

## Assertion of Malini in Tagore's Legendary Play *Malini*

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### Abstract

*Malini* is the first Buddhist play of Rabindranath Tagore published in 1896. It is adapted from the Buddhist legend of *Mahavastu Avadana* which Tagore found in Rajendra Lal Mitra's *The Sanskrit Buddhist literature in Nepal*. The play is set against the historical backdrop of the conflict between entrenched Brahminism and rising Buddhism. Tagore has created the character of Malini as a bold heroine. She embraces the new-fangled religion of Buddha. Though born in a king's house, she is strong-willed enough to discard all the beautiful dresses and ornaments of gold. Malini, as portrayed by Tagore, is a torch bearer and can be called a moral genius for extraordinary courage and integrity of character.

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*Malini* is the first Buddhist play of Rabindranath Tagore published in 1896. It is adapted from the Buddhist legend of *Mahavastu Avadana* which Tagore found in Rajendra Lal Mitra's *The Sanskrit Buddhist literature in Nepal*. The play is set against the historical backdrop of the conflict between entrenched Brahminism and rising Buddhism. In the original story, the king's daughter Malini, invites a Buddhist mendicant Kashyap to lunch.

The Brahmins are enraged to see this and ask the king to banish her. Malini begs one week's time from her father. In the meantime all her brothers, ministers, and citizens of Varanasi were proselytised to Buddhism. The confrontation of the newly converts with the Brahmins, compels the latter to seek king's protection. Still the Brahmins try to murder Kashyap, but they fail in their attempt. At last they themselves get destroyed.

Tagore has created the character of Malini as a bold heroine. She embraces the new-fangled religion of Buddha. Though born in a king's house, she is strong-willed enough to discard all the beautiful dresses and ornaments of gold. Her mother asks her: "why do you forget to put on dresses that befit your beauty and youth? Where are your ornaments? My beautiful dawn, how can you absent the touch of gold from your limbs? (45). To this Malini gives a humble reply that she can find riches in penury also. Her mother, however, assists her in her choice. She answers the king that her daughter is free to "choose her own teachers and pursue her own path" (47). When the King tells her that his people are demanding Malini's banishment, the queen quips "are all truths confined only in their musty, old books? Let them fling away their worm-eaten creeds, and come and take their lessons from this child" and further she adds that "she is not a common girl,- she is a pure flame of fire. Some divine spirit has taken birth in her" (48). The mother has an affectionate solicitude for her daughter. When the queen does not find Malini in the palace she pleads the king to "go with your soldiers and search for her through all the town, from house to house. The citizens have stolen her. Banish them all. Empty the whole town, till they return her" (64). Tagore has delineated brave mothers who bolster up their daughters in times of need. They do not constrict to any unethical tradition but rebel against it. The mother of Prakriti in the play *Chandalika* is also a befitting example of female assertion.

Malini, as portrayed by Tagore, is a torch bearer and can be called a moral genius for extraordinary courage and integrity of character. She pleads her father to banish her “like the tree that sheds its flowers unheeding. Let me go out to all men, - for the world has claimed me from the king’s hands” (49). She is ready to carry the burden of the world on her little shoulders. She has been compared by the queen with the image of light.

In Tagore’s plays the monopoly of the central figure by male characters gives way to the assertive heroines. The helpless Brahmins were reciting sacred verses and praying to the goddess for coming to their rescue. At that moment Malini appears before them with her divine gentleness and purity. She has a magnetic mien, exuding peace and compassion. She has the guts and grit to own the people who assembled to disown her. To Thompson, Malini remains an unconvincing character: “He (Tagore) has drawn the lines of her figure so tenuously that her thoughts and actions are seen as if moving through a mist of dream” (27). Malini is ready to forsake all comforts of palatial abode.

Tagore’s heroines do the task of battling against age-old customs, traditions and superstitions for which they have to come out of their house. They would know full well that this is a sorrowful world, but to feel its pain they have to step out of their threshold. Like Ila of *The King and the Queen*, Malini in the play *Malini* also tells the Brahmins that she had never looked out of the window of her palace: “I was born in a King’s house, never once looking out from my window” (*Sacrifice...* 57). Tagore makes his heroines come out of the eternal confinement.

Kemankar in *Malini* is an embodiment of patriarchal society. He is a resolute Brahmin. He urges upon the clamorous Brahmins to keep firm in their resolution of

banishment of the king's daughter. He instigates them by adding that an enemy, when she is a woman:

is to be dreaded more than all others. For reason is futile against her and forces are ashamed; man's power gladly surrenders itself to her powerlessness, and she takes her shelter in the strongholds of our own hearts. (51)

Tagore shows that it is very hard to squelch patriarchy. The brahmins' tumultuous emotional exaltation cannot deflect the iron willed Kemankar. With his dour determination, he tries to explore a violent way to exterminate the new faith. Supriya, who is under the spell, wants to go with Malini but Kemankar restrains him. Kemankar is a symbol of patriarchy which does not brook any change in the old order. He forces upon Supriya the critical state of affairs when the continuance of the old order is at stake. Kemankar unfolds his plan of bringing soldiers from outside to quench this conflagration. He assures Supriya that Malini is but a dream and she cannot take the place of the highest truth: "The magic web, woven of the elusive charms of a woman, is like that,- and can it take the place of highest truth?" (61).

