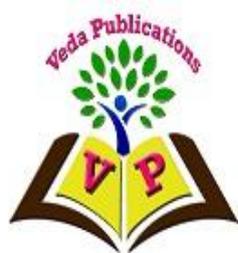


**SPIRITUALISM IN TAGORE'S NATIR PUJA AND MUKTADHARA**

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(Assistant Professor, Dept of English, Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad, Karnataka.)[DOI: 10.333329/joell.7.1.x](https://doi.org/10.333329/joell.7.1.x)**ABSTRACT**

Rabindranath Tagore is famous for his treatment of spiritualism and mystic experiences in his literary works. This is evident in his *Geetanjali* a collection of poems that got for him the prestigious Nobel Prize. Many of his short stories and poems address the spiritual experience of human life. It appears that Tagore found drama as a more effective literary form to explore the theme of spiritualism. His illustrious plays, *Natir Puja* and *Muktadhara*, like his several other plays, stand witness to this fact. *Natir Puja* explores the spiritual experience of a palace dancer, who achieves spiritual freedom and attains fulfillment of life through her dance. Through her, Tagore illustrates how attainment of spiritual experience can transform an ordinary and ignoble person into a superior personality. Similarly, in *Muktadhara*, the central character of Abhijit attains spiritual experience and fulfillment of life through his death, thus rendering spiritual glory to his life as well as death. The paper intends to study these two plays from this perspective.

Keywords: *Spiritualism, Mystic experience, Fulfillment, Spiritual glory.*



Rabindranath Tagore is known for his unique expression of mysticism and spiritual aspects of human experience. His Nobel winning work *Gitanjali* consists of poems that deal with the relationship between Man and God, between Man and Nature and between God and Nature. Many of his other poems and short stories too address this aspect of human life. He seems to have found drama as a more effective literary form to express this favourite theme of his. Out of the fifty plays Tagore has written, his plays like *The Post Office*, *The Ascetic*, *The Red Oleanders*, *The King of the Dark Chambers*, *The Sacrifice*, *The Spring*, *The King and The Queen*, *The Chandalika*, *Natir Puja* and *Muktadhara* are the plays that mainly deal with the theme of spiritualism. It is a well-known fact that he is fascinated by the other-worldly so much so that this world itself becomes merged with the other, in his works.

Natir Puja, like many of his works, is replete with spiritual elements. In the beginning, the drama focusses on the simple religious emotion of Srimati, the palace dancer of Bimbisara's kingdom. Gradually, Tagore takes this pure ritualistic devotion to an extraordinary height when Srimati experiences a unique spiritual emotion that lies beyond the earthly rituals. The union of the earthly with the other-worldly is achieved during her Last Dance, which is her Puja, her offering of the Best in her, to the Lord. After this spiritual experience, there is a complete transformation in the character of Srimati; her life is glorified in her death, or rather in her martyrdom. The death of Srimati is the greatest scene in the play as far as its appeal is concerned. Apart from evoking the reader's sympathy and thus creating a tragic feeling, the scene leaves behind, a sense of fulfilment on the part of Srimati, which is above all the other achievements of life. The scene also creates an atmosphere wherein the death gains a meaning different from all other meanings hitherto attached to it. It becomes a means of achieving the highest spiritual experience of human life, and as Tagore beautifully evokes it in this drama, this spiritual experience is the most superior, the most cherishable though the most difficult one to achieve.

Natir Puja is based on historical facts and legends about Raja Bimbisara a contemporary of the

Buddha and a follower of Buddhist ideology. Sensing his son Ajatashatru's craving for kingdom, Bimbisara had given up his throne to his son Ajatashatru, while Chitra, another son, had followed his father's path to become a Bhikshu. Lokeswari, the wife of Bimbisara who had great reverence for Buddhism, now repudiates it as it has taken away her husband and son from her. During his time as a king, Bimbisara had built a Stupa of the Lord in the zanana of his palace, which is cleaned and looked after by the maids of the palace.

Srimati, a palace dancer is now a follower of Buddhism, and she has happily taken this responsibility over herself. She reverently cleans the Stupa located in the palace premises and its surroundings. She has transformed herself from a palace dancer to a purely religious 'Bhikshu', thus gaining the respect of the higher religious authorities and the jealousy of the queen and the princesses, especially of Ratnawali. At the opening of the play, Upali the Bhikshu comes to the palace asking for alms. Srimati hesitates to offer alms as it is usually the prerogative of the princesses to offer. But Upali says that he has come to Srimati for alms, and the latter says, "To me? But I am so poor! In your alms-bowl anything that I could give would seem so mean." (NP. p. 88) When she asks him what could she, a poor dancer give, Upali says "Your best gift. This assurance of the Bhikshu awakens her sense of dignity and the human spirit in her. Rabindranath Tagore, like in many of his works, glorifies the human spirit, which, when awakened, can transform an ordinary or even an ignoble person into a spiritually awakened personality. When the dignity of the human spirit in Srimati is aroused, she is elevated to a position higher than that of the princesses. Because of her sincerity and devotion, Srimati is given the opportunity of offering a special puja on the occasion of Buddha Purnima, the Birth Day of Lord Buddha. This privilege given to the palace dancer, incenses the princesses, especially Ratnawali. In the meantime, Ajatashatru, the king, has ordered persecution of all the Buddhist Bhikshus in his kingdom, as also has banned the offering of the special puja at the Stupa in the palace. When Srimati reaches there to offer the puja, she is not allowed to



