical, positional, political, and physical power to corner knowledge and interpretation. Both Raghupati and Govinda Manik claim knowledge. The pretense is knowledge for the best practice of faith. But really each claims knowledge to legitimate his own power. The politics of knowledge is in fact a politics of worldly faith. Because both Raghupati and Govinda Manik want others to have faith in them and in their worldview, power is always the ultimate goal, knowledge a mere instrument.

Aparna instinctively knows that faith is entangled in the twists and turns of politics. She alerts the audience to the pitfalls – be they secular or religious – of the politics of faith and calls out to Jai Singh: “Come away Jai Singh. Leave this temple, let us flee” (Tagore, 1411, p. 64). Once Jaysingha understands the

consequences wrought by the confines of royal hubris versus clerical authority, he understands his condition and raises the alarm: "Truth is a prison" (Tagore, 1411, p. 64). The ideological apparatuses in Tagore's allegorical dramatic representation of the ideological regions of politics and religion metamorphoses the faith into the politics of bad faith that harshly reconfigure the spiritual quality of truth as the confining puzzle. Tagore's representation of imprisoning tentacles of truth resonates how Foucauldian discourse uncover the process making truth in relation to the reciprocated practice of power and knowledge. Foucauldian discursive formation of knowledge produces truth through the exercise of knowledge where "truth is what is made or allowed to seem true" (Fortier, 2002, p. 159). Studying "the interstices of cognitive discourse and historical practices", Foucauldian genealogies necessitate the "modern relationships of knowledge and power" to substantiate that "power touches people's lives through social and cultural practices more than through centralized state organizations or systems of belief. Power is diffused at the "capillary" level in the micro-politics of daily life" (Roach, 1989, p. 101).

In the play, Govinda Manik embodies a 'centralized state organization' on the one hand, and Raghupati a 'system of belief' on the other. In-between the two ideological regions, Jay Singh and Aparna are portrayed as 'people' at the 'capillary level' of dramatic action that exposes a microscopic zone of everyday life which is destabilized and perilous through the diffusive power practiced by two ideologues: Govinda Manik and Raghupati. Tagore's aesthetic stratagem is explicit in employing the method of alteration that seeks way to emphasis what is commonly unheard and unspoken. Aparna, the most subaltern within the subalterns in *Bisarjan*, when calls Jay Singh sincerely for 'fleeing' the 'temple' as the site of conflicting ideologies, creates a resonance of the marginals to dramatise a new schema of life against the dominance of power play. At this point, the social drama, according to Victor Turner, as "a sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive, or agonistic type", Tagore designs in his play *Bisarjan* that outlines a potential act of "redress" (Turner cited in Bell 2006). Social drama consists of such four phases as "breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism" (Bell 2006). Social theory of theatre proposes society as social drama that "begins when a member of a community breaks a rule; sides are taken for or against the rule breaker; repairs—formal or informal—are enacted; and if the repairs work, the group returns to normal, but if the repairs fail, the group breaks apart" (Bell 2006). However, Aparna's calling of "fleeing" alters the aesthetic act to the social act of "redress" that envisions a "schism". But the dramatic action seeks its progress neither in revolution nor in reformation, which defines life in relation to a spiritual connotation.

Jai Singh's inspiration to escape and break free of the politics of faith, even at the cost of his life, comes from Aparna. The cronies of the powerful have seized Aparna's goats - 'the bundle of her sweetest affections' - to sacrifice to the goddess; seeking redress from the goddess, Aparna arrives at the temple. To Jai Singh, however, Aparna represents the true spirit of the goddess, the universal

Mother, cast in stone upon the altar. Jai Singh's tears at Aparna's plight at the beginning of the play are her only refuge and his sympathy establishes a communion that leads Aparna to expectations of Jai Singh. Expectation turns into claim, as love takes hold. Aparna emboldened by love demands: "Come then, leave this temple and come" (Tagore, 1411, p. 19).

