

## The Eternal Quest in Three Plays of Rabindranath Tagore

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Way back in 1913, in a cool February evening Tagore initiated his lecture on 'Brahma' at Harvard University recalling the dialogue between sage Yājñavalkya and Maitreyi, his wife. When the sage offered Maitreyi his property prior to renouncing homely life for austere meditation in the forests, Maitreyi asked him, 'Will these material things help me to attain the highest?' The sage replied, 'These would make you rich in worldly possessions.' Maitreyi said at once, 'yenāham nāmritā syām kimaham tena kuryām', what shall I do with that which will not make me immortal? Tagore centred his entire discussion on the premise that in some form or other, Maitreyi resides in every human heart.

As a matter of fact, throughout his career, Tagore persistently emphasizes in his critical as well as creative writings, lectures and songs that human soul never has complete realization of itself within the bounds of biological requirements and material gains. Man has a 'larger self' which seeks fulfillment in the realm of eternal values, *Satyam* (Truth), *Shivam* (Goodness), *Sundaram* (Beauty), *Ānandam* (Bliss), The Absolute. The 'larger self' is man's true identity.

Spiritual quest is a major theme in Tagore literary creativity, including some of his outstanding play-of-ideas. Drama as a literary form has its own demands. In keeping with these demands, not always

convincingly though, Tagore presents the spiritual quest in different dimensions using varied dramatic modes. Let us have a glimpse of some of these dimensions. For the nonce, our study is limited to three plays, *The King of the Dark Chamber* (*Rājā*, 1910), *The Post Office* (*Dākghar*, 1911) and *The Cycle of Spring* (*Phālguni*, 1916). We shall probe whether for all their difference the three plays reveal any pattern in the quest and the spiritual realizations of the characters concerned.

### II

In *The King of the Dark Chamber* (*Rājā*), the drama of spiritual quest centres mostly on the experience and realizations of queen Sudarshanā. The drama moves simultaneously in the socio-political and the spiritual planes, between empirical reality and spiritual realization.

The unnamed King perpetually keeps himself invisible to everybody. The subjects interpret the invisibility in their own terms. 'The King is hideous to look at, so he has made up his mind never to show himself to his subjects' (10), says one. 'When ever has our king set out to dazzle the eyes of our people by pomp and pageantry?' asks another (33). The King meets queen Sudarshanā only in a dark chamber. The queen is ever restless to view the King in broad light. She feels suffocated in the darkness she is engulfed in. Having gone through the negative experiences of life, her

maid-of-honour, Surangamā, is better adjusted to the darkness. She has seen the King, her saviour, in her mind's eye. She speaks of her realization, 'A day came when my whole nature bowed down in humble resignation on the dust of the earth. And then I saw he was as matchless in beauty as in terror' (45), 'I seem to hear his footsteps in my own heart.' Surangamā speaks the language of the spiritual world. The queen does not understand her.

The drama inside the dark chamber increasingly turns into a drama within the human soul. The dialogue of the King and the queen reflects two levels of consciousness. Sudarshanā repeatedly pleads the King to make him visible. 'You will not be able to bear the sight of me—it will only give you pain, poignant and overpowering' (57), says the King. At the dawn of their self-consciousness, when Adam and Eve lost the paradise, they found the earthly life they were thrown into, all painful. Sudarshanā fails to fathom the King's words. 'Can you see me in the dark?' she asks her lord. The King answers her. The words are not of a mortal king, but of the eternal Creator, speaking of his creation, 'I see that the darkness of the infinite heavens whirled into life and being by the power of my love, has drawn the light of myriad of stars into itself, and incarnated itself in the form of flesh and blood' (52). The drama reaches the realm of visionary poetry. Sudarshanā hears the King saying, 'And that form, what aeons of thought and striving, untold yearnings of limitless skies, the countless gifts of unnumbered seasons!' Does the queen's inner self really hear the heavenly words? Or do the audience hear the voice of the poet-dramatist himself, who has the heavenly vision, and is wonder struck? Expectedly, the queen says, 'How can I believe the wonderful things you tell me'? I cannot find them in myself.' The King answers in highly philosophic terms, 'Your

own mirror will not reflect them—it lessens you. . . . But could you see yourself mirrored in my own mind, how grand would it appear! . . . You are verily, my second self' (53). That of course is the highest realization the mortal soul can have.

