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The Imprints

S. Ramanujam

This is not a study or review of Tagore's work. This is not even an article on Tagore. These lines are only the imprints which Tagore's work made on me when I tried to visualize them as drops of performances while I tried for a stage presentation on different occasions.

Thanks to Douglas Knight for this information that how Pandit Ravishankar recalled the concert of Balasaraswathy, the great exponent of Sathir, later it is named Bharatanatyam, in an all Bengali music conference held in 1934 in Calcutta. To quote "It was something out of the world, even more so, because Rabindranath Tagore the great poet, was there sitting in one corner of the stage on a special chair. I remember Bala was so excited." It is well known that Bala is not merely a dancer but a musician of vocal as well as through her body. Bala had also the privilege of presenting a performance of "Jana Gana Mana" of Tagore at Kolkata, Varanasi and Chennai during 30's of the last century not knowing that it would become the National Anthem of India after the Independence. It was sung in the style of South Indian Music sprung from Ancient Tamil music. It is not merely an incident that a Mahakavi witnessing the musical movements of a traditional art form or a Natyashironmani expressing in a melody through her somatic energy, the image of the poem. It is really an experience where a classical corporeal rhythm fuses with the musical vibration of a lyric.

Tagore's mystic expression in attaining a blissful state of mind in its profundity is visible in his work *Chandalika*, imbued with music and dance. The main character of the play is a lowborn, an untouchable whose internal desire of mingling with the eternal bliss



through a cry of love submitted to her lord. Ananda, the disciple of Buddha after a weary travel, quenching his thirst by taking water from hands of an untouchable girl, the Prakriti. The impartial attitude of the love of Ananda towards humans irrespective of the cast and creed kindles a kind of trance in Prakriti. The trance makes a deep love in her mind to a level, which creates not only a desire but a thirst to have a corporeal union.

A similar kind of love with thirst is found in the lyrics of Andal, a feminine Vaishnava Saint of Tamilnadu who belongs to the twelfth century. The myth behind the incarnation of Andal is rooted more on earth as well as spiritual. Prakriti, the goddess of earth asks her Lord, the abode of wisdom, to guide a path which will pave the way for attaining eternal bliss for the humanity to whom she bears. The answer given to her was that the eternal bliss is the union of one's inner soul with Lord, the Sath Chith Ananda. The simple and the easiest way is the Ganamarga, the path of singing his Glory. He cites a mythical parable, the story of chandala, a low birth and an untouchable devotee who redeems a Brahmin cursed to be a demon by the grace attained through his songs in praise of The Lord and this myth provokes Prakriti to become Andal and marry The Lord Himself through her songs depicting her somatic union with Him.

Neither a comparison of a common theme handled by two religious legends nor to project a coincidence in them is an intention here. But to recognize a spiritual unity that flows with all human soul from generation to generation surpassing the differences between the caste and creed prevailing in the reality of our soil.



Muktadhara has two levels of space and explicit, one is so much the physical, the nature. The invisible waterfalls echoes throughout the play with its melody that encompasses the pass, the road, the temple, the hamlet under its foot. The visible one is the huge machine towering towards the clouds as a symbol of conquest of human power over nature. There is a third level which is purely the mental space of human being which is clouded by the possessiveness on one side and purified by the generosity on the other side. The socio political implications in the first two spaces are intertwined by ecological with human necessities. In a review of the production of *Muktadhara* done in Malayalam by the writer of this article himself in a leading English daily referred it to the river water dispute between states going on at present in our nation. Ecological queries and protests are frequent at present when a project is implemented in relation to the soil.

