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## Pseudo Renouncement And The Conflict Between The Finite And The Infinite In Rabindranath Tagore's *Sannyasi Or The Ascetic*

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### Abstract

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, a worldly acclaimed literary giant, seems to write the *Sannyasi* or the *Ascetic* with a sole purpose to represent the pseudo renouncement of and detachment from the material world. He tries to convey the idea that the finite and the infinite are inseparable. Just renouncing the mundane world and keeping one-self aloof from the worldly responsibilities is not at all detachment and this does not lead to any spiritual height of ascetic achievements. It appears that through the myth of Jada Bharata in Vishnupurana, Tagore wants to tell the world that the Infinite cannot be achieved by the negation of the Finite. In other words, it can be said that to achieve the spiritual goals one has to go for the earthly means.

**Keywords:** - Renouncement, Conflict, Detachment, Ascetics, Spiritual height,

### Introduction

The study of Indian English literature, whether it is drama, poetry or story writing, without discussing Rabindranath Tagore is quite incomplete. It is an all knowing fact that the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi gave him the title of Gurudev. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was the first Indian literary figure who won the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Being a versatile genius Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore is an Indian star in the galaxy of world literature. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

He was a poet, dramatist, actor, producer; he was a musician and a painter; he was an educationist, a practical idealist who turned his dreams into reality at Shantiniketan; he was a reformer, philosopher, prophet; he was a novelist and short story writer, and critic of life and literature; he even made occasional excursion into nationalist politics, although he was essentially an internationalist. (Iyengar, 99)

When we discuss about Indian English drama, we find Rabindranath Tagore as a unique literary personality. His plays have been very skilfully woven with the beautiful combination of the classics of Indian drama and the European dramatic tradition. He is a playwright with a wide range and variety of dramatic culture. Most of his dramatic writings depict the influence of Indian mythology, the Buddhist legends and the other Indian classics on him. Tagore seems to use his plays as a carrier of his ideas earned from Indian classical traditions and myths and other sources without caring for their ability to be enacted on stage. As Edward Thomson observes, "His dramatic work is the vehicle of ideas rather than the expression of action." (Thomson, 47) In most of his dramatic writings Rabindranath Tagore seems

to deal with the Indian classical culture, religious aspects, philosophical ideas, political issues, social sensibilities, Indian myths and legends. The list of Tagore's plays include Sannyasi or The Ascetic (1884), The King and the Queen (1889), Chitra (1892), Malini (1895), Sacrifice (1895), Gandhari's Prayer (1897), Karna and Kunti (1897), The King and the Dark Chamber (1910), The Post Office (1912), The Cycle of Spring (1916), Mukta Dhara (1922), Red Oleanders (1924), Natir Puja (1926) and Chandaliika (1933). All of these plays by Tagore were originally written in Bengali and later on were translated into English by Rabindranath Tagore himself. A close study of the dramatic works of Tagore shows that he was a born literary genius undoubtedly. While giving his comments upon Tagore's very first play Sannyasi or The Ascetic, Edward Thomson observes:

That he should turn to drama was inevitable. Among his many gifts, he was a great actor. Bengal knew that he could act. In India drama is in the common life. The legends of the gods are staged, in 'lilas' such as those which autumn by autumn, hold the villages of the United Provinces spell-bound. 'Lila' - 'drama' - is, from first to last, a characteristic word of his poetry. The indigenous drama like the Athenian is played under open skies, in courtyards or streets.... 'Jatras' or travelling theatrical parties combine singing and acting. A kavidal, or 'a group of poets', will have question and answer, in verse; or the whole cast will perform an episode from the story of Rama or of Krishna. Especially in the autumn, these indigenous plays, so like the old English mystery and miracle plays, visit the villages. (Thomson, 46)

This shows that it was this atmosphere of live theatrical performances and stage dramas in contemporary India and particularly in contemporary Bengal that influenced, inspired and encouraged Rabindranath Tagore to attain himself the stature of a playwright to be known and acclaimed worldwide. Even after all these acclamations some critics form different points of view for his plays. As Nirmal Mukherji observes:

Some of the charges usually leveled against him as a dramatist are that his plays are mostly unactable; that they have inadequate dramatic action; that most of his characters are not full-blooded; that they are one dimensional, conceived as they are round on single idea; that his plots are woefully weak in construction and are dramatically flawed; that the abundance of music and dance is more often an intrusion in the dramatic conflict, in any, than any integral part of the play; that many of his plays are often sentimental and have mostly melodramatic endings; that his symbols are vague, ethereal, at times, wooden and conventional. (Mukherji, 50)