To the queen, all that is real at the moment is the darkness she is engulfed in, the darkness of ignorance (*ajnāna*). She craves to view her lord in the empirical world, where she sees 'trees and animals, birds and stones and earth'. The King agrees on condition that she identifies him herself amidst the crowd in the palace garden. Sudarshanā does the fatal blunder of identifying a handsome young man masquerading as king, as her King. She sends him flowers, confident that he will recognize the unnamed sender. The man does not.

Events happen fast. Taking advantage of the invisibility of the King, a group of kings and princes hatch a coup d'état. They plot to abduct the queen, and set a part of the queen's garden on fire. The fire quickly spreads all over. The fire of passion spreads fast. Sudarshanā sees the King fighting the rebels in the fire. She is shaken to her soul. The King is an image of destruction, the darkness incarnate. 'Terrible—Oh it was terrible! Black, black—Oh thou art black like the everlasting night!' (110), she is unable to resist her outburst. The mythical Naciketā made an arduous journey to the realm of death, met the King of Death and received from Him the boon of self-knowledge, the highest attainment of life. Sudarshanā's undisciplined mind cannot bear the dark sight of the King. She makes her confession, 'Beauty has now cast its spell on me—this frenzy, this intoxication will never leave me—it has dazzled my eyes' (111). 'It is false as mirage, empty as bubble', says the King, her preceptor. In view of the Indian philosophers, *Māyā*, *Prakṛiti*, 'the golden glamour' enveloping

the earth is a tremendous power that conceals Supreme Reality.

Sudarshanā leaves the King. Another phase of her inner quest begins. In her father's palace the unwelcome daughter in self-exile, goes through extreme humiliation, degradation, loneliness. In her heart of hearts she prays to her Lord, the King, 'Oh King. . . . I know of no stain of faithlessness within the hidden chamber of my heart. That dark chamber where you would come to me lies cold and empty within my bosom. . . . Will you not come and open doors? Then let death come, for it is dark like yourself and its features are beautiful as yours. It is you—it is yourself, Oh King!' (155). Coleridge's sin-ridden Ancient Mariner has his redemption at an unexpected moment when in course of living through guilt and death for days and nights, he finds the nauseating water snakes beautiful and blesses them 'unawares'. Sudarshanā too has her release when, unexpectedly, she views the darkness not as an opposite of life, but as life itself.

Deep devotion to Lord Krishna had taken queen Mirābāī to the road. Sudarshanā too takes to the road to reach her King. As she moves down the hard and weary ways all in tears, she has a realization that the King is there with her in her suffering, 'Ah! Yes he has come—he has held me by the hand just as he used to do in that chamber of darkness (199). She reaches the palace, meets the King in the dark chamber. It is no longer dark to her. Her dialogue itself is a prayer, 'You are not beautiful my Lord, you stand beyond all comparisons'. 'Your love lives in me—you are mirrored in that love, and you see your face reflected in me; nothing of this is mine, it is all your my Lord!' (199). The King leads her to light and the drama ends.

### III

Light and darkness play a pivotal role in *The Post Office* (*Dākghar*, 1911) too, but on a different key, as life—impulse and death—

consciousness, the ever-warring opposites. The play is all about the spiritual journey of Amal, a fatally ill parentless boy in the last phase of his life. The dark shadow of Amal's on coming death looms large throughout the play.

Tagore himself had the shattering experience of a series of deaths in his family during the period prior to writing the play. Specially the deep shock of the death of his youngest son Shamindranath, not yet in his teens, had brought him almost on the verge of nervous breakdown. It is often said that *The Post Office* is an outcome of his own death—consciousness.