Apart from these interpretations of socio –political and ecological implications Tagore adapts symbols as his language of expressions especially in his plays. Even the title *Muktadhara* is a symbolic one. Mahatma Gandhi called Tagore a sentinel of our tradition. As the sentinel of our tradition the compassion which leads to our spiritual coexistence runs as an undercurrent in every work of Tagore and especially more powerful in depiction of Abhijit's character. It is a kind of deliverance offered to nature being bonded by the self-possession of dictatorial attitude of humans. Abhijit breaks not only the bond of the waterfalls, but also the bond of the earth's music from the grinning ogre that muzzles it. The crowned prince who has to rule and make laws in future acquires a self deliverance also by allowing his physical body to flow along with the water so as to symbolize that no bondage could be made on compassion which unites the human soul. It is a kind of Gandhian spirit



that is not against technology but that it should not be applied as exploitation of human self sufficiency in his economy as well as self satisfaction in an artistic way of life. Lord Bhairava in the play stands not only the god of destruction but a god of protection. Abhijit, the crowned prince of the play stands as a symbol of compassion poured on the suppressed one who are indeed in need of water. The play moves to its climax by the breaking of the dam which stands as a symbol of breaking of bonds on human beings socially and politically, this is only at surface level. But at spiritual level, it is a breaking of selfishness that bonds the humanness in every soul.

Tagore draws so many aspects from our tradition but not blindly. The poet is firm on his view that tradition is not something that is blindly handed over from one generation to the other. The scenes of the school teacher and what he teaches to the young one are mockery on the brain drainage of a tradition.

Taser Desh, 'The Kingdom of Cards', is a mockery on the pressure of the tradition which could not easily be got rid of. It adheres to the pressure of tradition with all its rigidity which provides a way for a mechanical movement with the four symbols of cards.

The rigidness of traditionalism and conventions as handcuffs becomes a laughing stuff in the hands of the poet in his play *The Kingdom of Cards*. The rules and regulations play a higher hand than a human spirit. One has to lose his personal identity in such a world which paves the way for a mockery of a living pattern. Life has its own zeal which each individual could enjoy at his own way. But if that enjoyment is denied with a common parade



which could not be got rid of, life becomes merely a material manipulation where a distinction is not found between a boat and even a prince when it is sinking.

But Amal is so weak because of his physical sickness, and so, he flutters only with the wings of his imagination, which gives him not only solaces and comfort but courage to meet his end. The post office stands as a background, as a symbol of a centre of communication which could be accessible or not. The sensitivity of enjoying the music of the earth with its natural green and also the daily activities happening on the earth moulds Amal as a character different from other normal children. This sensibility makes him even to apprehend the approach of his own death. But he takes it as an adventure, as a playful attitude, rather than afraid of it. He imagines that death is a gift which would be sent by the King as if a message or an article delivered through the post office. He is waiting for such a call with a kind of readiness to submit all his soul. In this philosophical attitude, Amal fades himself into the poet, the Tagore, with a boy's fantasy. Hence, it seems to him to conceive that the death is an invisible voyage connecting the two worlds: the world of life and the world after life.

Gaining such a spiritual strength with a glorious imagination of death is an echo of the lines from Tagore's great work *The Gitanjali* itself. Death is not an end of a voyage, but a knock for the continuity of that voyage for which one has to be ready to submit all his earning materially, poetically and spiritually in his life.

Especially the poem which makes the poet to imagine himself as a beggar maid before the king, is meeting a surprise that the king himself stretches His hands for the arms before the beggar maid. The spiritual attitude of the poem is that it is not a wish to gain from the



Lord, but a submission of one's own life at his feet. Submission of soul to nature, to art and to God stands as an eternal message in all of Tagore's works.

As a modern theatre worker, one has to remember Tagore that he has paved the way to have a modernism in stage presentation very much rooted on the soil and at the same time a kind of community theatre that could prevail in our modern secular society through the artistic expressions as an enchantment with a festival attitude carried on at different occasions at Santiniketan.

[Prof. S. Ramanujam is the pioneer of modern Tamil theatre and is known as BHISHMA of modern Tamil theatre but was equally popular in Kerala and Andhra. He worked as the Dean in the Department of Performing Arts in Tamil University, Thanjavur, Tamilnadu. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Theatre Direction in 2008.]