Howsoever, whatever it may be, the study of his plays clearly depicts the familiarity of Tagore with the dramatic culture and tradition of India. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, "He admired Shakespeare, probably he admired Ibsen, probably also Maeterlinck; and he knew his Kalidas very well." (Iyengar, 122) Tagore seems to be equally inspired and influenced by the cultural folk theatre of contemporary Bengal and the classical Sanskrit and Western drama drama as well.

The very first and important play of Rabindranath Tagore, Sannyasi or The Ascetic (1884), like most of his other dramatic creations, was originally written in Bengali with the name Prakritir Pratisodh, and later on translated into English by Tagore himself. The theme of Sannyasi, as Tagore himself states in his, My Reminiscences, is the joy of attaining the infinite in the finite. He says, "The play should be

looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work; this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt- the joy of attaining the infinite in the finite.” (Tagore, 235)

The protagonist of the play Sannyasi, a ‘Sannyasi’ or an ascetic wandering lonely and declaring himself to be free from all the mundane fears and desires seems to celebrate his ascetic loneliness, when he states, “I sit chanting the incantation of nothingness.” (Sannyasi,3) As per Indian traditional thought an ascetic is one who willingly renounces all the worldly possessions and moves forward with on purpose or goal only and that is to attain salvation or moksha or nirvana, i.e., freedom and liberation from the mundane materialistic world and being one with the Supreme Creator. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar seems to establish a close resemblance between ‘Sannyasi’ and ‘Jada Bharat’ in Vishnupurana, when he writes:

Sannyasi is a study of the failure of what Sri Aurobindo would call the ‘Refusal of the Ascetic.’ In the Vishnupurana we learn that Jada Bharata, although he readily gives up the cares and pomp of kingship and retires to the forest, is unable to resist the play of pity which presently flames up into immaculate love. The Sannyasi, by withdrawing from the world, as he thinks, has merely developed a negative virtue. Salvation comes, however, not from negation, but from wise acceptance, purification and inner transformation. (Iyengar, 123)

As the mythical character of Jada Bharata in Vishnupurana, Sannyasi too, in spite of his ascetic promises and claims of renouncing the materialistic pleasures of the world, finds himself unable to keep away from his worldly commitments. Though his aim, his goal in life is to make himself free from worldly desires and aspirations, he cannot control his affection for the little girl called Vasanti; whose death in the end of the play causes serious shock for him.

It can easily be found that the central theme of the play moves round the efforts of the Sannyasi for the achievements of the Infinite. It can be said that, though the Infinite is supreme, Finite can never be rejected; and the Finite and the Infinite are absolutely inseparable. The Sannyasi says, “The origin is the end, and the end is the origin. It is a circle. The distinction between the subtle and gross is in your ignorance.” (Sannyasi, 12)

As the play begins we come across a quite lonely and an almost egoistic Sannyasi, who declares himself to be superior to the worldly people because he thinks himself to be free from all the bondages of this materialistic world. He state:

The division of days and nights is not for me, that of months and years. For me, the stream of time has stopped, on whose waves dances the world, like straws and twigs. In this dark cave I am alone, merged in myself,— and the ethereal night is still, like a mountain lake afraid of its own depth...I sit chanting the incantation of nothingness...and that joy is mine which comes to the god Shiva...I am free, I am the great solitary one. When I was thy slave, O Nature, thou didst set my heart against itself, and madest it carry the fierce war of suicide through its world. (Sannyasi, 3-4)

Now we see that the play has been framed in the natural setting of a village and the cave of the Sannyasi, which is full of darkness. In the darkness of the cave the Sannyasi feels himself far away and aloof from

the entire materialistic world outside. This dark cave for him is a place where he can become one with the Supreme God. He declares:

I took shelter in the darkness, — the Castle of the Infinite,— and fought the deceitful light, day after day, till it lost all its weapons and lay powerless at my feet. (Sannyasi, 4)