Significantly, in the play Amal himself is not conscious of his approaching end. He is not aware of the seriousness of his illness either. When asked about his disease, he answers in all innocence, 'I can't tell. You see, I am not learned, so I don't know what's the matter with me' (22). Disease and death, the dark reality of life hardly has any effect on his ardent life-impulse. Death-consciousness rather rests with the persons who come close to Amal. Agony, anxiety, sympathy, pathos increasingly darken the mind of the subsidiary characters. The drama moves in a seesaw pattern between the negative reality of death and the affirmative realization of the eternal values of life.

What seriously disturbs Amal is his confinement in a room as per strict instruction of the village doctor. The restless boy craves to reach the outer world of light, movement, freedom. He watches the pulsating rural life from his roadside window, people of different profession on their way to everyday work, aunty grinding lentils, the squirrel sitting with its tail up. Amal sees beauty everywhere. The faraway hill and a man going for it beacons him: 'I shall go right away the moment I am well again. I will walk on, crossing so many streams, wading through water. . . . I will tramp on and on seeking work far, very far.'

(18) His words, more musing than dialogue mark his inner journey. Nature gladdens his soul. To Amal nature is not a mere physical entity; it is a living presence.

The dairy man calls from far down the road, ‘curd, curd, good curd.’ It seems to Amal a call of life coming from beyond the horizon. He pictures the daily life of the dairy folk in the far away village in Panchmura hill, by the river Shamli, the locale the dairyman comes from. In his poetic rendering the ordinary appears extraordinary. Amal feels one with all. ‘You will teach me cry curds and shoulder the yoke like you and walk the long, long road’, he requests the dairyman. In his letter to C. F. Andrews (4 June 1921) Tagore wrote, ‘Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the road—he seeks freedom from the enclosures of habit sanctioned by the prudent and from the walls of rigid opinion built for him by the respectable’. (*Letters to a Friend*)

The inner journey takes Amal from one phase to another. The village watchman on his routine patrol has to strike the gong to mark time. Amal feels in his pulse the rhythm of the gong, the swing of endless time. ‘I love to hear your gong . . . dong, dong, dong!’ ‘Tell me why does your gong sound?’ he says to the watchman. The man answers, ‘My gong sounds to tell people, time waits for none, but goes on for ever’. Amal asks, ‘Where? To what land?’ The watchman replies, ‘That none knows’. Amal responds in his characteristic otherworldly way, ‘Oh I wish to fly with the time to that land of which no one knows.’

Watchman: All of us have to to there one day, my child.

Amal: But the doctor won’t let me go. . . . He only keeps me in.

Watchman: One greater than he comes and lets us free. (31)

The watchman initiates Amal to the wide perspective of time and eternity. Amal

immediately responds, ‘When will that great doctor come for me? I can’t stick in here any more.’ (32)

It is said that one who undertakes spiritual journey has to transcend the narrow confines of his egotistic self, the worldly attractions in order to seek emancipation beyond the temporal world of misery. In *The King of the Dark Chamber* queen Sudarshanā has to struggle hard with herself to overcome her self-centred self and her worldly attractions. Not yet caught in the snares of self-imprisoning worldly bonds, it is easier for Amal to rise to the spiritual level. The watchman notices that death has already cast its shadow on Amal’s body. He feels extremely sad. The watchman’s sadness hardly touches Amal.

Amal’s spiritual journey reaches another phase as he hears from the watchman about the new building he sees from his window, as the King’s post office. ‘Do letters from the King come to his post office here? . . . When shall I have my letter?’ asks Amal. He starts believing firmly that a letter from the King will reach him, and eagerly waits for it. The rest of the play centres on Amal’s waiting. To queen Sudarshanā the King, the lord, has been initially an incarnation of darkness, ugliness, ferocity. To Amal the King is an image of benevolence, deliverance, bliss.

‘Will you tell the postman it’s Amal who sits by the window here?’ Amal asks the village headman. ‘Whoever’s going to write to you?’ says the irritated man. ‘If the King does’, replies Amal. His faith makes him bold. The headman gets furious. He reads the situation in negative, political terms. Nonetheless, Amal remains unperturbed in his waiting.