All issues in the play, all possible outcomes, are summed up in this plea from Aparna. Jai Singh, a servant to the goddess, accepts Aparna as a manifestation of the divine and resolves to make his supplications: "This guest, the goddess in guise, shall I worship today" (Tagore, 1411, p. 19). For, gods, when they appear among humans, often come in the guise of the weak and lowly. They arrive as strangers, as guests. Aparna, as a guest, is assumed to be an incarnation of the goddess Universal Mother (Bishwa Mata). In his essay on 'Manuser Dharma' (lit. Religion of Man), Tagore says:

Our scriptures say that guests are gods in this world. The guest stands for every man. When the guest is fed, every man is fed. The host's means are enlarged, and he is drawn to the greater world. Hospitality merges us to the Great. Hospitality merges us with more than ourselves (1999, pp. 45-6).

In his desire to worship the guest, Aparna, Jaysingha moves toward merging with the greater. In accepting Aparna as divine incarnation he effaces himself, in elevating Aparna above himself he gains humility. Aparna's inspiration leads Jaysingha to find the courage to grow from the lowly to the exalted. This courage gives him the strength to sacrifice his life, and through his sacrifice he joins a greater being. In the philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, the idea of sacrifice is immensely important as he marks that "a Universal Spirit" of human being is "supreme sacrifice" that invokes human beings "to dedicate their lives to the cause of truth and beauty, to unrewarded service of others" (1922, p. 18). Moreover, from the experiential perspective, Tagore states:

During the discussion of my own religious experience I have expressed my belief that the first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with Nature – not that Nature which has its channel of information for our mind and physical relationship with our living body, but that which satisfies our personality with manifestations that make our life rich and stimulate our imagination in their harmony of forms, colours, sounds and movements. It is not that world which vanishes into abstract symbols behind its own testimony to Science, but that which lavishly displays its wealth of reality to our personal self having its own perpetual reaction upon our human nature. (1922, p. 18)

Ego and the drive for power reign over the peddlers of faith, Govinda Manik and Raghupati, as they freely ignore the "Soul that touches the universal soul of cosmos" (Tagore, 1999, p. 46). It is Jai Singh, the commoner, who is willing to sacrifice his life. That sacrifice is both a death and a union of a fragment with the whole which Tagore calls as Nature. The self, in dying, coming into alignment with the cosmos. Through his sacrifice then, Jaysingha embodies the best of humanity. Tagore, in his writings on the 'religion of man', argued that humans have three abodes. First, the earth; second, memories; and third, the spiritual

world, or the continent of all human spirits. It is in the last domain that humans are connected to one another. One person's spirit may be hemmed in by a narrow mind, another's by twisted beliefs. But there is a bigger spirit, which is not personal but universal. We stumble upon it by surprise, and suddenly we are eager to believe and die for that universal spirit (Tagore, 1999, p. 54).

Where Govinda Manik and Raghupati are focused on wielding power over the other to assert faith and knowledge on their side, Jaysingha sacrifices his life for another kind of faith: union with the cosmos. Where does Jaysingha find the strength for his self-sacrifice? Again, Tagore answers:

What gives man the power to throw away his life, to embrace pain and suffering, and oppose the might of injustice with no arms? Humans are not only endowed with their life, but also endowed with greatness (Tagore, 1999, p. 50).

CONCLUSION

Life is physical and of the body. But there is a greatness which surpasses the body, that is supra-physical, and this human greatness is in the realm of the spiritual. His worldly life tormented by the politics of faith, Jaysingha, in the true spirit of his faith ends his physical existence and joins the unending and the eternal. When we arrive at this awareness, we realize that loss from Jaysingha's sacrifice is not the main interest of the play. Jaysingha finds greatness and sacrifices his life to achieve it. On the contrary, Raghupati's proud attains bitterness that "almost slays him, as he realizes the impotence of the idol he has served to his ruin" (Thompson 1948:93). However, Jaysingha's sacrifice is the attainment of greatness. Thus, *Bisarjan* is not a play about loss and human failings but rather a union of the individual with the cosmological. Hence, Rabindranath Tagore's play *Bisarjan* rejects the politics of faith that is appropriated by the ideological apparatuses. Instead, the social drama of *Bisarjan* embraces the principle of sacrifice based on the principle of spiritual emancipation that appropriate the notion of "greatness" as the substantial code of life.

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