In Sannyasi Tagore represents the village as the symbol of affection, love and the actual truth of life; while Nature, in the play, seems to be symbolizing beauty and attachment; and moreover the village folks seem to symbolize the common routine of the social obligations and hence the day-to-day phenomena of worldly life. Though the Sannyasi declares to renounce the material world, he can be seen to be attracted by the beauty of Nature, as a loving mother. We can see him depicting the natural phenomena when he says, “On the left, the village huts are seen through the trees with their evening lamps lighted, like a veiled mother watching by her sleeping children.” (Sannyasi, 35) Though the Sannyasi declares to be detached from the world, but these lines, coming from the depth of his heart clearly notify that he is still attached to the world outside. The same conflict, as the Sannyasi goes through in the play, between the Finite and the Infinite can be traced in the debate between Professor Madhab and Professor Janardan on the “subtle” and the “gross”. Professor Madhab holds the view that the “subtle is the outcome of the gross”, on the other hand Professor Janardan sticks to his notion that the “subtle is the origin of the gross”. (Sannyasi, 11) It can be said that the outcome of this debate can be that to attain the heights of spirituality one must have to go through the ways passing through the materialistic world. Without knowing the materiality how can we know spirituality completely, as without being well informed by the darkness we cannot know the significance or worth of light?

From the beginning and throughout the first half of the play Tagore presents his Sannyasi full of hatred for the materialistic world and renouncing it with an insatiable thirst in quest for the Infinite. He takes shelter in the darkness of the cave to achieve his goal and that is the Infinite and he seems to think that he has achieved his heights of spirituality; and hence he can be seen mocking at the nothingness and bottomlessness of the world. He says:

Shelter? Don't you know this world is a bottomless chasm? The swarm of creatures, coming out from the hole of nothingness, seeks for shelter, and enters into the gaping mouth of this emptiness, and is lost. (Sannyasi, 20)

Throughout the play the Sannyasi can be seen struggling to present himself as a detached hermit; but all the time he appears to be attached to and attracted towards the world though he always proclaims his renouncement from the world and thinks it to be mere phantasm, “No, no, the beautiful is mere phantasy. To him who knows, the dust and flower are the same.” (Sannyasi, 31) He is so much obsessed with his renouncement of the world and his insatiable quest for the Infinite that he deserts the little girl, Vasanti, whom he has adopted. He assumes that his indulgence with the worldly affairs will place hindrances in the path of achieving his spiritual height, i.e., the Infinite.

Throughout his journey for the attainment of the Infinite, the Sannyasi seems all the time struggling with his own inner-self, which seems not to allow him to renounce the Finite completely. At so many places his renouncement and his detachment seem to be pseudo. But, after all, in the final part

of the play he realizes the reality of this life where it is quite impossible to achieve the Infinite without knowing the actual ways of the world. As his realization comes, “The Finite is the true Infinite, and love knows its truth.” (Sannyasi, 45) It is the finite love and affection that lead to the Infinite. Now the Sannyasi’s illusion is shattered when he states breaking his staff and alms-bowl:

Let my vows of sannyasi go. I break my staff and alms-bowl. This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time,—let it take me up again, let me join once more the pilgrims. (Sannyasi, 45)

At last, he realizes what he has to pay as the result of his pseudo detachment, renouncement and his incomplete ascetics; he comes to know about the unfortunate demise of the little girl, Vasanti, for whose sake he renounces that dark cave of seclusion and comes back to the real world knowing the real meaning of life that the Finite and the Infinite cannot be separated; when united they make a complete sense. Tagore’s picturization and representation of the Sannyasi struggling with the conflict of the Finite and Infinite going on in his inner-self seems to be inspired by the mythical character of Jada Bharata in the Vishnupurana. The playwright uses his Sannyasi to dramatize this myth of pseudo renouncement of and detachment from the world and finally returning to it after realizing the fact that the Infinite can be achieved through the Finite only. Tagore himself let us know the purpose and the object of the play in his *My Reminiscences*:

...the great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form, and the eternal freedom of the soul in love...on the side the wayfarers and villagers, content with their home-made triviality and unconscious of anything beyond; on the other the Sannyasi... when love bridged the gulf between the two, the seeming triviality of the finite and the seeming emptiness of the infinite alike disappeared. (Tagore)

To conclude, it can be said the playwright seems to convey a moral lesson to the world that mere pseudo practices of detachment, living a life of seclusion in the forests, renouncing the world and make one-self away from the responsibilities of the finite world cannot lead to any peace of mind. It can be assumed that detachment lies only in being attached.

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