

## Rabindranath Tagore and his Symbolic Dramas

Though Rabindranath Tagore is more renowned as a poet and philosopher, his dramatic achievements are also noteworthy. Beginning from his adolescent years, till his death he has written forty-six dramas and plays including dance dramas, operas, historical dramas and symbolic dramas. The present drama Cycle of Spring [*Phalguni*] falls in last group. The poet himself described it, in course of its dialogue as, "It could be a drama, or a poem, or a play, or a masque."

In this kind of dramas the poet put no importance on stage and costumes at all. From the skillful dialogues, the time and place of the event are revealed. The dialogue of this kind of dramas has also some specialties. The dialogues could be interpreted in two ways, one directly and the other deeply suggestive and symbolic way. This drama, Cycle of Spring is a play, one nested in another play.

Cycle of Spring is the English version of original Bengali drama *Phalguni* [of or about the spring month of *Phalgun*, which covers February-March]. This play was written to be staged by the school boys of Shanti-Niketan which, at that time, was a boys-only school. Later in 1921, it was staged in Germany with great success. As Dr. Thompson recalls in his Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist, the poet saying,

"I was so pleased when I had students from Heidelberg and other places. One student stood up and said in broken English, 'Now we heard that an Old Man from the East will come. I was looking for that an Old Man, but what my surprise that the Youth of the East speaks to me'".

About the nature of the play, Ernest Rhys in his RABINDRA NATH TAGORE: A Biographical Study, remarks, "Judged by a London standard, it may seem that all his dramatic work is lacking in ordinary stage effect, but to this criticism one can only reply that his plays were written to attain a naturalness of style and a simplicity of which only Irish players have so far realized for us.

Rabindranath Tagore may break the rules of our common stage-practice, but he breaks none that govern the leisurely drama of the open air and courtyard, which he and his fellow-playwrights in India have in mind." --Chapter VII, page 89-90.

The poet himself has remarked in course of dialogue between the king and the poet as follows, "The only background of play is the mind," (imagination)

The main specialty of this play is its abundance of exquisitely melodious songs. Prof. V. Lesny points out in his Rabindranath Tagore: his personality and work, "In his *Spring Festival* spring is welcomed by the song of the earth, the bamboo grove, mango orchards, the avenue of *sala* limes, the *bakul* tree, flowers, the river, wind the lamp and the forest path."

"The songs at the beginning of each act and those scattered through the play, full of enchanting, are clad in a mantle of symbolic expressions, and the reader gains the impression that some new teaching is intentionally veiled by this obscurity. The play resembles some of

Tagore's drawings; it is impossible to say at first what they mean, but in spite of this their delicate lines disclose an underlying idea." [pages 226-230, Chapter Six]

Dr. Edward Thompson (Lecturer in Bengali, University of Oxford) is totally unanimous with Prof. V. Lesny, with his comment about the nature of this play and comments as, "Then the play is lyrically rich. The festival of song sometimes attain very pure limpidity, exquisite on the lips of childhood; for example, in the Prelude of Act IV. Lastly, *Phalguni* is in a special sense the poet's own manifesto.

There is a dancing freshness in the blood of man and beast, and the groves rock with the mad laughter of the *kokils*. The songs were of ravishing beauty, and far more important than the words of dialogue.

All I know is, it was wild-wood music, such as the spirit of the bamboo, the spirit of the south wind, the spirits of the flowers, might sing, if they took human voice, a pulsing treble unspoiled by the least self-consciousness in the singers."

The poet also described structure of this play as, "The door of each act opens with the key of song."

About the theme of the play, K. Kripalany opines "The same idea of life perpetually renewing itself, of Winter throwing off its mask to reveal itself as Spring, he embodied in a delightful fantasy which he wrote for the boys at Shantiniketan - *Phalguni* (Cycle of Spring)... The plot is very thin; in fact there is hardly a plot at all, just enough to provide an excuse for a riot of song, dance and gaiety to express the author's mood in spring."

Prof. V. Lesny also expresses his opinion in similar way in the same book as above, as, "*Phalguni* ('Spring Play'), which was written for the Spring festival at Santiniketan in 1915, is a vivid fantasy of departure of Winter and the coming of Spring as symbol of eternal cycle of life in this world.

Nevertheless it is clear that in this play the poet desired to glorify the unceasing life on the earth." --pages 183-184, Chapter Five.

The poet himself discussed in course of the play, in different contexts, as,

"Theme of the play is disrobing the winter."

or

"The mask of Old Man is pulled off as in play of nature, Winter turns to be Spring each year. Thus the Old is ever new."

or

"The story is that a band of youths in pursuit of the Old Man enters a cave and discovers that whom they thought the Old Man of Winter, looking from the rear, is actually the Youth of the Spring in the front."

In the present author's view, it is, as if a garland of songs knotted together with a very delicate string of almost unperceivable story.