

# SALVATION: A UNIVERSAL THEME IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S THE KING OF THE DARK CHAMBER

## Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian author, known as 'Gurudev', 'Kobiguru', 'Biswakobi' in literature. Tagore was the first Indian author to win the Nobel Prize for a collection of poems called 'Gitanjali' Tagore was mainly interested in the delineation of the different facets of man's life through the characters of his works. In *The King of the Dark Chamber*, Tagore tries to justify God's way to man. The king remains in the dark chamber throughout the play that indicates gloominess of man's life. All the characters are going to attend the celebration at king's palace but wonder about the right way. One of the citizens informs them that what way they go, they will reach to his path. The king stands for God of death in the play. Similarly salvation is the ultimate reality of man's life. This chapter is a sincere effort to evaluate salvation as a universal theme presented in Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber*.

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***The flower that once has been blown forever dies***  
**Omar Khayyam, Persian Poet**

Life is a precious gift and man is a unique creation of God. God creates the whole universe to see how a man tastes the different fruits of life. There are many interpretations regarding life but no one can understand the real meaning of life. Though life moves between two opposite poles like birth and death, heat and cold, good and bad etc. and man's wandering between the two is called life. The journey of man's life begins with birth and ends with death. A common man is unable to break the cycle of rebirth and indulges himself in enjoying worldly pleasures that make him discontent. It is believed that man gets a reward in a new birth according to the deeds of his previous birth. The story of man's fall is very well depicted in Milton's epic *The Paradise Lost* in which Milton tries to justify God's way to man. This work is about how Adam and Eve fell from Heaven to earth.

Every religious saint and sage talks about salvation and shows the different ways to attain it. The word 'Salvation' means 'to get rid of the cycle of rebirth' According to Hinduism, man has to attain four purusharthas, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha pass through the four ashramas during his life. In the Gita, Lord Shrikrishna talks about how to live and what happens to man's soul after death. There is a good example of Nachiketa who meets Yama to know the mystery of death. Lord Yama first refused to explain the mystery of death to Nachiketa but he convinced him and knew that 'death is a mere illusion so man should not fear death.' There is a great depiction of the journey of the soul in Garuda Purana. In the Quran, it is said that man should try to get Jannat with his deeds. Ultimately all the religions favour salvation of man. When a man leaves the world, he leaves his body though the soul is immortal man's aspirations and desires die with his death. Man leaves only his memories to his relatives and becomes immortal in their talks. Man's relatives pray to God for his salvation and perform religious rituals. Indian saints and sages give advice that we should perform yoga and meditation for peace of mind. Sometimes man's desires lead him to disaster.

Literature is closely related to man's life. Literary authors intend to present the reality of life in their works. We find depictions of happiness and sadness in the literature of each country. Shakespeare was a good observer of human nature so he presents the harshness of destiny in man's life in his tragedies. His tragedies are based on themes of life and death. Shakespeare talks about salvation in the following manners:

**Thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity  
That makes the calamity of so long life.**

(Hamlet, Act -I, Scene-II)

It seems that Shakespeare asserts the salvation of man after death. Man meets the divine after death however man has to pass through different stages during his life. Emily Dickinson, an American poetess expresses her feelings on death in the following manners:

**The soul should always stand ajar,  
Ready to welcome the ecstatic experience**

(bellagracemagazine.com)

Emily Dickinson considers unison with the divine as an ecstatic experience. As everyone dies sooner or later one should be ready to face the reality of life.

Indian literature has been considered a gem of Indian writing in English. The authors like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand flourished Indian literature before Independence. Rabindranath Tagore, a prolific author in Indian English literature, was the first Indian English writer to get the Nobel prize in literature in 1913 for a collection of his poems Gitanjali. Tagore was mainly interested in the delineation of different facets of human life through the characters of his works. Tagore presents the theme of the purification of the heart of Bimala in his novel *The Home and the World*. He criticizes the cunning nature of people through the character of Sandip. Tagore draws readers' attention to the lusty nature of fake saints and sages in his play *Sanyasi*. He also composed music called Rabindra sangeet. We come across the psychological insight of his characters in all his works. Sometimes the readers' are not able to understand the philosophy of Tagore due to the signs and symbols in his works.

Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber* is full of symbols and complexity. The play is a symbolic representation of the journey of man's life through its characters. The play was written in 1910. It was first written in the Bengali language but later it was translated by the author himself. This play is based on the theme of spirituality. The play begins with the celebration of the festival in the kingdom and all the guests are going to attend the function in the kingdom. The play is rich in symbolism. The play begins with pomp and shows during the time of festival that indicates the birth of a man. We celebrate our birthday with pomp and show and invite others to be a part of our celebration. The wheel of fate always works behind the deeds of man. At last, the man reaches his end.

**We struggle and dig our own path, thus reach His path at the end**

(Tagore, p.22)

The man struggles a lot to gain materialistic prosperity and tries to fulfil all his aspirations. The tragedy of man's life lies in the fact that despite knowing everything, he remains unaware of the ultimate reality of life i.e. death or salvation. In the title, the word King refers to the lord 'Yama' who has the authority to punish man and sends his soul to either hell or heaven according to his deeds. Notably, the king is not visible during the daytime. One of the citizens says that all the ways of the guests lead to the king. Symbolically one can say that man's ultimate goal is to attain salvation. Surangama reveals the king's nature in the play.