The king and the prince, two different faces of Patriarchy, are firmly inclined to banish Malini. The king's attitude reflects his political dilemma for he realizes that his daughter's conversion poses an apparent threat to his throne. He tells Malini: "My daughter, storm clouds are gathering over the King's house. Go no farther along your perilous path. Pause, if only for a short time" (47). But when she does not pause, the king tells the prince that he "must decide to baish my daughter" (63).

The Brahmins now begin to acknowledge Malini as their mother. They call her a star which will lead them across the pathless sea of life. They beg her to save them from utter ruin

which is threatening this world. They call her a goddess who has come down in exile from heaven. Malini in turn reassures them that she will never desert them. The Brahmins are of the view that she has carved a distinct niche in their hearts.

Malini does not behave like a girl of that time. She crosses the limits of her body as a woman. She outsteps the four walls of the house. Tagore's heroines refuse to sit quietly in a corner. Tagore sets out to undermine the female archetype of the passive and docile woman yoked to household chores. Malini confides in her mother that she has "brought the outer world into your house. I seem to have lost the bounds of my body. I am one with the life of this world" (66). No other writer of that era could have thought of making his heroine so bold and brave. Those were the times when girls were not allowed to go out of the house. The queen also tells Malini that she has no need to go out now.

Malini's mother advises her to remain in the house as it is considered the proper place for women. In doing this she is not aware that she is unconsciously appropriating her daughter's role in patriarchal society. In phallocratic culture there is the distinction between biological sex on the one hand and socially constructed gender on the other. Says Hester Eisenstein:

The social control of women in a 'free' society... was not carried out through a rigid authoritarian system of force. Rather it took place by means of the engineering of consent among women themselves. Instead of being openly coerced into accepting their secondary status, women were conditioned into embracing it by the process of sex-role stereotyping. From early childhood, women were trained to accept a system which divided society into male and

female spheres, with appropriate roles for each and which allocated public power exclusively to the male sphere. (6)

Tagore does not portray Malini as a goddess or a deity. She is a person with flesh and blood who fights the wrongs of the world. She is completely exhausted by her new experience. She tells her mother that she is “tired. My body is trembling. So vast is this world” (*Sacrifice...* 66). Tagore’s heroines do not want themselves to be above everyone else. They only seek equality and equanimity with honour. In guiding the world, Malini seeks the help of Supriya who is more learned than her. She seeks his help:

I do not know how to hold the helm of the great ship that I must guide. I feel I am alone, and the world is large, and ways are many, and the light from the sky comes of a sudden to vanish the next moment. You who are wise and learned, will you help me? (68)

The quality of independent thinking or ratiocination makes the woman of Tagore a class apart. Supriya tells Malini that he has shown the letter of Kemankar to the King, “in which he wrote that he was coming with a foreign army at his back, to wash away the new faith in blood, and to punish you with death” (71). At this Malini retorts that she has room enough in her house for him and his soldiers. She is fearless; she is more articulate in expressing her views than her male counterpart. As the play advances Malini becomes more human without any halo of divinity. Malini’s compassion makes the play a triumph of eternal human morality. Malini comes to know from the king that the punishment for Kemankar’s treason is death. She begs pardon for him and ultimately when Kemankar kills Supriya, she pleads for his forgiveness. Malini’s plea for forgiveness is juxtaposed with her father’s

determination for vengeance. She manifests her cherished ideal of compassion for all, even for her dread enemy. It is a reflexion of her unpolluted psyche.

Kemankar hates all religious creeds other than his own. Kriplani glorifies Kemankar's obstinacy. For Kriplani the character of Kemankar is more convincing than that of Malini:

The most powerful and convincing character in the play is not this lovely and saintly but somewhat shadowy maiden (Malini) but her chief enemy (Kemankar) the leader of Hindu orthodoxy in whose proud personality is symbolised the strength and obstinacy of his religion. (172)

Malini, the King's daughter and a major Buddhist heroine, is squarely denounced by orthodoxy. But her sincerity saves her and Kemankar, her chief accuser, meets a right retribution. A Renaissance figure, Tagore, preferred modernity but could not dissociate completely from the traditional values. Tagore is taken to be the most brilliant creative genius of the Indian Renaissance, revealing his deep acquaintance with Sanskrit classics, Bengali, English and continental European literatures.

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