Sudhā, the little daughter of the flower-seller, stops at Amal’s window on her way to gather flowers. ‘Oh, flower gathering! That is why your feet seem so glad and your ankles jingle so merrily as you walk’ (43),

Amal says, charmed with the overall beauty of the scene. He pictures himself joining Sudhā. 'I'll go right into the dense forest . . . where the honey-sipping humming bird rocks himself on the end of the thinnest branch, I will blossom into a *Champā*. Would you be my sister *Pārul*?' In Amal's aesthetic vision *Champā* and *Pārul* of the fairy tale are as true as is Sudhā of the every day world. The down-to-earth Sudhā does not understand him. The drama turns increasingly more lyrical than dramatic.

Meanwhile, Amal's deteriorates. He gifts the village boys all his toys. A tone of renunciation rings in his voice, all energy spent. His yearning for the King's letter remains as intense as before. 'Do you know the King's postman? Will you bring one of them along so that he will know me?' (53) He requests the boys.

In Act II Amal is shown in bed. His friend Fakir, a village gaffer dressed as mendicant ascetic sits by his bedside. 'Fakir . . . just tell me, has the King sent me a letter to the Post Office?' Amal asks him in secret. A man of wisdom, Fakir assures the boy, 'I gather that the letter has already started.' The King, he refers to, is the Infinite King. Overjoyed Amal pictures the King's postman coming to him, 'down the hills, a lantern in his left arms. . . . I can feel him coming nearer and nearer and my heart becomes glad'. Fakir pays his tribute to Amal's realization, 'My eyes are not so young, but you make me see all the same.'

Amal has to go through another experience simultaneously. 'Fakir, I've been feeling a sort of darkness coming over my eyes since morning. Everything seems like a dream. I long to be quiet', he complains. The village doctor sounds his last warning, 'Can't hold him much longer I fear!' (74) All gather round Amal's room. The village headman hands over a blank slip of paper to Amal as the King's letter and has his derisive laughter. 'Say Fakir, is it so? . . . It

looks all so blank to me' cries the boy. Fakir, the ascetic, steps forward, 'Yes my dear. I as Fakir tell you it is his letter. . . . The King writes he will come himself to see Amal with his state physician' (79). Fakir's confident words transport Amal to another realization, 'Fakir, Shh, his trumpet! Can't you hear?' he exclaims.

Amal's long waiting is answered. Some force breaks open the front door. The King's Herald enters and makes the much awaited announcement, 'Our Sovereign King comes tonight'.—'At what hour of the night, Herald? . . . When my friend, the watchman will strike ding, dong, ding, dong, ding, dong—then?' asks Amal. Does Amal unknowingly refer to his own death knell? The audience shares the anxiety of the characters on stage. The Royal Physician arrives, orders to open all the doors and windows in Amal's room. He touches Amal. At his healing touch Amal attains a calm of mind. 'I feel very well doctor, very well. All pain is gone. How fresh and open! I can see all the stars now twinkling from the other side of the dark!' (83) His words reflect an inner joy. The stars, 'the light of heaven', bring Amal the blessings of the Eternal King. The Supreme Healer. Amal reaches the realm of Light beyond Darkness. He has his deliverance in Bliss (*Ānandam*).

The Royal Physician orders to arrange flowers in Amal's room for the King's visit, asks to blow out the oil lamp, 'only let the star-light stream in'. Fakir folds his hands in prayer; everybody stands in silence. The Royal Physician speaks, 'Sleep is coming over him. I'll sit by his pillow. . . . Hush he sleeps'. Amal's last sleep comes over him. Time merges in eternity.

#### IV

In *The Post Office* the quest eternal is undertaken by Amal's inner consciousness. Unlike Queen Sudarshanā, child Amal does not have any darkness in his soul to fight

against in order to attain spiritual vision. It is rather his childish innocence that enables him to easily ascend to the realm of Beauty, Goodness, Bliss. Amal expresses his spiritual realization in poetic terms throughout the play. In is on the wings of poesy that the drama transports the audience to the spiritual level. Tagore himself termed *The Post Office* a lyric in prose.