do so by the guards located there . In order to humiliate Srimati, Ratnawali influences the king to order Srimati to dance near the Stupa on the auspicious Purnima day. When Srimati agrees to dance, all the maids think that she is degrading herself out of the fear for the king , while some princesses think that she is doing so to save her skin. Ratnawali says that her true colour is now revealed, which she was hiding behind her pretence of a Bhikshuni. But as it happens in the course of the dance, Srimati does offer her puja through the dance thus offering the best in her to the Lord . As suggested at the opening of the drama during her conversation with Upali, Srimati is able to turn her talent -- a noble gift from God --into a worthy offering for Him. Her Dance, which she dedicates to Him, becomes a means of transporting her from this World to the other Spiritual one . When she achieves the the unique mystic experience, she no longer fears any royal order or persecution. In fact she is even unaware of the things around her . In this state of a heightened consciousness, Srimati sheds all her gorgeous outer garments and costly jewels to reveal the robe of a Bhikshuni inside. This is symbolic of her inner nature. Though a palace dancer in eyes of the society, Srimati is a real Bhikshu in her inner self

Thus, through the story of the *Nati* or the palace dancer, Tagore seems to suggest that, one can achieve a mystic experience, by offering, with devotion, anything that is the best in him . Tagore also brings out in an artistic manner, the glory of the mystic or the spiritual experience in human life.

Muktadhara , another play by Tagore that deals with the theme of Spiritual fulfilment through Death , enacts the story of Abhijit, the Crown Prince of Uttarakut . Abhijit is the son of Ranajit the king of Uttarakut. Muktadhara is the mountain spring that runs through Uttarakut and irrigates the plains of Shiv-tarai . The people of Shiv-tarai are held in subjection to the king of Uttarakut. In order to make them more servile, Ranajit has had a great dam built to the river to prevent the water from running to Shiv-tarai. Bibhuti, the royal engineer has done this difficult task though many lives have been lost in the process. A mighty engine tower taller than the trident of the temple of Lord Bhairava on a mountain

peak , has been erected. The king and the people of Uttarakut are very proud of the machine and the royal engineer who has built it. They are confident that the people of Shiv-tarai will for ever be at their mercy. Prince Abhijit however is sympathetic towards the people of Shiv-tarai and protests against the soulless achievement of Bibhuti. He also hates the obstruction to the free flow of water. The character of Abhijit is an ideal one in whom love of freedom and sympathy for the oppressed find an appropriate symbolism in his feelings for Mukthadhara. Mukthadhara becomes an objective counterpart of Abhijit's own spiritual freedom. When Mukthadhara is checked by a dam , he feels as if his own spirit has been imprisoned. When he learns that he is not the real son of the king but a child picked up near the source of Mukthadhara , his feeling for the river becomes a passion. This revelation makes him believe that his life has a spiritual relationship with the waterfall and to break free Mukthadhara from the iron shackles of the dam , becomes the sole aim of his life. When he decides to leave the palace ,Rajkumar Sanjaya asks him the reason ,and his reply is ; `` No you can't understand fully. But I know it is my destiny on earth; my river of life must run free, overleaping the palace walls." (MD. p. 28).

When Sanjaya says that it was time for rest, and so asks him to come to the palace, Abhijith says " Can one rest if one is in prison? " (MD. p. 29).

Sanjaya asks him from when he has begun to feel the palace to be a prison , to which Abhijith says , " It was when I heard that they had dammed up Muktha-dhara - then I knew....Somewhere or other in the external world ,God writes for us the secret mystery of each man's spirit .Muktadhara is His word to me ,bearing the secret of my inner being .When her feet were bound in the iron fetters ,I was startled out of a dream .I realised the truth--the throne of Uttarakut is the dam which binds my spirit. I have taken the road in order to set it free .(MD. p. 29) .

Abhijit decides to sacrifice his life in order to liberate the river by breaking it at a point which, he knows , is weakly built .Following the `calling' of his inner spirit ,he goes there and succedes in accomplishing the mission of his life. The leaping



stream of water breaks free , carrying away the body of its foster child .The death of Abhijit , like that of Srimati in Natir Puja ,leaves a sense of fulfilment .Though the tragic end of Abhijit's life is touching , it brings an element of Spiritulism to the play . As Srimati achieves spirtual experience through her dance, Abhijit finds it in his task of liberating the river. Abhijit experiences the presence of God in Nature represented by Muktha-dhara. He associates the liberation of his own Spirit with the liberation of the river. He achieves it though at the loss of his life thus rendering a spiritual glory to his life as well as death.

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