**To tell you the truth, Queen  
I could not say well what he is like.  
No, he is not what men call handsome.**

(Tagore,p.50)

According to Surangama, he is unable to describe the king's look however no one calls the king handsome. The king remains lonely in his dark chamber. Surangama considers himself a servant of the darkness. As the king says;

**Very well, you can try to find me but none will point me out to you.  
You will have to recognize me if you can yourself**

**And even if anybody professes  
To show me to you, how can you be sure he is speaking the truth?**

(Tagore,p.60)

It seems that no one can direct a man to the path of the divine but man has to find the path himself. It is not easy to unite with the divine but a man should try to recognize the divine himself. The truth seeker is united with the divine. The path of divinity leads a man to salvation. However, no one can deny the role of destiny in life. Indian saints believe that only enlightened beings can attain salvation while others indulge in the circle of rebirth.

Tagore expresses his views about the mystery of life and death in his works. Tagore believes that death serves the human and spiritual function. The full realization of life lies in the fact one should give up its narrow outlook. Death indeed gives away life itself that puts an end to whatever man considers as 'his' own life. Death has a special role in a spiritual process. However, death is not a denial of life; it is the gateway through which life constantly renews itself. There are two different aspects of the universe i.e. life and death. God is both creator and destructor but destruction is the renewal of life. Tagore believes that man is lost nothing with death and that life ceaselessly flows and renews itself.

Tagore is a mystic but he never advocates renunciation of life. He believed that God is present everywhere.

**He is with them in sun and shower, and his garment is covered with dust.  
Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down in the dusty soil!**

(Gopichand, Nagasuseela p.149)

Like Rabindranath Tagore, Vikram Seth talks about the pain of a death in all his three novels. The struggle of the main characters is noteworthy in all the novels. In A Suitable Boy, Seth says that good things are likely to happen but bad things happen. Seth seems to assert the fact that man is only a puppet in the hands of destiny. No one can escape from destiny. Man's deeds decide his future. In Ode to the Skylark, P.B. Shelley says;

**Our sweetest songs are those that tell of the saddest thought**

P.B.Shelley emphasizes sadness as the harsh reality of life. Similarly, Tennyson expresses his grief on the death of his friend Arthur Hallam in an elegy Morte d' Arthur. We find grief of death in a conversation between a second citizen and grandfather.

- **Second citizen:** My son died ultimately at twenty-five of raging fever in seven in seven days.

Could such a calamity befall me under the rule of a virtuous king?

- **Grandfather:** But you still have two sons left: while I have lost all my five children one after another.

(Tagore,p.79)

According to Surangama, the king is pitiless and hard even though nobody has ever been able to move him. It seems that no one can avoid death and the God of death is merciless. One should be aware of the ultimate reality of life i.e. death. It is stated that the king meets the queen in a dark chamber but she seems thirsty for physical beauty and longs to see the king in the bright light of the day. The king promises to appear in the crown to have her see him from the top of the palace. Like the Queen, other characters are unable to see the king and imagine the look of the king. On the day of the festival, vassal kings thronged the palace ground. On the other hand, Suvarna declares himself as the king and the queen is easily deceived by his charm. It is Surangama who had earlier strayed away from the path of virtue. Surangama herself confesses before the queen that she has made all good and evil for her so that she must go with her.

The Queen reaches her father's house with seven deadly sins and is attended by Suvarna. The king suddenly appears and defeats the king of Kanchi just like a tornado. He came and goes away without meeting out any punishment to the queen and leaves her and others quite bewildered. Similarly, unexpectedly man leaves the world. The Queen along with the King of Kanchi is in search of the King of the Dark Chamber. The play ends with The King's saying;

**I open the doors of the dark room today; the game is finished here.  
Come. Come with me now, come outside, into the light.**  
(Gopichand, Nagasuseela p.25)

Unison with the divine is seen in the conversation between the king and Kanchi

**King:** I shall lie down here  
I shall not move an inch  
Come what will, I shall not complain  
**Kanchi:** I will not allow all this nonsense.  
If I am to be burnt to death.  
You will be a companion to death. (Tagore,p.110)

It seems that Kanchi wants to attain salvation and unison with the divine after death. Shakespeare considers the world as a stage, men and women are mere actors and actresses in this world. Man plays his role and at last, the curtain falls that indicates death. In Greek tragedies, it is mentioned that man is a puppet in the hands of destiny. The cruelty of destiny is notable in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex.

**All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely Players;  
They have their exits and their entrances**

(en.wikipedia.org)

Shakespeare talks about the seven stages of man's life. Man has to pass through all the stages of life and meets his end.

Hence, Tagore's The King of The Dark Chamber deals with a universal theme of salvation. In the Gita, Lord Krishna says that only enlightened beings can attain salvation.

Those who cling to worldly objects never get salvation and indulge in the cycle of re-birth. The word 'Dark Chamber' indicates the second world after death. The theme of salvation is common in literature of the world. In Russian literature, the word 'Salvation' refers to Christ that sounded like Spas. Some Russian churches, icons, and feasts by this name Spas-on-blood. An idea of 'Salvation' can be seen in all spheres of life: medicine tries to save us from sickness and death, education from ignorance; literary criticism should have good literature. Any secular idea of salvation refers to the 'outer man who is expected to be saved from natural cataclysms, poverty, terrorism, injustice etc. While Christians try to save inner man from the power of sin, despair, bitterness, godlessness etc. As Dostoevsky wrote about the Byronic hero: "A fantastic and impatient man longs to be saved from mostly outward things, and he will never understand that truth and foremost within him" (www.academia.oup.com) The literary interpretation of the word 'Salvation' is 'inner transformation of the soul.'

However, Tagore himself felt the pain of the death of his wife and children but he presents death as the second way to reach God in the play. Like death, the king remains abstract in the play. Everyone has to accept the universal truth of death. The wheel of fate crushes everyone sooner or later impartially. Sometimes the Good suffers and the Weak prospers but human beings are unable to understand nature's law. The God of death is pitiless because he takes any man at any time, any place, and any age.

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