In *The Cycle of Spring* (1916) Tagore presents the quest eternal through the clash to the eternal contraries, both in the cycle of nature and in the human life process. The quest is a collective experience. In nature spring conquers winter and vice versa. In the human life age defeats youth, death defeats life, yet life blossoms. The theme of the drama is the victory of spring over winter, life over death.

In *The Cycle of Spring*, a highly schematized play, the quest eternal in nature and in the human mind are presented alternately, one through the song and dance of flowers, trees, the heralds of spring, in the 'Musical interlude' at the beginning of each act, the other through dialogue, action, the experience and realization of the characters. 'The Play of Spring in nature is the counterpart of the play of youth in our lives,' explains the poet-dramatist on stage to the King, his patron. *The Cycle of Spring* is a play within a play. 'Our only backdrop is the mind' says the dramatist. Most of the characters do not have individual names. As the dramatist introduces them, one is called Leader, 'He is the guiding impulse of our life', another, the Blind Minstrel 'because he does not see with his eyes, therefore he sees with his whole body and mind and soul'. A group of nameless men play a significant role. One who has an individual name is Chandra 'he who makes life dear to us'.

The dramatic action begins with a band of young men out on the road in quest of the Eternal Old Man, the embodiment of age, decay, death, the dark reality that always

casts its shadow on life. The young men are determined to capture the 'Old Man'. They sing a song of themselves as they move on:

We are out on our way  
And we fear not the robber, the Old Man.  
For us there is no rest, nor ease, nor praise,  
nor success.  
We dance in the measure of fortune's rise  
and fall. (63)

In the text it is not mentioned who among the group speaks which dialogue. In the context, the individual person is not significant, his observation/realization is. The spiritual quest is their shared venture. Although the play is on the conquest of the dark side of life, the darkness does not make its overpowering presence felt as it does in *The King of the Dark Chamber* and in *The Post Office*. The Old Man is someone the young men have merely heard about. 'He dwells in a cave and never thinks of dying', 'that Old Man is more existent than anything else. He lives within the ribs of creation', they discuss among themselves. At the initial stage the quest of the youth is the other name for query.

On their way the group comes across three wise men, a ferryman, a watchman, and an oilman. All the three speak of the Old Man and the way to his Cave in different terms. Let us hear their dialogue a bit. The young group cries, 'Ferryman, give us news of the Old Man. . . . You ply your boat from one landing state to another. Surely you know where—'. The Ferryman answers, 'My business is limited only to the path. But whose path it is, and what it means I have no occasion to enquire. For my goal is the landing stage, not the house.' The Ferryman's philosophy of life does not satisfy the youth. They say to the Watchman as he stops them, 'We want the Old Man. . . the Eternal Old Man.' The Watchman gives yet another philosophic answer, 'How absurd! While you are seeking him he is

after you. . . . He is fond of warming his cold blood with the wine of hot youth.’ ‘Have you seen him?’ asks the group. The Watchman admits, ‘My watch is at night. I see my people, but I don’t know their features.’ (71-72) The disappointed young group asks the same question to the Oilman. He replies, ‘I think I saw him in the distance last night. . . . Black. . . . Black as night, with two eyes on his breast shining like two glow-worms.’ (84) ‘That won’t suit us’, says the group, as they move on. ‘Do not doubt your path/ And the path wakes up of itself’, they sing.

Act three shows the evening. Weary and bewildered as they are, the young men are scared of being lost: ‘They all cry, “there, there”, and when we look for it, we find nothing but dry leaves’. They decide to stop their journey. In contrast, in the Song Prelude at the beginning of the act, winter is being unmasked. ‘Change his pilgrim’s role/ into the dress of the singing youth’, the Heralds of Spring dance as they sing the song. The drama in nature and that in the human mind do not keep the same pace. When presented on the stage, the difference often distracts the audience from the drama deep down the human mind. The dance and the song of nature have their own charm.

The very turning of the drama suddenly changes as Chandra brings in the Blind Minstrel, a chance found preceptor. ‘Will you be able to lead us right?’ ask the exhausted young men. ‘Yes’ comes the confident answer. ‘I hear the footsteps . . . I hear with my whole being’. In *The King of the Dark Chamber* the maid speaks in similar terms. So does Fakir, the ascetic in *The Post Office*. The blind minstrel is the only character in the play who speaks about his spiritual encounter with and conquest of the deepest darkness within the human soul, ‘The dark night revealed all its lights, and from that day forward, I have been no more afraid of the dark’ (100). The minstrel

moves on singing. ‘I cannot find my way, if I do not sing’, he explains. The song is his prayer to the Almighty who leads from darkness to light. The young group follows him.

Did Tagore have in mind the episode of the great sage of the contemporary times, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and his young intellectual disciples with Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda) in the forefront when he created the blind Minstrel, Chandra and the young group in quest of Eternal Truth in *The Cycle of Spring*? It is well known that Tagore had deep reverence for the so-called uneducated priest, ‘the great soul’ in Tagore’s words, who had ‘grasped the significance’ of different religions, himself went through different modes of ‘Sādhanā’ and had attained ‘the highest spiritual altitude’. (ref. Tagore’s address at the Sri Ramakrishna centenary, Parliament of Religions, Calcutta, 1937).

In the last act, the drama in nature reaches its completion much before the human drama does. Winter itself emerges as Spring. He answers the questions the blooming flowers ask in their song:

–Have you met . . . the ageless old who ever grows new?

–Yes.

–Do you own defeat at the hands of life?

–Yes.

–Have you passed through death to stand at last face to face with the deathless?

–Yes. (106)

Chandra undertakes a solitary journey to the cave of the Old Man, the realm of darkness under the guidance of the Minstrel. One may recall the mythical Nachiketā in the context. In his article, ‘The Problem of Self’ Tagore says, ‘the human soul has to go through the portals of death to realize the truth’ (*Sādhanā*, 81). In a certain phase, spiritual quest turns to an arduous subjective endeavour.

The young men watch the Minstrel in

deep meditation. He sits 'still and silent'. 'There is no fear in his face'. A change gradually comes over him 'as if some message were striking his forehead'. It is said that Tagore himself and witnessed Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa going into *Samādhi* in course of his deep meditation. In the play the young men, the witness characters, themselves have a realization: 'Simply by watching him we can see that some one is coming through the dark' (122). The minstrel stands up, makes his prayer. His whole being sings, 'Victory to life, to joy, love, to eternal light!' A ray of light hovers before the cave of the Old Man. Chandra comes out. 'Have you been able to capture the Old Man?' his eager companions ask. 'Yes, I have. He is coming' answers Chandra. He refuses to describe his experience in the cave. A spiritual realization cannot be described in everyday terms.

The light strengthens. The Minstrel envisions one coming from the cave. Chandra identifies the person as their own Leader, 'the guiding impulse' of their life. 'Where is the Old Man?' cries the wonder struck young group. 'Nowhere. . . . He is a dream' replies the Leader. 'We didn't recognize you. . . . you seemed old . . . and now you look like a boy,' the young men exclaim. The unified vision of the old and the new, the death impulse and the life impulse is attained at the height of spiritual

realization. Whether the young men reach the height in the play is debatable. The drama of human quest completes in tune with the finale of the drama in nature. All the characters join in the enchanting song and dance of the spring festival as the drama ends.

The overschematized ending elucidates Tagore's thesis, 'in the very core of the world heart, stands immortal youth. Death and decay . . . leave no mark of their steps—and truth remains fresh and young.' (The Problem of Self, *Sādhanā*, 88). But a thesis transcribed in dramatic form does not necessarily make a great play. *The Cycle of Spring* raises doubts whether it is successful in crossing the high mark of drama.

From the literary point of view, throughout *The Cycle of Spring* the uneasy blending of the drama in nature and in the human mind hampers the integral movement of the play. Probably drama is not a fitting medium to present spiritual realizations. In all the three plays of Tagore, time and again drama halts. It is poetry, be it poetry in prose, or in songs that lift the audience to spiritual heights. In all the three plays the quest within the human soul is presented as a process of self-disciplining, self-transcendence. In all the plays the quest leads the seekers from ignorance to enlightenment, darkness to light. The seekers come in all ages. The quest continues. ■

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